

# Iran versus ISIL

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**ABSTRACT** *Iran's response to the rise of ISIL has been driven by realpolitik rather than religious identity. ISIL threatens to undermine Iran's regional alliance structure and destabilize its borders. Iran has responded not only by mobilizing Shi'a militias but also working with the United States and the Kurds. Nevertheless, this pragmatic approach may prove unstable over the long term. Iran's new relationship with the United States remains fragile, and Iran's regional interests conflict with those of the Sunni members of the anti-ISIL alliance.*

**D**espite its outward appearance, Iran's involvement in the war against ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) defies simple sectarian explanations.<sup>1</sup> While ISIL might be motivated by its hatred for all things Shi'a, Tehran has not always rushed to the aid of its coreligionists. Instead, its support has been selective and strategic. This is true again, as it confronts the ISIL. It does not have the guns, troops or air power to threaten Iranian territory. Nevertheless, it poses a multidimensional threat to its core interests. Tehran's response, therefore, is more about realpolitik than religion. Nevertheless, because of the sectarian divisions in the region, and the ideological

schism with the United States there are deep contradictions within Iran's strategy for dealing with ISIL, and its long-term effectiveness is an open question.

## Iranian Realpolitik

Despite the religious foundation of the state, Iranian support for its Shi'a neighbors has actually been quite checkered. After the Kuwait crisis in 1991, Tehran did not intervene when Saddam Hussein brutally put down a Shi'a rebellion in the south of Iraq. Similarly, Iran backed Armenia against predominantly Shi'a Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh

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## Iran's commitment to keeping the Damascus-Hezbollah link intact was already in evidence before the rise of ISIL

conflict. Iran also deferred to Russian interests and withdrew support from Shi'a militias during the Tajik civil war. Of course, Tehran has backed the Shi'a organization Hezbollah in Lebanon and various Shi'a groups scattered across the Persian Gulf. However, this support has always been consistent with Tehran's broader regional objectives and its national security interests.

Tehran's regional strategy is built around escaping western-led containment, deterring military attacks from either the U.S. or Israel, and insulating Iran's borders from regional instability. ISIL threatens this strategy on multiple levels. First of all, ISIL threatens Iran's regional alliance network. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Tehran has invested a great deal in cultivating ties with the more than 20 Shi'a political parties that make up the National Iraqi Alliance. Tehran helped put Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in power, and then played an instrumental role in having him removed and replaced by Haider al-Abadi when it became evident he was not the man to handle the ISIL situation. For a country as isolated as Iran, the importance of having a friendly government on the border cannot be overstated.

Even with Saddam Hussein out of the picture, Tehran would see a Sunni led Iraq as a political and military threat. The friendly Shi'a government in Baghdad has also been a bulwark against a potential American invasion of Iran. If ISIL succeeds in redrawing the Iraqi border much of this will be lost. Iran might still have a friendly Shi'a government in Baghdad, but it would not have the same strategic impact. There would be a new hostile "Caliphate" dangerously close to the Iranian border, and an independent Kurdish state that would make a likely ally for both Israel and the United States.

ISIL also threatens Iran's relationship with Bashar al-Assad and the Ba'hist regime in Syria. The civil war appears to be mired in a stalemate at the moment and the infighting between the various opposition groups has given the al-Assad regime some breathing room. However, ISIL represents a much more coherent and effective fighting force than the other opposition groups. After the seizure of Mosul, it is capable of funding its own operations and in possession of a significant cache of heavy weapons. If a new Caliphate is consolidated on the territory straddling the Iraqi-Syrian border it still might not be able to oust Bashar al-Assad from power, but it would mean the permanent dismemberment of Syria. Even if al-Assad remained in control of Damascus, he would be diminished as an ally. Moreover, the new Caliphate would create a barrier between Iran and Syria, cutting important supply lines that have been used to ship

weapons to Syria and Hezbollah. Iran has other potential routes at its disposal, by sea and through Turkey, but they are much more vulnerable to interdiction.

