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A Nuclear Deal Inspires More Questions Than Answers

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What Are All the Implications That Spin Out From Agreement

By Ghaith Al-Omari

The interim, “first step,” agreement between the international community and Iran stands as an example of the power and efficacy of American leadership in the international diplomatic arena. It could have a huge impact on the future of the strategic landscape in the Middle East, including the prospect for reaching a negotiated solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Whether it does or not, however, and whether these changes are positive or negative in terms of regional stability and security, depends on many pending questions that will become more critical as the international community strives for a final deal with Iran.

The first question is whether Iran will fulfill its obligations. In the past, it has misled the international community, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency. So, even this modest exchange of nuclear rollback and sanctions relief still relies on the old formula of “Trust but verify” and will be approached skeptically by regional actors.

Second, the nuclear issue aside, will Iran behave more responsibly, or will it become emboldened by a belief that its developing partnership with the United States and the other major powers in addressing its nuclear program gives it more leeway in exerting hegemony on other regional matters? Will it rein in its proxies, or will it perceive the recent developments as affording wider operating space for its allies, such as Hezbollah, a force loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and its proxies in Iraq, Palestine and elsewhere.

These are matters that greatly concern America’s traditional allies in the Middle East, including both the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, and Israel. As things stand today, there is great anxiety among these actors regarding America’s direction.

Accordingly, the third question is whether or not the United States can overcome this skepticism and convincingly reassure these allies that it remains committed to their interests and security. Whether this process is a stabilizing or destabilizing one, assuming that it moves forward, it will be affected greatly by the extent to which these allies will be satisfied that their

interests are not being sacrificed in the name of nonproliferation and a rapprochement with Iran.

If some or all of them are not satisfied, that raises the fourth question: Would such regional powers attempt to act as spoilers in an effort to derail a process they find deeply threatening? Israel continues to reserve the right to strike Iran if it feels the need to do so, and it certainly has that military ability. But politically and diplomatically this may be implausible given an American-led diplomatic process to deal with Iran's nuclear weapons.

Other disaffected parties don't have these options, but they could seek to act as spoilers by engaging in proxy or clandestine actions designed to provoke or punish Iran, or, in some other manner, to derail the process. Hence the urgent necessity of effective American management of the process in its regional context.

This will all affect the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, and consequently raises other questions. Will Israeli and Arab preoccupation with Iran push the Palestinian issue even further to the sidelines than it has been during the Arab Spring era? Will the United States have enough credibility with Israel and the Arab states — whose buy-in and support are essential if the Palestinians are to sign an agreement — to effectively broker a final peace deal? Or will these parties view the Palestinian issue as a way to leverage the United States regarding Iran? Would such leveraging be negative, or will Israel and the Arab states take a page from Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin's playbook and seek to resolve the Palestinian issue independently of the United States so as to facilitate open cooperation against Iran? And will Israel feel less compunction about aggressive settlement activity, given its unheeded opposition to the Iran deal?

Views on this remain divided. For example, Bruce O. Riedel, a former senior official of America's government, told *The New York Times* that "the Palestinian issue is the big casualty of this deal," since it will now be very hard to persuade Netanyahu to do something on the Palestinian front." On the other hand, some Palestinian officials suggested that the negotiations with Iran are a kind of "precedent" or "platform" for the Israeli-Palestinian talks.

The implications of the historic breakthrough between the West and Iran could plausibly lead in either positive or negative directions, depending on how these and other questions are answered. Hence the pressing need to raise these questions now and consider the implications of the potential answers thoughtfully, responsibly and strategically.

Ghaith Al-Omari is the executive director of the American Task Force on Palestine.

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