

Iran and the P5+1: Did anyone in the Middle East notice the four month extension?

By Yossi Alpher

On July 20, 2014, the P5 + 1 and Iran announced that they had agreed to extend the deadline for concluding their negotiations regarding the Iranian nuclear program until November 24. In Israel and the surrounding Arab states, no one seemed to pay much notice. Had this event taken place a year or two earlier, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu certainly would have protested loudly that the delay represented weakness on the part of the 5 + 1 and an American failure to confront the Iranian nuclear threat more aggressively, and would have coupled these remarks with renewed threats against Iran. Israel's immediate neighbors would have responded with quieter expressions of dismay, perhaps accompanied for appearance sake by criticism of Israel's own nuclear profile.

It seems, then, that the events that transpired in the region in recent months have had a major effect on the degree of concern Israel and its neighbors evince regarding Iran and on the priority they assign to the perceived Iranian threat. To be sure, due note is also taken of the 5 + 1's refusal to offer Iran dangerous concessions, i.e., the fact that this round of negotiations with Iran did not end in a "bad" deal. One way or another, understanding these events and their influence is key to any attempt to assess attitudes toward the Iran nuclear talks in the four months ahead.

Three regional dynamics inform this assessment. One is the dramatic territorial gains registered by the militant Sunni Islamist group ISIS and their ramifications regarding Iraq, Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan and the US posture in the region. A second is the collapse of the US-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian peace process and subsequent events leading to Hamas' attacks on Israel and the latter's aggressive response. And a third, which interacts dramatically with the first two dynamics, is the region's response to the broad impression of both US

withdrawal from many aspects of active involvement in conflict situations and concomitant American strategic policy mistakes.

The emergence of the Islamic State: a new Levant reality

In a dramatic campaign in June, the militant Islamist group ISIS (*Daish*) completed a six-month conquest of much of eastern Syria and western Iraq. The territory was quickly designated the Islamic State; its leaders proclaimed their objective of conquering additional Arab lands in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia and vanquishing Arab Shiites everywhere, thereby placing all surrounding countries on high alert. ISIS units and related groups quickly threatened Jordan's borders with western Iraq and southern Syria, where they also potentially threatened Israel. This move at least temporarily consummated a strategic process begun in early 2011 when civil war broke out in Syria: the collapse of at least a portion of the post-Ottoman state system that had been created following the Sykes-Picot agreement nearly 100 years ago. The IS currently comprises a large land mass, millions of Sunni Arabs, and petro-carbon wealth that renders the "stat" virtually self-supporting.

One immediate outcome was the Kurdish occupation of Kirkuk with its historic significance and its oil treasure – a long-sought objective of the Kurdish national movement. The Iraqi Kurdish leadership set in motion a process that could soon lead to a Kurdish declaration of independence, thereby moving Iraq a step closer to genuine disintegration and partition into Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish entities that could even overflow across the old national borders. The Kurds in what was once northern Iraq and northern Syria are consolidating their territorial and economic control, plagued only by their own lack of unity. The Assad regime in Damascus has seemingly become resigned to a best-case scenario of holding onto "Useful Syria" in the western sector and abandoning much of the rest of Syria to IS and other disparate Islamist and other movements.

Here Iran enters the picture. Confronting the IS threat, Tehran is determined to support its regional allies, the Alawites in Damascus and the Shiites in Baghdad. Politically they represent its most successful investment in regional Shiite-related rule since the advent of the Islamic Republic some 35 years ago. And geographically they link Tehran, itself a state supporter of terrorism, all the way to Hizballah's stronghold on the western tip of the "Shiite arc" on the Mediterranean shores of southern Lebanon, from where Iran seeks to threaten and deter Israel.

Another major factor is the United States: the seeming collapse of Iraq's army in northern Iraq, an army trained and armed by the US that dissolved once confronted by a few thousand salafis and their local Sunni tribal and other allies, represents a major American strategic

failure. This has placed the Obama administration in the uncomfortable position of contemplating cooperation with Iran to stabilize Iraq and conceivably, or ultimately, Syria as well. The fall of Mosul to ISIS, following upon the Ukraine/Crimea crisis of recent months, the chemical weapons drama in Syria last year, and the failure of US-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, all combined to portray Washington in the eyes of Middle East actors as lacking in both military and diplomatic credibility, even if many Americans consider President Obama's caution to be justified and his decision-making sound.