The key concern for Tehran, of course, is its connection to Hezbollah. The organization was established by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) in the 1982 during the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon. Hezbollah has the capacity to destabilize the Israeli-Lebanese border if military strikes are ever launched against Iran. Although it is not clear to what degree Hezbollah would follow through, the threat is an important part of Iran's deterrent strategy. Hezbollah is also a central player in Lebanese politics. Although the Lebanese system divided power along sectarian lines (Shi'a, Sunni, and Christian) the relationship provides Tehran with some influence in Lebanese politics. The relationship also provides Iran with soft power in the region. By underwriting Hezbollah's military power, Iran can lay claim to being the leader of the resistance front standing up to Israel and Western domination. While it is far from clear how much influence the "Arab Street" actually provides Iran, for a country with so few traditional state allies, it is a valued resource, particularly in the Shi'a areas of the region. Hezbollah is also important within the Islamic Republic itself. It was created during the formative years of the revolution and remains a symbol of the regime's political ideology. Hezbollah's success on the battlefield is seen as a vindication of the revolution and a sign of

its continuing power. Among Iranian reformers there have been some complaints about the resources allocated to Hezbollah, and the regime's obsession with "resistance," but among conservatives these are still powerful symbols. Abandoning them would mean abandoning the revolution. Indeed, if there is a group that Tehran would be willing to fight for simply because of the ideological/sectarian connection, it is Hezbollah.

Iran's commitment to keeping the Damascus-Hezbollah link intact was already in evidence before the rise of ISIL. Hezbollah entered the Syrian civil war in late 2012 and were instrumental in the regime's regaining control around al Qusayr. This was a strategic blow to the opposition; it reconnected Damascus to Latakia in the north of the country and left opposition forces in the Homs area isolated. Just as importantly, it reopened the arms route from Syria into Hermel, the Hezbollah stronghold in the Bekaa Valley. Since then, the Syrian regime's defense strategy has become increasingly reliant on Hezbollah, and Shi'a militias loosely organized into Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA).<sup>2</sup> LAFA has been trained and organized by the al-Quds Brigades of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and among its members are volunteers drawn from pro-Iranian Shi'a militias originating in Iraq. Not only does this illustrate the extent of Iranian support for Hezbollah and the Assad regime, it also illustrates the degree to which Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq are all strategically interconnected from the Iranian perspective.

## The potential break-up of the Iraqi state does not just threaten Tehran's alliance network, it would likely create a number of significant domestic problems for Iran

The second threat involves the United States. Although they are currently lined up on the same side versus ISIL, they are still competing with each other for influence in Iraq. Since the fall of Saddam in 2003, the Iraqi government has been stuck in a tug-of-war between Tehran and Washington. With the Americans "pivoting" out of the Middle East and into Asia, Tehran had gained the upper-hand with Baghdad. Conversely, the U.S. has had better relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil, although the KRG has been frustrated by Washington's unwillingness to provide the KRG with more support in its various disputes with Baghdad. The current crisis has made the situation much more fluid and given both Washington and Tehran the opportunity to improve their position through the provision of military aid. Washington responded by committing approximately 3,000 troops along with air support. Although American military personnel have served mostly in an advisory role, U.S. airpower has been significant, with more than 1200 airstrikes launched. This has blunted ISIL offensives and made it difficult for the group to move large columns of personnel and equipment, forcing

them to shift to smaller scale attacks. Iran, for its part, has helped organize the defense of Baghdad by providing training and leadership for the Shi'a militias. This has included recalling Iraqi Shi'a militias serving in Syria along with the commander of the al-Quds Force, Major General Ghasem Soleimani. There are also rumors of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and members of Hezbollah joining the fight in Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Iran has also provided some ground attack aircraft to Baghdad, and as mentioned at the outset, launched some air strikes on its own. Significantly, Iran has also provided military support and weapons to the KRG, even though Tehran remains concerned about Erbil's independence.<sup>4</sup>

While it is far too early to tell, Iran may have taken an early lead in the competition. Whereas Tehran immediately offered a virtual blank check to Baghdad, Washington has been ambivalent about its commitment. The Obama administration has been adamant that American troops will not become directly involved in the fighting. When the U.S. promised to send an additional 15,000 troops, the new Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi welcomed the move but remarked that it was a little late.<sup>5</sup> Washington has also been unwilling to provide the Kurds with heavy weapons fearing this could upset the political balance between Baghdad and the KRG. At times, even U.S. air support has appeared hesitant. The KRG implored the U.S. to expand its campaign of air strikes in August 2014 while members of the Yezidi minority were un-

der siege on Mount Sinjar. Again in October, the Kurds were frustrated by the lack of U.S. air support initially provided in the battle of Kobane.

