

15TH KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST

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AFTER THE NUCLEAR DEAL: PERSPECTIVES FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

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Executive Summary

- The successful conclusion of negotiations on Iran's nuclear program paves the way for better relations between Iran and the West. However, it is also likely to increase tensions between Iran and its Sunni Arab neighbors. Confidence-building measures are therefore urgently needed, especially to mitigate the risk of a regional arms race.
- Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen marks the end of its foreign policy restraint. Moreover, it underscores the country's aim to reduce US influence on its regional policy. Considering the clash between Saudi Arabian and Iranian interests, the outcome of the conflict in Yemen is likely to have a lasting effect on the regional balance of power.
- The US *Iraq First* strategy is too limited to combat IS. Only a comprehensive approach aimed at solving the conflict in Syria and developing inclusive political structures in Iraq can achieve mid to long-term successes in the fight against IS.

On the home stretch towards the nuclear deal?

The framework agreement between Iran and the E3+3 states that was adopted at the beginning of April in Lausanne was described by the participants of the 15th Körber Dialogue Middle East as a turning point in Middle Eastern politics. The participants from the GCC states ardently warned of the negative consequences of the agreement and argued that Iran's hegemonic ambitions and its newfound strength could cause regional destabilization. In contrast, participants from Europe, the US and Iran pointed out that the agreement had opened up new opportunities.

The majority of participants expected the negotiations between the E3+3 states and Iran to be concluded successfully so that a final settlement to the conflict over Iran's nuclear program would be in place by the end of June. They pointed out that Tehran and the E3+3 countries, and especially the

United States, had invested a large amount of political capital into the current negotiations. One participant argued that a failure during the agreement's home stretch was "not an option" for either side. However, another participant reminded that although an agreement had already been reached on the majority of the acquis, "the devil was in the detail." Further negotiations would therefore be required before the end of June on the extent and scope of IAEA inspections (particularly regarding the possible military dimension of the Iranian nuclear program), on the requirements for Iranian research and development, and the order in which sanctions should be lifted. Some participants questioned the feasibility of the "snap back" mechanism, which is to provide the E3+3 countries with the possibility of an immediate return to sanctions in the case that Tehran violates the agree-

ment. These participants warned that procedural requirements were not the only issues that stood in the way of the mechanism, as the varying (primarily economic) interests of the five Security Council Members and Ger-

IF TEHRAN WERE TO VIOLATE THE AGREEMENT, IT WOULD BE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO “SNAP BACK” INTO SANCTIONS.

many meant that it would be difficult to form the necessary political consensus for an immediate return to sanctions. Despite the fact that an agreement between the E3+3 states and Iran would prevent the latter from acquiring nuclear weapons for the foreseeable future, participants from the GCC states unanimously viewed the agreement’s negative consequences as outweighing its benefits. One participant described Iran’s expansionist regional policy as a “political nuclear bomb.” Other participants were concerned that a comprehensive agreement that strengthened Iran could also lead the country to become more assertive in relations with its neighbors. Furthermore, Iran was viewed as benefitting psychologically and financially from the repeal of sanctions, and this led participants from the GCC states to warn that Iran might use its new resources to underpin its regional leadership at the expense of its Sunni Arab neighbors. Consequently, there was no reason for them to reach out to Iran, especially in light of the new agreement. One participant even concluded that the rift between Iran and the GCC states was now deeper than ever before and that Iran’s regional integration was further away than ever. Moreover, “rewarding” Iran for its destructive regional political role by ending its international isolation was viewed as a flagrant injustice. The participants from the GCC states underlined

that they too would expect the same – if not more – rights to use nuclear energy than had been granted to Tehran. In this respect, they argued that the Lausanne Agreement was counterproductive as instead of contributing towards nuclear non-proliferation, it could actually trigger increased nuclear proliferation. Accordingly, participants from the GCC states underlined that the agreement’s negative political consequences outweighed its economic benefits. The open distrust of Iran expressed by the GCC states led some participants to emphasize the importance of renewing existing confidence-building measures but also of developing new approaches. The dominant zero-sum logic in play on both sides of the Gulf, they argued, would have to be replaced with an approach aimed at building common interests. The discussion also clearly demonstrated the extent to which confidence in the US had been eroded among the GCC states. One participant called US President Barack Obama a “dreamer” who continued to hold onto the illusion that Washington could place its relations with Tehran on a new footing while maintaining its strategic partnership with traditional allies in the region.

THE RIFT BETWEEN IRAN AND THE GCC COUNTRIES IS DEEPER THAN EVER BEFORE, AND IRAN’S INTEGRATION INTO ITS REGIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD IS FURTHER AWAY THAN EVER.

The conflict in Yemen: Saudi Arabia's war?

