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### The Long Way towards Middle East Peace

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Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif shakes hands with US Secretary of State John Kerry after a statement early on November 24, 2013 in Geneva. (AFP PHOTO/FABRICE COFFRINI)

Manama/London, *Asharq Al-Awsat*—The US and Iranian presidents have taken a cautious tone on the November 24 interim nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1, a sign that the process remains very much in its infancy. But as the Geneva II conference on Syria approaches, there is nascent hope that the interim agreement with Iran will create positive momentum that could aid the efforts to reach a political solution to the conflict raging in Syria. Yet many complications remain, not least of which is the growing presence of Al-Qaeda and associated groups in the war-torn country.

“Constructive engagement [and] tireless efforts by negotiating teams are to open new horizons,” President Hassan Rouhani of Iran posted on Twitter shortly after the announcement that an interim agreement had been reached. Rouhani’s comment was positive but guarded. It contrasted both with the joy of the people in Iran, who are eager to see the Western sanctions lifted in the hope that it will improve their daily lives, and with the gloom of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who condemned the deal as a “historic mistake.”

US President Barack Obama’s statement was also somewhat encouraging. Like Rouhani, who continues to face opposition at home for his constructive approach to the “Great Satan,” Obama tried to capitalize on this limited diplomatic victory at a time when his popularity in the US has hit

an all-time low. "While today's announcement is just a first step, it achieves a great deal," he said in an address from the White House shortly after the agreement was reached.

Opposition to the deal, according to which Iran will limit its uranium enrichment activities and allow for regular inspections in exchange for sanctions relief, does not come from Israel alone. Most Arab Gulf states, still at odds with the US over the Syrian war and what they see as the US bowing to Iran and Russia, are deeply concerned about Iran's real intentions despite the substantial change in rhetoric. Leaders of Arab Gulf states have been vocal about the need for more reassurances from Iran, and for Iran to move from talk to action.

The biggest threat to a comprehensive deal between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) may well come from the US Congress, which is always inclined to approve fresh rounds of sanctions on Iran. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif stated very recently that new sanctions, even if passed over the objections of the White House, would strike a death blow to the nuclear deal.

Despite the agreement, Iran continues to send messages about what it considers a US double standard with regard to Israel's nuclear weapons program and the fact that the US ally is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The NPT forbids any state from building or seeking to build nuclear weapons, giving special exception for the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, which already possessed them when the treaty came into force in 1970. Iranians simply do not see the logic of calls for a nuclear-weapons-free Middle East while Israel is allowed its own nuclear arsenal. Israel's usual response to those accusations is that while security conditions in the region remain fundamentally hostile, they will not sign the NPT. Israelis also point out that those states in the Middle East that did sign the NPT—Iraq, Syria, Libya and Iran—have consistently violated it.

Nevertheless, there is now a different, more constructive diplomatic atmosphere in the region. There also seems to be an implicit understanding among the Western powers, Gulf states, Iran, Russia and China that a plan for a political transition in Syria must be found. For the few optimistic observers of regional politics, next year could be key in the efforts to achieve peace in the Middle East.

### **From an interim to a comprehensive deal**

In a political system where the Supreme Leader is the ultimate decision maker, Rouhani's election is not the only factor to consider when it comes to identifying the real causes of this apparently drastic shift in Iran's foreign policy. What Iran's real intentions are matters considerably. The question is whether Iran's acceptance of the interim agreement was a tactical move purely motivated by the necessity of getting the sanctions lifted, or if it corresponds to a more profound desire to engage with the West and improve relations with its Arab neighbors.

The impact of the economic sanctions has substantially hurt the Iranian economy and nourished a deep sense of discontentment among the Iranian people towards the cavalier style of the administration of Rouhani's predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This discontent was also increasingly directed at Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself.

Speaking to *Asharq Al-Awsat*, Mark Fitzpatrick, director of the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Programme at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), said that the "devastating impact on the Iranian economy" was reflected in the Iranian people's election of Rouhani. "His mandate was to try to get the sanctions lifted, and for that he was willing to accept some compromises that until today Iran was not willing to accept," he added.

