The Rise of Iran as a Regional Shia Power: A Closer Investigation of the Iran’s Wider Role and Influence in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT: Tehran has become the heart of the Middle East power center and Iran’s role in the Middle East geopolitics is undeniable. Without Iran’s perspective, understanding the future of Middle East is not possible. Nowadays, Tehran’s diplomatic and political power brokers are involved in negotiating power sharing in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Armenia and even Syria. They are trying to expand their influence in other countries including Yemen and Bahrain. Growing complexity in the region has helped Iran to expand its influence and flex its muscles in the entire Middle East. Tehran’s policies have always been successful and currently it is in the threshold of winning position. Iranian strategy and influence have increased after the Arab Spring. The region’s dominant power Iran has extensive connection with political parties, militia, and governments of several countries even at the ground level in the region. Components of the Middle East countries wait for Tehran’s gesture during both times of peace or war. Iranian military commanders deployed in the Middle East have high level of influence in comparison to other countries. Strong security and intelligence of Iran have played significant role in bolstering its influence in Syria, Afghanistan power deal, management of Hezbollah, connection with the Hamas, Yemeni Hutu or current role in Iraq’s victory against Islamic State terrorist fighters. What can be understood is that only a joint effort of Iran and the United States will help in stabilizing the region. However, making an alliance between these two countries might prove to be a Herculean task.

KEYWORDS: Tehran, Middle East, Regionalism, Conflict

1. INTRODUCTION

The Middle East in 2015, like the Middle East one hundred years ago and in 1915, is still a place for remarkable political trends, actors, groupings, as well as various forms of political dealing.
Iran’s actions in the Middle East of 2015 led to a return by all actors to Iranian solutions from the viewpoint of fighting against terrorism, bolstering alliances, emphasis on regionalism and opposition to presence of foreign forces in the region. The importance, role and position of the Middle East in 2015 was highlighted for Iran in the fight against terrorism, especially with regard to the ongoing crisis in Syria. However, the idea of regional convergence, which was continuously promoted by Iran in the Middle East in 2015 was overshadowed by other crises that are raging on in various parts of the region.

Of course, after conclusion of the Iran deal with the P5+1 group of countries on July 14, 2015, Iran took steps to rebuild its foreign policy in the Middle East on the basis of emphasis on neighborly rights. However, a set of measures taken by the Arab and Israeli front and radical groups erected impediments on the way of Iran’s effort in this regard. Of special note is the role played by the Arab-Israeli front, which is against Iran’s views and is pivoted around Saudi Arabia, in blocking Iran’s participation in building security across the Middle East. As the situation of the all-out civil war in Yemen became critical followed by expansion of Daesh terrorist group’s destructive operations in Iraq and Syria, and subsequent to the Mina tragedy in which a large number of Iran Hajj pilgrims lost their lives, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia became extremely tense and the Middle East in 2015 was pushed to the brink of proxy wars.

Unhappy with the Iran nuclear agreement, the United States Republican Party and Israel are focusing the bulk of their opposition on two fronts.

For them, the agreement fails to totally eliminate the Iranian nuclear threat. They also believe that the lifting of sanctions might potentially cause further havoc in the Middle East. While many scientists, former diplomats and members of the intelligence community in the US and Israel have spoken publicly about the technical parts of the deal, few have tackled the unproven claims that an emboldened Iran is creating further troubles in an already burning region.

Opponents rattle that Iran is the leading sponsor of terrorism in the world, and that the influx of billions of dollars into its coffers will somehow encourage Iranians to expand their influence at the expense of the moderate Arab regimes around them.

The events and actions of Tehran and the reactions in the region ever since the signing of the agreement in Vienna last July point in the opposite direction.

A look at the Syrian, Yemeni and Palestinian conflicts all point to the fact that the agreement has been playing a positive, rather than a negative, role.
2. NUCLEAR DEAL

In the wake of the nuclear deal, Tehran is hoping to be allowed to take its place on the world stage, but distrust of America, and especially of Israel, remains a huge obstacle. In the Syrian conflict, where the Iranians and Russians have supported Bashar al-Assad ever since the popular revolt began, Iran succeeded in brokering a 48-hour ceasefire in three important cities on August 12, a day before a visit by Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to the Syrian capital.

