

# the MENA Report

ANALYSIS & INSIGHTS  
FROM THE **ARAB WORLD**

الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا



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# ABOUT THE MENA REPORT

*The MENA Report*, published monthly by The Cordoba Foundation, provides unique insights and analysis of events and developments in the Middle East and North Africa. Seeking to provide impartial, accurate and authoritative content and analysis, we do this through The Cordoba Foundation's unique access to rare and highly important primary sources in the Middle East and beyond.



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# WELCOME



This edition of *The MENA Report* comes amid surprising events which are most likely to shape politics in the Middle East for the next cycle of events that usually takes the period of a decade or so. In each of the policy shift cycles, the only permanent factor is the alliance of Western governments with Middle Eastern autocracies who fear the rise of political Islam. This calculated policy of continued pressure to keep the autocracies alive, irrespective of the aspirations and demands of the people of the region, faltered when the people surged onto the streets demanding their rights and a better future. Undeterred by the initial success of the Arab Spring, via their autocratic allies in the region and deeply corrupt state apparatus, leading western governments managed to orchestrate the implosion of the new democracies.

Unfortunately for the West, it happens that they didn't possess this leverage inside Iran to create the desired government change. In the past 25 years, the West relied heavily upon the Iranian Diaspora in the West to try to entice

the young Iranian generation - with the trappings of the West: satellite TV and social networking sites. Until now, this influence is not bearing fruit for many reasons; the first being the strong national identity intertwined with strong religious dogma of the Iranian people.

Iran is aware that the United States and its regional allies will continue to press unrelentingly until they succeed in toppling this idiosyncratic theocratic democracy. With this knowledge, the Iranians have adopted a proactive political strategy to initiate pockets of resistances for its protagonists outside its borders. This policy proved its worth, as it forced the United States to ditch its threats of military strike for the alternate policy of negotiation and continued political engagement at the highest level. There is no doubt that the policy of engagement is aligned with the hope that gradual internal pressure and systematic step-by-step demands to yield to nuclear inspections will initiate the desired space for the reform movement and new dynamics to weaken the conservative clergy's grip on power.

The apparent ease with which foreign influence and interference was able to dislodge Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood elected government, and the ongoing troubles for the Tunisian and Turkish governments, lies in the inherent difference between Sunni Political Islam and its Shi'i counterpart. Over the centuries, Shi'i religio-political ideology has been in constant mobilisation to defend itself against an ideological enemy from within the wider contours of Islam. This state of siege was augmented by a strong Persian national identity; a formality and an authoritative hierarchy that bestowed regimental unity in the face of their adversaries.

On the contrary, Sunni Islamists and their political entities anchor themselves in informality -- a lack of religious hierarchy, autonomy and self regulation. Hence, their policies usually engender a plethora of protagonists and opposition from non-Islamists, and a clutter of alternative policies, ideas and religious edicts from fellow Islamists and similar organisations to advance certain issues. This

apparent disadvantage is in fact one of the Sunni's strengths as it engenders the individuals' sense of freedom from the tutelage of religious authority and the negative aspects of their entrenched national identity. Another advantage the Iranian Islamist proved to have over their Sunni counterpart was their expediency and ability to work with their protagonists to survive constant American and Western threats<sup>1</sup>.

American interventionist policy in the region was dealt an effective blow by the Iran-Russia alliance. Both countries collaborated in a war of attrition against The United States in Iraq and Afghanistan. Deteriorating American economy and the scaling down of their army will also degrade their ability to incur future responsibilities in the region. The same goes for the Europeans who are used to being piggy-backed on American military power. The rivalry between the ambitious Iranian government and the Gulf States will no doubt be to the advantage of the Iranians, forcing the Arabs to engage them in dialogue to settle their differences in Syria, Bahrain



## Iran is governed by a number of interrelated power centres, some of whom are official (constitutional government), and others unofficial

and Yemen.

Iran is governed by a number of interrelated power centres, some of whom are official (constitutional government), and others unofficial, such as the politico-religious institutions and semi-military forces which are under the leadership of influential clergy.

The president is entrusted with the running of day-to-day affairs of the country. He has no authority in determining strategic policies of foreign and domestic politics, nor any control over the army or security apparatuses, all of which fall within the jurisdiction of the Supreme leader, who runs the country through a network of clergy in collaboration with the office of the president. Unofficial centres of power control the direction of Iranian politics through the person of the president, who has very little say in these matters. This decision-making dualism gives rise to many conflicts in Iran; the likelihood of a full-blown confrontation one day between the Supreme leader and the *Council of the*

*Guardian Council* on the one hand and the Parliament on the other. However for the time being (for the past 4 years), this dualism is under the full control of the Supreme Guide and the religious paramilitary institutions.

The official constitutional leadership of Iran comprises a number of institutions: The Assembly of Experts, the Supreme Leader, the president, the Parliament, the cabinet, the judiciary, state radio and television, the army, the Revolutionary Guards and security apparatuses.

Compare this intricate power structure and institutionalised religious and political authority with the autocratic, family-based tribal governments in neighbouring Arab countries. In these traditional states, political process is largely meaningless; the policies are personal and have very little institutional depth. Consequently these governments will continue to depend on foreign assistance and will do its utmost to stop or reverse any popular afflatus, inspired by neighbouring countries, towards democracy. There are



however two key factors helped these regimes survive the winds of Arab nationalism, communism, political Islam and the Arab Spring. These are a continued American presence and support, and the unshakable loyalty and political indifference of their tiny populations. Nonetheless, both of the aforementioned factors are probably not guaranteed to withstand in the coming few years.

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1. There is much evidence from Western and regional sources which point to at-least some form of liaison between Iran and al-Qaeda as well as other al-Qaeda-associated groups like the Kurdish Ansar al-Islam.. According to credible sources from the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), the Iranians allowed members of Ansar al-Islam group access to Iraq from their camps in Iran following the invasion of Iraq in 2003. See the following links:  
<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424053111904888304576474160157070954>  
[https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/IranPrimer\\_Levitt3.pdf](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/IranPrimer_Levitt3.pdf)

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# IRAN-WEST DEAL: FROM ANTAGONISM TO ACCORD WHAT HAS CHANGED?

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The recent agreement between Iran and the West<sup>1</sup> to end the decade-old stalemate - the curbing of Iran's nuclear ambitions - was received with jubilation, trepidation, indifference, dismay and puzzlement. The disparity between the plethora of official and public positions reflects the instability of this vitally important region to the world economy, and its historicity in the conscience of nearly four billion people on this planet. Whilst Arab Gulf States, excluding Oman, were stunned and dismayed at this surprising agreement and the speed of events, others like Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey welcomed it, some reservedly.

The deal, which was signed in Geneva on Sunday 24 November, 2013, is the most significant agreement signed by the United States with a Middle Eastern country since brokering the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel on September 17, 1978. Clearly, this new accord signalled renewed cooperation between the two sides in the War on Terror. Each side has its own agenda and interpretation of the War on Terror campaign. Whilst the United States and

its allies have been busy in the past two decades fighting terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); Iran, on the other side, is locked in a geopolitical struggle with the Arab regimes in Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Iranians mastered the art of using the scarecrow of Arab terrorist organisations to garner the might of the West to its advantage.<sup>2</sup> It is evident that both parties, i.e. the United States and Iran, believe that they have achieved political gains besides the nuclear agreement.

The Iranians have probably gained more through this deal; they have managed to pacify the West's hostility towards its Syrian vassal and ease the crippling economic sanctions. Furthermore, they have managed to, yet again; convince the Americans that they are a worthy ally in defeating Sunni-orientated Islamist organisations and "pariah" governments in the region.<sup>3</sup> The agreement is a first step towards a comprehensive settlement between the West and Iran over its nuclear programme. President Obama addressed his people praising the agreement, proclaiming it will halt



## But the most significant gain is psychological: a boast of Confidence for the Iranian diplomacy in the region.

Iran's nuclear ambitions, ensure compliance with the strict regulations on building and using its next-generation centrifuges and halt its work at its plutonium reactor. Iran will also have to allow a strict international monitoring of its nuclear industry.<sup>4</sup>

The deal will free Iran's four billion USD assets from its oil sales and suspend restrictions on exports and imports. But the most significant gain is psychological: a boast of confidence for the Iranian diplomacy in the region. The reaction of the Saudi's and their allies in the Arab world was overt and unprecedented. The Saudis were dismayed and surprised at the secret talks between the Americans and the Iranians which were facilitated by Oman. Iran is no longer inhibited by its economic difficulties and it is free (from the threat of aerial strikes) to continue its support for the militant Shi'i groups in Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Iraq. Within the last 25 years, exactly after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranians managed to forge strong political and geographic deals with the West, often stigmatised by Arab governments as the *Shi'i Crescent*.<sup>5</sup>

The nervousness of the Arab Gulf States is legitimate, as they know the fragility of their regimes compared to Iran and its Iraqi and Syrian allies. Saudi Arabia for instance, the biggest and most populated of the Gulf States, is seriously disadvantaged when compared to Iran's military capabilities and its institutional capacity. Despite years of economic sanctions, internal political protests and unrest and their involvement in the civil struggles in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain and the Yemen, the Islamic regime has not just managed to survive but also solidify their international alliance with China, Russia and India. Incredibly they have also managed to channel this political deal to serve its strategic national security in the Middle East.

Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, the ruling clergy were now faced with three main challenges, their first being their competition with regional powers over religious and economic influence. The second challenge was their uneasy relationship with the international community (mainly Western powers). Whilst the internal struggle was the most serious for the regime as it threatened its existence, the

Western powers were really hopeful that the latter would, in the long term, dislodge the religious political strata – in favour of secular elites and a new generation of Westernised youth.

To win favour with the Iranian people, the regime has to couple economic and political reforms with demilitarising the society. However, this is not likely to happen in the near future. The government, embolden by the latest agreement with the West, declared that the military base *Mohammed Rasool Allah* ('Muhammad – the Prophet of Allah') - which belongs to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) - will hold routine exercises in the streets of Tehran. This would ensure that disturbances, such as those which occurred after the 2009 presidential election results, can be dealt with efficiently. Sensing difficulties ahead the Fars News Agency, linked closely to the security and military establishment -- announced the upcoming exercises in its interview with Mohammad Reyvandi, the co-ordination deputy of the *Mohammed Rasool Allah* military base. The manoeuvres will be held by a number of paramilitary agencies such as the

*Bait al-Maqdes* (Jerusalem), *Kawthar Brigades*, *Imam Ali* and *Imam Hussein Brigades*.

Reyvandi continued, saying that although the security services allied with the police, if need be the Guards and the Basij<sup>6</sup> militia could also engage and provide assistance whenever necessary. He also said, that

The threats in Tehran are completely under surveillance. The Tehran IRGC has identified cultural threats in addition to the security and physical ones. In Tehran, 4 or 5 key threats have been identified, the goals have been established and cultural plans have been drawn up. In line with this, some 110 to 115 cultural projects to confront cultural threats in Tehran are being implemented in the various resistance districts of Tehran and the environs<sup>7</sup>.

The economy remains the biggest challenge to the government's hold on power. The economic sanctions halved Tehran's oil revenue and put an enormous strain on



PHOTO: ERIC BRIDGES / US MISSION

its ability to conduct its local and regional programmes. Furthermore, cutting Iran from the international banking system caused a sharp drop in the value of the local currency, raising the inflation to more than 50%. Nonetheless, a July 2013 research paper by the U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS) suggested that Iran had the ability to adjust to sanctions, but added: ‘the election of Rouhani...suggests that sanctions are affecting political outcomes in Iran’<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that Iran has the resilience and ability to offset the adverse effects of sanctions and will manage to drive the economy and its regional ambitions though at a much reduced pace. Iran’s religio-political influence in the region mitigated its economic hardship and managed to spread the burden to neighbouring Iraq. The congressional report concluded that,

Sanctions do not appear to have materially reduced Iran’s capability to finance and provide arms to militant movements in the Middle East and to Syria. Extensive Iranian support to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad appears is continuing, by all accounts. Some press

reports, quoting the U.N. panel of experts, say Iran has been exporting arms to factions in Yemen and Somalia. Iran’s arms exports contravene Resolution 1747, which bans Iran’s exportation of arms.<sup>9</sup>

It is beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Iraqi government, led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, contributed immensely to alleviating the effects of sanctions on Iran and helping to sustain its allies with weapons, logistical and financial help. *The MENA Report* interviewed a leading Iraqi politician and economist to unravel the official but clandestine efforts by the Iraqi government to assist Iran in breaking the sanctions. According to our source, the illicit activity was uncovered when the governor of the Iraqi Central Bank complained to Prime Minister al-Maliki that bank officials close to the Prime Minister were involved in money-laundering and that foreign currency was being smuggled to neighbouring countries. The claim was later corroborated by the independent parliamentary committee overseeing the activities of the Central Bank<sup>10</sup>. The prime minister’s response was quick and unexpected. He ordered the judiciary to issue



## The recent deal forged in Geneva should not be seen as a panacea for resolving the extremely difficult Iranian-US relationship

an arrest warrant against Sinan al-Shabibi, the Governor of the Central Bank, whilst those who were named by the governor for corruption and money laundering, were not included in any sort of inquiry. This probably explains why, in the short-term, any sanctions against Iran will not gain results without having the proper monitoring procedures to stop neighbouring countries from flouting such sanctions. Our interviewee claimed that the Parliamentary Integrity Commission noticed that within the past two years, after the sacking of the Central Bank's governor, huge amounts of foreign currency had been transferred into foreign banks and the doubling of average daily hard currency bought from 150 to 300 million USD. These uncalculated and improper activities led to the decline in the local Iraqi currency, forcing the Central Bank to abandon its plan to drop the three zeros from the Dinar, associated with the astronomical hike in inflation during the sanction years in the 1990s. What is most worrying is the collaboration between the bank's officials and the Iran-backed Iraqi militias to forge the Dinar, especially the two tenders, the 5000 and 10000 bank notes. According to our high ranking official, the

government is very much aware of illegal activities to siphon off hard currency against counterfeit money.

It is reported that one of the biggest problems faced by ordinary people and traders with Iraqi banks is the insistence of the banks to tender the two aforementioned counterfeit bills and refuse to pay using other denominations; this alludes to the abundance of the two counterfeited banknotes.<sup>11</sup> In an interview with *al-Mada Newspaper*, another Iraqi MP accused the government of illegally channelling huge sums of Iraq's foreign currency stock to neighbouring countries.<sup>12</sup>

The recent deal forged in Geneva should not be seen as a panacea for resolving the extremely difficult Iranian-US relationship. Iran and the USA remain enemies and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. What has changed is the prospect of the latter resorting to force, to produce Iranian compliance on the nuclear issue. The threat of military action has receded (for now), but it has not disappeared altogether. As long as Iran and the USA are



By any standard, Iran is currently a nuclear threshold state, albeit one with a significant “breakout” vulnerability (i.e. the time needed to build deliverable nuclear weapons).

locked in a deep geopolitical struggle over the direction of events in the Middle East, there is the prospect of a military action. The threat will only disappear once Iran sees itself as having achieved invulnerability, in terms of military aggression, i.e. the country has secured credible capability to deter aggression by big powers.

This is one rationale that many analysts have used to argue the case for Iran's intention to acquire nuclear weapons capability, in so far as that capability gives Iran credible deterrence. This argument is not devoid of flaws, but it is rational and probably captures a kernel of the truth. Whether the Geneva deal works or not, and lead to a more lasting settlement, will depend in large measure upon the extent to which Iranian negotiators can sell the deal to a sceptical domestic audience. There are powerful political factions who are opposed to making significant concessions and giving up their nuclear research achievements which have cost billions of dollars.

Iran will be loath to give up capability that would threaten

its nuclear threshold status. By ‘threshold’ status, we mean the position where all the elements and expertise are in place to produce nuclear weapons once the political will has been generated. By any standard, Iran is currently a nuclear threshold state, albeit one with a significant “breakout” vulnerability (i.e. the time needed to build deliverable nuclear weapons). Most estimates place Iran's breakout vulnerability at anywhere between six-twelve months, long enough for detection and disruption by Western powers and Israel. In the absence of the Geneva deal, and should Iran continue developing its enrichment capacity, the breakout vulnerability can be reduced to a few months, thereby minimizing vulnerability in the face of Western or Israeli attacks. As long as the deal in Geneva is limited to containing and in effect, maintaining this breakout vulnerability - not removing actual capability - then the deal can potentially work for Iran. This is because it will keep Iran effectively in the nuclear club, during which it can accumulate and expand its technological capacity to reduce the breakout period.

President Rohani headed Iran's former nuclear negotiating team and was the country's top negotiator with the EU three – UK, France, and Germany - nearly ten years ago. He was also a member of the Supreme National Security Council since 1989, making him one of the pillars of the state, someone close to the supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini. All this renders Rohani with absolute authority and a sense of strategic direction, unlike his two predecessors. A glance into one of his speeches in 2005 to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council, when he was head of Iran's nuclear negotiating team, reveals Iran's negotiating strategy and commitment to the nuclear program. Rohani informed the council that having the capability of enriching uranium to 3.5% would most certainly mean that the country will be able to progress to reach 90% capability. He also alluded to Russian and Chinese objections to Iran having the technological capability, and Russia's proposal to supply Iran with the nuclear fuel needed for its nuclear reactors.

