

# A NEW PERSPECTIVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO THE US-IRAN RELATIONS IN THE REGION

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*Abstract:* This paper discusses the significance of the cooperation between the United States and Iran for the Middle East region. It will be argued that despite the political and ideological conflicts between the U.S. and Iran, reaching a “point by point” agreement would best help to resolve Middle East predicaments, especially the Islamic terrorism. To achieve this, the following pages examine the historical background of issues such as terrorism in the Middle East. This paper also focuses on two main paths to support the better U.S.-Iran cooperation, if not talking about relations at all. First, the theory of “point by point” approach helps both countries to tackle tough agendas and overcome the predicaments in the Middle East. Second, to reach the desired cooperation between these two countries, both the U.S. and Iran need to overcome their own internal constraints as well as the external constraints imposed by other countries. This paper takes an historical and theoretical approach to reveal the two countries’ common interests in the Middle East. The general thesis argues that the Middle East’s security requires the United States and Iran to develop a diplomatic and military cooperation.

*Keywords:* Middle East, United States, Iran, Nuclear Deal, Islamic State.

## INTRODUCTION

The current President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, won the 2014 election. It seems that his moderate approach to politics and his mandate to release Iran from the international economic and political sanction, is the reason for his current popularity in Iran (Akbarzadeh 2015: 44-45). The sanctions that followed the hostile foreign policies of the previous President of Iran, Ahmadinejad, are now taken seriously. In two years, President Rouhani and his cabinet have achieved the first phase of their foreign policy. They overcame part of a huge international sanction by means of successful results after the moderate approach to Iran’s nuclear negotiations: The Iran deal, which was breaking news for journalists.

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Many people in the Iranian regime, however, including the office-holders, are highly sceptical of the benefits of the compromise between Iran and the West. Their reason is the idea of anti-imperialism, anti-West, and their radical sense of nationalism. Though they believe that the United States is a great power, they reject it relentlessly, as if the U.S. will weaken Iran's sovereignty. The idea of nationalism in Iran has always been interwoven with xenophobia.

However, it was in the nuclear negotiations that one can see a notable change in the foreign policies of both Iran and the U.S. The Iran nuclear negotiations were not only a step toward a better understanding of the deal but also an initial gesture of peace between these two countries. Yet both the U.S. and Iran have been challenged in the Middle East by the so called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – IS, aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL/ISIS, or the Arabic and Persian acronym *Da'esh* – (Doostdar 2014), which is in fact a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that controls large areas of Iraq and Syria. This challenge is the result of the Arab Spring, in which the Arab upheaval has morphed into the sectarian warfare of extreme Islamists and consequently the formation of the centralized extremists power (Hass 2014). Furthermore, the emergence of terrorism in the Middle East also increased other atrocities such as human trafficking, drug trafficking, oil trafficking.

Such negative political, religious, and economic changes in the Middle East caused unexpected problems for all countries in the region, yet Iran seems to be exceptionally under pressure. Iran is an exception due to its political, religious, and economic uniqueness in the region. In short, Iran, as a non-Arab country, has had a unique experience in the economic and non-economic developments in the past thousands of years, compared to the neighbouring Arab countries, which have had merely economic experiences in the last century. Moreover, though Iran appears to be a Muslim country, it is a *Shia* country. This means that Iran diverges from the rest of the Muslim world. These two major points have always been strong decisive factors for Iranian politics and its foreign policy in the region.

## COALITION BACKGROUND

Critics in Europe and Iran have relentlessly tried to highlight the weaknesses of NATO – with the U.S. Army as the commander-in-chief – in the Middle East since the 90s. However, it seems that the emergence of the terrorist Islamic State (ISIL, ISIS) has changed the tension in the critique of the West.

ISIL has stated its intent to attack Americans. In December, 2015, shootings in San Bernardino, California were attributed to ISIL fighters who in fact had no apparent links to the organization, yet were praised by ISIL. Debates have continued over ISIL's atrocities in this regard, specifically, over whether ISIL is capable of directing, supporting, and carrying out further attacks in the United States and in the West.

Basically, what we need to know about the ISIL's statements is that they seek reactions from targeted, yet unnamed individuals. ISIL provokes and spurs confrontations between various Muslim sects and also between Muslims and non-Muslims. Looking at the bigger picture, in order to understand why the situations beyond the U.S. borders seem more dangerous, it is important to know that the doctrine of *jihad* incites bottom-up terrorism. Since November, 2015, a series of terrorist attacks, which were either inspired or directed by the Islamic State, has taken hundreds of lives around the world, especially in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Today, Islamism as an epidemic monstrosity creates a more global sense of urgency to combat the terrorist groups and reverse their spread from its wellspring, the Middle East.

Additionally, we need to know that ISIL has two main targets: the West and Iran. In this context, both Iran and the U.S.-led campaign to degrade and ultimately destroy the Islamic State organization in Iraq and Syria (IS, aka ISIL/ISIS or the Arabic acronym *Da'esh*) appeared to be entering a new phase in early 2016, as we can see that the official plans have been changing in terms of military strategies and tactics. Furthermore, they pursue new diplomatic and coalition-building initiatives, and are open to alternative proposals. The conflicts in Iraq and Syria still remain focal points in this regard (Blanchard & Humud 2016).