Third, the potential break-up of the Iraqi state does not just threaten Tehran's alliance network, it would likely create a number of significant domestic problems for Iran. Most obviously, Tehran does not want an independent Kurdish state on its border. Iran's Kurdish community represents about 10 percent of the country's population and resides predominantly in four provinces situated along the Iranian-Iraqi border, West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and Ilam provinces. Relative to Iraqi Kurdistan, there has not been as much violence on the Iranian side of the border, but there has still been significant instability. There was an insurrection following the 1979 revolution that was put down by military force, and periodic demonstrations since then. Since 2004, there has also been fighting between the Iranian government and the Kurdish militant organization PJAK (The Party of Free Life of Kurdistan). An independent Kurdish state to the west would likely inflame the situation further. At the very least it would be an inspiration to independence-minded Iranian Kurds. Worse from Tehran's perspective, an independent Kurdish state, perhaps in league with Washington or Tel Aviv, could provide money, weapons, political support, and safe-havens for Kurdish separatist groups.

Tehran also does not want to deal with the inevitable flow of refugees.

Although the dynamics of the refugee situation would obviously be different, the sectarian violence that followed Gulf War I in 1991 led to more than 800,000 Kurdish and Shi'a refugees entering Iran.<sup>6</sup> Iran already has over 2.4 million Afghan refugees in the country.<sup>7</sup> This number includes both registered and undocumented Afghans. Regardless of their legal status, the cost of each refugee to the Iranian government is estimated to be more than \$2.00 per head per day. The impact of these refugees goes beyond the mere dollar figure. The Iranian government considers the situation a threat to national security because of the potential connections refugees may have with drug smugglers and insurgent groups.<sup>8</sup>

Iran probably does not even want to see an independent 'Shiastan' on its border. While a new independent Shi'a state would in all probability remain friendly toward Iran, it would likely maintain a different type of political system. The constitution of the Islamic Republic is based on Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's non-traditional interpretation of Shi'a political thought, the doctrine of *Vilayat-e Faqih* (Supervision of the Jurisprudent), which advocated the direct involvement of the clergy in government. In practice, this doctrine is realized in bodies such the Council of Guardians, the Assembly of Experts, and of course the office of the Supreme Leader, which is the most powerful position in the state. There are those in Iraq who share Khomeini's political vision. However Najaf, the center of Iraqi Shi'a scholarship,



A picture of Iran's supreme leader

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei adorns a military vehicle as Iraqi security forces deploy, on May 26, 2015, during an operation aimed at cutting off ISIL in Anbar.

AFP PHOTO / AHMAD AL-RUBAYE

leans to a more “quietist” school of religious thought. This does not mean that prominent members of the Iraqi clergy, such as Grand Ayatollah Ali Husayni Sistani, are apolitical. They do intervene in mundane political issues. However, they do so only on an ad hoc basis and they oppose the idea of the clergy holding office in the government.

A new Iraqi state may, therefore, provide Iranians with a competing model of governance to emulate. This is not an insignificant concern. The political peace in Iran remains

fragile even five years after the 2009 election protests. Despite the election of a centrist president, Hassan Rouhani, in 2013, members of the Green Movement remain in detention and the divisions between conservatives and reformers run deep. There are even splits within the Iranian clergy concerning the principle of *Vilayat-e Faqih*. Although not as prominent as in Iraq, there is a quietist tradition in the Iranian clergy as well. An alternative model of government, which emerges organically from within a Shi'a country, would pose a serious challenge to the cur-

rent regime's legitimacy, and provide the opposition with something to rally around.

## Tensions and Contradictions

So far, Iran has responded to the ISIL threat within a framework of tacit coordination with the United States. Tehran and Washington independently support Erbil and Bagh-

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dad with weapons and training. Iran has also begun providing air support to its allies, though not at the same level as that provided by the U.S. and western states, such as Britain, Canada, and Australia. In addition, Iran has also helped organize, equip and lead Shi'a militias that have been used to bolster the Iraqi and Syrian armies, and reportedly the Kurdish Peshmerga forces.<sup>9</sup> While both Washington and Tehran have denied active cooperation, there is undoubtedly information being exchanged about troop positions and potential targets, if for no other reason than to avoid friendly fire incidents. This

strategy has been relatively successful in checking the spread of ISIL, although it will not be enough to unseat ISIL from the territory it has seized anytime soon.

