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IRAN'S EVOLVING ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: PARTNER? RIVAL? OR BOTH?

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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Maj R.J. Tarrant

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I have proposed the aging, defeated and cliché-ridden policies of the United States as being tantamount to that ailing Lion that has all the appearance of power but not the visionary wherewithal of the world he now inhabits and wishes to rule. The Islamic Republic, the wily Fox, meanwhile has managed to manipulate the geopolitics of the region, codenamed the Middle East ... But, I have concluded, even the Fox has proven to be too smart for his own good, and has just turned around to see that his tail is on fire.

Hamid Dabashi, *Iran, the Green Movement and the USA*

INTRODUCTION

Iran has gained a new significance in the Middle East since it signed a multi-nation deal, with the Permanent 5 (+1) members of the United Nations Security Council, to place its nuclear ambitions on hold for a decade on the 14th July of 2015. This has meant the lifting of most economic sanctions (some others remain) and an influx of much needed foreign capital to stimulate its resource-based economy. Besides the shelving of its nuclear program, there were few strings attached to the deal. This has led to a great deal of speculation as to how the lifting of most sanctions, and Iran's new found wealth, will cause its role to evolve in the region. The situation is not without its challenges; Europe's banks have not fully committed to this new market, fearing they will run afoul of remaining US sanctions.¹ Iran is at a crossroads that will determine how successful it will be against its regional rivals. Iran's ambition is to become a regional hegemon and it sees itself as the benevolent protector of the Shia peoples of the region, regardless of which other state they may be citizens.

This essay will attempt to demonstrate that the principal result of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, is that Iran will regain its position of prominence in the Middle East, as the most powerful nation in that region. The question that this paper seeks to answer is "What are the most viable options open to Iran to achieve this goal?" This paper will begin by

¹ Fabio Benedetti-Valentini & Ladane Nasser. "Europe's Banks Are Staying Out of Iran" Bloomberg Business Week (March 2016).

presenting several assumptions about Iran that will allow framing of the discussion that will follow. It will then examine the potential successors to American hegemony in the region, illustrating the relative merits and pitfalls of each. It will continue by building on the previous sections to demonstrate the two paths that Iran could choose to follow to achieve its aims, either the “Reluctant Partner” or the “Dogmatic Rival.” Finally, this paper will conclude by stating which technique is the most compelling for the power brokers in Tehran to choose to pursue their regional goals. Military professionals must understand the dynamics at play at the strategic level to be able to understand their implications and consequences at the operational level. For better or worse, Iran will play the major role in a key region that has garnered a great deal of international attention in the last several decades, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Understanding the options open to the current Iranian regime will go a long way towards setting the conditions for success in future engagement in that region.

ASSUMPTIONS

Iran is seen by many as an irrational, rogue state. While this may play well in the media it is not a compelling argument. Iranian leaders seek to avoid regime change and have regularly achieved many of their foreign policy goals.² For the purposes of this paper it will be assumed that Iran is a rational state with a coherent policy that is simply not known or well understood by Western nations or traditional media outlets. Further, it must be understood that Iranian leaders have to play to a core domestic audience when acting on the international stage. This begins to explain why they seemingly provoke the United States at every possible opportunity, from launching missiles in vicinity of US Navy ships, to arresting American (and, in the past, British)

² Ali Fathollah-Nejad 2014. "Why Sanctions Against Iran are Counterproductive: Conflict Resolution and State-Society Relations." *International Journal* 69 (1): 48-65.

sailors that enter their territorial waters. Iran's nuclear capability will not be discussed in detail in this paper, but for clarity, it will be assumed that Iran is a threshold nation with the ability to surge its resources to create a viable nuclear weapon.

REGIONAL ACTORS AND HEIRS APPARENT

The Iran nuclear deal has the potential to become a game changer in the Middle East by providing the opportunity for rapprochement between Iran, the preeminent power in the Gulf, and the United States, the preeminent global power, thus reducing the strategic importance of both Saudi Arabia and Israel. Israel's virulent opposition to the deal has also demonstrated that it has become a strategic liability for the United States.