The participants agreed that the civil war in Yemen between Houthi rebels and supporters of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi had gained an additional regional dimension since the beginning of the Saudi military operation. Moreover, Saudi Arabia was not only leading the intervention in Yemen, it was also providing protection to the Yemeni president. Given the clash between Saudi Arabian and Iranian interests, one participant argued that the outcome of the conflict could have a lasting effect on the region's balance of power. Another participant pointed to the complexity of Saudi Arabia's interests in Yemen. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia had declared its intention to reinstate the government of President Hadi who had fled to Saudi Arabia; on the other, Riyadh was attempting to push back the Iran-backed Houthi rebels and thus curb Iranian influence on the Arabian Peninsula. Some participants argued that the Houthi rebels were "puppets of Tehran" and that Iran was attempting to turn the group into the "Hezbollah of the Arabian Peninsula". However, this was contested by others who pointed out that the extent of Iran's control over the Houthis was unclear. Nevertheless, the majority agreed that the importance placed by Saudi Arabia on the stability of its southern neighbor was due to the countries' close historical ties and the fact that more than one million Yemenis are thought to be living in Saudi Arabia. However, there was no consensus on how to bring stability to Yemen. Some participants maintained that previous Western military interventions in the Middle East had demonstrated that stability could not be brought about through bombing campaigns. In contrast, other participants argued that air

strikes by the Saudi-led coalition could force the Houthi rebels to negotiate, and so create the conditions for a political process. It was clear that only an inclusive, democratically elected government could guarantee long-term stability in Yemen. However, there was less agreement on the question as to whether Riyadh was interested in inclusive democratic structures or was using military intervention to make an example of anti-regime forces that were threatening its stability.

Some participants underscored the domestic importance placed by the new Saudi leadership on the intervention in Yemen and the broad level of support it had garnered among the population. Moreover, whereas King Salman's predecessor Abdullah had been accused of excessive restraint in foreign policy, King Salman and his political leadership, it was argued, had successfully promoted themselves as advocates of Saudi interests, especially on issues relating to Iran. These participants pointed to Riyadh's new resolve and stressed that it was accompanied by stronger levels of strategic planning and structured decision-making. The establishment of the Council for Political and Security Affairs, which is presided over by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef, was taken as exemplary of this new situation. Moreover, the young Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense, Mohammed Bin Salman, had become the "face" of the operation in Yemen. Mohammed Bin Nayef's and Mohammed Bin Salman's current positions were viewed as demonstrating that members of the influential Sudairi line, which had been marginalized under King Abdullah, had now re-

ONLY AN INCLUSIVE, DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED GOVERNMENT CAN GUARANTEE LONG-TERM STABILITY IN YEMEN.

gained power, and that two grandchildren of the nation's founder, Abd Al Aziz Bin Saud, had taken on central offices within the Saudi power structure. This was said to mark the beginning of a long overdue generational change within the country's leadership. In particular, the appointment of Mohammed Bin Salman was viewed as constituting an im-

SAUDI ARABIA IS EMANCI-PATING ITSELF FROM "BIG BROTHER AMERICA" AND IS ATTEMPTING TO DEVELOP ITS OWN REGIONAL POLICY.

portant signal in the face of Saudi demographics: approximately 50% of Saudi nationals are younger than 25. The participants repeatedly stressed that Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen was also aimed at sending a signal to the Obama Administration. The growing level of disaffection between Saudi Arabia and the United States, which, it was argued, had been caused by US-Iranian rapprochement, had led Riyadh to emancipate itself from "Big Brother America," and actively develop its own regional policy beyond the influence of Washington. Moreover, Saudi Arabia had forged a regional coalition against the Houthi rebels. Consequently, it was signaling to its Western partners that actors in the region were ready to assume greater responsibility for regional stability. Turkey's support for the anti-Houthi coalition was said to mark a new quality in relations between Riyadh and Ankara, whereas King Salman was viewed as attempting to unite the Sunni world under a unified front against Iran's hegemonic ambitions. However, there was little agreement on the issue as to whether Saudi engagement in Yemen would result in a successful outcome. Some participants argued that Riyadh would do everything it could to gain militarily as it was seeking to develop favorable conditions – if

not a grand bargaining position – for diplomatic negotiations with Tehran. Other participants continued this line of argument by stating that Riyadh had to emerge victorious from the conflict in Yemen; any other result could significantly weaken its regional position of power. Some participants even warned that Yemen could turn into "Saudi Arabia's Vietnam".