Here, we strongly suggest that regional conflicts, along with the problems of radicalism, terrorism, and *jihadism* call for a diplomatic initiative and a military coalition between Iran and the

U.S., particularly the formation of a coalition against organizations such as ISIL, and taking it a step further in cooperation. The military coalition between the U.S. and Iran against ISIL in Iraq is a unique step because it is the first cooperative gesture over the past four decades of conflicts between these two countries. It is unique also because it might cause these two countries to find more common and greater interests for cooperation and tackling the predicaments in the Middle East. Yet such coalitions, which might positively affect their respective foreign policies, face hard challenges from the Arab countries and from the great allies of Iran, Russia, and China.

The challenges highlighted here are rooted in all aspects, including history, ethnicity, religion, economic, and politics. Despite the anxiety of Russian and Persian Gulf countries, the military coalition between the U.S. and Iran has taken the first steps. First, from Russia's point of view, when Iran and the U.S. took one step toward each other, it means that Iran took one step away from Russia. Second, Iran's neighbouring countries, especially Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Jordan, have a strong interest in their economic and political influence in the region, and they see this friendly gesture as a threat to their national interest and power. We may now have a clearer approach to the state's behaviour in the region, particularly the conflicts in Syria. Here, let us start with the politics of alliance previous to the Iran-U.S. negotiation.

## IRAN'S POLITICS OF ALLIANCE BEFORE THE IRAN DEAL

The history of Iran in the last decades and its recent political ideology can explain its anti-western foreign policy. Yet in the past few months since Rouhani took over the office of the presidency from fundamentalist Ahmadinejad, we see a discontinuity of the Iranian anti-western foreign policy in a broader sense. In the past years, the geopolitical situations have changed dramatically. Iranian officials felt the threat of national security from ISIL and the pressure caused by sanctions. This may have made Iranian officials flexible in issues that are important to the West.

This flexibility of Iranian officials to the West's interests after Iran's nuclear negotiations is also related to the recent developments between Iran and Russia, which can be understood as a

form of “Russian imperialism” (Saul & Hafezi 2014; Katz 2010). Iran, especially in recent years, is frustrated by what it sees as a lack of cooperation from the Russian side. An unfinished Russian nuclear power plant in Iran, particularly the one in Boushehr, had already cost Iran billions of dollars. Moreover, ambiguity in the Russian foreign policy, which is the essence of the political discourse in Russia, left Iran with broken promises in international relations (see Deutschmann 2016; Andreeva 2007).

Russia’s approach to Iran’s nuclear program shows this ambiguity and reveals that not only do Iran’s national interests disagree with Russia’s, but the two countries have quite opposing international-relation interests (Juneau & Razavi 2013: 208-22). During the negotiation of Iran’s nuclear program, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted four sanctions against Iran, which seems to have been Russia’s effort to dilute the resolution. However, at the end of each round, the Kremlin ultimately voted in favour of the UNSC sanctions. This is one example among many decisions Russia made that show its ambiguous position to Iran. Reviewing the Iranian-Russian relationship over the last 40 years, we can see that in the short term, Moscow not only had the upper hand but also profited. Even if Russia could dilute sanctions on Iran, it seems that it was merely for increasing Iran’s dependence on Russian protection.

The ambiguity of Russian politics teaches both the West and Iran a lesson. With regard to the West, Russia primarily attempts to block American influence on Middle East security, either by lobbying and vetoing in the UN, or by bullying its allies, or expressing its anger by using the ISIL as an excuse to bombard Syria. Consequently, Russia’s bold persuasion of national interests and its political ambiguity in international relations indicates its political instability in relation to the West and its unreliability for its allies, namely, Iran. This is also tangible in the Russian-Iranian relationship (Katz 2010). Therefore, Russia reveals its opposition to Iran becoming the regional power.

After the Revolution of 1979, Iranian officials saw imperialist offers as a good opportunity to have an ally in the region. In the long term, however, we can see that the core of Russian national interest, part of which is to have control over the southern flank, conflicts with the ambitions of Iranian officials to possess the ruling power in the region.

Russia's national interests do not comprise the rational-normative-principles nor do they share the common international interests of the West. This contradiction is also visible in the relationship between Russia and Iran. Moscow opposes Tehran's ambition to become the economic and military power of the region. In contrast, the reason Russia does not like Iran's development is simply because Iran is Russia's traditional regional opponent. We can also see that this opposition has manifested in the recent orientation of Iranian foreign policy toward the West by means of the Iran deal negotiation. The priority of Russia's foreign policy, in fact, is to monopolize influence throughout the region, hence combating the West. This would clearly show why Russia brutally bombarded Syria and occupied Crimea in Ukraine. Moscow wants to assert two points. First, Moscow wants to show Iran that if Iran wants to move to the West, Russia is ready to take any military measure to destroy the country. Second, Moscow wants to show the West, similarly, that it is ready to start WW III if it loses its influence in the region (Blanchard & Humud 2016: 21, 25, 35).