Mohammed Ayoob, *The Iranian Nuclear Deal*

The United States

The United States is the current hegemon in the Middle East, although they are seeking to divest themselves of this role, as shown by their deliberate withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq. They need a relatively stable ally in the region to be able to safeguard their enduring interests while not being seen to abandon their existing allies. The nations that immediately spring to mind in this case are Saudi Arabia, Turkey and, perhaps less obviously, Israel. This section will demonstrate why none of these states is a suitable successor to the United States as the regional hegemon in the Middle East, in the long term.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has taken over the role traditionally fulfilled by Iraq, in serving as the primary foil to Iranian aspirations in the region. While Saudi Arabia and Iran are long-time rivals, they have never matched the open hostility or brutality of the Iran-Iraq War that dominated the 1980s in the Middle East. Nevertheless, this Shia – Sunni rivalry runs deep, although the two countries have much in common with each other. Saudi Arabia is no friend to

Iran, although they have achieved détente in the past on specific issues.³ Saudi Arabia compounded the sanctions against Iran, further deepening their mutual animosity, by agreeing to make up any shortfalls that would have been created in world markets by the limitations placed on Iranian oil production.⁴ They are also fighting numerous proxy wars, including in Yemen, with Iran supporting Houthi rebels against the Sunni regime. This destabilises the region and means that the battle lines are clearly drawn within the Middle East along religious lines.

Saudi Arabia has a vested interest in portraying Iran as a rogue state, which needs to be contained. To this end, they have intentionally provoked Iran through such things as the surprise execution of a prominent Shia cleric⁵, and they are consistently at odds over Saudi Arabia's continuing stewardship of the holy sites at Mecca.⁶ Saudi Arabia is also prone to having to act internationally to curry favour with a domestic audience.⁷ As the birthplace of Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia and the United States are almost incompatible allies.⁸ They essentially have the same enemies (many of whom the Saudis have had a hand in encouraging and arming, such as the Taliban and Al Qaeda), although many in Saudi Arabia oppose American presence in their

³ Frederic Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy J. Ghez, Lydia Hansell and Robert A. Guffey. *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009.

⁴ John Kemp. "Saudi Arabia turns oil weapon on Iran." Reuters. (April 2016).

⁵ Nikola Slawson. "Saudi execution of Shia cleric sparks outrage in Middle East" The Guardian. (January 2016).

⁶ Ivana Kottasova. "Iran bans Saudi imports and pilgrimages to Mecca" CNN. (January 2016).

⁷ Frederic Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy J. Ghez, Lydia Hansell and Robert A. Guffey. *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009.

⁸ Max Fisher. "Six reasons the U.S. and Saudi Arabia are moving apart" The Washington Post (October 2013).

country and the region in general.⁹ Wahhabism is one of the contributing factors in many of the regions recent problems and beyond, enabling the radicalisation of youth throughout the region and the world at large. Further, Saudi Arabia can be seen as antagonising Iran to portray the regime as unstable and to force the hand of the United States to honour and reinforce their strategic partnership. Examples of this are the recent visit to the region by US Secretary of State, John Kerry, and the US rhetoric, delivered in Saudi Arabia, to continue to oppose Iranian militancy.¹⁰

Turkey

Turkey, as a regional power which straddles both Europe and Asia, would seem like a natural fit as a hegemon in the region and has attempted to act as such in the past.¹¹ Turkey is a relatively stable democracy by regional standards and, while majority Muslim, does adhere on some level to the secular principles on which it was founded, although less than those who are evaluating its European Union Membership bid might like. It would seem like a natural bridge between the United States and the Middle East, especially with its membership in NATO and recent move closer to Europe on many fronts. Its rivalry with Russia does present some difficulties in this regard, as many countries in the region rely on that former superpower for military and economic aid. The downing of a Russian fighter in Turkish air space, and the subsequent diplomatic fallout from that act, show that Turkey is not afraid to act to promote its interests. This has also made many in NATO nervous and caused many in Europe to question its judgement. Turkey, unfortunately, has too many internal domestic problems to be able to devote

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Pamela Dockins, "US, Gulf to 'Push Back' Against Iran." Voice of America. (April 2016).

