



**Détente, not Rapprochement:
Iran, the West, and the Middle East and North Africa
regional order at Geneva, November 2013 – February 2014**

Part I: The Islamic Republic of Iran's policy in the Syrian Civil War

Farzan Sabet*

Introduction

As American soldiers and their coalition partners have gradually retreated from their state-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the late 2000s has been defined by two broad convulsions that are transforming the regional order. The first is the Iranian nuclear crisis. Beginning in August 2002 over the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear activities—and more specifically its uranium enrichment policies—this crisis is rooted in the concern that Iran could ultimately produce the fissile material for a nuclear weapon that could change the regional power balance in its favor and create a nuclear weapons proliferation cascade. Israeli leaders have been the most adamant about the need to eliminate the Iranian nuclear program, through the use of military force if necessary. American leaders have opted for a “dual-track” approach that aims, on the one hand, to limit the Iranian nuclear program and pressuring Iran with harsh and far reaching economic sanctions and, on the other hand, offer the possibility of ending the country's economic and diplomatic isolation through negotiations. This crisis, if not resolved, could lead to military conflict between Iran and regional states, even a regional nuclear arms race.

The second convulsion has been the revolutionary wave that has enveloped the Arab world since December 2010, from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to the Indian Ocean shores of Oman, toppling dictators such as Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben-Ali, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Libya's Moamar Ghadafi, and Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh. While what many call the “Arab Spring” continues to reverberate in the region, one case stands out above the others in its status as one of the greatest national tragedies of our young century, with potentially negative implications for regional stability and security: Syria. What began as a peaceful movement for change in March 2011 has devolved into a brutal civil war, in no small part due to the way in which the Bashar al-Assad regime violently responded to the initial demonstrations, but also because of the intervention of regional forces seeking to advance their interests. As of the date of writing nearly 150,000 people have been killed in this conflict and 2.5 million displaced, and any resolution seems very far-off.

Iran, a central actor in both of these dramas, has been engaged in intense diplomacy in Geneva, Switzerland, with the E3+3 (Great Britain, France, and Germany, plus the United States, China, and Russia), resulting in the historic Joint Plan of Action (JPA) in



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November 2013. This interim-agreement addresses some of the fundamental issues of the Iranian nuclear crisis, albeit temporarily, and gives six months to one year of breathing space to allow for the negotiation of a more permanent agreement. It has been a tentative and fragile victory that bodes well for the resolution of the nuclear crisis and the broken U.S.-Iran relationship. This tentative success contrasts starkly with the experience of the Geneva II Conference on Syria. The Geneva II talks began on a dark note in January 2014 when Iran was unceremoniously disinvited from attending, and ultimately collapsed in February when it became obvious that the chasm between the regime and opposition is too wide to bridge in the near future. Unlike the E3+3-Iran talks, which demonstrated the ability of decades-long enemies to sit at the negotiation table and work toward resolving their differences, Geneva II reflected domestic Syrian and regional animosities and the inability to put aside differences. This contrast between the two Geneva negotiations begs the question: Which is more reflective of the MENA region's future and what is Iran's place in both? There is hope that the tentative success of the E3+3-Iran talks will translate into greater cooperation by Iran with the West, especially the United States, and their respective regional allies in ending the Syrian civil war. However, the divergence between the Syria and nuclear negotiations in Geneva reveals that while the foreseeable future may hold a tentative détente between Iran and the West, we should not necessarily expect a far-reaching rapprochement any time soon.

This two part-series looks at the Syrian and nuclear crises at the critical juncture of the Geneva negotiations from November 2013 to February 2014. It gives insight into the trajectory of change in the MENA region and the place of Iran at the center of the maelstrom. Part I briefly, the present article, looks at the Geneva II Conference and focuses on Iran's policy in Syria. Part II, which will be published at a later date, focuses on the E3+3-Iran talks in Geneva and the breakthrough of the Joint Plan of Action. Both articles ground Iran's perceptions and policy in these negotiations in the country's near and distant past, with an eye for the implications to the future.