As for the question of what Iran can do to close the fuel cycle and reach full nuclear sufficiency, Rohani cited

the examples of Brazil and Pakistan; in both cases the international community was powerless to stop them from entering the nuclear club after they managed to achieve the technological breakthrough of possessing full fuel cycle. The main objective in Rohani's speech is to achieve this threshold capability free from the looming military threat and economic sanctions. The following is an extract from his speech;

As for the question of what we can do now that they all disagree with our having the fuel cycle, I submit to you that we require an opportunity, time to be able to act on our capability in this area. That is, if one day we are able to complete the fuel cycle and the world sees that it has no choice, that we do possess the technology, then the situation will be different. The world did not want Pakistan to have an atomic bomb or Brazil to have the fuel cycle, but Pakistan built its bomb and Brazil has its fuel cycle, and the world started to work with them. Our problem is that we have not achieved either one, but we are standing at the threshold. As for building the atomic bomb, we never

PHOTO: ERIC BRIDGES / US MISSION



wanted to move in that direction and we have not yet completely developed our fuel cycle capability. This also happens to be our main problem.<sup>13</sup>

It is apparent from Rohani's speech that the Iranian leadership has to contend with two difficult issues before achieving their nuclear aspirations. First is the technological knowhow to achieve full nuclear cycle, and the second is the Western objection. In the same speech, Rohani bemoaned the lost opportunity of not declaring their nuclear activities. He accused spies of uncovering the true magnitude of their nuclear activities; had it been declared from the outset, the international community would not have been suspicious of their intentions.

As long as the Geneva deal is limited to containing and maintaining Iran's breakout vulnerability, not removing its actual capability, then the deal can potentially work. It all depends upon how the Iranian leadership deals with the intrusive UN and IAEA monitoring mechanism in the next

few months. There are definite disagreements between the Europeans (apart from France) on the one side, and the Americans and the Israelis on the other. It is most unlikely that a repeat of the tenacity and intrusive nature of the UN inspection teams against Iraq in the 1990s will take place. However, if the Iranian leadership discerns that their ambitions will be seriously curtailed, they will resort to the brinkmanship diplomacy with the West until their breakout vulnerability is reduced to but a few weeks.

The cost of the civil war in Syria is mounting; Iraq and Iran in particular are footing the huge bill, estimated to be at least \$200m a month.<sup>14</sup> Syria is an absolute red line for the Iranian government. Without it, their allies in Lebanon will be under the mercy of their local and regional protagonists. Syria is also considered a launching pad for the Iranians to exert indirect influence inside Turkey. In the past few years, a number of Turkish politicians and prominent figures warned about Iranian attempts to proselyte the Alawite minority in Turkey to the *Ithna 'Ashariya* (Twelver Imam) Iranian Shi'i



## In relation to Syria, Iran and the USA can potentially find common ground, as they did in Iraq and Afghanistan.

doctrine. Özdemir Özdemir, president of the Alawite Baktashi Turkmen community, criticised Iran's concerted efforts to convert his congregation to shi'ism.

Özdemir argued that the Iranian government was exploiting its influence inside Turkey;

[The government of Iran] exploited to the fullest extent the democratic atmosphere in Turkey, and used all available means to achieve their hopes and goals warning of the presence of dozens of associations and endowments, businesses, newspapers, magazines and Web sites on the Internet, and even political parties, serving on directly the interests of the Iranian regime.<sup>15</sup>

In relation to Syria, Iran and the USA can potentially find common ground, as they did in Iraq and Afghanistan. The common strategy came about after the apparent success of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, at the expense of more moderate groups under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The

failure of the FSA to consolidate its position is partly blamed on the concerted Saudi and UAE strategies to side-line moderate Islamists within the FSA and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces - which was founded in Doha, Qatar, in November 2012. The Saudis withheld a meaningful financial and military support for the FSA and the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) for the past two years, fearing an extended Qatari and Turkish influence in the region once Bashar al-Asad is ousted. They only agreed to fully support the SNC and the FSA when the Turks and the Qataris agreed to relinquish their direct involvement with the Saudis and the Emiratis.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> July, the coalition elected a new leadership: Ahmad Asi al-Jarba was elected President, and Anas al-Abdah as Secretary General. In an interview, a prominent member of the SNC claimed that al-Jarba was imposed by the Saudis to oversee their political interests and limit the influence of Qatar and Turkey within the coalition.<sup>16</sup> The Saudi involvement was too little too late. Vital time was lost,



## Iran is aware that Arab public opinion can easily be won back if their allies in Lebanon reignite limited border exchanges with Israel.

as in the period between January and September 2013, the Iranians managed to consolidate the positions of their Syrian allies and mobilize tens of thousands of Iraqi and Lebanese militias.

The FSA disadvantage was also seized upon by al-Qaeda and its affiliates such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Rich Arab Gulf philanthropists and a steady stream of volunteers outside of Syria consolidated their positions via the FSA. However, the unwarranted gains lost the Syrian opposition, in general, its international support and sympathy. This was a turning point when Iran managed to convince the West that the struggle in Syria was not against the tyranny of the Syrian regime, but rather, a struggle against al-Qaeda. As in Iraq, Iran has a deadly and unassailable advantage over the US in Syria; Iran knows the country very well and has loyal and highly committed allies on the ground. As mentioned earlier, Iran was the only beneficiary from the invasion of Iraq. It benefitted from America's disarrayed strategy; the policy of supporting and

having contacts with all factions including those who differ sharply with its political and religious ideology.<sup>17</sup> But despite Iran's heavy involvement in Syria, and their advantage over the Americans and its Arab neighbours, the conflict lost Iran and its Hezbollah allies Arab street sympathy for the past 15 years, especially after the Israeli defeat and the withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000. Nonetheless, Iran is not concerned momentarily with such a loss; the survival of their ally in Damascus is paramount because Iran is aware that Arab public opinion can easily be won back if their allies in Lebanon reignite limited border exchanges with Israel. This is a strategy which has been implemented by Arab autocracies throughout the past 60 years or so.

1. The five permanent members of the Security Council with Germany (5+1).
2. In an interview with BBC Radio 4 on 22 December, 2013, Mowafak al-Ruba'i, an Iraqi MP very close to Iran, warned the West that al-Qaeda and other extremist Sunni organisations would be attacking the West with nuclear weapons if Bashar al-Asad is toppled in Syria. Such an exaggerated and inflammatory language was used by the Iraqi opposition and they are known to be monopolised by the Iranian government to solicit Western help, which culminated in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Al-Ruba'i was appointed the National Security Advisor (NSA) by the Coalition Provisional Authority. He served in this position from 2003-2009.
3. A BBC programme documents Iranian involvement with the West in the toppling of Saddam Hussain and the Taliban. - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFWfTbkCiw>.
4. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/11/23/statement-president-first-step-agreement-irans-nuclear-program>.
5. Husni Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah II of Jordan, both warned of this possibility. The latter used the term Shi'i Crescent in his interview with the Washington Post, on Dec 2004, warning of the possibility of creating this broad and ideologically-based alliance should Iraq be governed by Shi'i majority politicians.
6. The Basij Resistance Force is a volunteer paramilitary group that operates under the IRGC.
7. <http://www.roozonline.com/english/news3/newsitem/archive/2013/december/17/article/the-basij-show-of-force-in-the-capital.html>
8. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/30/iran-nuclear-motives-idUSL6NOHQ1J120130930>
9. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/nov/01/us-report-sanctions-biting-harder>
10. <http://almadapaper.net/ar/printnews.aspx?NewsID=678>
11. Interview with a leading Iraqi economist and Member of Parliament, November 12, 2013.
12. <http://www.almadapaper.net/ar/news/678/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%89--%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B0%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%B6-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%82-%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A>
13. <http://lewis.armscontrolwonk.com/files/2012/08/Rahbord.pdf>
14. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/23/us-syria-oil-idUSBRE9BMOR120131223>
15. <http://gundem.bugun.com.tr/iran-hakkinda-sok-iddia-haberi/668862>
16. Interview with a leading member of the SNC, 19 October, 2013, London (interviewee wishes to remain anonymous).
17. In 2006, the director of the Sunni Endowment in Iraq met al-Qaeda commander in Samara along with other militant groups just before the 2006 elections, in an effort to persuade them not to disrupt the election process in the province of Salah al-Din. According to the minister, all the factions agreed to halt their activities apart from al-Qaeda commander who claimed to have liaised with the Iranians to continue their attacks in the province. The MENA Report interview was conducted with the minister of Sunni Endowment in London, 2006. Various other credible sources from the Iraqi government claimed that a number of Iranian officials confessed to links with al-Qaeda.

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# INTERVIEW WITH PROF ANOUSH EHTESHAMI

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For further insights into the geopolitics of the Gulf region and the latest preliminary agreement between Iran and the West, The MENA Report interviewed Professor Anoush Ehteshami from Durham University, United Kingdom. Ehteshami is Director of the al-Sabah Programme and Joint Director of the ESRC Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World in the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University. He is Joint Director of the RCUK-funded centre of excellence, the Durham-Edinburgh-Manchester Universities' Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World (CASAW), whose research focus since 2012 has been on the 'Arab World in Transition'. An expert on Middle East politics and author of over 21 books and monographs, Ehteshami has an illustrious academic profile, spanning many years.