Based on the history between these two countries, it can be understood that due to the conflicts of interests, ideologies, and foreign policies, Moscow is not a reliable ally. Indeed, the Iranian-Russian political history is affected by the rivalries between their powers. Even though they continued rhetorical strategies, in reality, they lack a sustained cooperation. Hence, as time passed by, their interests have been frequently more divergent than convergent (Juneau 2014; Juneau & Razavi 2013).

However, we should not forget that Iran needs a sufficient military power. Here, we might wonder why Iran and Russia are cooperating in producing S-300 or in the air-defence systems? We can answer this question only if we understand Iran's current position in international relations. On one hand, Russia is concerned with Iran's potential to dramatically develop in both industry and military. If Russia left Iran, Iran's dependency would have shifted toward the West. On the other hand, Russia helps Iran, if we can call it help at all, and benefits in a way that supports its imperialism by working all the way through Iranian' internal affairs. Thus, every diplomatic and military decision Tehran makes, somehow depends on or is related to Moscow.

The other problem influencing Iran's foreign policy against the West is China. As the one-party dictatorship with a state-

capitalist economy, China has anti-western interests in the Middle East. China is one of the largest energy consumers and sees Iran as its oil and energy resource, a good opportunity for its growing economics. At the same time, China shares Russia's opposition to Iran gaining power in the region. Thus, when it comes to negotiating the role of Iran, they already followed their defined roles in the UNSC, whereby China gave Russia a major decisive role in the Persian Gulf's military affairs. It seems that Beijing's approach built a firm tie with Tehran. Yet this tie came at some cost; China alienated the region's major oil-producing Arab countries (Guzansky 2015: 115).

However, China, just like Russia, showed that its national interests are not in agreement with those of its political allies. China is against Western influence in the Middle East and takes the same approach as Russia to Iran's potential power in the region. In this sense, Russia and China may appear to be Iran's allies, but in reality, they are against the strong role of Iran as well as of the United States in the Middle East (see Entessar and Afrasiabi 2015).

#### U.S.-IRAN RELATIONS AND THE PERSIAN GULF STATES: WHY IRAN?

Above all, Iran and the U.S. share one problem in particular that affects their relationship and their cooperation as well as the policies that they are adopting. Their common problem is the constraints caused mainly by the policies of the Persian Gulf states, specifically the Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, and Bahrain. From the historical point of view, there have always been rivalries between Iran, as a major power in the Middle East, and its Arab neighbours, which are chiefly due to their ideological, political, and ethnic differences. In this sense, when experts try to present a different interpretation of contemporary political coincidences that take place between the Persian Gulf states, they have to bear in mind that one of the most important insights is the simple but important differences between the ethnicity and ideologies of these countries. And if we reduce the differences to that simple element, we can argue that the differences in ethnicity are the oldest basis of the religious conflicts.

This argument may or may not appear new or popular, yet it is worth considering. To understand it we need a specific case. For example, the main reason for the divergence between *Shia* and *Sunni* was initially based on differences between Persians and Arabs. Whereas Iran comprises the *Shia* population, the neighbouring Arab countries are *Sunni*. Although these are both Islamic cults, they are rooted in the political movements that took place during the early age of the religion. Therefore, though it seems unlikely that modern, western experts would agree, the key to understanding the prevailing political concept in the Middle East is to consider the simple elements that we just named. Even those who study terrorism and Islamism can benefit from this approach. So let us elaborate on this point to understand the current political issues between Iran and the rest of the of the Persian Gulf states.

During early Islam, there were four major opponents known as the four “Rightly Guided” or Rashidun *Caliphs*: Abu Bakr (632-634), Umar (634-644), Uthman (644-656), and Ali (656-661). They were neither united nor made compromises. They were at war with each other until each was killed by one of the opponents. Their descendants carried on their rivalries for power. The descendants of Ali came to Iran as political refugees after the massacre known as *Ashura*. Over many years, the Persian nationalist ideology of became identical with being *Shia*, which is automatically associated with an anti-*Sunni* identity. As a result, we can see the two major Islamic cults: *Sunni* with a majority in all Arab states, and *Shia* with the majority in Iran (Hibri 2010).

After years of war, the *Sunnis* have presented themselves – in today’s political terms – as the conservatives who emphasize the early Islamic politics and the bold identity of *Jihad* or war. Because all of the wars fought in the Middle East are religiously anointed, *Jihad* politics are respected as a holy act in the name of Islam and *Allah* – the Arabic word for God – hence *Jihad* politics found increasing numbers of followers across the Arab world.

While various theories exist explaining why Persia/Iran openly accept Shia, two explanations are relevant to our argument: religious and political. From the religious point of view, most of the Iranian/Persian population have been influenced by the Islamic ideology and believed in Islam as hope for a new way of life. From the political and historical point of view, which is our concern



here, there had always been a political and ethnic conflict between the Persian Empire, which tried to control the Arab tribes, and the rebel Arabs, who could not see themselves under the control of Persian authorities. Thus, with the emergence of Islam, they centralized a political power which in capacity could condemn Persian rule over the Arab tribes. The flow of *Shia* in Iran, after hundreds of years of wars between Persians and Arabs, was a political opportunity for Persians who welcomed the refugees. Such religiously anointed politics caused Persia/Iran to become the *Shia* shelter and the Persians became their defenders. Since then, consequently, the political and ethnic conflicts between Persians and Arabs are also interpreted as the conflicts between Shia and Sunni. Thus, knowledge of this historical and political background is crucial to the understanding of today's situation in the Middle East. The current power relation in the Persian Gulf is the product of the ubiquitous competition between Iran and its Arab neighbours.

