

# Iran Nuclear Deal: Implications for the Middle East and Possibility of a Regional Security Forum

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## **Abstract**

The Middle East region can ill-afford destabilising conflicts which entail violent extremism, proxy warfare, and nuclear proliferation. The United States has restrained Iran's nuclear programme through successful application of soft power. Iran's possible return to the mainstream community i.e. opening trade and diplomatic relations, after the nuclear deal, has caused escalation in Arab concerns and Saudi-Iranian tensions. This situation calls for a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The implementation process of nuclear safety and security under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) provides an opportunity to regional states to move towards an inclusive regional forum. There needs to be a complex and multi-layered cooperative framework to reduce the region's vulnerability to shifting geopolitical preferences within and beyond and improve regional stability.

**Key words:** Iran Nuclear Deal, Middle East, Nuclear Nonproliferation, United States, Regional Security Forum.

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## Introduction

Iran's nuclear programme raised concerns in the Middle East and beyond due to its possible military dimensions. Resultantly, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) reached between Iran and the P5+1 or EU3+3 (Britain, France, China, Russia, United States (US), and Germany), which was implemented on January 16, 2016, carries ramifications for regional security and stability in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> The JCPOA provides Iran and P5+1, a 10-15 year window to resolve the nuclear *impasse*. Its significance lies in its landmark role in removing the taboo since 1979 of bilateral interaction between Iran and the US. It marks the US policy shift from containment to cautious engagement with Iran and signals the latter's return journey towards normalisation.

The JCPOA demonstrated that the international community led by P5+1 was ready to acknowledge Iran as a normal state instead of the pariah status it was inexorably sliding towards. Looking at the deal in perspective, it is obvious that the negotiators opted for relative gains instead of absolute gains. But what does the Iran deal mean for nonproliferation in the Middle East? Furthermore, would this deal result in enhanced regional security?

The only possibility of achieving the objective of regional stabilisation in a conflict-prone region is through concerted two-pronged efforts directed towards both nonproliferation and regional security. To begin with, this can be done via application of cost-benefit analysis within a cooperative framework similar in substance, if not in form, to the JCPOA. However, a regional security framework in the Middle East would require answers to these two questions: First, what are regional responses to the Iran deal? Second, could the deal become the first step towards both nuclear and human security in the region?

Regional responses to the Iran deal are generally pessimistic, particularly among the Arabs. There are four main powers in the region: Turkey, Iran, the Arabs, and Israel. This deal could become a first step

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<sup>1</sup> Miklos Gaspar, "JCPOA Implementation Day Ushers in New Phase for IAEA in Iran: Director General Amano" (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 2016), [www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/jcpoa-implementation-day-ushers-new-phase-iaea-iran-director-general-amano](http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/jcpoa-implementation-day-ushers-new-phase-iaea-iran-director-general-amano).

towards a regional mechanism for cooperation if the focus on nuclear compliance of Iran could ultimately result in economic integration and mutually beneficial political compromises. Such a cooperative framework would require that regional states carry forward momentum of the Iran deal to its logical conclusion of enhanced intra-regional collaboration. An inclusive Regional Security Forum (RSF) could set the stage for regional cooperation.

The Middle East is a region increasingly characterised by instability and turmoil. For instance, there is the Arab Spring, which engulfed the region in 2011. There was change in government in four states: Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya. There were political disturbances in various other regional states.<sup>2</sup> Then, there is the Iranian nuclear programme. Yet another cause behind regional troubles is the rise of violent extremism. The long-running Israel-Palestine issue is also a matter of concern. Thus, the main regional problems relate to nonproliferation (as in the Iranian case) and regional security (as shown during the Arab Spring and in Israel-Palestinian issue). The JCPOA addresses one of these above-mentioned problems that beset the region. Even if the Iran nuclear agreement is a step forward, what next? Does the JCPOA mean that other regional problems would now go away? Although this will not be the case, this article posits that it could provide a framework and a precedent towards regional cooperation. A major factor behind the urgent need for regional cooperation is violent extremism. This is a serious problem facing the entire region and requires a collective regional response.

The nuclear agreement has created the possibility of referral to Klasner's work on 'principles' and 'procedures' required for a regional cooperative architecture, including security arrangements. This article explores if and how procedure leads to principle? The implementation process of the nuclear deal provides Iran and corresponding states with a

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<sup>2</sup> The Arab Spring was a wave of revolutionary fervour and anti-government protests, which started in Tunisia in December 2010, and spread to several other regional states in the Middle East and North Africa. Certain residual effects of the Arab Spring phenomenon persist in the form of civil disturbances in Egypt and Bahrain, and in civil wars in Yemen, Libya, and Syria. To date, Tunisia remains the only example where a peaceful domestic political situation and democratic governance has prevailed as a consequence of the Arab Spring.

procedure for cooperative activities. The principle desired by regional states is regional security, which needs to be upheld through a regional security architecture characterised by cooperation and co-existence.