**The MENA Report:** What is your take on the nuclear deal between Iran and the West? Will it have negative ramifications on the Gulf and other Arab States?

**Anoush Ehteshami:** This is an incredible and historic agreement. Ten years of tensions and negotiations, then in a space of only three months both sides reached an initial agreement with a promise of comprehensive agreement to follow. This is not just a temporary thing in place. What is interesting, it seems that the deal predated the Rohani administration -- which tells us that both sides had reached an understanding that it is better for both parties to reach a comprehensive settlement. And Rohani's election may have provided a fantastic cover for reaching this agreement. What probably helped to push these negotiations further is the expertise and good stewardship of the foreign minister, Zarif. He is an expert on international relations and he also lived in the United States for a number of years. This agreement is good news for both parties and this is precisely what enraged Iran's neighbours, because they were not briefed by

Iran or the West, with the ongoing process of negotiation. None of them knew even in September what the Europeans in particular or the Americans have been doing in New York.

**TMENAR:** Were you surprised by the speed of the deal though?

**AE:** I knew that unlike previous negotiations the Iranians were very serious about finding a solution. The election slogans of Rohani were all about compromising and finding a speedy solution to the nuclear issue. That was all on the table when he was elected. Also, this time the negotiations were left for the foreign ministry, which meant that Rohani had the absolute authority over the progress of the negotiations rather than the National Security Council. Rohani empowered the foreign minister to negotiate the agreement with the backing of the supreme leader despite the objection of the conservative politicians. From then on, it was obvious that Iran was serious about finding a negotiated settlement. The secret negotiations went very

well; this explains the short period of three months taken to reach the agreement. Unlike previous Iranian governments, Rohani's administration was serious in finding a way out of the impasse, it also realised the vulnerability of Obama and America's economic hardship; so they offered him a very attractive deal.

**TMENAR:** Is there a historical context to this agreement in the region?

**AE:** To be honest I don't see it in this way. History may repeat itself but it will not be repeated in the same way. I don't think good academics should indulge in such explanation, linking old historical alliances and animosities to current political process or agreement. The animosity between the United States and Iran is undeniable, but the agreement is presenting everybody with the opportunity to heal the past to a certain degree and open a new page in history. This is good for the region simply because Iran is at peace with its neighbours, than the constant tensions that abound.

Frankly, I don't think that Iran will have a cosy and normal relationship with the USA, similar to its relationship with the Shah. The agreement will also have a moderate influence on the Iranian government; it will not give the Iranians the *carte blanche* to do what they please in the region. Furthermore, the West will be able to have a direct influence in Iran. I think Arab governments should underwrite the agreement and be the facilitator of the agreement because they will be the most beneficiaries from the probable moderate policies of the Iranian government. Iran is less dangerous to its neighbours when it is in agreement with the international community, plus the more conservative and the hawks within the Iranian government will lose to the more moderate politicians, whom are seen by the public as those who have achieved stability and taken Iran forward. The West also thinks that this agreement will strengthen their role inside Iran to engender change since the majority of the Iranian people are pro-democracy, human rights and freedom in general.



RIGHT PHOTO: FABIO RODRIGUES POZZIBON / AFR



Think about Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Syria; current problems in these countries will be more manageable if Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States come together to find common ground in these troubled areas.

**TMENAR:** Why are Western attitudes much harsher towards Arab governments (as reflected in their policies) to acquiring nuclear or other military capabilities; at the same time, not paying much attention to other countries e.g. North Korea and Iran?

**AE:** There are so many technical issues that Arab public opinion has to take on board. Firstly, technically, you cannot put Israel and Iran in the same category because Israel has never been a signatory of the NPT [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty]. As you cannot judge it by the NPT standard, hence the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] can force Iran to abide by the treaty's regulations.

**TMENAR:** Ok, why was North Korea allowed to go nuclear without the pressure which was exerted on Iraq, or other

Arab countries?

**AE:** North Korea only became a nuclear state after it had left the NPT. It was the United States' mistake to allow or force the Koreans to leave the NPT. Having left the NPT nobody had any control over their conduct. The second reason is that North Korea enjoys the patronage of China, which, as a permanent member of the Security Council with the power to veto any resolution, considers more favourable measures for their friends in North Korea. Furthermore, the Arab world, although many of them are friends with the United States, they don't have a real friend or friends in the Security Council whom they can depend on. This has been a tragedy for the Arabs for the past few decades. Thus North Korea, despite all its digressions, can afford to do so because it can rely on China.

In Iran's case, it is a member of the NPT; therefore technically you cannot threaten it with the use of force. The NPT requires the signatories of all nuclear states, including the five permanent members to negotiate, in effect tying the



Through their alliance with Bashar al-Asad, Iran is able to influence the Arab-Israeli conflict and by extension influence Palestinian politics.

hands of those who prefer the use of force.

When examining the Libyan example, we find that Qaddafi negotiated a settlement with the international community, voluntarily giving up his nuclear weapons. Of course it was under sanctions but he did give it up. However on principle, the Arabs are refused a nuclear know-how while India and Pakistan are allowed. The best things for the region are to be nuclear free, and for the Arab countries to take the moral high-ground and demand a nuclear free region, because the last thing that we need is another nuclear state in the Middle East.

Australia, New Zealand and South Africa have all agreed to have the Southern Pacific as a nuclear free zone, thus American war ships cannot dock at New Zealand ports if they are armed with nuclear weapons. This is probably the best strategy the Arab countries should adopt.

**TMENAR:** Are politics in the Middle East ideologically based?

**AE:** This is exactly so, there isn't a proper political organisation that can bring Arab and non-Arab countries in the region together. The OIC [Organisation of the Islamic Conference] is dysfunctional and does not have a regional focus.

**TMENAR:** How would you rate the Iranian political policies and strategy in the Middle East? What do you make of their unequivocal support for tyrannical regimes, such as Bashar al-Asad's, despite apparent ideological divides?

**AE:** The war in Syria is not a religious war being waged by Iran; Iran needs Bashar al-Asad because it needs Syria to access Lebanon. This is the only way Iran can influence the heart of Arab politics, i.e. through Lebanon and its animosity with Israel. In this regard, I share Saudi Arabia's worry that Iran is interfering in Arab affairs. Through their alliance with Bashar al-Asad, Iran is able to influence the Arab-Israeli conflict and by extension influence Palestinian politics. This interference is not acceptable to Arab politicians - take the plan of [Jordan's] king Abdullah to end the Arab-Israeli



## Many people in Iran are questioning the morality of their government in supporting a bloody regime in Syria.

conflict; all the Arabs including Bashar al-Asad agreed upon this, apart from Iran which rejected it, and it was able to influence Syrian politics in this regard. Syria has been a strategic ally for the Iranians since 1980, when Syria played big part in Iran's efforts in fighting Iraq. However, right now, Syria is the one in need of help and support. The Iranians' know that if the Alawite in Syria lose their grip on the Ba'th Party to the majority Sunni Muslims, they will not have any interest i.e. the Sunnis in keeping this strategic alliance with Iran. This is why Iran will hang onto Bashar for as long as they can (afford the price). Frankly, nobody is increasing the price for Iran at the moment; and this is why they continue their fight to keep Bashar in power.

**TMENAR:** But don't you think Iran paid a heavy price, in terms of its reputation, in the Arab and Muslim world?

**AE:** I totally agree, it is not just Iran but Hezbollah that lost as well. This is a survival for Iran and Hezbollah. Iran is not

an Arab country like Hezbollah, which is indigenous to the region, hence Iran's immediate priority is to hang on to its alliances and hang onto power as well. If they lose Syria, then their loss will be huge in Lebanon and the surrounding region. Therefore, they will fight to be on the negotiating table, so they can maintain their interest in this part of the Arab world.

**TMENAR:** Do you think that the main struggle for the Iranian government after the recent deal is about attending to the needs and aspirations of the young generation?

**AE:** That is a big issue; many people in Iran are questioning the morality of their government in supporting a bloody regime in Syria. Iranians are asking, "How can you talk about Islam while you support a tyrannical government?" You know what? They have no answers!

**TMENAR:** How do you evaluate the Arab-Iranian relationship and their strategies in relation to one another in the coming years, knowing that Iran has emancipated itself relatively, from the constant fear of an American strike, and the eventual lifting of the economic sanctions? Will the Gulf States ever be able to stop Iranian ambitions from extending their influence to the Gulf States and beyond?

