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Does US-friendly Iran change everything?

Three years into the Arab Spring a historic agreement over Iran's nuclear programme will further shake the region

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11/27/2013

Since being signed in the early hours of Sunday 24 November in Geneva the deal between Iran and six world powers over its nuclear programme has been subject to various interpretations. Iran and the United States, whose leaderships and governments have thrived on mutual hate and distrust for three decades, are now busy marketing the agreement to their respective publics — and the world — as a victory for their historic stands.

While maintaining Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy the "Joint Plan of Action" — the four-page interim agreement between Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council — the US, Russia, China, France and the UK — together with Germany, obliges Tehran to halt its nuclear programme for six months, the duration of the agreement. In return sanctions on the Islamic Republic imposed in 1995 by the US and from 2006 onwards by the UN Security Council will be partially lifted. According to the Geneva plan, Iran will now be able to sell crude oil, and US and EU sanctions on petrochemical exports, gold and precious materials and the auto industry will be lifted. The installation and supply of parts for Iranian civil aviation will be licensed, and no new UN, EU and US nuclear-related sanctions will be imposed.

Iran will have to dilute half its existing stockpile of 20 per cent enriched uranium and convert the other half to oxide, halt all activities at its nuclear plants and, among other requirements, allow full inspection and monitoring of its nuclear activities by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The Barack Obama administration is seeking to take credit for “halting” the progress of the Iranian nuclear programme while the Islamic republic’s leadership is presenting the deal as “recognition” by world powers of Iran’s nuclear rights. The debate will not end any time soon as the careful wording of the agreement, while clearly reducing Iran’s nuclear capabilities, recognises its “right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes under the relevant articles of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty.” In other words the plan is about achieving a political breakthrough with the intention of leading to a permanent agreement, which both Tehran and Washington want, one year from now.

Yet this stopgap measure that could still end in failure is likely to have a far more profound impact than its technical, nuclear related clauses suggest.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution and subsequent enmity between Iran and the US has shaped the entire region’s alignments and balance of power. The new reality is bound to reshape this in ways that remain to be seen.

Washington’s allies — Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Jordan — became ever more hostile towards Tehran, accusing it of exporting its Islamic revolution and destabilising the region. The Islamic Republic supported and funded the Shia Lebanese Hizbullah resistance movement and Islamic resistance in the occupied Palestinian territories as part of its anti-Zionist, anti-US discourse and foreign policy.

Tehran’s regional isolation grew, though in the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion it gained leverage in Iraq which has a Shia majority, and more recently in Syria where the uprising against the Bashar Al-Assad regime — which enjoys Tehran and Moscow’s support — has spiralled towards a civil war that many see as ushering in the end of the Arab Spring.

For what it’s worth, 2013 was the year when analysts confidently predicted a US-Israeli war against Iran was going to happen, changing everything in the Middle East. Yet instead, as various news reports have confirmed, the US and Iran have been engaged in secret talks since March, which explains the speed and determination to clinch a deal that closes the three-decade long chapter of enmity between the Islamic Republic and Washington. In the words of the Lebanese daily Assafir’s front page headline on the morning of 24 November, “The American-Iranian War is Dismantled”.

How does that impact a region which has just witnessed a series of revolutions against US-backed authoritarian regimes that are still struggling to materialise into real democracies?

Overnight Iran has moved from an isolated power on the brink of economic ruin and an impending war to a major player recognised by the world’s powers. “Tehran was brought to its

knees,” says Basheer Nafi, a historian and strategic expert, “but many doors are now open for an influential political role in the region.” The Russian-Iranian alliance is now officially stronger and Saudi Arabia, at odds with the US over its Syria and Iran policy, is less of an ally. By paving the way for peace with Tehran, the Obama administration has moved a step forward in its strategic pivot from the Middle East to East Asia. Meanwhile, Arab governments, irrelevant for now, are merely watching.

It is the kind of turning-point deal that will change the geopolitics of the region just as the Egyptian-Israeli agreement once did. It also holds the risk of pacifying Iran at the cost of the constants the Islamic Republic proclaimed at its outset and for which its 77 million strong population paid a heavy price.

Although Iran’s newly elected president, Hassan Rouhani, and other powerful Iranian officials are promoting the deal as a victory for the country’s steadfastness, hardliners within the regime have dismissed it as a defeat. “This might slow down Tehran’s regional political advances,” says Nafi, which the interim deal ushers in by default.

Israel and Saudi Arabia, the main proponents for a war on Iran, have spoken against the agreement, with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu slamming it as a “historical mistake”. But they stand as lone voices — representatives of the most unpopular alliance in the region.

The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain welcomed the agreement as a step towards stability in the region, followed by Qatar and Kuwait. Oman, US officials have revealed, had been hosting secret US and Iranian meetings all along. Jordan also came out in support of the interim deal.

Cairo has remained mum. “Egypt isn’t part of the regional equation anymore because it’s consumed by its internal problems,” says Nafi. But an Egyptian diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity said that Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmi had proposed mediating between Iran and the Gulf countries last month to narrow the gap. It never materialised but the notion reflected what the diplomat “sensed” to be an interest in establishing normal ties with Tehran. A brief Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement under ex-president Mohamed Morsi was quickly buried following his ouster. The purported reason was Salafist hostility towards Shia influence though deep rooted hostility towards Tehran from the Mubarak years undoubtedly played a role.

The Geneva deal could strengthen the push from Egypt’s diplomatic camp to normalise ties with Iran. But since Morsi’s ouster, which has Riyadh’s full backing, Cairo is hand tied.

The interim agreement poses compelling questions over Iran’s support for Hizbullah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but few are capable of providing answers. “Tehran won’t negotiate on that front easily and must get a huge price in the settlement of the [Israeli-Palestinian question],” said Nafi. “For now the Syrian file will come first.”

Beyond this, notes International Crisis Group’s senior Iran analyst Ali Vaez, the fact that Tehran has established direct communication channels with Washington “could lay the groundwork for

the two sides' cooperation on issues of common interest in the region, such as Afghanistan's stability, Iraq's future and the rise of Islamic extremists in the region".

There is, however, "no evidence to support that détente between Tehran and Washington will be tantamount to condoning Iran's regional policies. Three decades of mistrust and enmity cannot be overcome overnight".

What's clear is that Iranians are bracing for their country's rehabilitation and prospects of a world without sanctions. Rouhani who is presenting the deal as his first 100 days in office achievement is being celebrated in many ways, among them a Persian language music video replicating the "Yes We Can" for Obama in 2008. Three decades of hostility might not be as entrenched as many might think.