Historical Background

The Islamic Republic of Iran's perceptions and action in the Syria and nuclear negotiations in Geneva have been as much rooted in present day geopolitics as in a specific reading of Iranian history since the 19th century. Many Iranian historians, reflecting on the past two centuries, have highlighted the historical problematique of *este'mar* (colonialism) in Iran during this period, namely repeated foreign-backed losses of territory, invasions, and interventions. In the 19th century the Iranian state was forced to accept a number of humiliating treaties, including Gulistan (1812), Turkmenchay (1828), and Paris (1857), which entailed a considerable loss of territory and sovereignty. In the 20th century alone, Iran experienced several traumatic invasions which sought to change the course of Iran's domestic and political affairs. The Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905), a popular uprising that sought to limit domestic arbitrary rule and foreign influence by establishing a constitutional system of government, was in part suppressed by a Russian invasion under the auspices of protecting Russian nationals and interests. Iranian neutrality during the Second World



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War was overruled by an Anglo-Soviet invasion (1941) which replaced the strongman Shah Reza Pahlavi (1921-1941) with his more malleable son Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979). Soon after the Islamic Revolution (1979), Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Iran in order to overthrow the revolutionary government and annex Iran's Arabic-speaking and oil-rich Khuzestan province, with the backing of the United States, Soviet Union, many European states, and the Persian Gulf Arab monarchies.

Loss of territory and invasions were compounded by more subtle foreign manipulations in the last century which have nonetheless left equally indelible impressions. Following the Constitutional Revolution, the Anglo-Russian Convention (1907) de facto divided Iran into the "zones of influence" managed by these two powers. When democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh sought to nationalize the Iranian oil industry in the 1950s to gain a more equitable share of profits and lessen British influence, he was removed with the aid of Operation Ajax (1953), an Anglo-American-backed coup d'état. Finally, during the Cold War, Iran under the last shah was a U.S.-backed dictatorship and client state which ceded some of its sovereignty to the United States and West. As a result of these and many other experiences, the modern Iranian psyche is marred by insecurity and paranoia of Western intentions. Most, if not all, major political upheavals in modern Iranian history have had a strong element of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, whether the Tobacco Revolt (1891), the Constitutional Revolution (1907), or the Oil nationalization movement (1951-1953). This theme was arguably a major catalyst of the Islamic Revolution, reflected in two of this tumultuous event's most prominent slogans: Esteghlal, Azadi, Jomhouriy-e Eslami (Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic) and Na Sharghi, Na Gharbi, Jomhouriy-e Eslami (Neither Eastern nor Western, Islamic Republic). The first slogan highlighted Iran's struggle for independence from the great powers, while the second underlined its rejection of the Cold War's East-West dichotomy and refusal to join either the Soviet or American camps.

The contemporary Islamic Republic's desire for independence and concern with foreign intervention in its affairs, however, are not merely based on a historical abstraction. While the distant past sets much of the background, this desire and concern are more concretely rooted in the bloody Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), which saw hundreds of thousands of Iranian soldiers and civilians killed or maimed, Iran's economy ravaged, and the country largely diplomatically isolated. The painful experience of the war has been overlaid with over three decades of economic sanctions which have isolated Iran further and forced it to look inward for its needs. The most direct historical antecedent for Iran's role in the Syrian and nuclear crises, however, is probably the experience of the George Bush administration (2000-2009) and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. While Iran experienced a thermidorian reaction in the post-Iran-Iraq War (1989-) and post-Cold War (1991-) eras,ⁱ the consequences of the 9-11 attacks reversed this moderating trend. In January 2002, President Bush declared Iran as part of an "Axis of Evil", signaling the United States' displeasure with the Islamic Republic and possible desire for regime change in Iran. The U.S. invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 appeared to be the first steps of a much broader



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U.S. military-backed change in the MENA region, and Bush-era policies also targeted Iran's biggest international partners, including North Korea and Syria.ⁱⁱ The rise in U.S.-Iran and regional tensions and repeated Israeli threats to attack Iran's nuclear facilities contributed to the end of the post-1989 Iranian thermidor, a reversal embodied by the rise of the hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). It also helped convince Iran to pursue closer political, economic, and security relations with a number of regional states, especially Syria, in what today is referred to as the Axis of Resistance.