### **Grand Bargain**

The nuclear deal signaled the movement towards a grand bargain with Iran.<sup>3</sup> It meant that not only did the deal seek a behaviour change on the part of Iran to forswear the nuclear option, but it also provided the Republic with the leverage to protect its legitimate security interests in the region. The deal does not show US and European acquiescence to Iranian regional domination; nor was Tehran handed the keys to Middle Eastern region, it meant that the country would get a seat at the table. Further, a certain level of trust and tolerance was generated during the negotiation process, followed by domestic legislation in Iran and the US to ratify the agreement and United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231<sup>4</sup> to codify it into international law. Unless a Regional Security Forum (RSF) is able to institutionalise this new reality, the security architecture is bound to fall back upon sub-optimal outcomes of the deal, including regional rivalries and proxy wars. This would effectively mean renewed balancing efforts by both Saudi Arabia and Iran.

An outcome of the deal in the form of reversion to risky competition is fraught with dangers. It is potentially harmful to the enlightened self-interest of the two major protagonists since it is possible that continued security competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia would exacerbate across various conflict zones in the region. As a result of this bilateral rivalry, violent extremism would receive an impetus, which poses a direct threat to the US, Europe, China, Russia, and South Asia, besides the Middle East.

Unlike exclusive and rival military blocs, an inclusive RSF could help deal with two main issues in the Middle East: *Salafi jihadism* and the

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<sup>3</sup> Arash Karami, "Did Rouhani Sell 'Grand Bargain' with US to Iranian Voters?" *Al-Monitor*, May 15, 2017, [http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en\\_US/originals/2017/05/iran-rouhani-talks-us-non-nuclear-issues-khamenei.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en_US/originals/2017/05/iran-rouhani-talks-us-non-nuclear-issues-khamenei.html).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Security Council (UNSC), "Resolution 2231(2015): Background," July 20, 2015, <http://www.un.org/en/sc/2231/>.

worsening regional geopolitical rivalries.<sup>5</sup> Initially, the two key states – Saudi Arabia and Iran – must sit together to stabilise the critically weak states (e.g., Syria and Yemen). The failure of the Geneva process has demonstrated that Syria is not a problem the United Nations (UN) can resolve. These two key countries have stakes in regional stability and are not mere onlookers, rather actual protagonists in these conflict zones. Subsequently, stabilisation efforts can also be undertaken for conflict-prone areas like Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain.

Similarly, other major regional and contiguous states like Turkey and Pakistan can also join later. The US does not have to necessarily engage directly, as it did in leading the nuclear negotiations with Iran. Rather, Saudi Arabia should be induced to take the lead role. The primary task for the RSF would be to engage Iran and Saudi Arabia in regional dialogue on security; and include Pakistan and Turkey as both facilitators of the talks, and as significant players in their own right in Afghanistan and the Levant, respectively. These two countries have the advantage of enjoying the confidence of both Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The Middle East is a difficult region to manage. Its current regional security architecture is based on post-World War I boundaries, and is now under immense pressure in the aftermath of *Salafi jihadism* and sectarian conflagration centred on Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. There are also emerging intra-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) rifts. The so-called Islamic State (IS) has also managed to carve out a terrorist state in the border region of Syria and Iraq, which has injected further instability in the region.<sup>6</sup>

There are three broad objectives that could be met through a RSF: a

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<sup>5</sup> *Salafi jihadism* is the puritanical interpretation of religious ideologies along with declarations of war issued by non-state actors, for instance insurgent organisations such as Al-Qaeda et al.

<sup>6</sup> *House Foreign Affairs Committee, Al-Qaeda's Resurgence in Iraq: A Threat to US Interests* (2014) (statement of Brett McGurk, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iran and Iraq, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/221274.htm>. On June 10, 2014, Mosul in Iraq fell to IS, which subsequently controlled contiguous territory on both sides of the Syria-Iraq border. An Iraqi and allied offensive was launched to re-take Mosul in late 2016 and the Iraqi government announced its completion in July 2017.

US-Russia reset in the Middle East; supporting a regional balance of power; and countering *Salafi jihadism*. On the first point, the US-Russia rivalry subsided somewhat in the Middle East as demonstrated by the Syrian chemical weapons deal and the JCPOA. However, moving forward they both need to maintain regional *status quo* while remaining valuable partners to regional powers. Iran's theocratic regime has traditionally sought to maintain neutrality in superpower rivalry.