In fact, the ceasefire, part of an effort by Tehran to help resolve the Syrian civil war, was extended for a further two days.

In Yemen, popular forces loyal to the country's legitimate President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi have been making impressive gains mostly in the south of the country.

But the much talked about alliance between the Houthis and Iran - who were expected to move in support of their co-religious Yemenis - has never surfaced.

No strong evidence shows that Tehran is aiding the anti-Hadi forces. On the contrary, the Iranians have been supportive of the UN led peace talks in Geneva and are not viewed as serving much of a role in that crisis.

On the Palestinian front, a senior Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) leader visiting Tehran said that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is scheduled to visit Iran in the coming two months.

The visit followed a much publicized detachment between Tehran and Hamas, and a move by Hamas to get closer to Saudi Arabia.

These developments in the aftermath of the nuclear deal signal that Iran is a force of moderation - rather than extremism - in the Middle East.

A more confident Iran that does not feel an existential threat from the US should no longer be seen as the troublemaker in region.

While all the above might not be conclusive proof that Iran has further moderated its position since the signing of the nuclear deal, it goes to show that it is certainly hard to prove that Iran will become more radical, as opponents to the deal claim.

3. ARABS AND IRAN AFTER THE DEAL

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Since the start of the Arab uprisings, there has been much discussion about how the new strategic environment in the Arab world will affect both Iran’s role in regional politics and, more broadly, Arab attitudes toward Tehran. It was clear from the outset that the picture for Iran was mixed: on the one hand, there was the loss of key opponents, like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and the empowerment of the Shi’a communities in neighboring Arab states, especially Bahrain; on the other hand, there were the troubles of Iran’s key allies in Damascus and the consequent pressure on Hezbollah in Lebanon. Overall, there was a sense that the Arab uprisings presented more costs than benefits for Iran. Add to this a prevalent assumption that a democratic Egypt that could regain its popularity in the Arab world would ultimately erode non-Arab Iran’s influence—which is in good part a function of the vacuum of popular leadership in the Arab world—and Iran’s prospects look even weaker.

Worries among Persian Gulf states, particularly Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, about the expansion of the Arab uprisings to their own Shi’a populations have also increased these countries’ incentives to highlight a perceived Iranian threat. But this picture masks a far more complex reality in Arab attitudes toward Iran before and after the start of the Arab uprisings. This complexity is reflected not only in the gap of perception between the Arab people on the one hand and Arab governments on the other, but also in important differences on Iran across Arab governments. And even among Arab governments most threatened by Iran and most inclined to see it weakened, including militarily, their sense of threat and how to address it differs substantially from Israel’s sense of threat.

The futility and final failure of Saudi Arabia’s Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen in the middle of 2015, drew attention to Iran’s potentialities and strategies, and highlighted the need to bank on the Islamic Republic’s actions and influence for the resolution of strategic crises in the Middle East. Holding of the Munich Security Conference in Tehran in 2015, was one of the most important results of the increased attention by European neighbors of the Middle East to Iran’s original, natural, game-changing and solution-building role in the equations related to the Middle East, especially in Iran’s neighbors.

After Russia’s air raids against the positions of radical and opposition groups in Syria started in late September 2015, the international community’s need and Iran’s high potentialities, paved the way for the country to be officially invited by world powers to take part in new rounds of political talks on the situation in Syria in the Austrian capital city of Vienna. Iran’s official participation and presence in political talks on the future outlook of Syria in Vienna, was indicative of the country’s considerable influence on future security,
political and strategic arrangements in the Middle East. Also, after Turkey’s F-16 fighter jets shot down Russia’s Sukhoi 24 bomber over Syria, Iran took a reasonable position on this incident by advising both sides to exercise self-restraint. Iran's position was also endorsed by NATO and the United States and encompassed Iran’s strategic viewpoint toward the Middle East in 2015, which gives priority to order, security and stability.