From the Western perspective, however, the Iranian-Arab conflict works against the economic and political ambiance of the Middle East (Gause 2009: 244-245; Kostiner 2009: 244-245). Regardless of the nature of the Tehran regime, Iran has always been considered to be the hegemonic power in the region, or to have the potential to be so.

Until 1970, the United Kingdom and Russia saw Iran as the most advantageous oil-source of the region, with both occupying the South and North of Iran, respectively, and building the massive petroleum industry. As a compensation for such industrial abuse, they offered partial security to Iran against its Arab opponents and Iran's sovereignty over the region (Abrahamian 2008). Russian felt left behind in comparison with the English oil industry. So they triggered ideas of anti-English imperialism in Iran, yet did not know that such ideas would also cost them their own lucrative industry in the North of Iran.

Mohammad Mosaddegh was an Iranian politician who was the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran from 1951 until 1953. Yet his fame arose in response to his notable endeavours to nationalize the Iranian oil industry. As a consequence, his government was overthrown in a *coup d'état* aided by the British Secret Intelligence Service (Kinzer 2003, p.258). The conflict, obvi-

ously, was the imperialist struggle between Russia and the United Kingdom.

During the Pahlavi period, Iran's foreign policy changed in relation to its petroleum industrial partners. Iran wanted to be independent and took over the monopoly of its oil industry to benefit its oil resources (Flanagan 2013). This was the beginning of the modern conflict between Iran and the West. Yet the United State has had no imperialist interest to do what England and Russia did. This conflict continued until the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which was strongly supported by England, France, and Russia (Hakimfar 1991; Sahidi 2001). These countries hoped to begin a new era of imperialism in Iran. As a post-revolution consequence, Russia was able to win the situation and remain in Iran since then.

Washington has seen the power rivalries between Russia and England and the potential threat of semi-regional conflict in the Middle East, and as consequence, the collapse of the world economy in the 1970s. The American officials thought that they could not afford another catastrophe in the Middle East. Washington assumed responsibility for regional stability in the Iran-Arab and Iran-West conflicts. Iran's policies towards the Persian Gulf states have therefore also been shaped since 1979 by the strong American presence in what Tehran considers its sphere of influence (Fürtig 2007). The U.S. main objective is to stabilize the region to make it a safe zone. They want to protect it against Russia's significant influence and its economic and politically ambitious interests (Saul & Hafezi 2014). Yet Iran's interest has always been the power of the region, which is rooted in its historical, political, and ideological principles. In this sense, Iran – which has been excessively affected by the Russian influence – sees U.S. foreign policy in opposition to its own foreign policy. This sceptical approach to the West partially blinds Tehran to the foreign policies of its so-called allies. It also caused Tehran to make excessively conservative decisions.

Yet the role of Arab countries is a two-sided magnet. They push the U.S. to stand by them as they both offer and threaten the West with their possible economic influence which mostly relies on their limited and therefore temporal oil resources (see Tollitz 2005; Forest and Sousa 2007). Arab countries' foreign policies are contradictory, as they can only be realized at the expense of their

security, and in Saudi Arabia's case, can only clash with their own ambitions. Indeed, the potential war between Iran and the U.S., which now seems more unlikely than ever, would render both sides of the bargain irrecoverable, as did all the wars in history. On the one hand, it satisfies Russia, as Moscow can continue its politics of ambiguity, defeat Iran's ambition to be the region's power and hope for Iran's permanent military and political dependency on the Kremlin. On the other hand, it satisfies Arab countries, especially the Persian Gulf states, because such rivalry between Iran and the U.S. helps the Arab countries to achieve their economic and political ambition, namely, to be the dominant power of the region. Here, we have to ask what are the United States' interests, and can they be effected by these rivalries? Furthermore, should the cost of having a relationship with Iran be paid with the conflicts of other allies in the region?

The key to answering this question depends on the foreign policies of Iran and the U.S. If Iran and other countries in the region want to benefit the most from the region's stability, and have a balance of power, the vital step is to overcome the thousands of years of conflict with a new political perspective. That means that all of the countries in the region, such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Qatar, and Jordan, try to reach a constituent agreement with compromises and mutual benefits. Sometimes during this process, reforms in the regimes' foreign policies are inevitable, yet the benefits will compensate the partial losses and help support the sovereignty of each regime, as well as protect the economic and political security of the region. For example, we see the shift in the foreign policy of United States when we consider the period from Clinton's Dual Containment and George W Bush's Axis of Evil designation to Obama's negotiation process with Iran.

Indeed, the U.S. would benefit the most from good business with all Middle East countries and the secured region, instead of, on the one hand, taking part in the endless conflicts, and on the other hand, investing billions of dollars to secure the region.