The Axis of Resistance & Iran in the Syrian civil war

The Axis of Resistance, a name which plays on the Bush administration's Axis of Evil, has its origins in Iran's first decade of revolution and war after 1979. During the war, Syria was the only regional state to strongly support Iran. This has been a peculiar arrangement as scholar Joobin Goodarzi has noted in his study of post-1979 Iran-Syria relations, declaring that "The emergence and evolution of the Syrian-Iranian axis is a fascinating and rare example of an enduring alliance" in the Middle East.ⁱⁱⁱ He rightly underlines just how different these two regimes are at the ideological level: One is religious, revolutionary, and pan-Islamic while the other is secular, socialist, and pan-Arab. Goodarzi argues that it is exactly this lack of ideological overlap as well as divergent regional strategic priorities (the Persian Gulf for Iran and Levant for Syria) that has allowed this axis to persist. He identifies this relationship as primarily a defensive alliance targeted at the GCC and Iraq under Saddam in the Persian Gulf, Israel in the Levant, and the United States in the wider Middle East. Since the beginning of the 2000s, this relationship has taken on renewed importance as a primarily anti-Israeli alliance which also seeks to counter American military presence in the region and the influence of the GCC. The Syrian-Iranian axis forms the core of the Axis of Resistance, which also includes non-state actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories.^{iv} Until late-2010, three factors had contributed to the strengthening of this alliance. First, regime-change in Afghanistan and Iraq by the United States allowed for the formation of the Hamid Karzai government in Afghanistan, which has been friendlier toward Iran than the previous Taliban government, and the rise of a predominantly Shi'a government in Iraq, which has increasingly drawn closer to the alliance. Furthermore, by supporting anti-American Sunni and Shi'a insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq, the alliance gradually forced the United States to withdraw the bulk of its military forces from the region. Second, before the sanctions began taking their toll in earnest, Iran enjoyed enormous profits from the export of crude oil at high international prices for much of the last decade. Finally, the Arab Spring (which the Islamic Republic sees as an "Islamic Awakening" inspired by its own 1979 revolution) was knocking down one American ally after another. Yet this ascendancy was not to last. In early-2011 the alliance's position began to weaken, starting with Iran's economy which was finally feeling the ravages of sanctions. Then, in March 2011 demonstrations in Syria began and quickly gained momentum. As the Bashar al-Assad regime brutally suppressed peaceful demonstrations and regional states rushed in to fund and arm the Syrian opposition, the situation in Syria escalated into a civil war.



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Iranian perceptions of the Syrian civil war

As I highlighted in my study of Iranian media narratives on the civil war and what this could tell us about how Iranian political elites view the conflict, the Islamic Republic has not seen what is happening in Syria as part of the Islamic Awakening.^v Rather, it sees the Syrian civil war through primarily three lenses: (i) As a proxy war by its international and regional rivals to weaken it and the alliance (ii) as a vector for the spread of Sunni Islamist extremism and terrorism and (iii) as a threat to its claim as the premier anti-imperialist and Islamist force in the region. While there are some indications that the Islamic Republic may be dissatisfied with how the al-Assad regime managed the peaceful demonstrations in early 2011, today it views the Syrian opposition as the instrument of the United States, European Union, GCC, and Turkey to weaken Iran by denying it access to the Levant and specifically to its non-state allies in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. This would not only weaken Iran's influence in the MENA region, but also undermine its deterrence capability against any Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. The Islamic Republic thus sees a Syrian opposition victory in the civil war as a direct threat to its vital strategic interests, namely its freedom of action in the region and ability to defend its national security and ultimately independence from the West.

Iran also sees the Syrian civil war, and specifically the Syrian opposition as it exists today, as a vector for the spread of Sunni Islamist extremism and terrorism and perceives a need to fight these elements in Syria before they spread to its own border regions. If an anti-Iranian, GCC-backed, Sunni Islamist regime were to emerge in Syria, it could inflame the various low-level Sunni insurgencies on Iran's peripheries. Iran's Sunni minorities have historically been very socially, politically, and economically marginalized and have frequently taken up arms against the state. The anti-government campaign has become particularly intense in Sistan va Baluchestan province, where the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice) insurgent group has carried out numerous deadly attacks and hostage-takings against state security forces. Sunni Islamist extremism and terrorism also poses another, equally ominous, threat for Iran in the potential to set-up anti-Iranian and anti-Shi'a governments in regional countries (especially Iraq and Lebanon) which could threaten Iran proper and Shi'a communities outside.

