



**THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR DEAL:
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE US**

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In November 2013, Iran signed an interim agreement called 'The Joint Plan of Action' with the five permanent members of the Security Council and Germany (P5+1), suspending the advancement of uranium fuel enrichment and other nuclear activities that could be deemed as sensitive. This temporary deal for a period of six months came into force on 20 January 2014. The six months time frame is expected to bring favourable results for all parties concerned and would be utilised by the negotiating team to build a more permanent agreement.

The goal of the negotiations was to reach a mutually-agreed long-term comprehensive solution that would ensure Iran's nuclear programme will be exclusively peaceful. Iran reaffirms that under no circumstances will it ever seek or develop any nuclear weapons.ⁱ In return the P5 and other states have agreed to roll back certain provisions of the economic sanctions currently in force, which have severely impaired Iranian economy. Some restrictions have been suspended on the Iranian petrochemicals, automotive and precious metals industries and have begun the staggered release of US\$ 4.2 billion in Iranian cash frozen in overseas banks. Other Western provisions that were eased included restraints on insurance for Iran's oil shipments and licenses for services and parts needed by Iran's commercial airlines.ⁱⁱ

Israel has been vocal about its displeasure to lift sanctions against the Iranian regime, which it claims is the reason that Iran was forced to come to the negotiating table. A few members of the US Congress have also expressed their reservations on the deal. Speaking to the press, House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) stated, "The interim deal has been and will continue to be met

with healthy skepticism and hard questions... Iran has a history of obfuscation that demands verification of its activities and places the burden on the regime to prove it is upholding its obligations in good faith while a final deal is pursued.”ⁱⁱⁱ US President Obama who has been a supporter of the nuclear agreement with Iran has assured the Congress that if Iran doesn't comply with the provisions then any sanctions that have been withdrawn would be re-imposed along with tougher ones. Even now, the most crippling of the sanctions continue to be in place and would remain for the time being.

For the United States, the deal is an important step in building its relations with the Islamic Republic which were shattered with the Iranian Revolution. There is a trust deficit between the two nations; however, President Obama and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani are taking the first steps to bridge the gap through this deal.

Iran occupies a position of influence in a region of turmoil. It is seen as a country that is important to the stability of the region and is fundamental to the United States broader objective of preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and strengthening the prohibitions against their development.^{iv} Till the sanctions were applied it was economically stable. It has considerable power -military and non-military- over its neighbours. Iran has influence in Lebanon and Iraq. It is a key ally of the Syrian regime and while the United States has asked the UN to drop its invitation to Iran to join in the peace talks, the White House is aware that the road to peace for Damascus passes through Tehran. The United States is withdrawing from Afghanistan and trying to stabilise Iraq. In such a situation, it is wary of getting involved in the civil war in Syria. It is highly improbable that the domestic constituencies in the United States would allow the Congress or the White House to commit American troops to another war. Peaceful resolution of the crisis is required and Iran could play an important role in achieving this goal.

Continuous engagement with Iran is also seen as part of the subtle shift in United States policy towards the Middle East. As the cost of keeping its presence all over the world is becoming unbearably high, the United States needs to partially replace some of its presence by a new kind of cooperation with efficient, local or global actors.^v While it would be presumptuous to say that United States is building relations to counter Saudi Arabia, it would not be far to say that the United States is trying to expand its reach apart from the Saudi influence.

One possible reason for this shift could be the visible signs of Russia's involvement in the Middle East. Russia has been supportive of the Syrian government, including in the United Nations. Russia has established a naval task force in the Mediterranean Sea to facilitate its support to the Syrian government. Russia was instrumental in the surrender of the chemical weapons arsenal from Syria. The deal is being viewed as a lost opportunity for the United States. Today any peace talk with Syria is inconceivable without Russia. Beyond Syria, Russia has been supportive of the military in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood and is sympathetic of the Iranian government in its quest to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. It has ensured its presence in the most important decisions on peace in the Middle East.

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It is being speculated that the United States would be less dependent on oil and gas supplies from the Gulf region as it makes technological advances in exploring its own sources. Nonetheless, energy interests are not the only ties that anchor the United States to the region. Its allies would continue to be dependent on Gulf energy supplies. It also has geopolitical and strategic interests ranging from the security of Israel, stability in Iraq, counter terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destructions and long friendly relations with its allies. Despite changes in its Middle East policy, it is unlikely that Washington will allow its influence to diminish in the region.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

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ⁱ ---, "Joint Plan of Action", Accessed on 21 January 2013, http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/131124_03_en.pdf

ⁱⁱ Rick Gladstone & Thomas Erdbrink, "Temporary Nuclear Deal With Iran Takes Effect", The New York Times, 20 January 2014, Accessed on 21 January 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/21/world/middleeast/iran.html?ref=nuclearprogram>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ed O'Keefe, "Congress Members React to the Iran Nuclear Deal", Accessed on 21 January 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2013/11/23/congressional-reaction-to-the-iran-nuclear-deal>

^{iv} Dennis B. Ross & James F. Jeffrey, "Obama II And The Middle East: Strategic Objectives For U.S. Policy", (Washington DC, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2013), p. 07

^v Mansour Almarzoqi Albogami, "The three reasons behind US-Saudi fall-out", Accessed on 21 January, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/11/three-reasons-behind-us-saudi-fall-out-20131113123552217595.html>