Yet looking at the bigger picture, the U.S. struggled to handle with Iran's transformation over the last half of century, from consort in Shah period to adversary after the 1979 Revolution. The United States has lost what has invested in Iran once and it is to be sure that not only recovery from a close military, political, and

economic relationship was extremely difficult but also to replace Iran with other countries in the region was risky. Considering Iran as an alley in the Middle East may be impossible now and we are not arguing for that (Murray 2009, 145).

Fitting Iran into the regional political priority was partly to blame the political antagonism between the United States and Iran. In this sense, despite the issue of U.S.-Iran relations itself, probably both Iran and the U.S., based on the historical approach, would have realized that they can cooperate on the Middle East problems, especially the terrorism, that brought unwanted economic and security miseries to both of these countries. The U.S. officials realized that they should accurately judge Iran's influence in the region to be able to make better decision for their foreign policy. For example, it is important to note that Iran support forces for free election and women's right to vote. In Lebanon, Iran influence on Hezbollah for its gradual embracement of parliamentarianism (Murray 2009). Above all, is the matter of Islamic terrorism. Here, considering Iran as a state with the same intention to fight terrorism in the Middle East is highly plausible. Thus, it is remarkable to see the security issues in the Middle East prioritized, those that are, in fact, rooted in the Middle East. It is in the national interest of the United State to form a cooperation with Iran, otherwise, they would lose a great economic advantages, from which both states inevitably draw their security.

Nevertheless, the conflicts between the United States and Iran help Russia and China's ambitions grow, which in the long term could be the most dangerous threat to the economic and political sovereignty of the West (Schoen and Kaylan 2014). Therefore, the prevailing situations in the Middle East require American and Iranian policy to find a balance and help win the interest of the other side.

## THE FIRST STEP IN US-IRAN COMPATIBILITY IN FOREIGN POLICY: IRAN'S NUCLEAR WEAPON

The new Iranian President, Rouhani, made it clear in his campaign that economic improvement for Iran could only be possible if the international sanctions would be eased. With this simple message, Rouhani, with the apparent support of the Iranian

Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who is the ultimate decision-maker in the Islamic Republic, reinitiated the long-stalled nuclear negotiations with the P5+1, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) and Germany (Juneau 2014). After months of negotiations, Iran and the P5+1 reached an interim agreement in November, 2013, that temporarily froze Iran's nuclear program in exchange for a modest and reversible sanctions-relief package worth \$6-7 billion. The agreement laid the groundwork for a comprehensive approach that would seek, according to the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action", to satisfy the concerns of each side (Juneau 2014). This was the first peaceful gesture between Iran and the West, especially with the United States, after four decades of antagonism. Yet such a step toward an agreement encountered both national and international constraints. We have to ask, here, what were those constraints? And why were they imposed?

First, there have been two forms of constraint: national and international. At the national level, the conflicting agendas impacted policies. Both American Republicans and Iranian Conservatives have been imposing national constraints on their governments. The United States' congressional opposition to the agreement cost the White House severe and somehow democratic constraints. Yet Obama's administration believed that they could resolve the problem of Iran and the region via diplomatic channels. In Iran, the sense of antagonism toward the United States has always been one of the main mottoes of the Islamic Republic, so the move toward negotiations encountered a general and strong constraint by both *Majles* and the conservative officials. Yet, Rouhani's administration appeared to be moderate: they tried to resolve conflicts through the diplomatic channels.

At the international level, the Persian Gulf states as well as Russia and China have one way or another put massive pressure on the international organizations, the United States, and Iran to stop the process of negotiation and continue the sanction on Iran (see Entessar and Afrasiabi 2015).

Secondly, the negotiation and deal between the West and Iran were also opposed strongly by the other states in the region, particularly Saudi Arabia and Russia. This opposition is mostly due to the assumption that there could be no compromises be-

tween the Persian Gulf states. The foreign policy of Arab states hinges excessively on the idea of opposing Iran based on their two main interests: economic and politics. In the case of recent negotiations, the Persian Gulf states and Russia were against the removal of sanctions since their politics have always been on the zero-sum assumption: they believe that they could win the economic benefits only if the sanctions on Iran continue. That means they profit only if Iran remains under sanctions. Moreover, they believe the gradual lifting of sanctions on Iran would threaten their sovereignty. In this sense, they share a position with Russia. However, Riyadh may be correct in assuming that a thaw in the U.S.-Iran relations would come at the expense of its own privileged ties to Washington. Russia, on the contrary, assumed that the agreement between the United States and Iran would cost them a great deal of regional power (Whitlock 2003).

As it could be observed over the last eight years, the Obama administration's friendly approach in dealing with Iran issues went against the prevailing constraints. Such friendly gestures caused the beneficial relationship between the U.S. and Iran. For example, President Obama's annual speeches addressing the Iranian people on the occasion of "*Nowruz*" ("new day") Iran's New Year celebration, were an unprecedented attempt. As a tactful expression of good will, President Obama expressed his hope for a new beginning in U.S.-Iran relations each time.