Finally, the Islamic Republic views the Syrian civil war and possible rise of Sunni Islamists there as a threat to its ideological appeal and strategic depth in the MENA region. While Iran has staked its claim of legitimacy on its sectarian Shi'a character inside its borders, as an ethnically and religiously minority state in the region, it appeals to anti-imperialism and pan-Islamism abroad in order to have as wide an appeal as possible and build an ethnically and religiously diverse regional coalition against its rivals. With the prominent rise of powerful al-Qaeda affiliates such as Jebhet al-Nusra li-Ahl ash-Shām (Support Front of the People of the Levant) and Salafist-leaning al-Jabhat al-Islāmiyyah (Islamic Front), which are ethnically Arab and religiously Sunni, Iran's claim to leadership of the anti-imperialist and pan-Islamic movements in



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the region could be undermined. Already, the conflict has hurt once close ties with Hamas, and the true extent of the damage is likely much worse and remains to be seen.

Iranian policy in the Syrian civil war

For these reasons, among others, the Islamic Republic has made a strong commitment to propping up the al-Assad regime and holding back an opposition victory in Syria. Its support appears to have taken two primary forms, although it should be noted that much of what is written on Iran's involvement in Syria is speculation that is not sufficiently supported by publically available sources. The first is the provision of economic support, which appears to include a significant line of credit that enables the al-Assad regime to purchase many of the goods that help keep the territories it controls afloat.^{vi} The second is the provision of military materiel, training, and personnel to the al-Assad regime's war effort, which many view as having played a decisive role in staving off regime defeat. This includes sending the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Jerusalem Force (IRGC-JF), considered by many to be Iran's premier special operations forces unit, to re-equip, re-train, and fight alongside the al-Assad regime's security forces.^{vii} Iran appears to also be recruiting, training, and deploying Shi'a combat units from around the world for service in Syria. These include not only volunteers from Iran and its ally Hezbollah, but also very prominently Iraqi "special groups" such as Aşayib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous). While President Barack Obama and many others had predicted a swift end to the al-Assad regime soon after the demonstrations in March 2011, the advance of the Syrian opposition has in many areas ground to a halt and on other fronts actually been reversed, thanks in no small part to Iranian efforts.

Iran's perceptions of and policy in the Syrian civil war demonstrate that, even as Iran sat down for nuclear negotiations with the West in Geneva, it has undertaken enormous efforts in Syria because it fears an unraveling of its regional alliance and the empowerment of its international and regional rivals. Iran's refusal to accept preconditions to participate in the Geneva II conference and its subsequent disinvitation serve to only highlight this.

Iran at the Geneva II Conference on Syria and the road ahead

On 19 January 2014, one day before the start of the Geneva II Conference on Syria, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon extended a surprise invitation to Iran for the conference, which Iran appeared to accept. His invitation was rooted in the understanding that Iran had accepted the 30 June 2012 Geneva communiqué, which among other things calls for "the establishment by mutual consent of a transitional governing body with full executive powers" in Syria as the basis of the talks. Less than a day passed before the Syrian opposition threatened to withdraw from the talks, Iran denied ever accepting the Geneva communiqué, and Ban was forced to disinvite Iran.^{viii} The debacle cast a shadow over the conference and answered a question many had been pondering since November 2013: Had success in nuclear negotiations eased U.S.-Iran and regional tensions and would it translate to a more cooperative Iranian attitude on Syria? While the sequence of events which culminated in the invitation and dis-



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invitation of Iran remain unknown, the answer appears to be no. More than the Syrian opposition and their regional backers' vocal objections to Iran's presence at the conference, it is Iran's rejection of the Geneva communiqué that should concern us. Whereas on the nuclear crisis Iran has chosen to sit at the conference tables in Geneva to resolve the dispute, on Syria it is placing its bets on the battlefields of Damascus and Aleppo. It is not difficult to see why it has yet to participate in Geneva II, a forum which it views as largely dominated by its regional rivals unwilling to compromise. On another level, given the al-Assad regime's relative success in the last year or so in reversing opposition gains, Iran appears to not feel the need to give a concession to its rivals by accepting the Geneva communiqué nor did it see Geneva II as a productive forum for pursuing its interests. Short of NATO-led regime change or a shift in the negotiating process which better incorporates Iranian interests, both of which appear unlikely in the short-term, Iran's position on the Geneva communiqué is unlikely to change.