Iran is not in perfect harmony with the Russian camp because besides the need for stability in Syria and latest arms acquisitions, Russo-Iranian policies and perceptions might not be identical in all matters. Secondly, US interests in retaining military forces and economic influence have regionally been pursued by hub-and-spoke diplomacy. In the Middle East, it is more sensible to uphold balance of power as opposed to direct dominance to prevent any single regional hegemon. The RS Forum could implement this policy in a smooth manner.

Finally, regional states should realise that the spread of *Salafi jihadism* is a significant, amorphous, and insidious threat. Before emergence of IS in Iraq and Syria, it could be said that there were cognitive hurdles in the identification of *Salafi jihadism* as the primary threat by governments like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. This phenomenon is similar to the cases noted by psychologists, wherein extremist children of conservative parents are not recognised as such by the latter until a violent incident by them occurs.

A similar delay in recognition of a *Salafi jihadist* threat was evidenced in the case of Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, but that phase has passed. Now, the only hurdle left is the desire to pursue geopolitical goals through non-state proxies e.g. *Salafi jihadists* due to the state's security dilemmas. This rationale could be removed as a factor if Iran's nuclear issue is resolved, and it is brought into a regional security framework under a forum where competing influences in Syria and Iraq et al. could be calibrated. Similarly, Iran's positive role in Afghanistan could ameliorate Pakistan's concerns about the security of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border (i.e., the Durand Line).

The Saudi-Iranian equation is critical to a RSF because it is multidimensional. Four dimensions can be enumerated. The first is the calibration of Saudi-Iranian geopolitical rivalry within the framework of

the Persian-Arab identity conflict. The second is the sectarian dimension – Saudi Arabia is the leader of the Sunni world and Iran is the leader of the Shia world. This means that the establishment of an RSF could have broad impact in the region, and also in the rest of the Muslim world (e.g., South Asia and even Indonesia and Malaysia). The third is an ideological dimension with two non-violent strands in political Islam. The Saudi *Salafists* on the one hand, and the Jamat-i-Islami of Pakistan - Justice and Development Party of Turkey – Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (JI-AKP-MB) combination on the other. Iran is closer to the latter group. The regional forum could open dialogue between these opposing camps, resulting in an effective channel of communications that could help manage regional conflicts (even within the GCC). And finally, such a forum inside the US could unite various political opinions with a soft corner for either of the two sides in the Middle East. An internal political consensus in the US between the Democrats and Republicans on Middle Eastern security could also help guarantee its success.

The process of initiation of the proposed RSF could be via the established nuclear safety framework in the region serving as a confidence-building measure. Then with Saudi-Iranian involvement, the Forum could take up Syria as its first order of business. The immediate regional issue for the Middle East is the meltdown of Syria. Regional insecurity is bound to multiply if the war spreads north and south into Turkey and Jordan. Syria enjoys symbolic centrality in the Middle East, as Afghanistan does in South Asia and Central Asia. Just as South Asian threat perceptions would increase if the security situation in Afghanistan worsens, similarly the regional security architecture in the Middle East is closely tied to the fate of Syria.

A constructivist analysis of the Iran nuclear deal shows that in its aftermath, traditional security dilemmas of regional states have resurfaced, including Iranian power projection and Saudi assertiveness. An assessment of the JCPOA so far reveals that the grand bargain implicit in the deal is under increased pressure. Its impact is restricted to nonproliferation, but no headway has so far been made in terms of regional security. If the Comprehensive Plan is to be strengthened and adopted as a model for regional security, there has to be a forum that is

inclusive, as opposed to being exclusive, in its nature, constitution and objectives. Despite the many different problems faced by the region, including the Arab Spring, Iran's option of the bomb, Israel-Palestinian protracted dispute, Arab-Persian divide, Shia-Sunni cleavage, intra-GCC divide, the surprisingly simple answer to most of the above issues, given the region's cultural milieu, lies in direct interaction between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The JCPOA could prepare the groundwork for a nuclear safety regime. However, it has four weaknesses: having been signed by doves on both sides; the election of Donald Trump in the US and impact on negotiator stability; the Saudi reaction; and the Israeli reaction to the deal. Conversely, the deal also has certain strong areas: Iran's electoral results; International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports; and the potential benefits of the deal for Iran's economy. The basic norm that has been preserved under the Plan is nonproliferation, and non-violent resolution of an international crisis caused by inter-state dispute between the US and Iran. According to Jervis, an outcome with mutual gains is the result of cost-benefit analysis.<sup>7</sup> Krasner depicted international regimes as:

Sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations. Principles are beliefs of fact, causation and rectitude. Norms are standards of behaviour in terms of rights and obligations. Rules are specific prescriptions or proscriptions for action. Decision-making procedures are prevailing practices for making and implementing collective choice.<sup>8</sup>

This work applies Krasner's 'principles' and 'procedures' to test the viability of a prospective Middle Eastern security forum. The main principle is regional security, and the procedure applies to the implementation process of the deal within a framework of IAEA safety

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167-214.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 2.



standards. The application of these factors would help improve regional security because similar concepts are already prevalent in Middle Eastern discourse. Furthermore, Krasner points to the creation of clusters of issues with interlinkages, which would result in a complex, multilayered interdependency amongst regional states.<sup>9</sup>

### **Regional Environment: Iran-Saudi Relations in Perspective**

Currently, there are four main power contenders in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Arab states, and Israel. The US is also a player in the region, but it is not a permanent presence and chooses to engage selectively as per requirement. The Turks have been looking eastward in the post-Arab Spring scenario. The Arab bloc is a conglomeration of several states. A ready formulation is the six monarchical regimes of the GCC, which includes Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman. Out of this group, Oman enjoys close ties with Iran. The severance of Qatar's ties with Iran was cited among the 13 demands made by Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain in an intra-GCC rift in June 2017.<sup>10</sup> Saudi efforts at military alliance-formation have won it many partners beyond GCC within the last two years.<sup>11</sup> Among its closest allies outside

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<sup>9</sup> Robert O. Keohane, "The Demand for International Regimes," *International Organisation* 36, no. 2 (1982): 325-355. According to Keohane, the utilitarian social contract tradition based upon rational-choice analysis underpins international cooperation and regime formation.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Wintour, "Qatar Given 13 Days to Meet 13 Sweeping Demands by Saudi Arabia," *Guardian*, June 23, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> In December 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the formation of an anti-terrorism coalition – the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) - a military alliance of 34 states. The primary objective behind IMAFT is "to protect the Muslim countries from all terrorist groups and terrorist organisations irrespective of their sect and name." The alliance was meant to fight the "disease of terrorism that has damaged the Islamic world. The coalition would work together to target any terrorist organisation, not just ISIS in countries like Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Afghanistan." However, IMAFT does not include prominent Shia states like Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

the GCC, however, remains Egypt under General Sisi and Pakistan under former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.<sup>12</sup>

An analysis of threat perceptions is important in the Middle East in order to understand the inter-state rivalries which inform their behaviour. During the 1970s, the three main state-actors in the Middle East in competition with one another were Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>13</sup> The Nixon Doctrine of the 1970s envisioned a joint alliance with Iran and Saudi Arabia to counter the threat of Communist influence in the Middle East. However, the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 altered the regional security landscape. Consequently, the 1980s were marked by an Iran-Iraq War and Saudi ascendancy in the region, which supported both Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Afghan anti-Soviet elements during the Afghanistan War (1979-88). These two war efforts lay the founding infrastructure of violent extremism. In 1981, the six Gulf Arab states joined together to form the GCC. Iran was not invited to join. The GCC was not able to provide security to the Gulf region when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990-91 and the GCC states had to rely on the US help to evict Iraq from there.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was direct involvement in the region's power dynamics. However, when the US pulled out in 2011, it left behind a power vacuum. As a result of subsiding US hegemony, a balance of power started taking shape in the region between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This regional competition was exacerbated due to the Arab Spring in 2011. It widened sectarian faultlines and consequently exploded into a sectarian conflagration. At the same time, the US announced its 'Asia Pivot' policy. Subsequently, the US refused to assert its hegemonic presence in the region in alliance with Saudi Arabia when an opportunity arose in Syria in 2013 over battlefield employment of chemical weapons. This non-military and diplomatic involvement of the US in Syria was followed by another major role reversal from the Arab point of view, which is the Iran nuclear deal.

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<sup>12</sup> Editor's Note: The Pakistani PM was removed from office in August 2017 during the finalisation of this article following corruption allegations. His party Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) continues to be the ruling party.

<sup>13</sup> Henner Fürtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2002), xiii.

### **Iran-US Relations: A See-Saw Relationship**

For US diplomacy, the Iran deal was a diplomatic achievement of the same magnitude as opening up to China by Nixon in 1971. China in 1971 was an intractable problem that did not have any military solution in sight, so Nixon opted to secretly seek *détente* with a Communist state at the height of the Cold War.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Iranian power projection in the current Middle Eastern situation is a problem that does not have a military solution. It is generally agreed that a military solution would further aggravate the problem. It should be noted that this opening with Iran should be considered worthwhile even if, during the next decade or two, Iran's foreign policy posture follows the Chinese model. China trades with the world and maintains a functional working relationship with the US coordinating in most matters of international importance like the Iranian sanctions and nuclear negotiations. It would be beneficial to the Middle East if Iran adopts similar pragmatism. Even if this deal does not lead to complete normalisation of relations, it can still be an improvement upon the disastrous security competition which currently exists between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The momentum and interactive mechanisms created by the deal should be used to construct the linkage between nonproliferation and regional security in the Middle East.