Iran's response has, therefore, been pragmatic. Nevertheless, there are a number of tensions and contradictions in this strategy. Although ISIL represents a common enemy, there is still a great deal of mistrust between the U.S. and Iran, and between Iran and America's allies in the Middle East. As noted above, Iran and the U.S. are both collaborators and competitors in this fight. Indeed, this is not the first time they have had a common enemy in the region. During the 1991 Gulf War the U.S. and a coalition of Arab and western states went to war with Iraq. Iran, which had just fought a bloody eight-year war against Iraq, stood on the side-lines. While it did not fight a separate war against Iraq, as it has been doing with ISIL, it backed the Kuwaiti government in exile and condemned the Iraqi invasion. At the time, many saw this as the start of a thaw between the U.S. and the Islamic Republic. Of course, relations quickly deteriorated and by 1994 the official U.S. policy toward Iran was "dual containment." Similarly, after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks against the United States, Washington and Tehran were on the same side in the war against the Taliban. Once again, this was hailed as a new era in the relationship, but by January 2002 relations had broken down and Iran was a member of George W. Bush's "Axis-of-Evil." These two incidents

clearly demonstrate that a common enemy is not going to be enough for the U.S. and Iran to redefine their relationship. Worse still, the fact that they have gone through the process twice before and been disappointed can only reinforce the mistrust.

The fight against ISIL has also taken place against the backdrop of the P5+1 (the United States, United

bargain” that settles all of the differences between Washington and Tehran. However, it stops the clock on the nuclear crisis. Had the deal not been signed, sanctions on Iran would have been ramped up and it is quite possible that the United States and/or Israel would have launched airstrikes against Iranian nuclear targets. Western and Israeli critics of the JCPA maintain they could negotiate a better deal, but had the Vienna process failed the hostile rhetoric would have intensified, Rouhani and his moderate followers would have been discredited at home, and hardliners in both Washington and Tehran would have taken control of the issue. Under those circumstances it is hard to imagine negotiations getting another chance.

## **Tehran’s anti-ISIL strategy is also hindered by its troubled relationships with other regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Israel**

Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, and China) nuclear negotiations. Not surprisingly, the two issues have been intertwined. Had the nuclear negotiations broken down, it would have been difficult for Washington and Tehran to continue coordinating their strategies in Iraq and Syria. Similarly, if their strategies on ISIL had not been in sync, it would have been difficult for the two to keep talks going on the nuclear issue.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPA), signed in Vienna in July of 2015, has taken some of the pressure off of the Iranian-American understanding regarding ISIL. If implemented, the deal will involve Iran curtailing its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief from the U.S. and the west. It is not a “grand

There is significant domestic opposition to the JCPA in both countries. It is unlikely to be enough to prevent either country from ratifying the agreement but it is a good indicator of how troubled the relationship continues to be. In the U.S., the senate has the right to review the deal, but President Obama can use his veto to force the JCPA through anyway. A two-thirds majority in Congress could override his veto, however, it is unlikely that his opponents will be able to muster enough votes to do so. In Iran, the political process is more opaque, but the final arbiter of the deal is the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei. Formally, the deal must pass through the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which has oversight over national security issues. The body is divided



between hard-liners and moderates, however, decision-making within the body is heavily influenced by Khamenei. If Khamenei wants the SNSC to pass the JCPA, in all likelihood it will. Similarly, the power of the Iranian parliament, the Majlis, is limited in this matter. The Majlis has petitioned for the right to review the deal and have set up an ad hoc committee to examine it. Nevertheless, if Khamenei explicitly endorses the agreement or simply backs an SNSC decision to approve the deal, there will be little that critics can do. At that point, if they challenge the deal too aggressively, they will appear to be challenging Khamenei's authority, which is a red-line in Iranian politics that is rarely crossed.