¹¹ Gabriel Mitchell. "Turkey: The Almost Mediator State" Turkish Policy Quarterly 14, no.1 (Spring, 2015). 169-177.

itself to serving as a regional leader.¹² Although many will follow their example based on the exertion of both soft and hard power,¹³ they cannot be the successor to the United States until they sort out their own internal issues. There are those who would suggest that Iran suffers from the same issues. On the surface their situations may appear similar, but Iran does not have the trans-national and secessionist Kurdish population, including their armed resistance, that Turkey has to deal with.¹⁴ The Syrian refugee crisis, a rift with Russia and an on again off again relationship with the West are not issues that currently beset Iran, but are major factors in Turkish stability. Further, Iran has a stable form of government, such as it is, while many are concerned about the viability and stability of democracy in Turkey.¹⁵

Israel

Israeli reaction to the Iranian nuclear deal was especially alarmist, including their President burning a lot of political capital by going to Congress against the wishes of a sitting President, to contradict that administration's stated goals.¹⁶ Israel professes that a nuclear Iran is an existential threat to its existence.¹⁷ This is both interesting and debatable, considering that Israel has faced existential threats for the entirety of its history. As stated previously, this paper will not specifically deal with Iran as a threshold power or the vagaries of Israel's nuclear

¹² Andrew Duff. "Turkey's EU accession negotiations should now be suspended" Euractiv.com. (December, 2014).

¹³ Meliha Benli-Altunisik. "The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East" *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 2 (2008); 41-54.

¹⁴ Andrew Duff. "Turkey's EU accession negotiations should now be suspended" Euractiv.com. (December, 2014).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Uri Avnery. *Israel's Iran Debacle*. *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, (2014) 33(1), 10-11.

¹⁷ Ehud Eiran and Martin B. Malin. "The Sum of all Fears: Israel's Perception of a Nuclear-Armed Iran." *Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 77-89.

opacity. Further, it is highly unlikely that the Iranian regime, as a rational state, would provoke the complete annihilation that would inevitably follow from a nuclear attack against the state of Israel.¹⁸ The real threat to Israel is that at a nuclear Iran could challenge its military hegemony in the region and limit its freedom of maneuver, to do as it sees fit to ensure its own survival and interests.¹⁹

Israel can never fulfill the role of regional political hegemon as it will always be pre-occupied with its own survival and the Zionist agenda which transcends the Middle East. While Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states benefit from the counter balance that Israel provides to Iranian ambitions,²⁰ they have no love for it. At best Israel is the friend of a friend (the US) with whom most countries maintain an uneasy and relatively quietly antagonistic outlook, with most refusing to recognize its existence. While Israel will continue to be a major military and political player in the region, it can never officially be recognized as part of any alliances or coalitions, as demonstrated by both of the United States' expeditions in Iraq.

Israel is far too concerned with its own survival to be able to be a regional hegemon. It has adopted a policy of not making decisions when there are no good options, preferring to forestall until the situation changes to potentially more favourable terms, as demonstrated by their indecisiveness on the question of a future state of Palestine.²¹ While this may be more rational than it seems on the surface, it does not allow for the type of leadership that will be

¹⁸ Cham E Dallas., William C Bell, David J. Stewart, Antonio Caruso, and Jr Burkle Frederick M. "Nuclear War between Israel and Iran: Lethality Beyond the Pale." *Conflict and Health* 7, (2013).

¹⁹ Kenneth Waltz. *Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability*. Foreign Affairs. July/August 2012. Volume 91, Number 4.