The role of the US is neither consistently decisive in regional outcomes nor is it pervasive. It exercises regional influence due to periodic involvement in regional matters and military presence in Bahrain and Qatar. The US experience in Iraq demonstrated the phenomenon of power being dissipated when it is converted into force. It showed the perils of exercise of power. However, with the Iran deal, the US was able to successfully demonstrate its soft power and proved that it is still able to shape regional outcomes according to its will.

For the sake of peace dividends, the US will have to maintain its commitments in the Middle East. This is due to the geopolitical significance of the region. The US would have to use its influence and alliances to deal with three main problems: elimination of *Salafi jihadist*

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<sup>14</sup> Ian Morris, "Iranian Power is not Inevitable," *Stratfor Worldview*, May 27, 2015, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/iranian-power-not-inevitable>.

terrorism, supporting fledgling states, and containing proxies. The US can increase arms sales to the Gulf Arab states, but this will not remove the main cause of Arab anxiety and tension, which is Iran's regional role to which the US has no answer.<sup>15</sup> It could extend security guarantees like the North American Treaty Organisation (NATO) states extend to each other or in case of Iran's nuclear weapon, it could promise extended deterrence, but the Arabs are likely to remain sceptical.

### **Saudi Assertiveness and the Islamic Military Alliance: A Spanner in the Works**

Security competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia has exacerbated since 2011. After the refusal by former US President Barack Obama to take action against Syria in 2013 subsequent to a chemical attack in Ghouta, Syria, the Saudi balancing efforts intensified both internally and externally. Internal balancing efforts included increased defence spending,<sup>16</sup> with external balancing in the form of regional alliances. In March 2015, a military coalition made up of nine regional states was formed to launch an aerial bombing campaign against Houthi tribesmen in Yemen. The Houthis are the protagonists in an ongoing Yemeni civil war with alleged Iranian backing. As mentioned before, in December 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the formation of an Islamic Military Alliance of 41 Muslim states including Pakistan, but not Iran.

The nuclear deal pointed to the probability of US-Iranian rapprochement. According to one view, this was bound to impact other regional states like Saudi Arabia and Israel, which had drawn closer to the US in the vacuum created due to Iranian post-revolutionary diplomatic

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<sup>15</sup> Vali Nasr, "Why did Iran Sign on to a Deal that will Weaken its Regional Hold?" *Washington Post*, July 31, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-did-iran-sign-on-to-a-deal-that-will-weaken-its-regional-hold/2015/07/31/a9f48494-354a-11e5-8e66-07b4603ec92a\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.b5100d77cd66](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-did-iran-sign-on-to-a-deal-that-will-weaken-its-regional-hold/2015/07/31/a9f48494-354a-11e5-8e66-07b4603ec92a_story.html?utm_term=.b5100d77cd66). He writes, "The Arab countries most worried about Iranian mischief outspent (on defence) Iran by a margin of 8 to 1."

<sup>16</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, "Saudi Arabia Passes Russia as World's Third Biggest Military Spender," *Washington Post*, April 5, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/05/saudi-arabia-passes-russia-as-worlds-third-biggest-military-spender/?utm\\_term=.f6f8a5971486](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/05/saudi-arabia-passes-russia-as-worlds-third-biggest-military-spender/?utm_term=.f6f8a5971486).

*volte-face*.<sup>17</sup> A rapprochement between Iran and the US was not a desirable outcome for these regional rivals of Iran. Accordingly, the post-deal debate in the US in the run-up to the Congressional vote was framed in terms of ‘Iran versus Israel’ question, and not merely as an exercise in nonproliferation.<sup>18</sup> Ironically, in May 2017, Saudi Arabia hosted three summits i.e. Saudi-US Summit, GCC-US Summit and the US-Arab-Islamic Summit, which was attended by 55 Muslim states and the US. Not only was Iran excluded during the meetings, both President Trump and King Salman Bin Abdul Aziz singled out Iran in their statements for its destabilising role in the region.