As we shall see, both Israel and many Arab actors reacted aggressively to this perception of American weakness in the region even as the Iran nuclear talks appeared to be registering slow but certain progress. Correspondingly, the advent of IS amplified Russia's concerns over salafi terrorism at home while (in stark contrast to the US) boosting Russian efforts to reestablish a serious presence in the Middle East. And Europe could now contemplate not only another wave of refugees from the region but also an upsurge in local Muslim volunteers for the new jihad, some of whom would eventually return as terrorists.

The failed US-sponsored peace process and subsequent war in Gaza

By May 2014 it was clear that the nine-month attempt by US Secretary of State Kerry to bring about a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had failed. The reasons are multifold and are relevant to our discussion insofar as they appear to many in the Middle East to reflect poor American understanding of regional dynamics and, consequently, poor strategic decision-making. Of particular interest in the security context is Israel's rejection as "unrealistic" of a concerted US effort to produce a viable security regime for the West Bank under which the Israeli military presence could be phased out.

Kerry's enterprise was not merely another failed attempt to implement the 1993 Oslo accords. By now it should have been clear that Israelis' and Palestinians' opposing narratives regarding the events of 1948 are irreconcilable; an effective process would have focused exclusively on post-1967 issues such as borders and security and set aside issues like holy places and refugee right of return. Washington should also have recognized that this dis-functionality built into the process was reflected in the very act of bringing together a sovereign state, Israel, and a national liberation movement, the Palestine Liberation Organization, whose primary constituency is in the Palestinian refugee diaspora, just as it was reflected in the attempt to bring together two leaders, the PLO's Mahmoud Abbas and Israel's Binyamin Netanyahu, whose ideological and political concerns and

regional preoccupations were antithetical to a process based on trust and compromise.

Under these circumstances, heavy American and other international pressure would have been necessary to induce even a hope of progress. But it was not forthcoming. Finally, and given the challenges Kerry encountered, the objective of ending the conflict in nine months was wildly unrealistic.

It would probably have been wiser for Kerry to avoid initiating two-state negotiations entirely. Failed talks, particularly talks ballyhooed enthusiastically by a chronically optimistic US secretary of state, have a way of making matters worse. And that is precisely what happened, though precisely to what extent the damage to American prestige and influence in the region directly contributed to this new Israeli-Palestinian deterioration can only be a matter of conjecture.

Thus it transpired that a part of Kerry's confidence-building package, prisoner-release by Israel, was aborted in the final stages of the talks. In parallel, Abbas responded to Kerry's failure by bringing Hamas into a Palestinian Authority unity government arrangement that gave the Islamist movement greater freedom of activity in the West Bank. This was followed by the abduction and murder of three Israeli yeshiva students, apparently by "freelancing" Hamas militants, in a settlement area near Bethlehem. This in turn generated a huge manhunt and the arrest of hundreds of Hamas activists, including prisoners released by Israel in the 2011 Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange, and the revenge murder of a Palestinian teenager in East Jerusalem. Hamas responded by attacking Israel from the Gaza Strip, thereby initiating a war that was thoroughly preoccupying Netanyahu when on July 20 the Iran nuclear talks were adjourned with a new, four-month deadline.

Even before the Gaza war began, and with greater emphasis once it was underway, Netanyahu responded to regional events by publicly revising his strategic threat assessment for Israel in a manner that both downgraded the Iran threat and positioned him in open confrontation with some aspects of the US regional posture. In many ways, his newly enunciated positions appeared to correspond with those of moderate Arab neighbors: Egypt – which collaborated closely with Israel during the Gaza fighting, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and some of the Gulf emirates.

In a policy speech at a Tel Aviv think tank on June 29 and again in a press conference on July 11, after the Gaza war began, Netanyahu allowed that Israel's updated security challenges were now defending its borders against militant Islam (ISIS, Hamas, Hizballah), "shaping" the territory between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River from a security standpoint, regional cooperation against extremism, and preventing Iran from reaching a nuclear threshold.

Not only was Iran now relegated to fourth on the list. During the very countdown to the P5 + 1 July 20 deadline, gone were the threats of a new Holocaust and the ominous innuendos regarding Israel maintaining its right to use military force against Iran's nuclear program. Criticism of the negotiating positions taken by the P5 + 1 was articulate, but muted. The message was that Netanyahu would still lobby the P5 + 1 but would apparently acquiesce in whatever agreement they reach.