4. ECONOMIC BOOST: A POWER TOOL IN THE HANDS OF IRAN

Iran’s is likely to become a regional economic powerhouse over the next 10 years, with growth rates of around 3.5% this expected this year as sanctions begin to loosen. This would place Iran as the second fastest growing of the MENA economies. According to the IMF, since 2011, sanctions have wiped off between 15-20% from Iranian GDP.

In addition to this, the nuclear deal will also unfreeze around $100 billion of Iran’s overseas assets (estimates range from anywhere between $50 billion and $150 billion). This infusion of liquidity into the Iranian economy, coupled with the fact that Iran is already MENA’s most diversified economy, provide the ingredients for Iranian economic superpower status by 2025.

Additionally, Iran will also be able to add a further 1.5 million barrels of oil per day to the world markets. While it will not be able to match Saudi Arabia’s overall oil output, Tehran does hold a distinct advantage over its rival by virtue of the fact that the House of Saud despite, recent efforts to diversify, remains a one-trick pony heavily reliant on petrodollars to prop up its economy.

Buffeted by international sanctions, Iran remains rich in natural resources. The removal of sanctions may also see the return of the estimated 300,000 Iranians forced to look for work abroad. Iran will also continue to make strides in its historically strong fields, mathematics and science, where it will look to become a world leader once again.

Iran’s economic future appears bright, with circumstances conducive to regional superpower status by 2025. Iran has obvious potential to dominate the MENA region economically as its economy heats up post-sanctions. Its well-diversified economy will enjoy the benefits of a return to international trade, aiding it in its quest for regional dominance.

Whether this provokes an evolution in Iran’s external predilections is open to question. With the electoral vetting process making it difficult for reformists to truly play a large role in

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politics, power arguably remains concentrated in the hands of hardliners, intent on propagating anti-Western, anti-Israeli propaganda. Such a stance will do nothing to evolve Iran’s position within the global order.

Iran’s reintegration into the global economy with the lifting of economic sanctions brings great joy of Iranians but deep reservations to many Americans. With access to more than $100 billion in once-frozen assets, Iran will undoubtedly help shape our world economy, allowing Iran to expand its sphere of influence, mainly in the Middle East.

To Iran, one of the positive elements in this turn of events is its ability to rejoin the top ranks of global oil producers. Iran expects economic growth of more than 5 percent in 2016, its central bank's governor said on Saturday, after emerging from years of isolation and crippling international sanctions over the country's nuclear program.

The major oil producer's economy is still struggling and growth is close to zero but many investors are betting that restoring Iran's links with the world and attracting foreign capital and technology will trigger a long-term economic boom.

5. CONCLUSION

Apparently the Iranian foreign policy in the region is particularly active in every field of diplomatic relations. The systematic and multiple character of Iranian influence and collaboration with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon makes Iran the only country in the region which has developed such a diverse activity. Moreover the Iranian activity in these countries is not accidental but it takes place according to a plan with specific goals. These features could term the ongoing Iranian activity as an effort to create and sustain an “axis”. Furthermore, the framework agreement between Iran and the P5+1 (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPOA) is a watershed event for the region, both on its own merit and in the light of other events in the region. Advocates of the agreement view it as the harbinger of stability insofar as it is supposed to defuse one of the most critical issues that hovered over the Middle East during the last decade – the specter of Iran becoming a nuclear power. Its critics view it as appeasement of an extremist Islamist regime that will give birth to a poly-nuclear Middle East, encourage Tehran to persevere in its current aggressive policies in the region and add fuel to the Sunni-Shiite war.
Considering all the points raised, it seems that Iran will continue increasing its power in the Middle East owing to the strategic movements it has taken in the recent years. The competition between Iran and some of the Arab countries will move to the future. Finally, the economy of Iran will boost soon as the sanctions are really lifted.

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