### **From Procedure to Principle: The Political Context Underlying Nonproliferation Efforts**

As a realist action in pursuit of idealist objectives, the nuclear deal is open to recrimination. The deal could be the first step towards a regional security regime, if regional security is brought within the purview of established dialogue process between Iran and the US et al. According to the definition by Krasner, there are four factors which characterise security regimes: principles, norms, rules, and procedures.<sup>19</sup> Even if a security regime is not realistic in the current Middle Eastern environment, nonetheless the predictability of a regime remains the penultimate objective behind any actions directed towards regional security. However, at this stage, the practical policy option would be the facilitation of increased direct communication between Iran and Saudi Arabia whether in the form of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) like Track Two interactions, summit-level talks, or expert-level dialogues. Some

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<sup>17</sup> Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007). He has argued that in the post-Cold War world, Iran worked against the peace process, fearing that it would be left isolated in the region, and Israel sought to prevent a US- Iran dialogue because it feared that Washington would betray Israeli security interests if Iran and US were to communicate directly.

<sup>18</sup> “The Final Tally: How Congress Voted on Iran,” *The Iran Primer*, September 17, 2015, [iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2015/sep/11/congress-votes-deal](http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2015/sep/11/congress-votes-deal).

<sup>19</sup> Krasner, *International Regimes*, 2.

procedural and technical aspects of the Iran deal have resulted in the establishment of a dialogue process between Iran and the US along with P5+1.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the main principle that underpins the deal is nonproliferation. This is the crux of the deal as well as a generally recognised principle in the region. Significantly, there have often been regional proposals related to Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZs) made by regional states at international conferences. The principle of nonproliferation is supported by the institutional infrastructure available with IAEA as well as the influence and resources available with P5+1, including the European Union.

The second principle is sovereignty and non-intervention. This is the essential norm which has been preserved through non-violent settlement of the Iranian nuclear issue. It is imperative to maintain non-intervention as the foundational norm for regional stability sustained through restraint and reciprocity in the current environment characterised by proxy wars.

The third principle is recognition of the role of cooperation and non-military resolution of conflicts. The pro-pragmatist result of three Iranian elections after the nuclear deal was signed (parliamentary elections and assembly of experts in 2016 and presidential elections in 2017) demonstrates impact of the cooperative norm on Iran's electorate is significant. Iran can play its role as a legitimate regional actor against terrorist organisations like IS.

If this nuclear deal has to progress towards an inclusive security forum for the region under standards set by IAEA, then other regional issues should also be taken into account within the broader Saudi-Iranian rivalry. An important consideration is the rise of violent extremism under Al-Qaeda and IS. Fighting violent extremism is the declared reason behind Saudi military alliance formation, however, the pointed exclusion of Iran has cast a shadow of doubt over their real motives. Geopolitically, regional hotspots can be handled amicably if there is demarcation of zones or spheres of influence which pertain to critical national security interests of the two states concerned.

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<sup>20</sup> Milad Jokar, "Iran Nuclear Deal: Success of Diplomacy and Opening of a New Era," *HuffPost*, accessed August 1, 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/milad-jokar/iran-nuclear-deal-success\\_b\\_9001742.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/milad-jokar/iran-nuclear-deal-success_b_9001742.html).

The fourth factor of decision-making procedures is inbuilt in the Iran deal in the form of enhanced inspections and verification measures, including additional protocols. It can be formalised as a security forum, which could become the venue for a regional dialogue process. The nuclear deal's implementation, by definition, points to a linear-dependent process. The Iran nuclear deal sets the decision-making procedures through a linear trajectory. This path-dependency means that the conditions outlined in the deal make it unlikely that it will fall apart. It is robust and technically sound. The deal gives Iran three and a half weeks to allow inspections of a suspected site, which seems like a long time, however, experts contend that the time lag does not matter since uranium traces are ineradicable. The second aspect of robustness of the deal can be garnered from the fact that the international coalition brought together to impose sanctions represented the entire international community. Subsequently, the manner in which the deal has been welcomed by the governments, public, and business communities in Europe, China, Russia, India, and elsewhere shows that it would be difficult to reinstate the same kind of stringent sanctions regime by the US, its European allies, along with the IAEA in the event of some minor Iranian infraction or a shift in priorities caused by political change like the 2016 Republican victory in the US. The major principles underlying this deal on nonproliferation are non-intervention and cooperation. These can form the bedrock of any regional security forum in the future.