²⁰ Nazir Hussain, and Sannia Abdullah. 2015. "Iran Nuclear Deal: Implications for Regional Security." *Journal Of Political Studies* 22, no. 2: 475-493. International Security & Counter Terrorism Reference Center.

²¹ Natan Sachs. 2015. "Why Israel Waits." *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 6: 74-82.

required to be the natural hegemon in the region. Any country that seeks to serve as the hegemon in the region must have a plan of engagement with Israel, as the predominant military power next to the United States and Iran must be aware of this. Relations are currently strained between the United States and Israel, but this is the exception to the rule. Certainly, any external threat to Israel would earn a strong reaction from the United States. Helpfully, Iran and Israel have achieved limited détente in the past on common issues, including colluding to strike to eliminate the Iraqi nuclear program, which bodes well for Iran as it seeks a greater role in the region.²²

Iran

As the United States actively tries to extricate itself from the Middle East quagmire they helped create, they need an exit strategy and that would involve handing over and supporting, from a safe distance, a regional hegemon with whom they have similar interests. First and foremost, those interests are stability and economic prosperity. While seemingly counter-intuitive, this heir apparent should be Islamic Republic of Iran. The Iranian regime is seeking a return to prominence in the Middle East as the Shia power in the region and, despite rhetoric to the contrary, they are a rational state. Unlike Saudi Arabia, which is deeply divided and threatens to destabilise the region through the support and export of radical Islamic thought, Iran is relatively stable. This stability is often achieved through repression of opposition domestically, but as this paper will demonstrate, the solution to this is engagement and not isolation.

²² Erik Schechter. "Desert Duel Once they Mounted Covert Operations Together. Now, Locked in a Conflict Driven by Religion and Nuclear Threats, Iran and Israel are Fighting a Bitter Spy War in the Shadows." C4ISR (Jan 01, 2007): 19.

RELUCTANT PARTNER

With the ascent of the reformist cleric Khatami to presidency in 1997, the long lasting rivalry between the reformist faction that seeks 'Islamic democracy' at home and Iran's integration into the world politics, and the conservative faction whose guiding principle is the return to a revolutionary Islamic ideology, has become apparent in post-revolutionary Iran. While the hardliner Ahmadinejad's rise to power in 2005 meant flashback to revolutionary ideology both in domestic and foreign affairs of Iran, the victory of pro-reform cleric Hassan Rouhani in 2013 marked the beginning of a new era in Iran's relations with the West through nuclear negotiations.

Sezgin Kaya & Zeynep Şartepe, Contentious Politics in Iran

President Obama took a political gamble when he changed American Policy direction on Iran towards one of engagement, vice the adversarial approach that had been in place for decades, characterised by isolation and sanctions.²³ The success of this approach is best characterized by the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, more commonly known as the Iran Nuclear Deal. President Obama has presented this as a clear demonstration that engagement works and that Iran can be rehabilitated and brought back into the fold of the international community of nations.²⁴ While Israel and the US Congress have decried the Iranian Nuclear Deal, there are those that suggest it played a very real role in the shift towards reformist candidates in the recent Iranian elections, along with continued support of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.²⁵ Hardliners still control all of the state's key institutions, including the Republican Guard, but the will of the people was heard, at least those people in the vicinity of Tehran.²⁶

²³ John Limbert. "The Iran Primer" The Obama Administration - United States Institute of Peace. (2015).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ian Bremmer. 2016. "The Nuclear Deal Pays Off In Iran's Elections." Time 187, no. 9: 12

²⁶ Ibid.