Others see it as a result of a deeper change in foreign policy orientation toward a far more pragmatic approach. Related with this is the attempt to improve Iran's international image, which matters a great deal to Iranians.

But the road to a comprehensive deal on Iran's nuclear program is thorny and full of obstacles. For one, there is always the looming threat of the US Congress approving new sanctions, despite the efforts of the Obama administration to convince Members of Congress to restrain themselves. As US Secretary of State John Kerry told the House Foreign Affairs Committee earlier this week: "We are asking you to give our negotiators and our experts the time and the space to do their jobs and

that includes asking you while we negotiate that you hold off imposing new sanctions.”

Fitzpatrick, who served as a US diplomat for 26 years, including a final posting as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Non-Proliferation, thinks it will “be very difficult to reach a comprehensive agreement at the end of six months.”

“The two sides are still fundamentally at odds over their goals. While Iran still wants to hold on to its nuclear option, the US and its partners don’t want Iran to have that option,” he said. According to Fitzpatrick, this difference in objectives, plus the domestic factors in the US and Iran that can potentially undermine the deal, “makes a comprehensive settlement very difficult. I think it’s most likely that at the end of six months the interim deal would be extended and talks will continue.”

As a way to address the concerns of the Gulf states about the nuclear deal, there have been suggestions that the P5+1 should be turned into the P5+2, adding the Gulf Cooperation Council to the talks. Although the GCC states have legitimate concerns about the process and its implications to their security, others have expressed skepticism about the usefulness of a P5+2.

As Alistair Burt, a British MP and former Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, told *Asharq Al-Awsat*: “The difficulty of widening the negotiations beyond those who are already engaged is that it leads to the argument that others should become involved as well.” But he added that no agreement should be reached by the P5+1 without close cooperation with the West’s allies across the region. “The P5+1 should not come to a conclusion that has not been fully tested out with its partners,” he emphasized.

Fitzpatrick also believes that “it might be difficult to add a party that has a fundamental difference with the current interim agreement.” He referred to the keynote speech of US Secretary of Defense Charles Hagel during this year’s Manama Dialogue, the annual regional security summit organized by the IISS, who mentioned there are other consultation mechanisms that could be used to bring the views of Iran’s Gulf neighbors into the process.

Despite the worries of the majority of Arab Gulf states, the interim agreement represents a departure from the status quo, given that it caps Iran’s nuclear capabilities. This allows enough time for the P5+1 to act if an agreement is not reached by next summer, and before Iran is able to make a decisive move towards developing nuclear weapons, notwithstanding Iranian denials of any such intention.

### **The impact of the interim agreement on Geneva II**

There are growing calls, including from Russia, for Iran to join the Geneva II conference on Syria. Yet so far, there are no indications that Iran will participate. The conference, scheduled for January 22, and its immediate aftermath are widely regarded as the first big test of Iran’s goodwill after the interim agreement on its nuclear program.

“There is a 50–50 chance,” Seyed Hossein Mousavian, former Iranian ambassador to Germany and spokesman for Iran’s nuclear negotiations team from 2003 to 2005, told *Asharq Al-Awsat*. He warned that Geneva II “would fail without participation of all key regional and international players, including Iran,” adding, “Iran would be ready to participate, but I cannot imagine Iran would accept any preconditions.”

On whether Iran would be prepared to accept the idea of a Syria without the current President Bashar Al-Assad at its head, Mousavian said that “Iran has maintained its position for free and fair elections in Syria since the beginning of the crisis. Iran would support whatever the Syrian nation decides.”

There are positive signals coming from Iran and other supporters of the Assad regime. Earlier this month, Rouhani told Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki that the goal of Geneva II should be to prepare the ground for “holding an absolutely free election with no preconditions.”

Russian and Chinese representatives at this year’s Manama Dialogue also acknowledged the aspirations of the Syrian people and the need for change in Syria. The Russian representative said there should be a new transitional period with the agreement of both the regime and the (moderate) opposition.