### **Nonproliferation: Non-intervention and Cooperation**

The *raison d'être* of the Iran deal is pursuit of the principle of nonproliferation. The deal permits Iranian indigenous nuclear fuel cycle, no matter how circumscribed, is something that has not been allowed to any Arab state.<sup>21</sup> But this possibility is connected with the underlying

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<sup>21</sup> On Iran's nuclear programme and the extent of its indigenous capabilities, "Iran Claims Nuclear Fuel Cycle Capabilities" (Washington, D.C.: Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2009), <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/iran-claims-nuclear-fuel-cycle-capabilities/>. The full nuclear fuel cycle consists of extracting and crushing unrefined uranium ore, enriching the material and preparing it for use in power reactors, reprocessing spent fuel, and managing or eliminating waste.

hope which has propelled this deal - Iran would one day return to the community of nations as a normal state in good standing with the international nuclear regulators. That is why there is a 10-15 year transition phase provided under the agreement. If at the end of these ten years, Iran's behaviour is sufficiently altered, it would set a new gold standard for nuclear development by Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) after the one set by the UAE's safeguarded nuclear programme.<sup>22</sup> Given the litany of issues surrounding Iran's negative image, it is likely that other factors including missile development, human rights, and regional complaints of domestic interference would also weigh in during the final assessment. If Iran decides to remain a pariah in terms of nuclear intentions even after this decade, in which case the US and other concerned states might have to deal with the Iranian problem once again.

The Iran deal supports the norm of sovereignty because it eschews the option of forcible regime change without exhausting non-violent routes. There has not been a single case in the world yet, where a state bent upon building a nuclear weapon due to security reasons, relinquished the programme out of economic and political considerations. India, Pakistan and North Korea were all cajoled and coerced by major powers at one time or the other to give up their nuclear programmes. In the case of Brazil, Argentina and South Africa, it was regime change or imminent regime change, which propelled the decision to abandon nuclear pursuits. In the case of Iran the same ruling regime, which was said to be seeking nuclear capability, has now agreed to exercise nuclear restraint.

It is also important, therefore, to look at factions within Iran's domestic politics. The conservatives were not willing to concede to international demands, the reformists seek wider interaction with the outside world, while the ruling pragmatists, including the current

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<sup>22</sup> April Yee, "UAE Presses the Case for Nuclear Gold Standard," *National*, April 19, 2012, <https://www.thenational.ae/business/uae-presses-the-case-for-nuclear-gold-standard-1.370895>. UAE started its nuclear programme in 2008 in what was regarded as the gold standard for nations seeking peaceful atomic power for the first time. UAE declared that, "new nuclear nations should not pursue uranium enrichment because it makes no commercial sense." UAE issued a USD 20 billion contract for four reactors helped by close international cooperation. The first reactor is due to be commissioned in 2017.



president Hassan Rouhani feels that Iran's rights under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) need to be safeguarded without necessarily acquiring nuclear weapons capability. The Arab neighbours of Iran, particularly Saudi Arabia, feel that the Iranians merely wish to deceive the international community through the deal by hiding or withholding the programme to 'sneak out' at a later date or move towards a 'break out' when the duration of the deal expires and the world is not looking. However, under the nuclear deal, Iran has also agreed to reveal past efforts towards the military dimension of its nuclear programme, which undermines the position of those who are objecting to it.

So, was regime change a factor? It is pertinent that for the first time since the revolutionary regime took power in Iran in 1979, it has been able to gain international guarantees of continuity. This is a huge relief for the clerical regime, which had lived under the weighty threat of regime change since taking power. As long as the terms of this deal hold, it is no longer possible for any member of the international community, except perhaps for Israel, to try to unseat the ruling elite of Iran, which signed off on the deal. The Israel factor is a wild card that is useful to the US in case of a contingency situation and Israel should realise this role beyond forceful rejections of the deal although even unilateral action would probably require a *casus belli*.

The Iran nuclear deal reaffirms the rule of cooperation in high politics. Most experts agree that the deal is an effective effort towards nonproliferation. However, it is not possible to pursue nonproliferation while ignoring the context behind it. The context remains Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, resultant break-up between the US and Iran, and the evolving security framework of the region characterised by exclusive military blocs and incessant proxy wars.

## **Conclusion**

The Middle East enjoys symbolic status in global politics because of strategic, economic and historical factors. US involvement with the Middle East formally began after the Suez Crisis in 1956. It has maintained an on and off engagement ever since. Most of its influence is

exercised through an alliance system. In the current scenario, this alliance system could be effectively utilised in order to support a Regional Security Forum (RSF). The delicate balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia signifies the growing Middle Eastern commitments of the US. Regional security prognosis would be bleak if the Iranian deal fails as it could have implications for Iran's domestic politics with conservative supremacy, increased regional role of *Salafi jihadism*, economic sanctions and their regional effects, and possible Israeli strikes on the Republic.

However, if the regional security environment reverts to conflict formation mode in the aftermath of the Iran deal, its larger purpose could be defeated. Iran and Saudi Arabia must find ways to collaborate in the current scenario. Therefore, there is a need for an RSF. What would be the basic criteria for a successful security architecture in the Middle East? For one thing, even while the need for a collective platform were established, it would be the level of inclusivity that would determine its longevity. A coalition led exclusively by conservative Arab states in pursuit of a vague and exclusive agenda would be unlikely to pull the region along.