In order to continue to make progress in this arena, Iran must continue to be engaged and the United States must continue to extend the olive branch when it can. Ali Fathollah-Nejad suggests that the stated justification for sanctions and isolation in the past when dealing with Iran, actually had the opposite effect. He suggests that while they sought to weaken the regime internationally and domestically, they actually strengthened the political elite by imposing a bunker mentality on the state.²⁷ This also made them less likely to come to the bargaining table in the interests of conflict resolution by hardening opposition to American policies in the region.²⁸

One of the potential emerging roles for the Iranian state in the aftermath of the Nuclear Deal is as a begrudging ally to the United States on specific issues. Certainly, there are issues on which the two countries will never be able to see eye to eye, but as is the current case, their interests may be complementary, even if their goals are not. Prominent examples of this common ground include opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan and Iran's efforts to oppose ISIL in Iraq. Some, such as Alireza Nader suggest Iraq is a perfect situation for the United States and Iran to achieve détente.²⁹ Nader states that "Iran has mobilized allied Shi'a Iraqi militias and has taken a prominent and public role in leading the Iraqi campaign against ISIL."³⁰ As an illustration, the US recently asked the Iranian-backed Shia militias not to participate in the liberation of Mosul.³¹ This is interesting as it shows the power and prestige of those militias,

²⁷ Ali Fathollah-Nejad. 2014. "Why Sanctions Against Iran are Counterproductive: Conflict Resolution and State-Society Relations." *International Journal* 69 (1): 48-65. Fathollah-Nejad is a PhD candidate in International Relations, in the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Alireza Nader. "Iran's Role in Iraq: Room for U.S.-Iran Cooperation?" Rand Corporation (2015).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Seth Frantzman, "Iraq's Struggling Mosul Offensive" *The National Interest*. (March 2016).

which speaks directly to the success of Iranian efforts to arm and train them. Unfortunately, it also speaks to the fractured nature of Iraq, and the greater Middle East, as they fear the employment of Shias based on the threat of retaliation and score settling along religious and ethnic lines.³²

The dominant narrative in the United States and Europe is that the American government was able to bring Iran to the negotiating table by crippling its economy over many years through sanctions. The Iranian political elite are well aware of this and their anti-American rhetoric is well-entrenched in their narrative since the Revolution. This includes deliberately provoking the US in limited ways on the international stage to curry favour with a domestic audience. An example of this is the launching of missiles in vicinity of US Navy ships close to Iranian waters, to provoke, but not engage the United States.³³ The fact that so many nations are only tentatively investing in Iran's newly open markets speaks to another truth; they are concerned about running afoul of remaining American sanctions, not all well-understood, and the Iranian economy is continuing to suffer as a consequence.³⁴ The Iranian political leadership must understand that to truly ascend to a position of regional leadership they must remove any latent impression that they head a rogue nation which poses a threat to American interests. This is obviously much easier to say than to do but the upside is lucrative and attractive.

Iran's numbers are impressive and compelling to investors. It is a \$420 billion a year economy, which makes it the second largest in the Middle East.³⁵ In addition, it has the world's

³² Ibid.

³³ Crawford, Jamie. "Close encounter between U.S. warship and Iranian rocket". CNN (January 2016).

³⁴ Fabio Benedetti-Valentini & Ladane Nasser. "Europe's Banks Are Staying Out of Iran" Bloomberg Business Week (March 2016).

³⁵ Danielle Myles. "Iran's nuclear pact: what happens next?" International Financial Law Review (September 7, 2015): 1. Business Source Complete.

second largest oil reserves and the fourth largest reserves of crude oil.³⁶ It has a well-established stock exchange that is ripe for foreign investment and its economy has been artificially suppressed for years as a result of punitive sanctions, meaning that it is ready for a boom now that most, but not all, have been removed.³⁷

On the surface the Iranian regime has begun to soften in recent years. The current President is seen as a moderate and a reformer, especially in contrast to his predecessor. President Hassan Rouhani congratulated his fellow citizens after their most recent election for electing reformers, and moderate candidates, but also 6% female representation.³⁸ Sceptics (or realists) will highlight the fact that the political apparatus is subservient to the religious leadership, who truly run the country and make the important decisions.³⁹ They will present this as a false softening from the hardliners and there is a well-developed convention of using the position of President as a distraction, as was previously the case with President Ahmadinejad. They may be absolutely correct, but it is more important that so many of the Iranian people have chosen representatives that would seek closer relations with the international community.