**AE:** The relationship between the Arab Gulf states and Iran will improve gradually. In the past 8 years, Iranian politics has been securitised; exactly what George Bush had done when he securitised the Gulf region in his War on Terror and the war in Iraq. There is a long way to go before the desired improvement is achieved, but it has a chance under the stewardship of president Rohani. In the last few meetings between the Iranian foreign minister and the Qatari, Omani, Saudi and Emirati foreign ministers, he affirmed Iran's intentions to mend its relationship with its neighbours. I think the Arabs should take the Iranian approach at face value and demand that Iran address contentious issues in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and the Eastern province in Saudi

Arabia; put them on the spot! The problem in the past was that there wasn't a real dialogue between the two sides.

**TMENAR:** Do the Arab Gulf States in particular, actually have a strategy?

**AE:** Some do and some don't, but it is important for them to have good relationship with Iran. Take Oman for example or Tunisia and Jordan, all have a normal relationship with Iran.

**TMENAR:** Is the instability in the politics of the region a reflection of the weak internal politics of the Gulf States? For example, the UAE has an indigenous population of less than 14% of the total population, while Saudi Arabia depends mainly on oil to provide for its growing population - with virtually no political representation, accountability or transparency in the distribution of oil revenues.

**AE:** Having peace with Iran will stabilise the economies of the Gulf States as the price of oil will be stabilised.



PHOTO: ANOUSH EHTESHAMI

**TMENAR:** How do you rate the Gulf States' political strategy in supporting the military coup in Egypt, especially after it was revealed that the Egyptian military sympathises with the Syrian regime? Do you believe that the Gulf States served an unintentional blow to their fragile national security?

**AE:** I don't think the Gulf States has a common strategy towards what is happening in Egypt or Iran. Each has its own national policies and interests. Some welcomed the coup in Egypt, others did not. I myself find it difficult to condone or condemn the July coup. I think Morsi was taking Egypt down the wrong path, but at the same time, it was a legitimately-elected government. You cannot depose an elected government by the power of demonstration, but at the same time you need to have in place a robust enough constitution to stop a government, like that of Morsi's, from committing such mistakes. Unfortunately, these kind of robust rules were not in place when Morsi's government was trying to change the political reality on the ground all the time. This is why it gave the urgency to the Tamarrud movement to intervene;

it is very difficult to be categorical about what happened and it is difficult to see it in black and white. I sympathise with those who went to the streets to protest Morsi's rule, but at the same time I find it very dangerous to topple a democratically-elected government through street protest.

**TMENAR:** How do you envisage the priorities of the Arab Gulf States and the rest of the Arab countries in the next 10 years (ignoring for a moment the pressing need of shoring-up their national security)?

**AE:** I think that they have three priorities; the first is to get past the transitional period, the post revolution in Egypt, Bahrain, Tunisia and Yemen; Syria is totally different and the problems are deep and complicated.

The second step for the oil producing countries is to keep oil prices high until they find an alternative economic strategy to ease the dependency on oil. These countries need to work hard to create economies post oil production. The UAE is



Arab youth have tremendous energy, innovation, aspiration and desire; they need the commitment of the current generation.

pushing to emerge as a post oil economy, unlike Iraq which we don't see any sign of effort to progress their economy beyond the production of oil.

All these countries need to explore how to survive beyond the production of oil. The production of the oil industry should be considered as the basis for an alternative -not *the* only alternative - for the survival of their economy.

The third priority is to manage the youth bulge the Arab world is experiencing at the moment. Arab youth have tremendous energy, innovation, aspiration and desire; they need the commitment of the current generation. As I see it now, there are no plans to provide the youth with what their grandparents enjoyed, in terms of stability, personal security, and education with a prospect for a job that will allow them to start a family and afford their own living. These are basic human needs. These are the three priorities the Arab countries must tackle in the next decade or so.

**TMENAR:** Has the Arab Spring reached its final stop? It appears that democracy is not a priority for the people now as it was in the first few months of the mobilisations.

**AE:** I don't think the revolutions or change has reached the end; it is best called a transition because it is ongoing. Looking medium to long term, there is a much better future for the region than the current situation. I am an optimist! Even in Egypt, for example, the new constitution, with all its faults, is full of promise for the future; it remains much better and more progressive compared to what was under the Mubarak regime. Don't forget this progress occurred within the short space of only three years. Just by listening to the discussions in the constitution committee entrusted with writing the constitution, it can be seen that it is all about freedom, equality and political parties. These are discussions we never had in the Arab world before in a meaningful manner; in my opinion this is real progress. In Tunisia, the largest party i.e. al-Nahda Party refuses to take control because it wants to be within a power-sharing arrangement.



## Arab secularism is extremely weak, that is why they don't trust the ballot box.

The discussions in Yemen are regarding a plural society, not a sectarian one; in Bahrain, in the darkest hour, they talk about national dialogue. In Libya the discussions nowadays are about establishing an assembly based on a plural political system.

The difficulty in reaching an agreement is precisely because there are differences and there is respect for different political points of views. It is messy, but is not bad if it leads to a better place. The process is never linear, it goes up and down but the trajectory is towards progress; this is progress.

The same applies to the Syrian conflict; I think the Syrian people have experienced so much pain and destruction that they will progress quickly to finding a solution when the conflict subsides. It is precisely because they do not want to go through the same tragedy again.

**TMENAR:** Why do you think that the secular political elites and parties in the Arab world refuse to abide by the ballot box results? Is this a part of Arab culture which rejects

democracy, or do you believe that it is an indication of the roots of Arab secularism having leftist inclinations?

**AE:** Arab secularism is extremely weak, that is why they don't trust the ballot box. When you don't find authoritarian regimes, the only parties you do find around are Islamically-leaning political entities. This is exactly what is being discussed in the constitution in Egypt. What you want to create is a level playing field which does not exist at the moment in the Arab world. I don't believe it is the culture of rejecting democracy because democracy is not just the result of the ballot box; democracy is a way of life. The problem is that in the past, we measured democracy with the result of the ballot box. George W. Bush was wrong when he thought that Iraq became a democracy by the mechanism of voting alone - this is nonsense. What happened in Egypt was that through the first step of democracy - which is the ballot box - the government wanted to exact an undemocratic change to the political system. The ballot box is the indicator of the process of change but it is not the end. The post-uprising culture needs



more pluralism, the right of the individual, transparency, the rule of law, freedom of expression, and you need guarantees of these liberties before you go to the ballot box. The freedom of the individual is paramount, that is what is needed and be guaranteed in the Arab world at the moment.

The duty is on the Islamists to assure others that they respect the freedom of expression and pluralism. This is why the Tunisian example is so vital and assuring; when the al-Nahda party refused to monopolise the political scene of course. This was primarily due to the presence and objection of the secular parties but nonetheless, it is a good example for the rest of the Arab world.

**TMENAR:** How do you evaluate the Western political position towards the Arab Spring? Why do you think that their policies differed when dealing with the revolutions in Egypt, Syria and Libya?

**AE:** I think, what the Arab uprising has done is bring to the

surface the West's problem, not just with the Arab world but internationally. They want to be seen as democratic, plural and inclusive on the one hand but they have on the other hand pure national interest. What the Arab uprising has done is bring to the surface the tensions between these two positions. Until 2011, they didn't have to take a decision on any of the internal issues in the Arab countries. In regards to the Palestinian issue, the West didn't have the urgency to make a decision - all they did was just talk and talk. With the Arab uprisings they had to make quick decisions... Egypt is burning so what are you going to do about it? Before long Syria flared up, quick decisions were needed.

What the uprisings have shown is that Arab countries are unique, different from each other and each has different internal pressures. What the West needs to do is develop a nuanced strategy to deal with the different problems. They can talk about democracy but they cannot impose democracy. They cannot support the military in Egypt, then oppose it Syria. Similarly, they cannot ask the Egyptian government to refuse an increased influence for the military



in political life, but at the same time keep silent for the military interference in Algeria. It is also unacceptable that the US condemns killing protestors in Syria while ignoring similar incidents in Bahrain.

What the present events in the region has shown is that the West cannot function with one policy and continue to present themselves as the holders of great moral authority because they cannot deliver on it. They are divided between themselves on the Syrian issue and other issues in the region.

**TMENAR:** Agreed. But the differences between the policies and politics of the Arab world give the West a breather and enough space to exercise national interest politics rather than the morally-laden political positions they usually preach. It is so different when dealing with Iran with its single political strategy. Iran in the past 10 years managed to exhaust the United States in Iraq, also managing to create measured military and political tension in the Gulf, and in the region in general, to its strategic benefit.

**AE:** Exactly, this brings us to your question earlier- why the West's position towards different uprisings are different: precisely because the uprisings in Syria, Egypt and Libya are different. They couldn't have the same policy to deal with these different settings. Revolutions, by definition, are destructive processes, they destroy before they build. No country outside the Middle East, which has an interest in this vital region, would prefer to see a revolution, especially if events develop to touch the Gulf States, which is vital for the world economy.

