Enemy of My Enemy: Keeping Iran Cornered through Saudi-Israeli Strategy

The endlessly fickle oscillation of global affairs is being witnessed today by the waxing and waning of American enthusiasm for an Iranian nuclear deal, now supposedly concluded with a brokered agreement on July 14. But that supposition is in error. The debate between the initial liberal excitement of rapprochement with the long-time adversary that was always quickly countered by the expected conservative skepticism of a deal being nothing but Persian subterfuge to sneak nuclear weapons past the nose of Western inspectors is going to continue. The subsequent broadsides taken by said skeptics by a “counter counterpunch” will also continue: failure to engage Iran will only undermine any latent local democratic passion in-country while strengthening the true adversary – the Guardian Council and its overarching theocratic irrationality. If that has not spun your diplomatic head enough, given that we are all supposed to be celebrating the newly concluded deal, consider these battling fear and fantasy logics about engagement with Iran (how continuing, or not continuing, sanctions against Iran is either incitement to create an imperial Persian tyrant or, conversely, much ado about nothing) will ultimately be insignificant compared to how both Israel and Saudi Arabia work strategically to keep Iran deep in its global community corner, deal or no deal.

The fear aspect comes from worrying about ‘freeing’ Iran from crippling sanctions. While those who view Iran from a more hawkish perspective lament how much influence the Shiite republic has managed to obtain across the Middle East while ‘weakened,’ they are nearly apoplectic with the possibility of removing sanctions and actually letting Iran enter the world market and start to develop global economic stability. The fear logic dictates that a prosperous Iran would not be newly responsible but only more bullish and disruptive across the region. The fantasy aspect, however, decrees that the West is making too much out of Iranian desires to be a regional military hegemon. This dismissal relies on materiel statistics that judge Iranian war-making capability as not just obsolete and behind most of the possible regional rivals it might challenge, but as possibly decrepit. Indeed, Saudi Arabia and Israel both massively outspend and out-invest Iran in terms of defense and military capacity and their current standing in terms of direct comparison is considered laughable: simply put, Saudi Arabia and Israel are modern 21st century militaries while Iran is a mid-20th century military at best. All of this back-and-forth, however, misses one very key aspect: it plays exactly into the geopolitically manipulative interests of Saudi Arabia and Israel as it concerns holding Iran down.

This is not necessarily a criticism of either Saudi Arabia or Israel aiming to accomplish this goal. Geopolitical competition is always about advantage and disadvantage and most view that game still as zero-sum. This has been especially so in the Middle East. In the world of Intelligence Studies, however, what matters most is gaining insight from information. And while that is possible when the information is impartial, it becomes nearly impossible when the information is flawed or misleading. This is what will happen in the aftermath of the nuclear deal with Iran, as anyone who reads it will notice almost immediately that it is much more a temporary postponement rather than a permanent solution. What I find so distasteful is not how the interested parties are all now trying to cater and ‘manage’ the information to their own national agendas. To me, that is a basic definition of foreign affairs, albeit a somewhat callous and blunt one. No, what is distasteful is how the United States often fails to see itself being played by ‘allies’ while being adamantly watchful against such possibilities with ‘adversaries.’ The problem, of course, is that whether you are played by friend or foe you are still, in the end, simply PLAYED. And being played doesn’t usually end up in your own favor. A recent piece from Foreign Policy perfectly illustrates how this can be both openly evident and inexplicably not noticed:
The Russian and Iranian position is that the Security Council resolutions rested on the understanding that the arms embargo would be lifted once concerns regarding Iran’s nuclear program were resolved. Provided that a deal is reached on Iran’s nuclear program, Russia and Iran thus argue, the arms embargo loses its legal justification. The current U.S. position, however, may be less interested in maintaining coherence with past policy than it is with ensuring that it mitigates regional allies’ concern as much as possible as part of a nuclear deal with Iran. Understandably, U.S. President Barack Obama’s administration fears that undoing the arms embargo on Iran would be a step too far for some of the United States’ key regional allies, all of which — but particularly Saudi Arabia — threaten to undermine the administration’s case for a nuclear deal should they perceive their interests to dictate in favor of doing so.” (The Myth of the Iranian Military Giant, Foreign Policy, July 10, 2015)

The line emphasized in bold and italics is a nod to Israeli and Saudi concerns about Iran as a legitimate regional presence. It is not so much about military conquest or even regional defense hegemony, which is what the original Foreign Policy piece was trying to dismiss from the discussion table. Rather, it is acknowledgement of a very serious but more implicit reason: namely, Saudi Arabia and Israel never want to see a Middle East that has a globally-embraced or even slowly-integrating Iran. In Israel’s case, it is an obvious reference to Iran’s so-called foreign policy goal to wipe the Jewish state off the map. No matter what changes happen within Iran, no matter what reforms or constraints or inroads made against the Guardian Council, Israel will never see Iran other than the Holocaust-denying, anti-Semitic, radical Shiite republic incapable of ever truly altering the political course set in 1979 by the Ayatollah (Prime Minister Netanyahu’s comments today only bear witness to this).

In Saudi Arabia’s case, it is the sometimes shrill Wahhabist concern over Shiite encroachment in the Gulf and any perceived challenge, no matter how remote, that Iran might make against the Ummah, the transnational Muslim community writ large. It is easy to forget the radical cleric community within Wahhabism is not exactly tame and docile compared to the radical cleric community within Shia Islam. We are, in essence, witnessing the battle between Gulf radical Islam versus Persian radical Islam for the ‘religious conscience’ of the region. This is not, of course, the official diplomatic line given from the Saudi royal family in terms of its priorities or agendas. But it is, without question, a matter of ‘soul importance’ to the religious community within Saudi Arabia. And the fact of the matter is that Saudi religious zealots do not take a back seat to Iranian religious zealots as it concerns zealotry. America just chooses to not draw its attention to that fact and the nuclear deal is not going to lessen this intense rivalry in the least.

And thus, back to the original quote above. That which piece fails to observe or conclude is just how long-term damaging such a position is to the diplomatic and foreign policy credibility of the United States. Put another, more blunt, way: it is stating that America honors or betrays its own policies not because of coherence or rationality or justice. But rather it arbitrarily alters course dependent upon present-day allegiances and the needs of those duly initiated into the ‘inner American circle.’ What mitigating allies’ concerns truly means in this case is America may ultimately betray its promises and principles on stage today for other promises made to friends tomorrow. It just depends on how important the friends are. And Israel and Saudi Arabia are banking on always being very good friends. This is the true Great Game of the Middle East that no one likes to talk about. It is a game of strategic doubletalk. What is potentially the most frustrating in this particular context is how the Great Game might in the end actually backfire on the long-term security of not just the Middle East region or the United States national security agenda but of the actual nuclear deal concluded today.

Truly turning Iran, long-term, into a functioning member of the global community, not just with its benefits but with its responsibilities and obligations, might be the only real plan that allows the Iranian people, long-studied and long-documented as perhaps the most democratically-knowledgeable and democratically-aspiring people within the Muslim world, to finally reconstruct its own society in a manner that fundamentally changes the nature and the dynamic of the region. That possibility has only an inkling of a chance if the present deal is not actively undermined, if the powers on the stage that crafted it work in the coming years to turn what was initially a temporary band-aid into a full-on permanent brace. And that, quite frankly, won’t happen if the two most important countries that did not have their flags on the dais today in front of the cameras work hard to ensure this temporary solution becomes simply a confirmation of everyone’s worst assumptions about Iran. Perhaps, in the end, that is exactly what Israel and Saudi Arabia want the most. They don’t want change. They want affirmation. Sometimes status quo has its seduction.

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