Conclusion

Since 1979, Iran has placed itself firmly outside of the Western-backed regional order premised on Israel, Turkey, Egypt and the GCC. As one of the few states in the region with the population base, natural resources, and geo-strategic expanse to attain local superpower status, Iran has doggedly pursued an independent foreign policy that has often brought it into conflict with its neighbors. Especially in the 2000s, the Iran-centered Axis of Resistance has become a force to contend with, especially as Iraq has been gradually drawn into its orbit. In the Syrian civil war, Iran and its allies see themselves as being under attack by the West and its regional partners. Whatever progress has been made on the nuclear crisis, the Syrian civil war demonstrates that Iran is still, to some extent, a revisionist state which does not accept what it sees as a regional order imposed by extra-regional forces. Indeed, while nuclear and Syria negotiations are not completely disconnected, the two Geneva talks highlight the two ambivalent aspects of Iranian foreign and security policy: A desire to be integrated into the international community and willingness to accept some of its structures and norms while, at the same time, seeking independence and rejecting what it sees as a Western-imposed regional order.

Of course, the al-Assad regime's ultimate victory in the Syrian civil war - and therefore Iran's victory - appears unlikely. At the very least, al-Assad will not be able to put Syria back together again the way it was. However, an absolute defeat may also not be inevitable. Outside of absolute victory for one side and absolute defeat for the other, at least two distinct possibilities come to mind. The first possibility is that the two sides, including Iran, sit down and come up with a political compromise that re-orders Syrian politics while maintaining the country's territorial integrity. This would require Iran's bitter regional rivals, namely the United States and Saudi Arabia, to negotiate and agree that Iran's interests in Syria will largely be respected. This is not too dissimilar to the fragile balance that exists in Lebanon today. The second possibility is that Syria, de facto or de jure, splinters into two or more states, one of which is likely to be an Iranian client-state.^{ix} Especially as



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Russia becomes alienated from the West, this possibility, which threatens the entire Sykes-Picot Agreement nation-state framework in the MENA region, cannot be ignored. This second possibility raises the specter of a Russia-Iran axis emerging in the Middle East to rival the West-Israel-Turkey-Egypt-GCC alliance. Despite, the promise that nuclear negotiations hold for détente between Iran, the West, and their respective allies, the failure of Geneva II and Iran's rejection of the process shows us that any rapprochement is likely far off.

* PhD Candidate, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva



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By 1989, three events were bringing about a *thermidorian reaction* (a term which refers to the revolt against the excesses of the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution) in Iran.

ⁱ During this period Iran was confronted by U.S. military forces on nearly all of its terrestrial and maritime borders.

ⁱⁱ Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*. (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), 2.

^v In the past, Hamas in Gaza has also been associated with the Axis of Resistance.

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ⁱ Michael Weiss, "Black Navy: Tracking the Iranian-backed Fleet That's Fueling the Assad Regime." *Foreign Policy*. 28 Oct. 2013. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.

ⁱⁱ "Jang-e Penhan-e Iran Dar Syria (Iran's Hidden War in Syria)." YouTube. BBC Persian, 30 Oct. 2013. Web. 12 Mar. 2014. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YjqLTO_jU40&feature=youtu.be>.

ⁱⁱⁱ "UPDATE 3-UN Chief Ban Disinvites Iran from Syria Peace Talks." Reuters. 20 Jan. 2014. Web. 12 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/20/syria-crisis-un-.dUSL2N0KU0L720140120>>.

^x Badran, Tony. "Alawistan." *Foreign Policy*. 27 July 2012. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.

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