**TMENAR:** Will the latest Iranian deal with the USA reduce the USA's commitment to the national security of the Gulf States? For example, Saudi Arabia is simmering now, with much internal pressure and demands for change and a fairer distribution of wealth and power. Past policies of the present Saudi King are considered by many as absolute failure. It reduced the influence of the Saudi State in the region; it also increased internal tensions and reneged on its earlier promises of political and social reform. The King is ailing and there are rumours that the struggle between the factions



One thing that the Gulf States learned from past events is that it is very easy to start a revolution, but it is very difficult to end it.

within the royal family has already begun.

**AE:** I was listening to the American defence secretary Chuck Hagel last week when he reiterated their huge commitment to the security of the region.

**TMENAR:** They have plans to spend \$500 m to expand their military base in Bahrain.

Their presence in the Gulf region is not just about the Middle East, but about Asia and their broader interest in the Caucasus and other parts of the world. The Americans cannot satisfy their interests if they don't have presence in the Middle East. Irrespective to the latest agreement with Iran, I think the American military commitment to the region is hugely important. Furthermore, don't forget Israel which is an important ally for the US in the region, the US will never abandon its commitment to Israel.

**TMENAR:** So your advice to those who contemplate change in Saudi Arabia is to start a dialogue with the US simply

because America will continue to underwrite the present regime and intervene to reinstate them?

**AE:** There should be a continuous dialogue, especially in the Gulf region. One thing that the Gulf States learned from past events is that it is very easy to start a revolution, but it is very difficult to end it. People in the region have dreams and aspirations but they are weary of the consequences because it could end up much worse from what they presently have. The intellectual class in the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries realise this, but equally the ruling elites recognise that they cannot continue indefinitely with the present situation. They need to address the challenges much earlier before it is too late. The challenge of the youth in the GCC courtiers is huge and significant. If Bahrain succeeds (eventually) with its internal dialogue, this will be good example for the rest of the Gulf States. Frankly I don't see any other alternative, otherwise they will witness the process of upheaval replicated.

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## IRAQ AND IRAN: ALLIANCE OF OIL AND IDEOLOGY

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The prospect of increased oil production in Iraq and the eventual return of Iran to the oil market can boost Iran's regional influence and further weaken the Saudi and Turkish influence in the region. Iraq's oil minister has set ambitious strategy to increase Iraq's oil production to 9 million barrels per day by 2020. Iran is expected to return to the pre-sanction level of 4.2 million barrels per day within six months, increasing to 6 million barrels per day within 18 months. Both goals are not very realistic, although any increase will bolster their regional reach and global allies. Asian and European dependence on oil from the Gulf region is on the increase; China is already investing in Iraq, Iran and the Saudi oil industry.

The increase in oil production will impact the price of oil and will also increase the importance of Iran and its allies in the region to be on par with Saudi Arabia. However there is one fundamental difference: Saudi Arabia cannot survive without continuous expensive American arms, American military presence and protection. Coupled with the ever-increasing

population that is used to a high standard of government-sponsored services, the state coffers will no longer be able to satisfy the needs of its people without carrying out thorough social and political reforms -- which is highly unlikely. The royal family knows very well that political reforms -- however mundane -- will engender popular appetite for real and substantive political change. Eventually the Saudis will have to dampen their regional aspirations, in the absence of strong allies, to underwrite and support their competition with the rising Shi'i politics in the region.

In the past 10 years, the United States and its European allies have learned from their experience in Iraq that the best way to preserve their influence in the region (without spending money or shedding blood) is to create a balance between the different sects and countries in the Middle East. The Sunni-Shi'i divide provided the United States with an excellent opportunity to strengthen its influence with minimal effort. To keep Sunni Islamists in check in Iraq and Syria, all it had to do was tacitly support the Iraqi



## The Iraqi Prime Minister managed to win the backing of the United States during his last visit to the White House, saying he desperately needed US backing to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria

government's extra judicial and illegal policies against the Sunni population. The same applied to the American strategy against the Shi'a community in Bahrain and Yemen. What we will witness more of in the next 10 years until another policy change by the United States and its European allies, are more static unending sectarian tensions in the Middle East. This minimum covert intervention was very successful in Egypt. All the United States needed to do was to give the green light to its Arab allies to support the deeply corrupt remnants of the old Mubarak regime to carry out the coup against the democratically-elected president. Moreover, it didn't have to pay for the campaign to dislodge Morsi, as Saudi Arabia and the UAE had already incurred all the cost.

For the next ten years, American policy in the region will probably lend enough power for each side to keep the status-quo between the Sunni and Shi'i power, Arabs versus Iranian and Kurds versus Turkey. Saudi Arabia and the tiny Gulf States will not be abandoned, though the price for

ensuring the interest of the United States will be paid by the people of the region with minimal intervention. Iraq is the most to benefit from the latest agreement between Iran and the West as it had to incur a large share of the burden of economic sanctions on Iran. The close political, religious and social ties between the two countries has been a game-changer since it reduced the effects of American sanctions on Iran, allowing Iran to pursue its regional influence in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey during the last few difficult years.

Furthermore, the Iraqi Prime Minister managed to win the backing of the United States during his last visit to the White House, saying he desperately needed US backing to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria. Soon after his return to Iraq, the Iraqi army received a consignment of Hellfire missiles and surveillance drones. Barely a month after receiving the shipment, a special force -- directly controlled by the Prime Minister with the Iraqi Army -- attacked the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah, West of Baghdad. Heavy fighting erupted on



In the past four years Nouri al-Maliki and his government was severely criticised by human rights organisations for the widespread detentions, torture, unfair trials and executions.

Monday, December 30, 2013 between the Iraqi Army and tribal gunmen, after a force directly linked to the Prime Minister, raided the house of Sunni MP killing his brother and a number of his bodyguards. The MP was taken into custody despite his parliamentary immunity. Dozens of people were also killed and scores of civilian casualties were admitted to the hospitals after the army started shelling one of the districts in al-Anbar province.

In the past four years Nouri al-Maliki and his government was severely criticised by human rights organisations for the widespread detentions, torture, unfair trials and executions.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the scarecrow of al-Qaeda was enough to convince the American Administration to lend its support despite mounting evidence of systematic torture and executions. Recent reports suggested that some of the weapons recently shipped were used against the civilians in al-Anbar Province. However what is almost certain to happen is the deepening sense of disorientation among the people with the political process and democracy overall. This

will only benefit the extremists and will certainly feed the continued mayhem and instability in the region.

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1. Saudi Arabia and the UAE were the first to recognise the military coup in Egypt, followed by John Kerry's statement which was, in effect recognition, of the military coup and its road map. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/07/211574.htm>  
2. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE14/001/2013/en>



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# INTERVIEW WITH DR HACHIM AL-HASANI MP

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To delve further into the ramifications of current events on the Middle East and Iraq in particular, *The MENA Report* interviewed Dr Hachim al-Hasani, a Member of Parliament in Iraq. He served as a member of the governing council in 2003. He was also the former minister of Industry and Minerals in 2004, and former Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament in 2005.

**The MENA Report:** What is your take on the nuclear agreement between Iran and the West? Will there be negative ramifications on the Gulf and other Arab States?

**Hachim al-Hasani:** The scope of the nuclear agreement between the West and Iran is still unclear, and the negotiations thereof have still not concluded. I believe that its short-term outcomes will pave the way for its future demise. The side agreements, which are far from the nuclear matter, will determine the nature of the nuclear agreement. Iran will demand the expansion of its area of influence in the Middle East – starting from Iraq to the Gulf States, Syria, Lebanon, and all the way to Afghanistan – in exchange for its every commitment. This is where danger lies, as it will lead to toppling the strategic balances in the region, rendering some Gulf countries to become no more than Iranian protectorates, as well as threaten the security and stability of other countries like Saudi Arabia and Yemen. This is why we see Saudi Arabia as the country most worried about this deal. There is also a ghost war going on now in

Yemen between Saudi Arabia and Iran; the intensity will only increase if the West and Iran come into agreement. Saudi Arabia's forceful intervention in Syria, in a new way that is contradictory even to American policy, is but an attempt to alleviate the loss of its upper hand in Yemen and the closer relations with Iran which some Gulf countries, like Oman and the UAE, have started to forge at the expense of the GCC.

**TMENAR:** Were you surprised by the speed in which this deal was struck?

**HH:** No, I was not surprised by the deal. At the time when the USA was assisting Iraq during the latter's war with Iran, the Contra scandal came into light, exposing that the US was secretly supplying Iran with weapons to match Iraqi firepower. Iran and the USA also collaborated in the latter's invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. The USA works for its best interests and all we need to do is study those interests well, along with new variables in any arena, and we will be able to figure out the US's next move. This

can only be achieved through precision monitoring as knowledge of such matters is similar to that of the stock exchange and its changes.

