

COMMENTARY

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Lifting the Sanctions will not End Iran's Revolutionary Zeal

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The timely implementation of the Iran deal and Tehran's full compliance with its various provisions to date should not be viewed as just an accomplished goal, but as a continuing process that could take several years to determine its viability and the extent to which it impacts Iran's foreign and domestic policy. I believe the deal will encourage Tehran to continue its customary underhanded activities to advance its strategic interests. Conversely, it will intensify the restiveness of many of the Western-oriented Iranian youth, who are resentful of the regime's heavy-handed social and political policies.

Given Iran's domestic political volatility and regional ambition, Tehran should not be expected to choose a single strategy to advance its national interests. Instead, it will pursue a mixture of policies consistent with its self-perception and drive to become the region's hegemon.

Iran perceives itself as the most significant regional power by virtue of its rich culture and long history extending over four millennia in one of the most geostrategic locations in the world. Iran has a huge pool of natural resources and a multi-faceted economy with an industrious population of nearly 80 million people (larger than the combined Sunni population in the Gulf), and a landmass bigger than the entire Arabian Peninsula.

Notwithstanding the Iran deal, Tehran remains determined to acquire nuclear weapons and views the deal only as a temporary strategic pause. Iran's resolve to possess a nuclear arsenal is driven by its sense of insecurity and vulnerability because it is surrounded by unstable states including Afghanistan and Pakistan. In addition, a nuclear Iran would allow it to assert itself regionally,

neutralize Israel's nuclear capacity, prevent forcible regime change by outside powers, and domestically present itself as a significant global power to be reckoned with.

As such, Tehran feels it has not only the inherent right to be the region's hegemon, but also the right to protect itself not only militarily, but by any other methods including cheating on the nuclear deal, subversion, and supporting terrorism.

This explains why the lifting of sanctions and the billions of dollars now at its disposal will not change Iran's behaviour, neither domestically nor in relation to other countries. In fact, it might even further embolden Tehran to intensify its direct and indirect involvement in the countries in which it has a unique strategic interest:

Syria: Iran will join the conference on 25 January to find a political solution to Syria's civil war as long as it can maintain its influence in Syria with or without President Assad. For Iran, Syria provides a contiguous crescent extending from the Mediterranean to the Gulf, making Syria indispensable to Tehran's regional ambition which is at odds with Saudi Arabia, who wants to deprive Iran from maintaining a foothold in Sunni-dominated Syria.

Iraq: Since the start of the Iraq war, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been engaged in a proxy war between the Iraqi Sunni minority and the Shiite majority, in which the stakes for both countries are extremely high because they see it as a fight for the soul of Islam. Although ISIS poses a threat to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, and they have a common interest in defeating it, they do not view ISIS as an existential threat having any effect on the intrinsic Sunni-Shiite conflict, which is one of the main sources for continuing regional instability.

Yemen: The civil war in Yemen provided Iran a momentous opportunity to interject itself into the Arabian Peninsula by supporting the Houthis (a religious group affiliated with the Zaydi sect of Shiite Islam), who are fighting against the Saudi-backed Sunni government of Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. With tens of billions of dollars in its pocket, Iran will likely increase its financial support for the Houthis in an attempt to bleed the Saudis.

Lebanon: For Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon is an indispensable Shiite force which Tehran supports financially and militarily, even more so at this juncture as the group is fighting on Assad's side in Syria. Iran also views Hezbollah as the conduit to threaten Israel from the north. Once the civil war in Syria ends and ISIS is defeated, Hezbollah may well move to implement its long-term plans to establish (with the support of Iran) an Islamic state in Lebanon, which is bound to further destabilize the entire region.

As long as the mullahs in Tehran view their revolution as still in the making, and with more money at their disposal, they will undoubtedly continue to export terrorism and increase their

support of Islamic extremists such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad to further advance their revolutionary agenda beyond their country's borders.

The Obama administration, which championed the Iran deal, speculates that once the sanctions are lifted, Iran might become a prominent and constructive player on the global stage. This in my view is farfetched; even though Iran aspires to become such a power, its revolutionary and religious zeal will trump even its lofty aspirations. For this reason, the US, along with its allies, must stand fast in dealing with Iran by:

Taking whatever action necessary, including military, if Iran is caught cheating on the nuclear deal; enforcing UNSC resolutions that forbid Iran from research and development of ballistic missiles; imposing tough new sanctions (as President Obama has just done, albeit more forcefully and immediately); tracking Iran's subversive activities and making it clear that there will be serious consequences should it continue to support extremist groups and terrorists; requiring Iran, through quiet diplomacy, to end its public acrimony against Israel; and pressuring Iran to help mitigate the Sunni-Shiite conflict, knowing full well that this is not a conflict that either side can win.

Regardless of how Iran pursues its foreign policy objectives, the greatest danger the regime faces is from within. Whereas the government will spend a considerable amount of money to improve the economic conditions of ordinary Iranians, that in and of itself will not stifle the public's cry for freedom of speech and press, respect for human rights, and an end to draconian laws.

Indeed, the lifting of the sanctions will encourage the public, especially the young, to voice their discontent as they will no longer feel the need to rally behind their government, which was battling the West over the sanctions. This is the Achilles' heel of the regime. The 2009 Green Revolution will not be an aberration; a new uprising may now become inevitable. I believe the question will be only when.

Sadly, with or without sanctions, as long as the mullahs are in power, they are unlikely to change their messianic mission, which will remain a source of major concern to Iran's enemies and is the recipe for regional destabilization and violent conflicts.

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/lifting-the-sanctions-will-not-end-irans-revolutionary-zeal/>

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