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Iran-US enmity to continue despite deal

By Mahan Abedin

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In the wake of the Geneva interim agreement of late November, which marked the first formal agreement between Iran and the United States since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, there are increasing hopes and fears of an Iranian-US rapprochement. Whilst much of the international community views Iranian-US rapprochement in positive terms, the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf led by Saudi Arabia and Israel are stridently opposed to this putative rapprochement on political and ideological grounds.

Formidable regional opposition to a rapprochement notwithstanding, and assuming that last month's interim agreement leads to a lasting settlement on the nuclear issue, an Iranian-American detente is unlikely to unfold foremost due to the nature and ambitions of the Iranian political establishment.

Both the logic driving Iranian foreign policy and the emerging domestic consensus in Tehran militate against a detente. On the international sphere, whilst the Islamic Republic continues to be a revolutionary state, the incremental success of its foreign policy has transformed originally ideological goals into normative policy platforms that are perceived to be synonymous with the national interest.

On the domestic front, the emergence of a more authoritarian state since 2009 has lent greater cohesion to public opinion and aligned it more closely to the dominant state ideology. The net

result is that the bulk of the Iranian public, in tandem with the ruling establishment, instinctively view the United States as an inherently unfriendly power. Whilst this does not condemn the two states to perennial enmity, it does rule out full-fledged normalization of ties.

Strident foreign policy

In the light of the Islamic Republic's successful regional diplomacy, it is difficult to argue against the general direction of Iranian foreign policy. Iran's geopolitical weight has increased steadily since the 1980s to the point where the Islamic Republic figures prominently in every issue and fault-line of import in the region. For example, Iran's role as spoiler has been central to the skewed evolution of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

Iran has proven adept at skillfully exploiting America's foreign policy mistakes since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, notably in occupied Iraq (2003-2011), where the Islamic Republic deftly transformed Iraq's strategic profile from one of proximate enemy to a friend and even a potential ally to Iran.

In Syria, the resilience and inherent rationale of Iranian foreign policy is coming into sharp relief as the Syrian government gradually asserts control and the balance of power shifts away from the armed opposition. However, the most important observation from the Syrian civil war is not that Iran is winning, but that even in the face of daunting odds the Islamic Republic is fiercely loyal to its friends and allies. It is worth remembering that Syria was Iran's sole Arab ally during the difficult years of the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s.

Nearly 35 years since the Iranian revolution, one of the most striking features of Iranian politics is the extent to which originally revolutionary ideals have been transformed into apparently normative goals and values. This is especially the case in relation to the Palestinians and revolutionary Shia movements in Lebanon, whose cause has been consistently championed by Iranian rulers over the past three decades. In both cases Iran's position is viewed by a critical mass of Iranian experts and the wider public as consistent with the national interest.

The metanarrative of Iranian foreign policy is infused by opposition to the United States, and to that end Iran has very deliberately framed its regional foreign policy goals in contradistinction to that of the Americans. It is clear that any wide ranging detente with the United States - let alone the full-fledged normalization of ties - would pose serious conceptual problems to the theoretical basis of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy.

Unity at home

At the domestic level, the Islamic Republic is now more united than ever before. For the first time since the 1979 revolution conservatives of various stripes are in charge of every branch of government. For three decades, and up to the disputed presidential elections of June 2009, factional politics was the defining feature of the Islamic Republic's political society. The political disputes centering on former president Mahmud Ahmadinejad's controversial re-election - and the street protests and riots which ensued - galvanized the establishment and its supporters to embrace a more authoritarian state model.

Persistent discontent notwithstanding, a critical mass of the Iranian public is aligned with the state's world view, whose central ethos is ideological and cultural opposition to the United States, encapsulated by the characterization of America as the "Great Satan".

Beyond party politics, the Islamic Republic's dense institutional landscape is infused by nationalism and an idiosyncratic Islamic revivalist discourse. The emergence of powerful institutions committed to safeguarding revolutionary goals and values is the biggest obstacle to a return of American influence in Iran.

The best example of course is the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), whose military might is superior to that of the conventional Iranian armed forces. If the voluminous public statements of its commanders are any indication of its ideological moorings, then the IRGC is arguably more anti-American than al-Qaeda.

While President Hassan Rouhani is expected to exert the maximum effort to try to reach some kind of accommodation with the United States, he has neither the mandate nor the ambition to interfere with the powerful institutions which shape the Islamic Republic's posture on the global stage.

Even as the Islamic Republic makes modest concessions on the nuclear issue, it is likely to pursue its goals on other fronts with renewed vigor. US President Barack Obama's inability to force his declared red lines on Syria was a massive boon to the Iranians, who are more confident than ever of avoiding a shooting war with the Americans.

For more than a decade Syria was presented by neo-conservatives as the so-called "hanging fruit" of the Iranian influence infrastructure in the region, which could be knocked out by expending minimum effort. From Tehran's point of view, if the Americans are not steely enough to attack Syria for fear of provoking dramatic unintended consequences, they are highly unlikely to bomb the Islamic Republic.

At the grand strategic level, even if the much talked about decline of US power in the Middle East proves to be slower than anticipated, Iran is still likely to undertake increasingly bold steps to displace the United States as the region's dominant power. In the final analysis, as long as the United States maintains a hegemonic military and political presence in the Middle East the cry of "death to America" will continue to resonate across the streets of Tehran.