

## **The Iranian Nuclear Deal: Global Respite, Regional Enigma**

*Daneesh Sethna*

The agreement reached between the E3+3 and Iran in Geneva on November 24<sup>th</sup> has been touted by the West as a historic win for diplomacy. The Iranian nuclear issue that had been stalled for over ten years with tough negotiations leading to tougher sanctions has finally seen a significant breakthrough in Geneva this November. The seven parties involved in the negotiations have all welcomed the deal as a stepping stone to future agreements. Despite the West and International Organisations like the UN and the IAEA having welcomed the compromise reached during these talks, several regional powers like Israel and Saudi Arabia are far less jubilant.

The United States' closest ally in the region, Israel has been the most vocal opponent to the deal. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the deal a 'historic mistake' saying that it has made the world a 'much more dangerous place' than before. While stating that Israel was not bound by this agreement, Netanyahu also reiterated Israel's long standing threat to take military action against Iran if they felt their security was threatened, stating that Israel had the right to defend themselves against Iranian aggression. Israel has strongly objected to the deal allowing the Iranians to continue enrichment activities, even up to 5%. They have said that the steps taken by the E3+3 are merely cosmetic meaning that the Iranians could reverse these measures anytime. Israel believes that Iran should be forced to stop all production of uranium as they say that it will not be very difficult for Iran to convert low enriched uranium to weapons grade uranium. They have also called for an increase in economic sanctions placed on Iran as they doubt Iran's sincerity on the nuclear issue.

Joining the Israelis in their opposition to the agreement in Geneva are the Arabs who are concerned with the apparent thawing of relations between Iran and the United States as well as the Iran's growing influence in the region. While the official response from Saudi Arabia has been a cautious welcoming of the deal, many government officials have expressed their discontent with their Western allies for the way in which the deal was struck. They too are wary of Iran and are skeptical of Iran's nuclear intentions. Already discontent with Iran's involvement in the Syrian Civil War, they also believe that the deal would help Iran widen their sphere of influence in the region, to countries like Bahrain and Lebanon.

The discontent of its regional adversaries is not at all favorable for Iran. While they might have gained a diplomatic win within the international community, Iran needs to work out their intra-regional issues. Iran's neighbors do not believe that their nuclear intentions are peaceful and thus, the Geneva deal has done nothing but add to their fears about Iran's growing nuclear power. Saudi Arabia has long-signalled that if Iran were to succeed in becoming a military nuclear power, it would not be long before they followed suit. US Secretary of State, John Kerry has tried to appease the fears of his Middle Eastern allies, stating that the deal does not recognize Iran's right to enrichment and places limit on their uranium production which would ultimately make the Middle East a safer place. However, the nuclear deal has definitely added to the tensions within the region. The Sunni dominated Arab states are wary of Iran's power and influence in the region and thus anxious of any sort of rapprochement between Tehran and Washington D. C.

The intra-regional situation however goes beyond the nuclear issue and the current status quo does not bode well for the Iranians. Saudi Arabia believes that the Geneva Agreement has

given Iran a significant advantage in the tug of war between these two regional giants for supremacy in the Middle East. This will inevitably lead to more hostility towards Iran from Riyadh and its allies. The Arab monarchies have felt that Tehran's support for the Shia minorities within the region is a threat to their stability. Adding to that, the Iranian support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the presence of the Revolutionary Guard in Homs, has aggravated these sectarian problems as Saudi Arabia has responded by increasing its arms supplies to the anti-Assad forces in Syria. These developments threaten the peace and stability in the Middle East, and the Geneva Agreement may, in fact, have added fuel to an already blazing fire.

Nevertheless, the nuclear deal has been welcomed by most of the states in the region. Iranian allies like Iraq and Syria have undoubtedly rallied around the deal as a precursor to peace and a step forward towards solving other regional problems. Arab states like Oman and the UAE as well as Egypt have also welcomed it, although they remain cautious of Iran's intentions. The Gulf States have officially come out in favor of the deal but have cast their doubts about its efficacy in private. It remains to be seen whether this common apprehension towards the Agreement will bring together Iran's two greatest adversaries Israel and Saudi Arabia. There have been reports of covert sharing of intelligence between these two states, however, while Riyadh does not even recognize Israel as a country, it seems unlikely that they could work together, even against Iran.

America is undeniably the biggest ally of both these regional players, and despite the current disappointment it has caused them. While the reasons behind the United States pushing for a deal with Iran are multifold, it does lead us to question why the US would pursue a deal that is so obviously objected to by its allies. Various factors contributed to this, including the Syrian Chemical Weapons crisis and its diplomatic solution, the election of the moderate Hassan Rouhani as President and the threat of military action by Israel looming large over the region. However, one of the most prominent reasons seems to be America's shifting sphere of interest from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. It would seem that America wishes to tie up its engagements in the Middle East so that they can focus their efforts to the Far East and the Geneva Agreement set the path for a more lasting accord with Iran, and hopefully, peace and stability in the region.

While internationally, the Geneva Agreement may be accepted with a sigh of relief, regionally, the Iranian Nuclear Issue continues to be an enigma. In a region as volatile and unbalanced as the Middle East, the deal has evidently not had the desirable effects. Neither Israel nor Saudi Arabia could be expected to sit idly by while the centrifuges continue to turn on Persian soil. Both countries had expected the United States to deliver them the ashes of the Iranian nuclear program and have been sorely let down by their biggest ally. They both feel that the deal does not put enough pressure on Iran to slow down their nuclear activities. However, their concerns about Iran stem from sectarian and ideological differences as well as a historic enmity. One cannot expect to eradicate these differences overnight, as we can see from their reactions to the November 24 Agreement in Geneva.

*Daneesh Sethna is a Masters Student at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (Sciences Po), France*