So far, Khamenei has not clearly endorsed the JCPA, nor has he condemned it, but it is unlikely that it would have gotten this far without his approval. While he has made statements suggesting he is skeptical about the deal, he supported the negotiating team during the talks, and published a letter lauding their efforts once the deal was signed.<sup>10</sup> The deal was also praised by Ali Larinjani, one of Khamenei's closest supporters.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, given Khamenei's position within the Iranian political system, it is hard to believe he was not kept well apprised of the negotiations as they took place. Most likely, Khamenei is being reticent for domestic reasons. First, although Khamenei's position as leader is unassailable, there is intense factional competition below him. Rouhani represents a pragmatist-reformer coalition that is made

up by members of the elite associated with former president Hashemi Rafsanjani and political groups close to the Green Movement and another former president, Muhammad Khatami. Rouhani's opponents include traditional conservatives close to Khamenei, and so-called neo-conservatives close to former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as well as a new generation of conservatives who have risen through the ranks of the IRGC. Although the conservative forces have been too fragmented to make common cause against Rouhani, they have maintained a steady barrage of criticism against him and have stifled his attempts at domestic reform. Also, they are not anxious to see Rouhani have any foreign policy successes. They fear that if Rouhani can claim to have improved relations with the west, or the Persian Gulf states, or brought economic relief from sanctions, his position will be strengthened. By taking what appears to be a neutral position on the nuclear deal, Khamenei is able to control this conflict. If he backed the agreement too openly, he would in effect be siding with Rouhani and his allies, and would risk alienating the conservatives, who are the bedrock of the regime. Second, while the JCPA will bring economic relief and facilitate the war against ISIL, Khamenei still wants to keep the United States as an enemy. Despite the apparent contradiction, the logic behind this is relatively straightforward; the regime needs to maintain the discourse of the revolution to ensure the stability of the political system. As long as political debates

Iranians shout slogans waving flags during a protest against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq on June 24, 2014 at Imam Hossein Square in Tehran.

AFP PHOTO / ATTA KENARE



have to be framed in terms of revolutionary principles, it is impossible to challenge current political order. Some specific policy choices can be criticized, but not the principle of *Vilayat-e Faqih*, or the rulings of the Supreme Leader. For this reason, the regime plays down the level of coordination taking place between Iran and the United States. In December, Khamenei went so far as to blame the rise of ISIL and other radical Sunni organizations on the United States and Israel claiming that it was part of a plot to divide the Muslim world.<sup>12</sup> After the JCPA was signed, Khamenei was quick to claim that it would not open Iran up to the United States. More recently, Khamenei's office even tweeted a picture of what appeared to be Barak Obama with a gun to his own head.<sup>13</sup> Khamenei's skepticism about the deal is consistent with this pattern. It reassures the

regime's supporters that America is still considered an enemy.

Tehran's anti-ISIL strategy is also hindered by its troubled relationships with other regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has grown increasingly intense since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. After which the Saudis have seen themselves as encircled by a Shi'a crescent that stretches from Iran across southern Iraq through Syria and into southern Lebanon. The Arab-Spring added to the Saudis feeling of vulnerability because of Shi'a unrest in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, as well as the collapse of the Saudi backed government in Yemen. All of which Riyadh blamed on Iran. Although ISIL represents a threat to the al-Saud as well, Riyadh is more concerned that Iran is using the crisis to deepen this

encirclement. Consequently, the Saudis would rather use their resources to fight the Shi'a Houthis in Yemen, than fight ISIL in Iraq. The Saudis are also committed to the removal of Assad, which from their perspective, would create a gap in the Shi'a crescent and diminish Iran's strategic position in the region. Saudi hostility to Iran also puts strain on Tehran's understanding with the U.S. The Saudis opposed negotiating with Iran from the beginning. Once the JCPA was signed, Riyadh officially gave the agreement its support. Unofficially, however, they have continued to oppose the deal, reportedly funding anti-JCPA advertisements in the American media.<sup>14</sup>

Although Israel has been on the sidelines in terms of the war against ISIL, Tel Aviv still believes its interests are at stake. Israel sees Iran as the primary threat to its security either through its support for anti-Israeli Islamic groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, or potentially, through the development of nuclear weapons. Therefore, like the Saudis, Israel has been trying to keep Iran isolated both at a global and regional level. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been dismissive of Hassan Rouhani's election, calling Iran's moderate president a "wolf in sheep's clothing".<sup>15</sup> He has also been openly critical of American President Barak Obama and the JCPA. While he was not able to derail the negotiating process he has not given up lobbying for it to be rejected. From his perspective, the ISIL crisis is distracting Washington

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from the main threat, Iran, which is using the crisis to expand its influence in the region and leverage the nuclear negotiations. Tel Aviv is also concerned that the ISIL crisis and the Syrian civil war are providing Iran with cover while it transfers arms to Hezbollah.

