

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für  
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development  
Institute

# The nuclear deal with Iran: adding fuel to the fire or ushering in peace in the Middle East?

By Bernhard Trautner,  
*German Development Institute /  
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

# The Current Column

*of 29 June 2015*

## The nuclear deal with Iran: adding fuel to the fire or ushering in peace in the Middle East?

Bonn, 29 June 2015. Only if a nuclear deal is achieved as planned by the end of June 2015 will sanctions against Iran be lifted. Such an agreement with Iran offers more opportunities than risks in the long term. By contrast, were negotiations to come to nothing or a deal fail to be implemented, the risks facing the already fragile Eastern Arab region (al-Mashriq), comprising a range of countries including Lebanon, Israel, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, would increase.

The deal would take effect at at least two levels. The first would be the regional policy level in the Near and Middle East (including Israel), as Iran is pursuing its own interests in most of the region's virulent conflicts. One of these interests involves vying with Saudi Arabia for regional supremacy. At the second level, the deal would have an impact within Iran itself, where sanctions have allowed the development of highly opaque and ultimately corrupt political and economic structures. A deal would remove the economic basis for such structures.

The civil population would face growing economic pressure as a result of sanctions. If oil prices were to remain low, state fuel and food subsidies would be cut, leading to increased social and political tension. How convenient then, that there is already someone to blame for the economic misery, namely 'the West', which still considers Saudi Arabia its main partner in the region. This is the same regime which explicitly derives its legitimacy not from democratic principles but from the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. Its puritanical interpretation of Sharia has already provided a religious and political foundation for many Islamist movements, the most prominent current example being 'Islamic State'.

If no deal were reached, Tehran would also continue to exert, and perhaps even increase, its influence on regional conflicts through its proxies Hezbollah, Hamas and the Assad regime. By doing so, it would aim at the very least to establish itself as an effective protecting power for oppressed political minorities. It would appear that, in seeking to attain this status, Iran is compensating for the political legitimacy denied to it by the international community. As a result, international peace negotiations on Syria and Yemen would continue to be conducted in Geneva without the involvement of Tehran. After years of denial, at least EU High Representative Federica Mogherini admitted several weeks ago that there is "of course" a link between the nuclear talks with Iran and the Syrian conflict.

In the past, Tehran withdrew key components of its nuclear research activities from the monitoring programme of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which was the main reason why the EU and the United States imposed sanctions. These sanctions prohibit not only the sale of nuclear technology but also the sale of crude oil and the acquisition of spare parts for the aviation sector.

Engaging with Tehran and indeed its opponent Riyadh to enable them to assume their respective political responsibilities with regard to the region goes beyond promoting the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. Neither the Yemeni nor the Syrian nor the Iraqi central government can meet the elementary needs of its population for security, basic services and political participation. Tehran and Riyadh do not need to win support in these countries. On the contrary, these regional hegemonic powers are increasingly becoming protecting patrons for oppressed population groups and governments, with Sunni and Shia identity not always playing the critical role.

In this situation, a nuclear deal with Tehran would help to normalise, that is regulate, the balance of power in the region. After all, Iran did not only begin competing with Osmans, Turks and Arab (successor) states for geostrategic supremacy yesterday. The priority now is to keep this regional power struggle in check. One aspect of this involves Tehran overcoming its current pariah status, which would enable it to be included in efforts to transform regional conflict. Any gain in Iran's political stature is viewed by Saudi Arabia as a loss of its own influence, both regionally and in relation to the West.

Germany can play a key role in building trust between actors in the region, with Berlin already having been prominently involved in the nuclear negotiations with Iran. Given the current conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, the Conference for Security and Cooperation in the Middle East, proposed by Germany in a different context, would hardly be expedient without the participation of Iran. An Iran that, like its counterparts, hopefully implements the nuclear deal as stipulated. An Iran that no longer pursues its regional political ambitions by means of veto or as Riyadh's competitor, but that instead, having been freed from sanctions, exerts a moderating influence in the region in its own geo-strategic interest and driven by its own population's expectations.