

Together, Iran and the United States can shape the Middle East's future

A former nuclear negotiator for Iran says that for the first time in history, America has the chance to escape its total reliance on its free-riding regional allies

By Hossein Mousavian

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The historic deal negotiated between Iran and the P5+1 world powers will have far-reaching implications. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Middle East and indeed the world will never be the same. The peaceful resolution of what had become one of the most pressing crises of our time is a victory for the cause of stability and order in the Middle East.

As many observers have pointed out, this deal will be a major part of President Obama's legacy. However, the reason behind its significance is not simply that it has resolved the crisis over Iran's nuclear program, a huge achievement in its own right, but that it has opened the door for a new US approach towards the Middle East.



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What this agreement does is give the United States an option that it has never had before: the opportunity to escape the total reliance it has had for decades on its free-riding regional allies. This deal opens the door to a new regional security framework in which the United States and Iran work to advance, rather than thwart, each other's interests. The consequences of such co-operation will in all likelihood nurture a far more stable, peaceful, and prosperous Middle East that will cease to be a drain on the resources of regional and world powers.

America's overarching strategy towards the Middle East has long been premised on what can succinctly be described as "oil for security." This policy has entailed the United States providing security guarantees to some of the world's most despotic regimes in order to ensure the free flow of oil out of the region. As one former US politician once told me: "We have only talked about our real values like democracy in the Middle East but in practice oil has been our religion for the last several decades in the region."



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When willing to make a deal at any cost, this is the result. From early reports, we can see that the deal is a historic mistake.

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1,922 1,248

The results of this policy have been resolutely counter-productive for US interests and regional stability. Not only is chaos and anarchy spreading throughout the region and putting the United States on the edge of another entangling and costly conflict, more often than not the allies of the United States in the region have played major roles in instigating this discord and have offered little help to alleviate it.

The reality is that while these states take all of the benefits of a strong security partnership with the United States, they contribute little to nothing to the causes of enhancing regional stability and eliminating terrorism. As the world is witness to now, American allies in the region have shown little resolve in addressing the threat of ISIS even as it has established a presence in Libya, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and even Jordan. "Our allies in the region were our largest problem... They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad except that the people who were being supplied were al Nusra and al-Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.....", said Joe Biden Biden, the US Vice President.

THE U.S. JUST SECURED A DEAL THAT ACHIEVES WHAT WE ASKED FOR:
PREVENTING IRAN FROM OBTAINING A NUCLEAR WEAPON

- ✓ Increase the time it would take Iran to acquire enough material for 1 bomb from 2-3 months to at least 1 year
- ✓ Reduce Iran's stockpiles of enriched uranium
- ✓ Reduce the number of Iran's installed centrifuges by two-thirds
- ✓ Prevent Iran from producing weapons-grade plutonium
- ✓ Track Iran's nuclear activities with robust transparency and inspections

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America's relationship with its Middle Eastern allies has led to the classical "moral hazard" problem, epitomized by US allies engaging in provocative and aggressive actions while knowing full well that the United States will cover the costs of any of their failures and missteps. Yemen is a case in point here, with the Saudi-led attack on the country greatly empowering the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) terrorist group, a fact the Saudis do not seem to be the least concerned about given that they know that America will eventually be forced to deal with this threat for them.

The Arab Spring has shown that corrupt, autocratic and unrepresentative regimes are destined to collapse and that the United States cannot divert this trend. The implacability of the status quo Arab regimes in the face of this inevitability has unfortunately led to the rise of more extremist terrorist groups on one end and more hardened authoritarians on the other. As many experts have repeatedly said, the problem of terrorism will persist unless the governments of the region address the needs of the marginalised sectors of their societies and become more accountable.

It is all too ironic that America's main foe in the region, Iran, is actually more stable, powerful, democratic, and has more long-term interests in common with the United States than many American allies in the region today. Iran is one of the leading forces in the Middle East in the fight against Jihadist terrorism, whether it be Isil, Jabhat al-Nusra, or al-Qaeda. Furthermore, Iran has proven it is willing to contribute all manners of resources, including ground forces, to win this fight. Contrary to what the crisis created over Iran's nuclear program would have people believe, Iran has also initiated efforts for a Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (MENWFZ) and has for over 20 years supported a WMD free-zone in the Middle East. The nuclear deal has solidified Iran's commitment in this regard. Similar to the United States, Iran also has a vested interest in securing safe passage out of the Persian Gulf for hydrocarbons, and unlike many US Persian Gulf allies, actually has the means of ensuring this itself.

President Obama's legacy will endure for generations to come if he seizes this opportunity to reshuffle America's strategic posture in the Middle East. With a nuclear deal reached with Iran and the United States set to overtake Saudi Arabia as the world's top oil producer by 2020, the time has never been better for such a strategic shift. A more amicable relationship between the United States and Iran, where both sides co-operate in mutually beneficially ways and work to foster a regional co-operation system among regional powers specifically Iran and Saudi Arabia, is the only way forward.

Hossein Mousavian is a former diplomat who served as Iran's Ambassador to Germany (1990-1997), head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council (1997-2005) and as spokesman for Iran in its nuclear negotiations with the European Union (2003-5)



How we moderate

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