Tensions between Iran and Turkey have not been as severe, however, they have conflicting interests in Syria. Ankara abandoned its "zero-problems" policy in the Middle East in 2011 and sided with the Arab-Spring demonstrators, including those in Syria. As the Syrian civil war has deepened, so has Turkish involvement. Ankara is now committed to the ouster of Bashar al-Assad. Moreover, the government of Tayyip Erdoğan appears less concerned with ISIL than it is with the growing power and independence of Rojava, the three Kurdish cantons (Jazira, Kobani and Afrin) along the Turkish border. In July of 2015, after an ISIL bombing attack in the Turkish border town of Suruç, Ankara began establishing a 'safe-zone' along the Turkish-Syrian border and started launching airstrikes within Syria. However, the airstrikes have targeted Kurdish forces as well as ISIL, and the campaign coincides with the collapse

of the peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), giving rise to speculation that Turkey's real target is the PKK.<sup>16</sup>

## The Future

It is impossible to predict the future, particularly in the Middle East. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify several political dynamics that could have a large impact on Iran's ability to manage the threat posed to its interests by ISIL. The first is the future of the JCPA. As noted above, the deal will probably be ratified in both

may be counting on this. They may realize that they cannot stop the ratification process, but over time their complaints and pressure tactics will wear their opponents down. Considering the deal will take place in stages of 10, 15 and 25 years, the fight over the deal is probably a long way from over.

The second is Washington's ability to hold the middle ground between Iran and the other powers in the region. So far, Washington has been able to maintain its diplomatic juggling act because the conflict is stalemated. ISIL has gained territory in some areas of Iraq and Syria, but lost ground in others. However, if the war against ISIL goes as planned, this will change. As ISIL is beaten back in Iraq, Iran's influence and military presence will inevitably grow. Similarly, if operations in Syria prove affective against ISIL, Assad may decisively gain the upper hand in the civil war, or at least consolidate his position to the point where there is no choice but to negotiate with him. Such a turn of events could also give the Syrian Kurds of Rojava an opportunity to form an independent state. Ironically, all of this means Iran could end up being a victim of its own success. To the extent the war against ISIL goes in Tehran's favor, there will be growing pressure on Washington to side with its old allies against Iran.

The third issue that needs to be monitored is Iran's diplomatic efforts in the Persian Gulf. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has approached the Gulf Cooperation

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countries. However, implementing the deal over time may prove to be difficult. Both sides will interpret the text of the JCPA to suite their own interests and it is likely there will be disputes over the obligations each party is under. Indeed, differences between the American and Iranian "fact-sheets" issued after the deal was signed suggested the two sides read the deal in different ways.<sup>17</sup> Each time there is a dispute over the implementation of the agreement, the debate over the deal will begin again in both countries. Critics of the deal

Council (GCC) with a diplomatic solution to the Syrian Civil war. The plan is unlikely to gain much traction. It still includes a prominent political role for Bashar al-Assad, and the Saudis are unlikely to talk seriously with Iran in the current climate. However, it will probably not be the last Iranian initiative. Tehran has reached out to the GCC several times since the election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013, and the Rouhani government likely sees improving relations with the Saudis and the GCC as a way of consolidating the diplomatic gains made by signing the JCPA. If the GCC reached a *modus vivendi* with Iran, it would be much more difficult for critics to object to the JCPA and coordinating with Iran against ISIL, and Israel would be isolated as the sole voice calling for Iran's continued isolation. Rouhani and Zarif are therefore likely to keep up the charm offensive. They will continue focusing on Oman, Qatar and Kuwait, and gradually try to convince the Saudis that an accommodation is possible. While the odds are not good, the possibility of a diplomatic breakthrough cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Finally the success of Iran's strategy will likely depend on Khamenei's ability to keep domestic politics insulated from Iran's new relationship with the US. As noted above, the JCPA could alter the factional balance of power in Iran, and potentially compromise the regime's political identity, which is still defined to a significant degree by the anti-American ideology of the revolution. So far, Khamenei has managed the situation

by backing Rouhani on foreign policy but leaving him to fend for himself on domestic issues. He has also maintained a steady stream of anti-American rhetoric. This could become more difficult for Khamenei to do as the economy opens up to western trade, or if Rouhani pushes harder for domestic reform. Given the fragile state of the relationship with the west, it is hard to tell what would happen if Khamenei felt compelled to either weaken Rouhani or escalate the rhetoric to stabilize the domestic situation. ■

## Endnotes

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