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Regional Reactions to the Deal between P5+1 and Iran: The Case of Egypt

Policy memo

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Since 2003, Iran has been using the nuclear issue, and more specifically the enrichment percentage, as a negotiating card in order to gain recognition for itself as a regional power, that counterparts, according to Hassan Rohany the Iranian president, the American influence in the Middle East. For instance, during the Baghdad talks between Iran and P5+1 that took place in May 2012, Iran raised the non nuclear issues, like the conflict in Syria and the situation in Bahrain, in order to make it a forum to discuss all the issues with the western countries and not only the nuclear issue.

The policy of connecting the problematic issues become the norm in Iran's behavior not only with the P5+1, but also with the regional countries. For instance, when ex-President of Egypt Mohamed Morsi attempted to engage Iran in a regional dialogue for settling the conflict in Syria, through his initiative of the regional quartette that included Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran besides Egypt. Iran expressed its preference to have it as a forum to discuss all regional issues not only the Syrian issue, and requested having Iraq and Venezuela as members in the group. This position hindered the proceedings of the quartette's second meeting in Egypt and motivated Saudi Arabia to boycott it.

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The Iranian policies toward the US and the western countries, since the victory of Hassan Rohany in the presidential elections, is based on constructive engagement, that requires as explained in his article published in the Washigton Post in Sep 2013, an understanding of what each side does not want, provision of concessions through constructive interactions, working on issues of mutual interest first like countering terrorism, and developing other channels for negotiations with the US not only the P5+1, in order to provide other channels to negotiate the non-nuclear issues.

In the framework of this strategy, the first step agreement between Iran and P5+1 is paving the way for a comprehensive agreement that is expected not to be limited to the nuclear issue, but might include other issues that allow Iran to re-position itself as a counterpart to the US in the region.

Egypt's Reaction:

Despite, the first step agreement announced in Nov, 2013 coincided with the complicated transition Egypt is going through since Jun 30 2013 revolution, Egypt's reaction to it, was less ideological and more pragmatic. On one hand, Egypt welcomed the agreement, as it was in line with the principles guided its foreign policy toward the nuclear issue in the Middle East in general, and toward Iran in particular. Egypt supports Iran's right, to gain nuclear capabilities for peaceful proposes as long as it is in line with the NPT, and it supports the peaceful settlement of the nuclear crisis between the US and Iran.

On the other hand, the strategic implication of this agreement is a concern. The deal would transform the matrix of regional roles in the Middle East in favor of Iran , given that the agreement would end Iran's status as being a rouge state as labeled by George Bush, to be a counterpart or even a friend to the US. This could, I argue , restrict Egypt's regional role, especially after the transitional period is settled.

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In order to balance Iran's nuclear capability, as recognized by the first step agreement, as well as the expected comprehensive deal, Egypt eyes its nuclear options. In spite of the instability caused by the transitional period Egypt is going through, the discussions of activating the nuclear project that is to be used for peaceful purposes in Daba'a region is being renewed. Many analysts expect it to be one of the main projects to be debated during the presidential elections.

Besides, Egypt is very well concerned with the implications of this agreement on its friends in the Gulf region, especially Saudi Arabia and UAE that are supporting it since June 2013. Nabeel Fahmy the Egyptian Foreign minister stated in 22 Jan 2014, that what defines Egypt's policy towards Iran is its friends' interests in the Gulf region.

The need for Regional Diplomacy:

The efforts for reaching a comprehensive agreement with Iran till now, is done through the framework of P5+1, with a prominent role played by US and Russia. No genuine role is played by the regional countries that are concerned with these negotiations, like Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries. This was one of the reasons for tension between Saudi Arabia and the US after the first step deal was reached.

This strategy reflects a belief of circle in the American administration, that the thorny issues between Iran and GCC if put on the table, no agreement is reached. Thus, it prefers not join GCC countries in this phase, and brief them with the result of every meeting. This strategy goes inline also with Hassan Rohany's strategy of constructive engagement with the US and the west to gain an international recognition to its role and not a regional one.

However, this strategy, overlooks the importance of having an effective regional diplomacy in order to make this agreement if reached more successful. Especially if

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the Iranians managed to make the non nuclear issues, that is a concern for the GCC countries as well as other countries in the Middle East part of the agreement.

The suggested regional diplomacy could be based on encouraging regional powers that could relieve the tension between Iran and GCC countries, and propose initiatives that could hinder any further nuclearization of the region.

This regional diplomacy could be based on three pillars:

1. Create a regional mechanism, independent from P5+1, following the mechanism of 6+2+1 created by Condoleezza Rice after Iraq war in 2003. In the case of Iran it can be 6 (GCC)+1(US)+2(Iran and Egypt). The role to be played by Egypt, that is less ideological, could facilitate the trust building between these countries.
2. Launch a regional process, that target the business interest groups inside the region, that would create real economic interests between GCC and Iran as well as other countries like Egypt.
3. Support Egypt's proposal of making the Middle East a free zone of nuclear weapons. This proposal was supported by Iran in 1970 in the UN, and Hassan Rohany in an interview with NBC in Sep 2013, supported the idea. The realization of this zone requires an international support from Russia as well as the US.