**TMENAR:** Is there a historical context to this agreement in the region?

**HH:** Once again, if we are able to identify the interest of the USA specifically, and the West's general interest, we will then be able to pinpoint the path of the Iran-West agreement. There are definitely many intersecting interests for both parties, yet the two most important are the protection of oil flow from the Strait of Hormuz, and the protection of Israel. These interests are not recent ones, but set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the establishment of Israel and the exploration of oil were at their early phases. These two targets were the priority of the West and the US. [[From the beginning of the last century, Britain supported Colonel Zahir – father of the last Shah of Iran – in his coup on Iran's Shah Ahmed. Zahir was crowned as the new shah

of Iran with the intention of making Iran as an ally of Great Britain a buffer zone to stop Russian and Ottoman ambitions. Zahir and his son after him played their role well until the Khomeini revolution. Afterwards, Iran hailed the slogan of animosity towards the US and Israel, but in reality, Israel was never deemed a serious enemy of Iran; it actually played an important role in the 'Contra-weapons' deal that they were assisted with in its war against Iraq. There is a whispered pact between Iran and Israel as well as many indirect meetings and unannounced agreements. After the demise of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, the intelligence services of the US and Iran were active in eliminating ex-officers, scientist, and academics; not once have the two clashed until this very day.

**TMENAR:** Why are Western attitudes much harsher towards Arab governments (as reflected in their policies) to acquiring nuclear or other military capabilities; at the same time, not paying much attention to other countries e.g. North Korea and Iran?



PHOTO: SFC GARRI E. JOHNS / USA

**HH:** Since the events of September 11, 2001, the West has adopted a new outlook that classifies Sunni extremists as the head of world terrorism and Sunni dogma as what enriches terrorism against the West -- the Shi'a do not represent a danger to Western interests. Theoretically-speaking, Arab politicians, especially Iraqis, have assisted the West in coming to this understanding. But if we delve deeper and look at the massive strategic changes that have occurred around the world in the last 25 years, especially the scattering of the Soviet Union, one notices the emergence of a new historical era, with new requirements. A massive struggle of influence occurred between the West and the Soviet Union since its establishment in 1917, and the first person who anticipated that the West's new adversary would be Russia was General Kitchener, who was running the Arab file from Egypt and The Sudan. The common-held idea of the West then was that the Arabs are a nation incapable of ruling themselves and that the West should do so through military occupation. This occupation later transformed into another vision through their proxies in the region. This vision is still shared by many in the West.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, there was rethinking of drawing-up the map of the region, which was under Ottoman rule at the time and whose dissolved countries came under the rule of many Western powers afterwards. The new division would ensure the monetary interests of the West and the protection of Israel, through the creation of sectarian and ethnic divisions upon which countries would be divided. The best tool for achieving this was the sectarian struggle between Sunnis and Shi'a along with other nationalistic ones. As the old division took years to achieve, so would the remapping of the area. Throughout these coming years, Israeli statehood would have achieved full legitimacy establishing countries on sectarian and religious bases would remove a huge obstacle for Israel in being accepted as a religious country. This plan actually started taking shape after the Iran-Iraq war, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the US invasion of Iraq, and the start of the ethnic and sectarian conflicts that will -- according to the plan -- lead to dividing Iraq into three countries.

Afterwards, the Arab revolts began; they were invested



## Iranian politics is premised on the preservation of Iranian national security, which many may view as support for the Shi'i ideology in the region

in by the West to allow for instability to reign in Egypt, subsequently extracting it from the New Middle East equation after the toppling of the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. Then the Syrian conflict erupted, and we witnessed blatant Iranian intervention leading to an increase in the sectarian tensions in the region. This in turn paved the way for the division of Syria as well. Afterwards, the US drew out of the Gulf countries, after implicating them in the toppling of the elected government in Egypt, returning to become allies with Iran as it did previously in Afghanistan and Iraq. This was done in order to instigate a struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which will eventually lead to dividing Saudi Arabia itself.

**TMENAR:** How would you rate Iranian political policies and strategy in the Middle East? What do you make of their unequivocal support for tyrannical regimes such as that of Bashar al-Assad, despite the apparent ideological divides?

**HH:** Iranian politics is premised on the preservation of Iranian national security, which many may view as support

for the Shi'i ideology in the region. However its true essence is spreading Persian influence in the region. Since the rise of Khomeini to power, Iran has been able to make major advances in this facet, surpassing even the Shah regime therein. Iran of today has clear influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, Palestine, Kuwait, Oman, and the UAE. It also has a good presence in Africa. This influence has reflected Iran's relations with the West and the East; the latter two heed Iran more than they do the entire Arab countries together.

As for Iran's support of the Syrian regime, it is not because of ideological reasons but for Syria's strategic location. Iran cannot complete the 'Persian Crescent' except via total control of the situation in Syria. Iran has provided the Assad regime with massive aid, both militarily and economically, through its aerial bridge via Baghdad. Iran takes into account all the scenarios about Syria as it endeavours to preserve Assad's rule – if possible – or control the coastal area in case Syria is divided.



Hence, via this grand intervention, Iran's message to the world is clear: it wishes to be a main pivot in the 'New Middle East'!

The most ominous matter is the Revolutionary Guards and al-Quds Brigade's direct supervision and training of Bashar's hooligans or *shabeeha* and their existence in large numbers inside Syria. This means that in any probable scenario, Iran will have total control over the Syrian scene. Qassim Suleimani instructed the leader of al-Quds forces, Muhsin Jizari, to lead the Syrian militias of *shabeeha*. Noteworthy is that this person was charged with the training Shi'a militias in Iraq, and arrested by American forces at the house of Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim in 2006. The Iraqi government subsequently released Jizari on the pretence of him being an Iranian diplomat. It was evident that the al-Quds forces were leading Syrian militias when the al-Quds Colonel Hassan al-Shatiri was assassinated in Damascus countryside while returning from Aleppo, then a major war zone. Hassan used to be responsible for the training of Hezbollah's militias in Lebanon. Hence, via this grand intervention, Iran's message to the world is clear: it wishes to be a main pivot in the 'New Middle East'!

**TMENAR:** How do you evaluate the Arab-Iranian relationship and their strategies in relation to one another in the coming years, knowing that Iran has emancipated itself relatively, from the constant fear of an American strike, and the eventual lifting of the economic sanctions? Will the Gulf States ever be able to stop Iranian ambitions from extending their influence to the Gulf States and beyond?

**HH:** There is clear Arab apprehension towards the American-Iranian closeness, particularly by some Arab Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia. The warm relations coupled with the presence of large Shi'i minorities threaten the national security of many of these Gulf States. The oil-rich eastern parts of Saudi Arabia have a strong Shiite presence and pose a threat if Iran is to gain influence in the region. The case is similar to Bahrain, and to a lesser extent, in Kuwait and the UAE. Saudi Arabia has attempted a strategic move to protect the Gulf by directly proposing a union that would overcome this weakness, but countries like Oman and the UAE have objected and began extending friendship with Iran. In fact,

Oman has played an important covert role in the America-Iranian closeness; as for the UAE, its constant fear is based on the huge Iranian presence within its most influential economic sections.

Iran views the Gulf States as lacking backbone and dependent upon the protection of the USA. When Iran manages to break this, through its new deal with the US, it will be easy for it to control these states. The Gulf countries made a strategic error when they backed the American coup in Egypt, a matter which led to its loss of a strong ally in the wake of the Iranian encroachment. The USA's episode of abandoning the Gulf States began after the toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood's rule in Egypt, which was the probable ally of these states. The Gulf States have Also, wrecked their relationship with Turkey which made them lose an important ally with significant strategic weight. This is why the Gulf has been rendered naked of any international or regional protection.

Saudi Arabia has tried in vain to find a new international ally by approaching Russia, as the American-Iranian agreement poses a threat to Russia's strategic interests in Syria and the region. However, Prince Bandar bin Sultan of Saudi Arabia has been unable to convince the Russians yet of such an alliance. Yet lines are still open to both countries to come up with a formula that appeases the two nations.

All of this is an indication that the US has withdrawn its support from the region and the Gulf States, presenting it to Iran on a golden platter. The American midterm strategy is based on draining Iran and Saudi Arabia and then reformulating the region's map in a way that ensures its acquisition of the large piece of the Middle Eastern cake, that which grants Iran the piece which the US believes it deserves. America believes that the greatest danger to its interests is the Sunni extremism incubated by the ordinary Saudi man – not the government – and because the Americans themselves don't have the patience and ability for long military intervention. They have given this role to Iran

and its Shi'i allies.

The US had a precedent in World War Two when it gave this very same role to Great Britain, and to Europe. After having been drained of their power through two World Wars, interventions, and occupation of countries, the relaxed USA emerged as a superpower along with Russia, whilst Europe sat in the back row.

Will the Gulf countries be able to turn the tables? Well, everything is possible if the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia particularly, rethink their strategic alliances and begin to open a new page with Russia and China, on the one hand, and with Turkey on the other. They also need to distance themselves from the coup in Egypt and gain a clear role in the Iraqi equation. This will put pressure on the new American direction to change its path. Politics is an art of give and take, and a vessel for good understanding of possible future changes. Do the leaders of the Gulf States possess such a vision and determination, or will it remain locked away in ancient and outdated equations?