Along with these formalities, we need to consider the national interests of both countries. At first glance, from the economic point of view, we can argue that the mutual benefits to the United States and Iran would exceed the benefits of sanctions against Iran. According to the OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2015, Iran stands in third place in both world resource and export (Flanagan 2013). Therefore, Iran's market offers huge potential to the West, yet because of the sanctions, only China has benefited the most in the East and Russia in the North of Iran and even abused the market since gaining a monopoly. On the contrary, with good relations with the West, not only can Iran benefit from an open market, but the West would benefit as well. Nevertheless, unlike the other Persian Gulf states, Iran not only offers oil to the world economy, but a multitude of other geographical, industrial, and strategic opportunities. Here, we can argue that the strategic considerations are linked directly to Iran's geography. As the se-

cond largest country in the Middle East, Iran shares territorial borders with countries of great interest to the U.S. (e.g. Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Turkey) as well as the former Soviet satellite countries that are still very much under the influence of the Kremlin. To the north, Iran has access to the largest inland body of water in the world, the Caspian Sea, which is known for its sizable reserves of oil, estimated at over US\$ 12 trillion. To the south, Iran has control over the Strait of Hormuz. Such a geopolitical situation is very important, because the Strait of Hormuz is the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean suitable for exporting petroleum. Forty-percent of the world's daily oil consumption is transported through the Strait. Moreover, Iran has significant historical and cultural ties across the region. Iran's open border means optimal opportunity for foreign investors. In this sense, the investors would benefit the most from such a peaceful situation.

Although the conservatives in both countries expressed their strong disagreement with the deal and tried to stick with their traditional and sometimes not diplomatic channels, history has proven that neither is Russia the perfect ally for Iran nor are the Arab countries for the United States. In this sense, Obama's and Rouhani's respective cabinets are neither conservative nor antagonist. They made it clear that both countries would benefit from this deal in the long term. Both the U.S. and Iran would enjoy the economic and political benefits. Moreover, from the political point of view, the nuclear deal can help U.S. foreign policy. It would provide the American policy makers more options in a sense that it reduces America's reliance on authoritarian Arab states such as Saudi Arabia – which, despite being a key U.S. ally, has played a central role in spreading Islamic radicalism and *ji-hadism* through both the Middle East and the world (see Bjørgo, 2005, 193). In this sense, the moderate governments of the U.S. and Iran realized that Arab states do not really concern themselves with the potential benefits that can be brought to the region by peace rather than war, specifically, by the mutual agreement between the U.S. and Iran. In fact, the Arab states are unable to see that such an agreement will bring security to the Middle East.

In summary, both Iran and the United States should overcome the strong regional and international pressures. In particular, Iran should overcome the strong constraints of their right-

wing conservatives to overcome its isolation in the international arena and try to trade with the rest of the world to decrease its dependency on Russia and China. This leaves Iran with only one choice: a close relationship with the West.

The United States should also overcome the convergence of the Arab countries against Iran, which is undoubtedly raising the costs of Tehran and Washington's efforts to form a mutual and progressive diplomatic relationship. The EU, in this sense, has done a good job reducing the tension between the United States and Iran. However, such support to build up a good U.S.-Iran relationship would be superseded by other powers: Saudi Arabia sees Iran as their chief competitor for regional influence and resists possible developments that could unshackle Iranian power (Guzansky 2015). To do so, Saudi Arabia put pressure on the U.S. to increase its influential capacity in the region. Russia and China oppose Iran's power in the region, especially in the economic and military spheres (Thompson 2008). However, Washington should already be very concerned with its long-term relationship with Saudi Arabia, which cannot separate its militant *Sunni* character from its politics in the region, and whose economy depends on temporal oil production (Pipes 2013). The U.S., however, must also be concerned with losing no allies when they gain new ones.

Iran would be a critical perspective ally for the West. Significantly, Iran is able to counter Russia and China's regional ambitions. Russia and China have been traditionally willing to hinder U.S. attempts to become the arbiter of the Iranian nuclear stand-off, sanctions, and Iran's regional conflicts (see also Schoen and Kaylan 2014). Against such an unwelcome trend came the comprehensive agreement between Iran and the P5+1. This step can become important in shifting the politics of the region as well as the framework of international relations. The nuclear program has certainly made it worse by sowing greater mistrust among Iran's neighbors, but was a first step toward great benefit to the West, in the region, and Iran. The essential features of the structure of the region can be also found in the political discourse of the U.S. and Iran's officials which helps U.S.-Iran relations.



