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« US Needs Help to Disentangle from Syrian Misadventure »

Par Habilian
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Iran nuclear talks drew to a close and a historic agreement was reached between Iran and P5+1 and the deal was implemented, but the opponents, from the Israeli Prime Minister and Saudi Arabia to Iran hawks in US congress to the Iranian terrorist groups functioning unhindered in the West, went out of their ways to sabotage the agreement from the very beginning.

A Beirut-based commentator and analyst covering Middle East geopolitics says Saudi Arabia and Israel were desperate to strike a blow at Iran's further international 'rehabilitation'. Sharmin Narwani says the deal was also struck as the US and its allies "desperately needed the support of rational, capable parties within the Middle East to help disentangle from their Syrian misadventures."



Sharmin Narwani

In the following interview with Habilian Association, Narwani speaks about those who've failed to influence the deal. Having a great knowledge of Iranian society, she also touches upon the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK, a.k.a. MKO) and describes them as "useful to the deal spoilers" who lacks any kind of support in Iran.

1. What is your take on the opponents of Iran nuclear deal before the agreement was reached between Iran and P5+1?

The primary opponents of the P5+1-Iran negotiations were Saudi Arabia and Israel – these two states were on the forefront of a large-scale propaganda campaign intended to derail the talks and prevent a deal from being struck. Their motivations were entirely political as both states actively seek to undermine Iranian influence in the Middle East and beyond. Both states view growing Iranian clout as a direct and existential threat to their nations, and to their ability to manipulate the region to advantage. During the one and a half years of negotiations, the Islamic Republic was in ascendency in the region, while Saudi Arabia and Israel were hemorrhaging credibility – even with their western allies. Their desperation to therefore strike a blow at Iran's further international 'rehabilitation' was even more urgent than usual, and they were successful, on the surface at least, of gaining public support from at least one P5 member state, France. The French took some very hardline public postures – they managed to secure some large weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and Qatar during this period – but behind the scenes and at the actual negotiating table, I am told they barely made a peep.

2. How do you assess such activities after the agreement was reached? What are their post-Iran-deal plans?

Of course the French came into line immediately post-deal, mainly to try to gain a piece of the Iranian post-sanctions-relief economic pie. I believe France's Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius may have even been the first P5+1 official to visit Iran. You can see from the slew of western officials and business delegations making pilgrimages to Tehran in the immediate aftermath of the Vienna deal, that commerce is of paramount importance to these states suffering from stagnant economies.

Economic considerations aside, this deal was also struck because the US and its allies desperately needed the support of rational, capable parties within the Middle East to help disentangle from their Syrian misadventures. By mid-2012, the US and its western allies suddenly realized that Syria would not be a quick 'regime-change' operation and were starting to grow concerned about the proliferation of jihadis and other extremists outside of their control, most of them armed, funded and supported by western allies in the Persian Gulf and Turkey. That's when the US reached out to Iran in a secret meeting in Oman. So I think another consideration for the P5+1 is definitely to gain Iran's assistance in helping to put out some of these fires. Iran will help, in the sense that eradicating political violence, re-stabilizing states and halting extremism is high on its priority list, but it is important to understand that western goals are not the same. The west is perfectly happy with weakened Mideast states – it just doesn't want the extremism it has spawned to breach its own borders. At the present moment, the nuclear deal has been helpful in that the US can openly work in the same military theaters (Syria, Iraq) with Iran without a confrontation breaking out between the two. This is a direct result of Vienna.

3. Please tell me what do you think of Netanyahu's March 2015 address to the US Congress over Iran accord?

I didn't watch the speech – Netanyahu never has anything interesting or truthful to say. I did, however, watch the circus around it, and I have to say that if I was an American I would be seriously appalled at the pandering of my elected officials to a foreign official. I do think Netanyahu was a net loser by giving that speech. He created a contentious split in the American body politic and gained acrimony instead of galvanizing support. Clearly he lost, as the Iran nuclear agreement is a reality today. But it would be a mistake to write off Netanyahu. He – and his allies in the US and elsewhere – intend to exploit every opportunity,

at every turn of this agreement, to put a wrench in the works. One way to do this is to undermine the 'spirit' of this deal, which we are seeing at the moment with further sanctions talk, threats about Iran's missile program, and the ridiculous visa restriction measure that was signed into law by Obama a few weeks ago…

4. What is your opinion about the activities of Iranian groups such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK, aka MKO) against this agreement?

I was in Vienna covering the final round of talks and there were some MEK people around with their usual stunts. I don't really see this group as significant in any way. They are useful to the deal spoilers only insofar as they provide them with token 'Iranians' to parrot more anti-Iran propaganda. The MEK's main interest is in constant demonization of the Iranian government because it enhances their funding opportunities and gives them access to some rather shifty 'policymaking' rooms in the west. So Vienna was a valuable platform for them – it probably earned them a few extra dollars. They make good parrots, but nothing more.

5. What is your take on the MEK which was until recently listed as a foreign terrorist organization in the US and is now functioning unhindered in the US and European countries?

Look, the MEK doesn't really figure into any serious analyst's calculations on anything to do with Iran. They are an extremely marginalized group within Iran – in all my visits to the country over the years, I have never heard a supportive word for the MEK from a single Iranian. On the contrary, Iranians tend to view them as traitors for fighting alongside Saddam Hussein's military in an aggressive 8-year war that saw hundreds of thousands of Iranians die. So there is no love lost for the MEK inside Iran. Furthermore, the group's support comes almost exclusively from foreign adversaries of Iran, which adds to the perception of MEK treachery.

Even when the organization was listed as a terrorist group in the west, it continued to function under different aliases, with the tacit approval of its western hosts. It has only ever been used as a tool by the west, to be pulled out when these states want a 'lever' against Iran. Look at the delisting in the US…it took place in late 2012, a few months after Washington had initiated quiet meetings in Oman with Ahmadinejad's government which ultimately was the 'opening' that led to this nuclear deal. The Americans delisted MEK so they could have a pressure 'card' in their hand – to show the Iranians the US was willing to escalate if the Iranians didn't fall into line. But Iran is well-versed in US tactics. I can't imagine this bothered them much – though it did make the Americans look extremely hypocritical on their « War on Terror. » After all, the MEK had killed US citizens in Iran in the 1970s, attacked US soil in 1992, and continues to abuse its own members. This was the State Department's very language when they delisted the group.

Listed or delisted, the MEK remains exactly the same. It always enjoyed western cover of sorts. Like many other western-groomed 'opposition' groups based outside the Middle East, it will be employed opportunistically by its hosts, and cut off when it is no longer of use.

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