Dorsey's Column

Revival of Iran Nuclear Agreement likely to test Middle Eastern Detente

James M. Dorsey

Foreword

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Introduction: regional diplomacy may help to revive the Iran nuclear accord

A potential revival of the Iran nuclear accord, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) \(^1\), is likely to test the sustainability of Middle Eastern efforts to dial down tensions and
manage differences by improving diplomatic relations and fostering economic cooperation. In the latest round of fence mending efforts, two Gulf states, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), announced their ambassadors’ return to Tehran. The two countries, together with Saudi Arabia, withdrew their envoys in 2016 after rioters protesting the execution of a Shiite cleric in the Saudi kingdom ransacked the Saudi embassy in the Iranian capital.

For its part Saudi Arabia is engaged in a round of Iraqi-mediated talks with Iran focused on security issues, including an end to the war in Yemen where Iran supports Houthi rebels.

The Gulf’s latest outreach to Iran comes on the heels of two years of regional diplomacy that produced UAE, Bahraini, Moroccan, and Sudanese recognition of Israel; greater Saudi openness towards the Jewish state; improved Saudi, Emirati, and Egyptian relations with Turkey; and most recently, restoration of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel.

Regional rivalries may hinder a nuclear accord with Iran

Laudable as all these diplomatic overtures may be, much of the endeavour to manage disputes is built on thin ice. It appears to be built on the premise that improved communications, common economic interests and a shared regional concern that any major armed conflict could prove devastating for them all, would reduce differences or even help resolve disputes in the longer term.
Moreover, the endeavour has been in response to major powers—the United States, China and Russia—making clear in recent years that they expected Middle Eastern players to take greater responsibility for managing regional conflicts and disputes, in reducing tensions, their defense expenditures and thereby the consequent risks of a regional arms race spiraling out of control.

The Gulf states, alongside the United States and Europe, further hope that a dialling down of tensions will challenge Iran's regional alliances like those with factions in Iraq, where they are betting on the campaign by populist Islamic scholar Muqtada al-Sadr, a leading Shiite powerbroker, to counter Iranian influence in Iraq.⁴

Regional rivalries and contrary interests between Turkey and its neighbours

Even so, the rivalry between various regional powers continues more subtly. For example, competition for regional influence drove the battle between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand, and the UAE on the other, for the contract to manage Kabul's international airport.⁵

The rivalries are also evident in Turkey's still fragile regional relationships and Saudi moves. The rivalry was the subtext of a recent visit to Greece by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who earlier had visited Turkey, and Israel's sale to Cyprus of its Iron Dome air defence system at a time when Turkish-Greek-Cypriot tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean threatened to heat up again.⁶
There is little doubt that the Iron Dome system would serve as a defence against Turkey, which has had troops in the breakaway Turkish Cypriot republic since it invaded the island 38 years ago. Similarly, Turkey will likely watch argus-eyed at Saudi Arabia's expanding ties to Greece, its longstanding archrival.

Turkey has also insisted that relations with Israel would not dampen its support for the Palestinians, a festering problem that repeatedly erupts into violence at the expense of innocent civilians which resonates in Turkish and Arab public opinion. Add to this that Turkey may see its hopes dashed of finding common ground in curtailing Kurdish aspirations in northern Syria with Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, whose demise Turkey has demanded for the past decade.7

Finally, when it comes to Turkey, a potential rift in NATO if Turkey renews its opposition to Swedish and Finnish membership could impact the country’s regional calculations. After all, as a precondition for supporting their NATO membership, Turkey has demanded the extradition by the two Nordic countries of scores of ethnic Kurds and followers of exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen, some of whom are Swedish nationals.8

Revived Iran nuclear accord good for stability yet insufficient for durable peace and rapprochement

To be sure, a revival of an admittedly problematic and flawed Iran nuclear accord is better than a failure of the negotiations involving the
United States, the European Union, Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia. Even so, a revival of the accord is unlikely to reshape the regional environment given that in the words of analyst Trita Parsi, “the current US and Iranian political leaderships ... have few domestic incentives to move beyond their shared enmity”. Mr. Parsi added that “still, both sides can take steps to address these concerns and make the deal more durable. If they do not, even this historic breakthrough could be merely a precursor to an even more dangerous crisis”.

As a result, a revival of the nuclear deal could be as much a regional stabiliser as a regional destabiliser. Such a revival would return Iranian oil to world markets and compensate for the loss of sanctioned Russian crude. As a result, it would likely spark a drop in oil prices and weaken the Saudi-Russian grip on pricing. In the ultimate analysis, Saudi Arabia may see this as a price it must pay for averting a regional conflagration in the absence of a nuclear deal.