## THE SECOND STEP OF U.S.-IRAN COMPATIBILITY IN FOREIGN POLICY: CAPABILITY IN FIGHTING TERRORISM, A NEW PERSPECTIVE FOR A BILATERAL U.S.-IRAN RELATIONSHIP

The interim growth of terrorism has become a dramatic threat. Above all, the complex crises that have fuelled the emergence of Islamic radicalism and facilitated its spread show little sign of abating, despite the recent efforts on the parts of Iran, the United States and the European states to combat the Islamic State. However, such situation may significantly alter the context in which U.S. leaders make their decisions. While U.S. diplomats seek a settlement to the Syrian civil war, they are aware of the fact that the unbalanced forces in Syria may provide an opportunity for the Islamic State to expand its occupied territory (see also Boeing 2014). Both Iran and the U.S. have shifted their efforts to Iraq and Syria to ensure pressure would be increased on the terrorist groups (Cafiero and Wagner 2015). Over the past years, the U.S. closely monitored Iranian actions and believed that Iran, politically, does not produce terrorism in the region (Kenner 2013), which in contrast, can be seen on the political agendas of some countries, such as Saudi Arabia (see Tollitz 2005). Iran also seeks to ensure that maximal restrictions are placed on any extreme religious and political trend in the country, because in this way it obtains immunity for its sovereignty. For Iranian officials, fighting terrorism also means opposing the idea that the West could help Iran to secure its own soil. They learned from what happened in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Libya, and recently in Yemen and Syria.

The Iranian government, in addition, insists on cooperating in the fight against terrorism in the region (Akbarzadeh and Conduit 2016). To throw more light on the relationship between terrorism and the Iranian government, we can again compare *Shia* and *Sunni* ideologies. *Shia*, as the official religion of the Iranian population is close to the Protestant idea of individualism. This means that the *Jihad* aspect of resurrecting the political-religious sovereignty against the West is absurd and refuted, although during wartime, the idea of holy war and nationalism would be emphasized. Here, we might ask if we sometimes see the *Shiite* countries engaged in war: the answer is yes. However, we have to bear in mind that from the Iranian perspective, there is a line between the

*Jihad* (as the holy war for Allah) and war (as the nationalistic act of defense,) although they believe somehow in a link between Islam and politics. In comparison, *Sunni* belief obscures any such division between *Jihad* and war. As the official and major religious cult of all Arab countries in the Middle East, *Sunni* supports the idea of *Jihad* against the West as one of the core element of their political practice. Here we can argue that without such theo-political understanding, we cannot analyse the concept of “friend and enemy” in the foreign policies of the U.S. and Middle Eastern countries.

Having said that, the historical, ideological, and psychological backgrounds should proceed with the innovative and progressive diplomacy between the United States and Iran. Their common interests are an area in which the initial diplomatic efforts can be relied on for reaching a further agreement is the common interests. Having a common interest brings about: 1) Overcoming the understanding deficit between the two states; 2) Building trust over time as agreements are reached; 3) Establishing cooperative and constitutive relations.

Considering these three points in the new cooperation between the United States and Iran could mitigate the political tensions in the region. Moreover, reaching an understandable agreement based on the common interests helps to tackle tough agenda items. The mistake that George W Bush made should not dismissed these common interests. In particular, George W Bush confounded that Iran was more interested in developing economic and diplomatic links to Russia and China (Murray 2009, 153). He could not see that Iran have had no other choice. Here, we propose that the common interests that may build the agenda-item agreements can be a joint policy towards Afghanistan and Iraq.

At first glance, the common problem and advantage would be that the Middle East suffers from ill-politics, militant “political Islam”, drug-abuse and other sorts of corruption. Iran, as the prosperous land, will continue to have serious refugee problem, most of whom arrive illegally from Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, Iran is the victim of crime problems, because its neighbours continue to suffer from the civil wars, social unrest conflicts, and political fragmentation. Iran has already hosted some two-million refugees from Afghanistan, with another estimated 100,000 from Iraq.

The conflicts in the region have always challenged U.S. foreign policy. The unrest damages both the U.S. and world economies, increases the chance that Russia and China will achieve domination of Middle Eastern countries, and also increases the chance that the militant Islamists and radicals become the champions of their lands.

Thus, we can see that the U.S. and Iran obviously have important common problems to address and common interests that concern the region. Moreover, we can strongly argue that both countries seek a stable and permanent ground on which to form a benevolent power relation to control these problematic trends (Hosseini 2008: 879). Indeed, without such an approach, overcoming such problems becomes, if not impossible, very difficult. Furthermore, to the extent that we agree on the idea that the U.S. and Iran have common interests, they would require full bilateral cooperation in efforts that aim at stabilizing Iraq – and Afghanistan – on at least three common grounds.

The first matter concerns civilian access to military facilities in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. Iran would obtain assurance that American weapons will not land in the hands of a militant group, like ISIL, or that Iranian weapons will not find their way into the hands of Iraqi insurgent groups.

The second matter concerns drug and human trafficking. The opium trade in bordering Afghanistan is penetrating Western markets and creating generations of addicts in Iran. It is estimated there are between two and four million drug addicts in the country (Christensen 2011). Iran spends close to \$1 billion annually to combat drug trafficking, and loses thousands of police officers and young soldiers in the struggle against the drug dealers. Besides, according to recent troop-deployment projections, Iran will have a combined total of 100,000 American and NATO troops on its Afghanistan border alone. These circumstances are perceived as dangerous when there is an antagonistic relationship between Iran and the West. Conceiving alternative arrangements and trying to move to a peaceful situation in the Middle East would be possible when the relationship between Iran and the West, especially with the United States, is peaceful and productive (Weed 2016). The arrangement, indeed, while meeting the needs of both sides simultaneously, would make it easier for the international community to cope with Middle East issues.