Syria, Iraq and the fight against IS

The participants were pessimistic about the current possibility of finding a viable solution to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. In discussing the liberation of the western Iraqi province of Al Anbar, the participants viewed unifying the various actors involved in the fight against IS, developing a comprehensive strategy, and strengthening the combat-effectiveness of the Iraqi Army as the most difficult challenges that had yet to be overcome. Furthermore, Prime Minister Al-Abadi would also have to control the Shiite militias and especially the Hashid Al Shaabi more strongly, as looting and devastation, such as that which had occurred after the recapture of Tikrit, was viewed as worsening sectarian tensions. The participants concluded that as long as the fear among Sunni residents in IS-controlled areas of Shiite militiamen was greater than their fear of IS, there was little chance of defeating the terrorist organization in the long term. Moreover, doing so would also mean that the Iraqi government under Prime Minister Al-Abadi would have to overcome the marginalization of Iraqi Sunnis, anchor the principle of inclusiveness in political processes, and rebuild viable state structures. In par-

ticular, this meant implementing legislative reforms to secure further federalization and the protection of minorities, as well as comprehensively reforming the security sector and integrating ethnic and religious minorities within the Iraqi armed forces. The participants also un-

COMBATTING IS IN THE LONG TERM IS IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT SOLVING THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA.

animously agreed that the conflict in Syria had to be solved if successes in the fight against IS were to be secured in the

long term. One participant described the IS jihadists as “like water”: when they were displaced from one area, they easily found their way into neighboring territories. This, it was said, explained why IS was also on the rise in Syria. These points led one participant to express doubts about the US *Iraq First* strategy, and instead propose the construction of a cordon sanitaire around the entire territory controlled by IS to “dry out” the terrorist militia and cut it off from its trade and supply routes.

The participants recognized that in contrast to the radical Islamic fighters, the Assad regime had been significantly weakened. They also argued that Assad’s survival was almost exclusively dependent on support from Tehran and Hezbollah. The capture of the northern Syrian city of Idlib by Islamist fighters, including Jabhat Al Nusra, at the end of March, was viewed as an indication of Assad’s current weakness. Furthermore, recent reports that the regime had used chlorine gas were also accepted as evidence that “Bashar’s back was against the wall.” The weakness of the regime, according to one participant, was directly linked to Saudi-Turkish support of Jaish Al Fatah, a command structure within the Jihadist rebels. At a meeting in early March, King Salman and President Er-

dogan cleared their differences regarding Turkish support for the Muslim Brotherhood and agreed on stronger regional policy coordination, including on the conflict in Syria. Although one Saudi participant advocated providing support to “moderate jihadists” fighting the Assad regime, such as the umbrella group Jaish Al Fatah, others warned against cooperating with radical Islamic fighters. Doing so, they stressed, might thwart the US ‘train and equip’ initiative aimed at moderate pro-Western opposition groups. One European participant expanded on this point by emphasizing the importance of building a non-jihadist counterbalance to the Assad regime. This would also weaken the narrative that the West merely viewed the Syria conflict through the “prism of IS” and relied on Assad as the bulwark against the militia.

Several participants stressed that an “organized retreat” by Assad still constituted an essential aspect of any negotiated settlement and an indispensable step in solving the conflict in Syria. This in turn meant that Iran, which is protecting Assad, would also have to play a central role. Nevertheless, one participant underlined that Tehran’s support of the Syrian regime was neither unconditional nor immutable, but was dependent on the geopolitical calculus of the Iranian leadership. The participant reminded that Tehran had only supported former Iraqi Prime Minister Al Maliki as long as it had been opportune to do so. Despite this, Syria constituted a cornerstone of Iranian security doctrine, and not just because of the country’s access to Hezbollah. Instead, Teh-

THE WEST MUST HELP TO BUILD A NON-JIHADIST COUNTERWEIGHT TO THE ASSAD REGIME.

ran's security circles believed in a "domino theory," according to which the loss of Damascus would inevitably entail the fall of Baghdad.

The participants agreed that heavily internationalized civil wars, such as the conflict in Syria, could not be solved militarily. Given the ongoing support provided by external ac-

tors, the participants argued that it was unlikely that one side of the conflict might be defeated or that both would simply "burn out." Instead, the key to a solution ultimately lay in the regional powers; this meant that settling the Syrian conflict would be unthinkable until agreement had been forged between Riyadh and Tehran.

About the Körber Dialogue Middle East

The KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST provides a platform for multilateral discussions about current foreign and security policy issues relating to the Middle East. The dialogue involves foreign policy experts from the EU, the US, and the Middle East who meet regularly in a confidential environment to develop policy-oriented ideas and recommendations. Senior foreign policy professionals and representatives of leading think tanks gathered at the workshop in Berlin to discuss the latest developments in the Middle East.

This executive summary contains a selection of the arguments that we believe are relevant to the current political debate. The summary is distributed to the participants of the KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST and selected policymakers.

KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST

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