Iran would have a lot to gain from being the hegemonic successor to the United States in the Middle East. Constantly opposing American interests in the region could serve to prolong the US presence or, failing that, ensure that they continue to support, and in some cases “prop-up” their opponents. While Iran may have ties of convenience to Russia, having a common enemy in ISIL and seeking to counter balance American interests in the region, Russia has no

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Bremmer, Ian. 2016. "The Nuclear Deal Pays Off In Iran's Elections." *Time* 187, no. 9: 12

³⁹ Eliot Cohen, Eric Edelman, and Ray Takeyh. 2016. "Time to Get Tough on Tehran." *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 1: 64-75.

permanent presence in the Middle East. Further, it is in the grips of its own serious political and economic problems, both at home and its near abroad, closer to its own sphere of significant strategic influence. While Iran has made a cottage industry out of declaring “Death to America”, they would be far better served through cooperation with the world’s sole remaining super power, than opposing it.

If Iran is not an ally to the United States in the fight against ISIS, then they are the enemy of their enemy, which is almost as good. As mentioned previously, Iran and the US cooperated in Afghanistan against the Taliban and the hardline Islamic state has even cooperated with Israel against the former-Baathist Regime in Iraq. Any long-term solution in Iraq must involve Iran. The Shia population there, as with the greater Middle East, looks to Iran for leadership, protection, and support and they have spent a considerable amount of money and resources in order to gain influence there.

All of these things indicate that Iran could fulfill the role of regional hegemon without a major shift in foreign policy. It is already happening to a certain degree. While the United States and its allies talk openly about opposing Iran’s ambitions, they remain conspicuously moot on the points where their interests intersect, seemingly attempting not to draw too much attention to the fact that their goals align on certain issues. Iran is certainly prone to fits of theatrics and makes the most of any opportunity it has to attempt to oppose the United States, but these are seemingly less and less plentiful. If Iran is serious about ascending to the position of regional hegemon, it must be able to censor itself and not immediately pounce whenever the global hegemon has a mis-step in the region.

The challenge to this theory is similar to Iraq and Libya. Western political elites and media outlets had dedicated so much effort to demonising and undermining Saddam Hussein and

Muammar Gaddafi that rehabilitating them to be able to serve as critical allies was beyond the pale. In both countries, the regimes were presented as so illegitimate that they could not be seen to be rational enough to be bargained with, making regime change a more attractive option than cooperation. The benefit of hindsight demonstrates the challenges that follow from regime change. Further, in the minds of many the pursuit of nuclear weapons by Iran can be seen as an insurance policy to avoid being deposed, such as in the pariah state of North Korea and could contribute to long term peace, under the right conditions, and not threaten it.⁴⁰

DOGMATIC ANTAGONIST

Any Iran policy worthy of the name must start from the fact that the Islamic Republic is not a conventional state making pragmatic estimates of its national interests but a revolutionary regime. U.S. policymakers since the days of President Ronald Reagan have failed to understand that there can be no rapprochement between the two governments, because, as Iran's leaders understand, that would undo the very existence of the Iranian regime. They have overlooked the fact that Iran is an exceptionally dangerous state—to its neighbors, to close U.S. allies such as Israel, and to the broader stability of the Middle East.

Eliot Cohen, Eric Edelman & Ray Takeyh, *Time to get Tough on Iran*

Efraim Karsh, suggests that the United States, and the Obama administration have been “duped by the Mullahs” in their dealings with Iran and that the regime has manipulated them to their own ends through ignorance of Iran’s true intentions.⁴¹ He goes on to say that:

Obama's appeasing demeanor cast him as weak and indecisive, and this image was further reinforced by his knee jerk response to their brutal suppression of popular protest over the rigging of the June 2009 Iranian presidential elections. That the U.S. president ... remained conspicuously aloof in the face of the flagrant violation of these very principles did not pass unnoticed. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

⁴⁰ Kenneth Waltz. Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability. Foreign Affairs. July/August 2012. Volume 91, Number 4.