Major hurdles: Israel persists in opposition to the Iran nuclear accord—and the US to Iran’s influence the region

Despite the aforementioned reasons for Middle Eastern states to revive the Iran nuclear agreement however, in talks in Washington DC in late August 2022, senior Israeli officials, including Defence Minister Benny Gantz and National Security Advisor Eyal Hulata, made their persistent objections to this nuclear agreement abundantly clear. Israeli officials said they had found a sympathetic hearing in Washington DC, including their demand that the United States develop a military option if all other efforts fail to prevent Iran producing a nuclear weapon.
Indeed there are few signs that the United States is softening its stance vis-a-vis Iran and its proxies. For instance, the US struck twice in late August 2022 against Iranian-backed forces in Syria in response to attacks on a US base in the country. Analysts suggested the latter attacks were retaliation for Israeli strikes against Iranian targets in Syria.\textsuperscript{13}

Israel has insisted that it retains the right to strike Iranian nuclear facilities on its own, a move that could spark a regional war. Moreover, even if it decides not to do so, Israel's covert war against Iranian targets in Iran itself as well as in Syria risks armed confrontation with Iranian-backed groups, including the Islamic Republic's foremost non-state ally \textit{Hezbollah}, the Lebanese Shiite militia.

Confrontation with Hezbollah could erupt at any time, not only because of Iran but also because the group is threatening to attack Israeli drilling platforms in the Mediterranean if a final agreement is not reached in US-mediated talks to draw the Israel-Lebanon maritime border.\textsuperscript{14}

Adding to the uncertainty is the possibility of a return to office of former Israeli prime minister Benyamin Netanyahu following elections in November. Mr. Netanyahu was a driving force behind former American president Donald Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and his failed maximum pressure strategy on Tehran.\textsuperscript{15}
Conclusion: some of the Israeli and Arabic arguments against the Iran nuclear accord may be valid

Like the Gulf states, Israel argues that the nuclear agreement or JCPOA would allow Iran to increase its support for allied militant groups in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen—and does nothing to curb the Islamic republic’s ballistic missiles program. Neither issue was part of the original deal. Israel and the Gulf states are further concerned that the deal has a remaining shelf life of three years at best, at which point Iran would be free to do as it likes unless a follow-up deal can be negotiated.

Moreover, Iran will likely continue to be a nuclear-threshold state with or without a revival of the nuclear agreement, raising the spectre of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East in the more distant future, with countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey seeking to match Iranian capabilities. So far, albeit undeclared, Israel is the region's only nuclear power.

The risk of an arms race was enhanced by the recent blocking by Russia of an agreement on the final document of a review of the 50-year-old Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), to which Israel is not a signatory. The document called for the first time without apparent objection for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. Russia blocked the agreement because it contained a statement critical of the takeover by invading Russian troops of Ukraine’s Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, Europe’s largest.

As political scientist Paul Rogers once said: “What appears to be stable, although unjust, is more fragile when you take a closer look”.

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Or as the Leonard Cohen song, *Anthem*, puts it: ‘There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.’

*Dr. James M. Dorsey is an award-winning journalist and scholar, a senior fellow at Nanyang Technological University’s S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, an adjunct senior research fellow at National University of Singapore’s Middle East Institute and co-director of University of Würzburg’s Institute for Fan Culture.*  
*[jmd@jmdonline.org](mailto:jmd@jmdonline.org)*

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A video version of this earlier version can be found on YouTube. A podcast version is available on Soundcloud, Itunes, Spotify, Spreaker and Podbean.

Endnotes—Sources

1. See for some background on JCPOA, some early contributions in our journal on this topic (Rezvani, Ten Dam, Dorsey et al 2014—see Bibliography).
2. See Jennifer Hansler & Adam Pourahmadi, ‘Revived Iran nuclear deal is ‘closer now than it was two weeks ago' but gaps remain, US State Department spokesperson says’ *CNN Politics*, 23 August 2022;  
3. Edward Yeranian, ‘Iran Resumes Diplomatic Relations with UAE and Kuwait, Talks Continue with Saudi Arabia’ *Voice of America (VOA)* News – Middle East, 23 August 2022;  
5. Ragip Soylu, ‘How Turkey lost its bid to run Afghanistan’s airports to the UAE’ Middle East Eye, 26 August 2022; www.middleeasteye.net/news/afghanistan-turkey-airports-how-lost-bid-run.
10. Ibid.


Bibliography—Relevant sources in our journal


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