Further, the new reality in which the primary threat is Islamic State, Hamas and Hizballah dictates several lines of defense that totally contradict not only the US security proposals offered by Kerry and addressed fairly constructively by Netanyahu during the two-state solution talks. Indeed, they even constitute a reversal of Netanyahu's own negotiating position. Thus the Israeli prime minister now requires a Jordan Valley border fence, an open-ended Israeli military presence in the Valley, and the right to intervene militarily anywhere in the future Palestinian state ("shaping") without prior coordination.

In effect, Netanyahu felt free to slam the door on any US attempt to renew the peace process with the Palestinians by diminishing the end product to a Palestinian Bantustan. In a second open affront to Washington, Netanyahu gratuitously welcomed the independence of Kurdistan in the territory between IS and Turkey. That the Kurdish leadership did not solicit Israel's embrace was of lesser significance than the fact that the emergence of a separate Kurdish state directly contradicts Washington's aspiration, shared by Iran, to hold Iraq together. Israel, and almost certainly Saudi Arabia and Jordan, appear to prefer a fragmented Iraq part of which is held by fanatic Sunni Islamists as a means of weakening Iran's drive for hegemony in the Shiite arc, even at the risk of having to confront those same Sunni Islamists on their own borders.

In parallel, reflecting Netanyahu's third new security priority, the Israeli government floated ideas for integrating Israeli-Palestinian peace and security arrangements into security and economic cooperation agreements with surrounding Arab states, including Saudi Arabia and the emirates. Here is an attempt to leverage shared concerns over Iran, ISIS, Hamas and Hizballah into expanded Israel-Arab relations, and in so doing blunt pressures for direct Israeli concessions to the Palestinians. Not surprisingly, all of Israel's Arab interlocutors, both overt (Egypt and Jordan) and informal (Saudi Arabia and the emirates), continued to rebuff these proposals, citing the need for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement as a sine qua non for a truly open security relationship. The fact that the war that erupted in and around Gaza in July played into tensions between Egypt and Saudi Arabia (the anti-Muslim Brotherhood camp) on the one hand and Qatar and Turkey – the lone Middle East state supporters of Hamas and the Brethren – on the other did not appear to soften this stance.

Full-fledged US security cooperation with Israel continued throughout this period and appeared not to have been affected by Jerusalem's overt reservations regarding American policy wisdom and commitments in the Middle East. But US defense aid to Egypt was curtailed in protest over constraints on democratic expression there. And the American commitment to supporting militarily the efforts of moderate forces fighting the Assad regime in Syria, always limited, was reduced even further in response to ISIS' triumphs, thereby prompting Jordan to weigh a more even-handed approach toward Assad. An effort by Secretary of State Kerry to mediate a ceasefire in the Gaza conflict by integrating some of Hamas' conditions as represented by Qatar and Turkey ran into open and occasionally offensive expressions of lack of confidence by both Cairo and Jerusalem.

The months ahead

Assuming the broad drift of Israeli and Arab attitudes toward Washington's Middle East policies and actions does not appreciably change during the coming four months, it would appear that P5 + 1 success in reaching an agreement with Iran concerning its nuclear program and sanctions relief will not provoke any significant Israeli or Arab reaction. Moreover, the current sense of growing US detachment from the region will prevail. Israel and its more moderate Arab neighbors will be on the lookout for alternatives, including closer relations with Russia. Moscow, after all, appears anxious to augment its Middle East profile and appears to some in the region to have a better understanding than Washington of the radical wave of change sweeping the Arab world.

These indications of even the mere potential for a tectonic shift in US and Russian interests, influence and capabilities in the Middle East should alarm western strategic observers.

And if the P5 + 1 fail and there is no further extension of their nuclear negotiations with Iran? Israel, Saudi Arabia and most of the emirates will react with alarm. Israel in particular will have to factor this development into an already alarming threat perception with regard to the militant Islamists gathering on its borders. So will Jordan and Saudi Arabia, though unlike Israel they do not claim to possess the capability of dealing directly with Iran by military means. On the other hand, failure to "solve" the Iranian nuclear threat also affords Netanyahu yet another excuse to avoid softening his position regarding a Palestinian state and to continue absorbing that state's potential territory, to the long-term detriment of Israel's real interest in remaining a Jewish and democratic state.

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