⁴¹ Karsh, Efraim. 2016. "Obama's Middle East Delusions." Middle East Quarterly 23, no. 1: 1-14. International Security & Counter Terrorism Reference Center. Efraim Karsh is the editor of the Middle East Quarterly and emeritus professor of Middle East and Mediterranean studies at King's College London and professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University.

demanded Washington's apology for its supposed meddling in the elections while Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, ridiculed Obama for privately courting Tehran while censuring it in public.⁴²

Further, Nazir Hussain and Sannia Abdullah tell us that “Both Israel and Saudi Arabia consider Iran ‘not trustworthy’ partner to enter into any bilateral or multilateral agreement, based on the mutual mistrust and baggage of past conflicts” and did not support the nuclear deal on these grounds.⁴³ Are these the kinds of fences that can be mended and does Iran have any interest in playing a role other than simply acting as the regional foil to the United States and its allies? Certainly, this is the role that many expect Iran to play in the region, preferring to think of it as a mad dog rather than a shrewd fox.

Iran certainly has a lot on its plate right now. Iran and Saudi Arabia are currently involved in a proxy war in Yemen. While Iran opposes Sunni-based ISIL in Iraq, its support of the Assad regime in Syria, while not inconsistent, put it at odds with the United States and its allies in the Middle East. Hezbollah and Hamas have both acted as proxies for Iranian foreign policy against Israel in the past. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard is credited with joining together, arming and training the fractured Lebanese Shia militias that became Hezbollah,⁴⁴ as well as supporting them today as they conduct operations inside Syria. For all intents and purposes, Hezbollah is seen as a tool of Iranian foreign policy. While they are currently more focussed on the conflict in Syria, the day will come when they focus their attention back on Israel. This is a dangerous game to play as anything that Hezbollah does will indirectly be

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Nazir Hussain, and Sannia Abdullah. 2015. "Iran Nuclear Deal: Implications for Regional Security." *Journal Of Political Studies* 22, no. 2: 475-493. International Security & Counter Terrorism Reference Center.

⁴⁴ Brent J Talbot & Heidi Harriman. "Disarming Hezbollah." *Mediterranean Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 29-53.

viewed as having been directed by Iran. This is a challenge that Iran must deal with sooner than later, depending which path it chooses.

Iran's traditional rival in the region, Iraq, is currently a weak federation of ethnic political disparity with no end in sight. Iran is arming and training Shia militias and has deployed IRG forces to the region to assist in the fight against ISIL. Iran's proxy wars could be further financed and enabled by the renewed flow of currency into their coffers from the lifting of sanctions. This is an essential crossroads for Iran. If they choose to support a destabilized Iraq to keep their traditional rival in a frozen state of conflict, they may achieve some level of short term security, but at the risk of exacerbating the radicalisation of Sunni Muslims in the region, which could have very negative long term effects for their Shia regime. If they choose to simply act to counter American interests, even when they intersect with their own, in order to lower American prestige and play to their domestic hardline base, then they risk alienating those in the region who are on the fence. If they choose to attempt to bring more countries into their orbit by pushing their position as a "threshold" nuclear power they also risk provoking the ire of Israel. An Israeli strike is less likely than before based on international acceptance of the deal, but the Iranian leaders would completely discount this possibility at their own peril.⁴⁵

When considering the possible roles that Iran could play in the region, another important consideration is how much say they actually have in their own ability to change course. Assuming that the regime did decide to pursue a policy of limited rapprochement with the United States, they have funded and trained numerous national and trans-national actors that would likely oppose this move. Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Assad regime spring instantly to mind. After having used Hezbollah as a proxy for so long in its attempts to de-