During the last few years, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have pursued active global diplomacy. Iran managed to ink a successful nuclear agreement with world powers. Saudi Arabia has brought together two international coalitions of regional states. In 2015, the Yemen War coalition was formed, and in the same year, the Islamic Military Alliance against terrorism was formed. Although the significance of regional forums is evident from the main argument made in this article, it is important that such a forum be able to fulfil the criteria of inclusivity and durability.

What should such a security forum encompass? The first point of convergence for all regional states within a security framework is the common threat of violent extremism. This convergence of interest could be a foremost factor in dialogue initiation. Other issues of importance could be added later. Security arrangements outlast their original *raison d'être*. It is much harder to form cooperative frameworks than to maintain them.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Lipson, "Transaction Cost Estimation and International Regimes: Of Crystal Balls and Sheriff's Posses," *International Studies Review* 6, no. 1 (2004): 1-20.

The central objective in the current security environment is to form a reasonably complex and multilayered security framework. Issue-density could be achieved through linkages between clusters of issues encompassing principles and procedures. This would serve to create sufficient interdependency among regional states to offset the countervailing effects of regional power tussle. The Forum could not only help mitigate negative effects of the current competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, if proven durable, it could also counteract any future discord between the former and other regional states. Iran needs to be brought into the regional fold on terms of parity not primacy. Unfortunately, the history of reciprocity is not encouraging in the Middle East.<sup>24</sup> However, it is hoped that the implementation processes of the Iran deal coupled with the necessity of dealing with the threat of extremist violence would serve as the necessary trigger for regional collaboration.

The Forum could serve as a conduit for economic and security issue-linkages. The Middle Eastern region has a successful example in Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Iran and Saudi Arabia can manage to settle for a functional and working relationship within the framework of OPEC.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, there is the factor of intra-regional investments which have become a significant source of revenue for Middle Eastern countries. If Iran wishes to benefit from this potential economic boom, it would have to coordinate its policies with regional states. The role of Europe is likely to be important in Iran's economic integration.

Another important factor is nuclear safety and security. While Iran's nuclear programme would remain under IAEA scrutiny as per the terms of the deal, the perspective of nuclear safety should be highlighted in tandem with other regional nuclear programmes to lay down nuclear safety infrastructure as part of the regional security framework. It would be

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<sup>24</sup> Joshua S. Goldstein, Jon C. Pevehouse, Deborah J. Gerner, and Shibley Telhami, "Reciprocity, Triangularity, and Cooperation in the Middle East, 1979-97," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 5 (2001): 594-620.

<sup>25</sup> "OPEC Reaches a Deal to Cut Production," *Economist*, December 3, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21711088-oil-prices-surge-saudi-arabia-and-iran-sign-deal-opecs-meeting>.

worthwhile for GCC states to seek coordination with former Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) states viz. Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and the United Kingdom. Another regional organisation is the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) made up of Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and Central Asian states.

There is an opinion that the US hub-and-spoke alliance system in the region would now include Turkey, followed by selective engagement with Iran as its own policies evolve in the region.<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that in order to achieve regional ascendancy, a state must not only be an economic and military power, but also a cultural role model to pull the region along in the certain direction of its own choosing. Both Turkey and Iran possess soft power to the extent that they are democratic to varying degrees (they have yet to provide a satisfactory account of their experimentation with Political Islam). The post-Arab Spring Tunisia was able to provide evidence of functioning and pluralistic governance in a much shorter time frame.<sup>27</sup>

However, both Iran and Turkey are evolving politically, and there is room for hope. It is the kind of hope that engenders the nuclear deal in the Iranian case. Saudi Arabia is an ecclesiastical monarchy, yet it has been able to pull together sizeable regional coalitions. However, in the absence of Iran – the other pole in the dyadic and bipolar regional dynamics – from these forums, the durability of such endeavours remains a moot point. As for Pakistan, it has been rightly observed that it should only involve itself on the condition if it can pursue the policy objective of a *détente* between the two regional protagonists - Saudi Arabia and Iran. ■

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<sup>26</sup> Yasmeen Serhan, “‘A New Era’ in US-Turkish Relations,” *Atlantic*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2017/05/trump-erdogan/526851/>.

<sup>27</sup> Anouar Boukhars, “The Reckoning: Tunisia’s Perilous Path to Democratic Stability” (paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., 2015), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/04/02/reckoning-tunisia-s-perilous-path-to-democratic-stability-pub-59571>.