

156TH BERGEDORF ROUND TABLE

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IRAN AND THE WEST: PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION

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Executive Summary

- Relations between the West and Iran under the new Iranian government have improved markedly and a constructive atmosphere for debate exists between the two sides.
- The current stage of negotiations provides a realistic chance of a solution to the nuclear conflict with Iran. Nonetheless, it remained unclear whether the E3+3 and Iran will actually reach an agreement before the end of July.
- Closing the nuclear file would open up new fields of cooperation between Iran and the West.
- Future cooperation would be most likely in Afghanistan, especially in the fight against drug trafficking, or on the issue of global energy security.
- Significant differences among the participants remained with regard to the situation in Syria and Iraq; the participants merely agreed that the advance of the ISIS troops threatens the stability of the entire region.

Iran's New Foreign Policy

In his opening speech at the Bergedorf Round Table in Tehran, Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, stressed that security in a globalized world could no longer be achieved at the expense of the security of other countries. He stated that problems are interconnected and have a global impact. Zarif argued that this was particularly the case with the immense challenges that terrorism and extremism posed to the Middle East region. He continued by arguing that terrorism could not be fought selectively. Instead, it was necessary to develop a comprehensive approach, embedded within a framework for regional cooperation.

The Iranian participants stressed that the events associated with the 'Arab Spring' had

shifted the balance of power in the entire region. However, attempts to restore the status quo ante by force would have the opposite effect. Rather, the relevant countries in the region should seek dialogue and common solutions.

Cooperation in Afghanistan?

The participants expressed various views on the future of Afghanistan. There was agreement in principle that the recent elections were a sign of positive developments in the country.

The European participants maintained that the West was committed to Afghanistan

despite the withdrawal of its military contingent, and that it would fulfill its agreed upon commitments.

The majority of the Iranian participants argued that the Afghan government needed to take on full responsibility for the future of Afghanistan and find its own solutions to the fragile security situation.

To a large extent, the participants agreed that dialogue should also be sought with the moderate Taliban as both Iran and the West have long-term interests in the existence of a stable Afghan state and the containment of radical Islamic forces.

A number of Iranian participants contended that in recent years Iran had contributed highly towards the stabilization of neighboring Afghanistan, and would continue to do so in the future.

There was a large degree of willingness on both sides to cooperate on specific issues.

Some of the participants pointed to the fight against drug trafficking as a common interest that could provide a foundation for future cooperation. Iran, in particular, was said to be facing massive problems due to the constant influx of drugs from Afghanistan. This problem was compounded by the fact that profits from the illicit drug trade were

being used to finance international terrorism. The issue is thus highly relevant in terms of global security. Iran and the West would have to work together to ensure that state-building in Afghanistan did not fail again.

Islamist Challenges in Syria and Iraq

Iranian and Western participants expressed highly divergent views on the challenges faced by Iraq and Syria. However, they did agree in principle that cooperation between Iran and the West was indispensable if a solution to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq was to be found. Despite this, some European participants argued that cooperation was only conceivable if Iran were to exert a positive influence on the Syrian regime and no longer provide it with support. The Iranian participants countered this with the view that recent elections in Syria had confirmed the legitimacy of the Syrian government, and called on Europe and the US to accept the decision of the majority of the Syrian people. In answer, the European participants contended that the Assad regime had lost any legitimacy it may have had by attacking its own people. At the same time, they argued that the Syrian elections had hardly adhered to democratic standards.

“WITHOUT NEGOTIATING WITH THE MODERATE TALIBAN THERE WILL BE NO STABILITY IN AFGHANISTAN.”



The Iranian side reminded the round that the territorial gains made by ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) in Syria and Iraq could not have been obtained without the help of other countries in the region.

Furthermore, a number of participants warned that former supporters of ISIS were now becoming its victims. Similarly, those who currently provided ISIS with support were likely to be faced by the organization's terror in the near future. Some of the Iranian participants did not rule out supporting intervention by Iran to protect Iraqi Shiites.

At the same time, other participants underlined that the nuclear issue was being used as an excuse to avoid a resolute approach to tackling regional problems. The participants agreed that it was time to resolve the nuclear issue in order to focus together on the complex challenges faced by the region, as the long-term consequences of these challenges were hard to predict.

Regional Cooperation in the Gulf Region

The issue of security in the Gulf region was dominated by the contrasting positions of Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the question of a possible rapprochement between both countries. The Iranian side stressed that the new government under President Rohani had approached Riyadh directly after taking office. However, there had been very little positive response to this gesture. Other participants pointed out that these gestures were viewed differently in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, both sides were aware that the problems in the region could only be resolved through cooperation.

According to numerous Western participants, Saudi Arabia currently finds itself in a difficult strategic position, as a rapprochement between Iran and the West was viewed by Saudi Arabia as threatening its interests. It was noted that Europe could play an intermediary role here and help improve dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The US 'pivot to Asia' and the country's long-term expectations of becoming independent of gas and oil supplies from the Gulf leave the role of the US in the region ill-defined. While Saudi Arabia benefited from a guarantee of US security for decades, these changes force Saudi Arabia to realign its security priorities.

Many participants argued that a regional security framework that included both Iran and Saudi Arabia was the only promising long-term solution to the problems facing the region.

“IRAN IS THE FUTURE REGIONAL POWER – ITS ECONOMIC POTENTIAL IS ENORMOUS.”

Energy Security

Iran holds a majority of the world's oil and gas reserves, which makes it a key player in energy security issues.

The Iranian participants stressed that the crisis in Ukraine has shown that European states in particular should have a strong interest in diversifying their energy supplies.

The European side countered this point by arguing that only about fifteen percent of Europe's gas market would be affected by Russian restrictions on gas. Despite this, the

worst-case scenario would entail noticeable energy shortages next winter, particularly for Central and Eastern Europe. It was argued that Europe had been promoting diversification of its energy market for some years. The results of this were said to include long-term alternatives such as new pipeline projects, the exploitation of shale gas reserves and an increased focus on renewable energy.

Many Iranian participants favored depoliticizing the energy issue. Iran, they argued, could play an important role in global energy security and was a reliable energy supplier.

However, the European participants underlined that Iran would only be able to develop a stronger energy policy role if agreement were first reached on the nuclear issue.

The Chances of Solving the Nuclear Issue

Even though the current negotiations provide the first realistic chance of a solution to the nuclear conflict with Iran in many years, the participants were skeptical that an agreement between the E3+3 and Iran could be reached before the deadline in late July 2014.

The European participants emphasized that no attempts were being made to prevent Iran from developing the peaceful use of nuclear energy. All of the participants recognized that there was limited time available to find a solution. Additionally, if agreement had not been reached by the deadline, negotiations were likely to become more difficult due to the personnel changes expected within the European Union, and the US mid-term elections. Consequently, it was essential that the diplomatic momentum be maintained.

Importantly, the Iranian participants made it clear that Iran would not simply accept any agreement whatever the price. They reiterated that Iran had long been a member of the international community, even if this had been hard for the West to accept. Moreover, they pointed to Asia's rapidly expanding markets as providing Iran with strong opportunities.

However, both sides agreed that the current situation offered a unique possibility to close the nuclear file. If negotiations failed, however, it could take years before both sides were willing to approach each other again at this level. The Western participants argued that any agreement would have to be adequately communicated throughout the region, in particular to secure the support of the Gulf States.

The fundamental conditions for improved cooperation between Iran and the West are in place, both sides now have to seize this historic opportunity.

“SOLVING THE NUCLEAR ISSUE IS THE FUNDAMENTAL BASIS FOR COOPERATION BETWEEN IRAN AND THE WEST.”

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