⁴⁵ Rachele Marshall. "Kerry Faces Down Israel and its Lobby to Achieve Agreement with Iran." *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 33, no. 1 (Jan, 2014): 8-9, 11.

stabilize Israel, and by association the American position in the region, could Iran contain them if they attempted to gain closer relations with the United States. Surely, this would be seen as treachery or abandonment of the highest order if not handled correctly. As with the Sunni radicals of ISIL, Iran may learn how difficult it is to put the genie, which it released, back in the bottle if it were to pursue policies that are anathema to its allies and proxies. The easier thing to do would be to stay the course and continue down this road. Iran would have to come to terms with its proxy actors if it wanted to carry out a policy shift or re-orientation. How it engaged them would likely determine their success or failure.

Iran's support for the Assad regime is one the main reasons that it is holding on to power in that country's brutal civil war. While Iranians see support for Assad and opposition to ISIL and other Sunni extremists as complementary, this is not the general narrative in the West. Jeffrey Martini, Erin York, and William Young, analysts at the Rand Corporation, suggest that those external actors supporting the regime in Syria, such as Iran, believe that the cost of failure is much higher than those that support the opposition.⁴⁶ Further they state that "External influence in the Syrian conflict would be decisive only if the United States significantly increased the scope of its support to the opposition or Iran or Russia significantly ratcheted back their support for Assad."⁴⁷ If Iran legitimately believes that this is a struggle of Shias against Sunni radicalism in the region, what could possibly convince it to abandon the fight? Especially when it believes the consequences for Shia Muslims in the area would be dire, and it would be seen to have abandoned them, abdicating its responsibility as the most powerful Shia nation in

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Martini, Erin York & William Young. "Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition" Rand Corporation (2013).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

the region. For these reason, it is unlikely that the United States and Iran could reach any type of détente on the Syrian conflict, at least that portion contained within Syria.

For the Iranian regime to continue down the road of the “Dogmatic Antagonist” it would simply be business as usual. What would suffer, however, is the economy of Iran and its prestige on the world stage. This is exactly the role that its rivals want it to continue to play and the very reason that the United States and its allies imposed sanctions in the first place. The threat of the re-imposition of those same sanctions should be enough to invalidate this course of action from an Iranian perspective, but the fact that they lived under them for so long raises questions about what the state will endure and why. Iran’s best interests would be served by avoiding sanctions, but they have shown in the past that there are things that they value more than economics and positive relations.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented two possible approaches for Iran in the pursuit of its interests in the Middle East. This is by no means exhaustive, but does serve to demonstrate that the regime has options open to it as it seeks to regain its prominence in the Middle East and grow its economy in the absence of most of the sanctions that have artificially subdued it for several decades. Certainly, Iranian leaders could be considered myopic in limiting their options if they pursued one of these options completely exclusive of the other, but they begin to provide a framework for understanding potential future Iranian actions in the region. That being said, this paper demonstrates that Iran would be best served by pursuing a policy of engagement with the United States, demonstrated by the “Reluctant Partner” scenario. While this would require a major rapprochement by both sides, engagement is the stated policy of the Obama administration

after years of sanctions and animosity, so there exists a window of hope. The results of the upcoming US election will be crucial to this relationship to determine whether more moderate voices in Iran can continue to find a kindred spirit in the new American administration.

As Iran continues its ascent in the Middle East, it will need support and cooperation from outside sources. The United States has shown the will to remain in the Middle East for the long haul, but this is not its ultimate end state and it needs a successor, for which Iran is the best candidate. Allies of the world's sole remaining superpower must understand its aims in the region, and any lasting strategy must involve Iran. It is important for military professionals to understand this and to endeavour to gain a greater understanding of Iran, including what its likely goals and aspirations are, as the past and future hegemon of the Middle East.

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