But the positive atmosphere does not convince other observers of the real leverage the interim nuclear deal can exercise over the diplomatic efforts to reach a political solution to the Syrian conflict.

"We have to differentiate," even though Iran's nuclear program and its active involvement in the Syrian war "are intertwined," says a senior fellow for regional security at the IISS, Emile Hokayem. He believes the Gulf states should accept Iran's presence at Geneva II, but only under the condition that it accepts the principles of Geneva I. Hokayem told *Asharq Al-Awsat* that "it would be wrong to put pre-conditions on the Syrian regime or the opposition in Geneva, but with regional actors pre-conditions are fair. Iran has to accept the principle of a transition."

Issued in June 2012, the Geneva Communiqué was accepted by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the League of Arab States, Turkey, and the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. It reiterated the commitment to the sovereignty, independence, national unity and territorial integrity of Syria and it called for the full implementation of then-Special Representative for Syria Kofi Annan's six-point plan and Security Council Resolutions 2042 and 2043. Among other issues, it called on all parties to "re-commit to a sustained cessation of armed violence in all its forms." Given Iran's active involvement in the Syrian conflict, subscribing to those principles and living up to them would force Iran to drastically alter its Syria strategy.

Alistair Burt thinks that a potential impact of the interim agreement on the diplomatic efforts on Syria "much depends on what we discover about the real intent of Iran [and] whether it holds to the conditions set out in the interim agreement." He also brought up another argument: "While Iran has managed to focus the rest of the world on the nuclear issue, it is able to continue its own work in supporting the [Syrian] regime."

"My personal view is more towards the latter than the former," he added. He said that the impact of the interim nuclear agreement will be "genuinely marginal" and that it is important to differentiate the Syrian issue from the interim agreement: "There are reasons why that [Syrian] conflict should come to an end, they are absolutely imperative and totally separate from the [nuclear] agreement."

Fitzpatrick recognizes that the interim agreement "has a positive externality; a positive impact on the way that Iran is viewed." It shows Iran's ability to make concessions and reveals a more pragmatic leadership. But he continues to hold doubts that Iran might take a more positive and less obstructionist role in negotiations on Syria.

Iran has been an obstacle on the road to peace in Syria, but it is certainly not the only one. Hokayem, the author of *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, says that in present circumstances, a political solution "is unlikely in the short to the medium term." He mentions a list of factors and "self-sustained dynamics on the ground and regionally that basically make any political solution at this point largely unlikely." These include the development of a war economy in Syria, fragmentation on both the regime and rebel sides, and the lack of a united position among the regional and international supporters of the rebels.

Beyond those concerns lies a lingering worry about the presence of Al-Qaeda on the ground in Syria, which might work against a political solution.

### **Al-Qaeda, an obstacle to peace in Syria**

In a recent off-the-record meeting with a group of journalists at which *Asharq Al-Awsat* was present, a senior delegation of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (the coalition of moderate opposition groups) and of the Free Syrian Army (the moderate armed opposition) dismissed concerns about the impact of the remarks of US Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker. Earlier this month, Crocker was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying that "we need to start talking to the Assad regime again" about counterterrorism issues and other matters of mutual concern.

The Obama administration has not made similar comments. Yet its position on the Syrian conflict over the past year does indicate that Al-Qaeda and its associates, namely the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Al-Nusra Front, are important factors in the way the US defines its strategy towards and priorities in the conflict. The US and, more generally, the moderate opposition's Western backers have refrained from providing significant military support and heavy

weapons to the rebels, at least partially due to the fear such weapons could fall into the hands of extremists.

But Alistair Burt rejects the idea that the presence of Al-Qaeda and associated groups in Syria has had a decisive influence in the way the UK government has considered its options on the conflict: "No, I don't think that has had an impact on the UK." He mentioned that the British government is very conscious of the presence of Al-Qaeda, but reiterates the continuous support the UK government has given to the moderate opposition through the Friends of Syria group. Burt also dismissed the idea that the US, like the UK, might be willing to talk to Assad, emphasizing that it is "the actions of the regime that are encouraging terrorism."

