

Touted deal of the century

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The interim agreement in Geneva between Iran and the P5+1 group of countries (permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) is a historic step that could transform the foreign policy landscape of the Middle East. Although the accord was panned even before being signed by Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a “deal of the century” that lets Iran off the hook with freebies, the measured quid pro quos contained in the Joint Plan of Action hold out hope of thawing a three decades-long cold war between Iran and the West. Iran made a few concessions on its disputed nuclear programme and got some limited sanctions relief in return. It was classic diplomacy of reciprocity, underlined by political will in Iran and America to make a new beginning to work out a pragmatic understanding.

Obama’s fascinating authorisation of secret direct American bilateral negotiations with Iran, parallel to the multilateral P5+1 format of talks in Geneva, shows that Washington took risks to build trust with Tehran. Much international attention has focused on the publicly known spoilers of the rapprochement with Iran, viz. Israel and Saudi Arabia. But France had acted as a stumbling block in a previous round of negotiations in Geneva, earning its president Francois Hollande the status of a folk hero in Israel. Obama’s resort to opening a direct line of talks with the Iranians in Geneva could have been a tactic to bypass French obstinacy and other potential objectors from within the P5+1 ranks.

Western commentators presume Iran is desperate for an agreement now because economic sanctions have weakened its resolve to adamantly pursue a clandestine nuclear weapons programme. The current supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei’s endorsement of “heroic flexibility” in diplomacy with the West, and his analogies about the path of peace taken by the Shiite Imam Hasan in 661 AD to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, may indeed be influenced by the rising pressure of economic sanctions on Iran’s oil and banking sectors.

But it is also clear that Khamenei perceives Obama to be different from the hawkish neoconservatives of the George W Bush era, who were hell bent on overthrowing the Islamic Republic of Iran. That Obama has earned such extreme mistrust of the Israeli leadership is itself a signal to Iran that this American president is different. Especially in his second term as president, Obama is less beholden to the hardline Jewish lobbies in Washington which paint any softening towards Iran as blasphemous and foolish.

Iran is not necessarily “nicer” to the West at present because of the economic losses being imposed by sanctions, but also in response to the refreshing change of approach in Washington during Obama’s second term. Iran’s leadership was always open to a respectful give-and-take type of relationship, something that had been myopically spurned by the West in the past.

To attribute the current unfreezing of ties to the alleged success of sanctions is thus not entirely accurate. Such a narrative feeds into the militaristic mindset of right wing elements in the US and Europe, whose objective is to wage relentless economic war on Iran and eventually force an externally-imposed regime change there.

Because more expanded sanctions relief to free Iran’s oil and banking sectors lies in the hands of a US Congress packed with Israel sympathisers, Khamenei’s heroism is a calculated gamble that could backfire if the Geneva deal unravels. Already, hardliners in Iran’s Majlis are demanding that they should be given the chance to ratify the Geneva

agreement. As a deft politician, Khamenei might reverse course from the current track of working out a negotiated settlement with the West if he sees the tide of domestic elite opinion turning against more difficult compromises that would be needed for a comprehensive settlement with the P5+1 in the months to come.

If Iran is risking much by going with caps and freezes on its nuclear programme, why did the US endanger its strategic alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia by chasing a deal with Iran?

The geopolitical case for befriending Iran in order to stabilise war-torn Syria and Afghanistan is not new. Thus far, there is no public indication that the behind-the-scenes talks in Geneva involved linkage between the nuclear programme and Iran's co-operation in ending the armed conflict in Syria and countering Sunni fundamentalism of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

But the Americans would not have forgotten that Iran's maps of the Taliban's military formations were crucial for overthrowing the latter after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. With the war in Syria at a senseless stalemate, Washington also needs Tehran to chart out a satisfactory exit strategy from that morass. Even Turkey, which had drifted away from Iran, is now trying to patch up with it to achieve a regional solution to the Syrian war.

As to antagonising Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab monarchies which detest Iran, the progressively lessening American dependence on oil imports from these allied nations in the Middle East is a factor that lends confidence to Obama's Iran peace overture. Obama's emphasis on his determination to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons is meant to salve wounded feelings in Riyadh and Tel Aviv, but the latter two have realised they cannot hold American foreign policy hostage as long as Obama is in charge.

Scholars like Harvard University's Stephen Walt have been arguing for years Saudi Arabia and Israel are undermining larger American national interests in the region. Washington is long due for a realignment, wherein Iran could be the fulcrum of a new, more mature and farsighted American foreign policy.

The Joint Action Plan signed by Iran and the P5+1 in Geneva is admittedly only a preliminary foray into what could be a lasting strategic reordering of alliance patterns in the Middle East. Like past agreements to freeze or slow down nuclear programmes with North Korea that collapsed, there is no guarantee that the Iranian imbroglio would have a fairytale ending.

Yet, as Tehran has been insisting all along, diplomacy is the only way for the West to accommodate Persian civilisation and heal the hatred that has festered since 1979. Geneva could be the deal of the century in a positive sense, i.e. the beginning of the end of one cycle of clandestine and open Western-fuelled wars which have kept the Middle East on indefinite boil.

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