**TMENAR:** How do you evaluate the current position of the Arab Gulf States' national security, particularly after the downfall of Morsi's government and the apparent sympathy of the new transient Egyptian government and army towards the Syrian regime?

**HH:** As said earlier, the Gulf States committed a fatal mistake when they adopted the American stance in toppling Morsi's rule in Egypt and introducing the Egyptian military institutions' leaders as rulers *de facto* – this same institution whose powers are drawn from the USA.

The Gulf's only remaining strong ally was Egypt, and Turkey at a regional level. But with the fall of the Egyptian ally and alienation with Turks, the Gulf States have become exposed to threats. The Old World always had pivotal countries in the region which gave it balance- those being Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt!

**TMENAR:** Will Iran's role in Iraq's internal affairs deepen, especially after their latest diplomatic success, compared to



## It is strategically well known that for centuries, Turkish-Iranian balance in Iraq was a major factor in Iraq's political stability and security.

the apparent weakness of Saudi and Turkish influences in the region? Will the close economic and military cooperation between Iraq, Syria and Iran be a prelude to a more solid political unity that might include Lebanon and possibly Bahrain in the not too distant future?

**HH:** Since 2003, the Iranian role in Iraq has become clear and evident. Most Shiite political powers and militias are clearly connected and highly organised, in harmony with political, military, and economic decision making circles in Iran. This Iranian expansion has risen due to the shrinking Arab and Turkish roles. The Turkish role was clearly absent until 2007, when it gradually returned to the Iraqi arena. It is strategically well known that for centuries, Turkish-Iranian balance in Iraq was a major factor in Iraq's political stability and security.

When I met with Turkish PM Recep Teyyep Erdogan at the Economic Forum in Davos, I spoke to him about the weak Turkish role in Iraq and how it had allowed for Iran's encroachment of the Iraqi state and its national fabric.

This should not be understood as a request for Turkish intervention in Iraq's internal affairs, but rather underscores the need for a better understanding of the Iraqi situation. These are bound by internal, regional, and international balances; any error in these balances will cause a clear anomaly in Iraq – a matter which we have and remain to see. As for the Arab role, it is semi-nonexistent. This is because Arab policies are bound by the American umbrella, which limits and restricts Arab role to self-determination.

As for the discourse on a joint economic market between Iraq, Syria, and Iran, this is too early to discuss, as the redrawing of the region is still at its inception. Military and security facets must be completed before delving into the other elements of the new division plan. This does not negate the existence of large economic cooperation among these countries, but the situation for Iraq is different, for the commercial scale still tips greatly towards Turkey. This is because Turkey is the largest investor in the Kurdish region of Iraq (KRG) and in some Sunni governorates; while Iran is active in the Southern governorates and in Baghdad. To



It is also not unlikely for the prime minister to declare a State of Emergency if the security situation in one of the governorates deteriorates.

Turkey, the KRG is part of the latter's national security, more so than Iraq's other areas as is the case for Iran, regarding Iraq's Southern areas.

**TMENAR:** Is there truth in the rumours which allude to the intentions of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to declare a state of emergency before the next general election? If so, what are the constitutional and political obstacles?

**HH:** Announcing a State of Emergency in Iraq requires, by constitution, a two-third parliamentary majority. This is very difficult for al-Maliki to achieve in the current intricate political environment. But he may announce this State of Emergency between the end of the current parliamentary term and the beginning of the new one, as it does not necessitate his referral of the matter to Parliament. It is also not unlikely for the prime minister to declare a State of Emergency if the security situation in one of the governorates deteriorates. But I stress, it could only pass through the present parliament if the Kurds and some Sunni

parliamentary lists vote in favour of the prime minister's motion.

**TMENAR:** What are the reasons for the disintegration of al-Iraqiya election list (consisting mainly of Sunni and secular politicians) into 4 or 5 election groups? Will the Sunni community and their political representatives in Iraq be able to overcome their disunity and political crisis?

**HH:** When I was called upon to become part of the Iraqi List at its formation, I refused because it would lead to the marginalisation of Sunnis. This is because the leader of the list was secular and belonging to the Shi'a. My refusal was not based on sectarian extremism. Rather, I felt the political process in Iraq needed a sectarian balance and equilibrium to avoid one sect dominating. I said, at the time, the list would dismantle at the beginning of government formulation because it did not possess a vision to achieve the targets upon which it was established. Moreover, the entities contained within, had contradictory visions and



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interests. I believed we were presented with two choices at the time: either formulate a Sunni list and that other parties would form their own lists leading to the formation of a coalition, or the Sunnis join the *Dawlat al-Qanun* list (The Rule of Law). If the latter won more than 30% of the vote, they would force the bloc to commit to national interests. I decided to join the *Dawlat al-Qanun* on this basis. However, the winds did not bring the tidings we had hoped for, and what I expected happened, i.e. the disintegration of al-Iraqiya list and our inability to achieve our aims through the *Dawlat al-Qanun*.

We had exerted great efforts during the formulation of the Government so that it would include *Dawlat al-Qanun* and al-Iraqiya lists provided that the latter would be awarded the state's Presidency and half the ministries, but al-Iraqiya insisted on leading the Government as well. The impasse was resolved by the Erbil Accord, which in-turn was not applied, which led to al-Iraqiya's inability to achieve anything worthy and its subsequent dispersal into varied lists.

**TMENAR:** as a former speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, what, in your opinion, were the main obstacles that prevented the current Parliament from playing an effective role? "Is it true that the Prime Minister and the Constitutional Court played a major part in impairing the effectiveness of the Parliament?"

**HH:** Many factors have led to marginalising the Parliament: Firstly: Loyalties and agendas within the election blocs differed and quarrels ignited sharp differences and authoritarian tendencies. The al-Iraqiya list also had many differing allegiances and agendas, including competing over chairs and authorities, yet it possessed no clear political vision - which was its greatest pitfall. This is why al-Iraqiya – in two terms – was incapable of amending the Constitution despite the presence of an Article that mandated forwarding amendments to the parliament within four months of the first parliamentary term, after the drafting of the Constitution. It was then that I told the leaders of al-Iraqiya and the consensus list (*al-Tawafiq*) that we all needed to resign from the parliament and cabinet if the other blocs

refused to conduct the required changes. Had they agreed, they would have aborted the entire political process, and now – after the passage of eight years – no constitutional change has taken place.

The second factor relates to the vagueness of Parliament's jurisdictions and the inexistence of a head therein. That head was removed leading to three heads of Parliament with the same jurisdictions and powers. When I approached to form a third presidential commission whilst Head of Parliament during its first term, I rejected the matter categorically, as any ship would sink if its captains were many. That is when I told them they should seek someone else if they were searching for a presidential entity. Due to the circumstances and sensitivity of the phases, they were unable to pass the plan, which led to a better performance of Parliament in that term than the successive parliaments. This was a matter that all neutral observers agree upon. It was not due to the president's personal performance and personality, but rather that of the institution which possessed a clear hierarchy and

authority. But today, the Head of the Parliament cannot close a session without the approval of his two deputies, let alone taking important administrative decisions.

The third factor concerns the encroachment of the Executive Authority on the Legislative, through utilising divisions that occurred in the varied lists. Because of the presence of these lists, it led to a decree from the Federal Court which prohibited the parliament from legislating. Strange enough is the fact that the Court did not even consider the minutes of the Constitution Drafting Committee's meetings when explaining this Article of the Constitution. In a session that included more than 80 MPs, it addressed the Head of the Cabinet and reminded him that those who drafted the Constitution are still alive, the minutes and voice recordings of the sessions are in the Parliament's archives. The entity which presented the proposal was the Shi'a coalition because they were working towards the prevention of the emergence of new dictatorships, bringing about a new dictator and the marginalisation of the State's most

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The Parliament's future role will be limited to nodding heads in approval of the President's decisions.

important democratic entity. But the Head of the Cabinet did not answer me, and ended the session despite a Shi'i MP agreeing with my views (the session is on record). This is the most dangerous decision of the new Iraq, and unless it is reviewed, the Parliament's future role will be limited to nodding heads in approval of the President's decisions.

The fourth factor is the end of the Parliament's oversight role when the Executive Authority prevents parliamentary committees and members from monitoring the State's institutions. It also does not respond to accountability and questioning procedures. In all democracies, the legislative institution has two main missions, legislating laws and monitoring the government. The Federal Court, which has now come under the Executive Authority's rule and which forfeited its independence, has withdrawn this right from Parliament, and along with the Executive Authority, has obstructed the oversight process. Why should we then have a Parliament? It is not just the Prime Minister who bears responsibility here, but also the ministers from al-Iraqiya List,

the Kurdistan Coalition, and the National Coalition; they are all part of the decision-making system.



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