The third matter, which is key to supporting the hypothesis of the presented paper, concerns terrorism. Iran, like the U.S., perceives *Al-Qaida* and *Taliban* as its enemies, so both the U.S. and Iran support President Karzai's goal to stabilize a force in Afghanistan (Poorsaied 2007). Some observers, including CIA Director John Brennan, suggest that the terrorist groups in the Middle East can continue conducting high-profile attacks in neighbouring countries and beyond as a means of demonstrating viability and success to its followers/recruits and drawing outside forces deeper into battle. This means that Iran is exposed excessively to the threat of terrorism. The recent regional summit meeting held in Iran – with both President Karzai of Afghanistan and President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan in attendance – is a clear indication of the significant shared interests and challenges confronting these nations. However, to tackle terrorism, Iranian officials must know their boundaries. For the Iranian leadership, there is no line of separation between *Shia* and Islam, yet their position against *Jihadism* separates them from the other *Sunni* countries. The position of Iran against ISIL partly reflects the early *Shia* history and partly reflect the fact that Iran's contemporary regional rivals adhere to Sunni Islam. The Iranian leadership quickly emphasized the ideological connection of ISIL and the *Sunnis*. Yet Iran's position against ISIL is also strongly related to its role in the region. Iranian officials, however, need to know the positions of other actors in the region. In this sense, they need to know that for the American leadership, there is no line between security and stability. The U.S. position also indicates that for the West, terrorism and foe are identical. So we say that most of the Arab states show no discernible position against Islamic terrorism. In this sense, the 113th Congress of the United States considered enacting a new authorization for deployment of military force targeting the Islamic State. Such a trend in American politics continued into the 114th Congress; the issue, however, remains contentious. Since January, 2014, U.S. officials have made several public statements describing the potential for Syria-based extremists to pose terrorist threats to the United States. American and European officials have highlighted the threat that may be posed by foreign fighters, some of whom hold U.S. and European passports. Central Intelligence Agency Director John Brennan said in his testimony before

the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence in February, 2014, that

there are three groups of people that are a concern, from an extremist standpoint; *Abrar al-Sham*, *Jabhat al Nusra*, which is the *Al-Qaida* element within Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant -ISIL. It's those latter two I think are most dedicated to the terrorist agenda. We are concerned about the use of Syrian territory by the *Al-Qaida* organization to recruit individuals and develop the capability to be able not just to carry out attacks inside of Syria, but also to use Syria as a launching pad. So it's those elements – *Al-Qaida* and ISIL – that I'm concerned about, especially the ability of these groups to attract individuals from other countries, both from the West, as well as throughout the Middle East and South Asia, and with some experienced operatives there who have had experience in carrying out a global *Jihad*. There are camps inside of both Iraq and Syria that are used by *Al-Qaida* to develop capabilities that are applicable, both in the theater, as well as beyond.<sup>1</sup>

In August 2014, the U.S. government supported the adoption of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2170, which strengthened international sanctions measures designed to combat the ISIL, *Jabhat al Nusra*, and *Al-Qaida*-affiliated entities. The resolution calls upon all member states “to take national measures to suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters to, and bring to justice, in accordance with applicable international law, foreign terrorist fighters of, ISIL, ANF and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaida,” and reiterates member states’ obligation to prevent terrorist travel, limit supplies of weapons and financing, and exchange information on the groups (Blanchard, Humud, Beth, & Nikitin 2016: 8-9). President Obama provided Congress a new authorization proposal in February, 2015, and recently has called on Congress again to enact a new authorization for the use of military force (AUMF) targeting the Islamic State. The Obama Administration’s official position on presidential authority to use force against the Islamic State, however, has remained constant, relying on the previous 2001 and 2002 AUMFs against those who perpetrated the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, and the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, respectively (Weed 2016)<sup>2</sup>. Also, the United State does not wish to be seen as another dominant state with an imperialistic character. We can see that both the U.S. and Iran consider ISIL a threat to their sovereignty. Thus, it is clear that ISIL and other extremist groups working for major powers in the region can move freely if

the atmosphere of ignorance and intolerance combined with the U.S.-Iran conflict prevail in the Middle East.

As of early 2016, statements from leading U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic officials suggest that the confrontation between the ISIL organization and its adherents, on the one hand, and the United States and its partners on the other, may be protracted, costly, violent, and challenging for the U.S. (Blanchard & Humud 2016: 35). Moreover, the United States and Iran disagree on Iranian roles in Syria (Khalaji 2011). However, ignoring a possible U.S.-Iran bilateral relation on these three grounds only helps those who want things to remain as chaotic as they already are in the Middle East. Furthermore, it damages the reputation and sovereignty of the U.S. and its military capability in the Middle East. These common interests call for cooperation between the United State and Iran. They also call for diplomatic progress on these common grounds, which will do much to improve U.S.-Iran relations in a broader sense. After all, it seems that the United States can effectively lead Iran to a new democratic perspective for its internal affairs.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Testimony of CIA Director John Brennan, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, February 5, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See also U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Services, hearing on regional implications of U.S. strategy in Syria and Iraq, 114th Cong., 1st sess., December 1, 2015 (testimony of Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter).

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