However, he recognized that there is "not parliamentary support for the provision of arms or anything like that" and that the presence of Al-Qaeda and the idea of weapons falling into the wrong hands might "weigh on the minds of parliamentarians." In August this year, the government of Prime Minister David Cameron lost a motion in parliament over the possibility of the UK participating in military action against the Assad regime as deterrence against the use of chemical weapons.

Hokayem agrees that the fear of Al-Qaeda has been a driver of both US and Western policy toward Syria: "The danger today is for Western officials to assess that Al-Qaeda is a much bigger threat than the Assad regime itself, which would open the way for counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation with the Assad regime." According to him, this would be a "terrible outcome."

"Just turning counterterrorism into the entirety of Western policy towards Syria would be a real tragedy," he said, because it would legitimize Assad and radicalize the opposition even more.

While these debates unfold, the Syrian conflict has reached a stalemate. The Assad regime continues to resist the rebels' armed incursions, with military backing from Iran and its allies, but it is largely unable to hold on to areas it recaptures from opposition forces. The moderate rebel forces have been vocal about the lack of international support, as well as the consequent firepower gap between them and the regime.

The sad irony is that Al-Qaeda forces are "stabbing the revolution in the back," as members of the Coalition put it while speaking to *Asharq Al-Awsat*. Opposition members claim that ISIS is not fighting the regime, and the regime is not fighting them. They are mostly concerned with establishing a foothold to spread their ideology, providing medicine, food, and other services, and assassinating FSA commanders. As things stand, the FSA does not have the means to fight a war on both fronts, and thus it has prioritized the war against the regime. These members of the opposition noted that FSA fighters outnumber the Al-Nusra Front's members by more than 10 to 1, but the latter receive far more substantial support.

Another irony is that the Assad regime has manipulated jihadists in the past. It did so in Syria, in Lebanon, and in Iraq after the US-led invasion in 2003, after which the regime armed jihadists who were jailed in Syria and sent them to Iraq to fight foreign forces, only to have them jailed again upon their return. On this, Hokayem adds that "the notion that the Assad regime is a real barrier to these groups is utter nonsense."

An important development on the ground is the formation of the Islamic Front, announced in late November. As the group's statement put it, this umbrella group will be the result of a "gradual merger" by a number of Syrian Islamist factions that aim to overthrow Assad and establish an Islamic state. Experts believe that the Islamic Front might work as a counterweight to the Al-Nusra Front and ISIS, but it also represents a threat to the moderate FSA. On December 11, the US and British governments announced the suspension of nonlethal aid to the Syrian opposition in northern Syria. This followed the alleged seizure by the Islamic Front of warehouses on the border with Turkey that contain assistance supplied by the US to the FSA.

Not only is the moderate opposition the only real barrier to the rise of extremist groups in Syria, but the absence of more international support to the rebels means they will lack leverage on the ground that could be translated into pressure for a deal at Geneva II that includes Assad's removal. In these circumstances, the pressure the permanent members of the UN Security Council can exercise over Assad may well prove decisive. Even if the conference is productive, it will only represent the beginning of a round of talks that could continue indefinitely. The war will go on, and its human and material costs will continue to rise.

Under the present conditions, Geneva II is very likely to fall short of the main goal of the moderate opposition: consensual agreement about a transitional government formed by members of the regime and the opposition but excluding Assad and his close circle. Syrian opposition leaders also stressed that for any such transition to succeed, Iran and Hezbollah must pull their occupying forces and militias out of Syrian territory.

“So we must hope to make 2014 a year in which we turn the corner on the Syria conflict, bring a two state solution to the Middle East Peace Process within reach, and make every effort to negotiate a comprehensive settlement with Iran on its nuclear programme,” the UK’s Foreign Secretary, William Hague, said recently. Amidst all the uncertainty, 2014 will reveal how much that is wishful thinking.



### [Manuel Almeida](#) [2]

Manuel Almeida is the assistant editor-in-chief of both *Asharq Al-Awsat*'s and *The Majalla*'s global editions.

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