

Iran, Israel, Syria, and the U.S.: Views From China

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Brief Analysis

Next week, President Rouhani of Iran will visit China for a summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping, on the margins of a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Two weeks ago, coincidentally, I spoke in Shanghai at a mid-sized meeting billed as “the first conference on Syria ever held in China”—which included an influential Iranian foreign policy adviser—cosponsored by two leading local institutes and facilitated by China’s embassy in Washington. The presence of diverse dignitaries in such a closed, relatively informal but intense forum afforded a rare opportunity for first-hand impressions of interactions among Chinese, Iranian, Syrian, and other key actors in the emerging, increasingly multipolar Middle East scene.

Speakers at the conference included an unusual mix of officials and scholars: the Chinese, British, and French special envoys on Syria, the UN’s senior political adviser on that issue, a Syrian government (but no opposition) representative, the Russian Deputy Consul General, plus diplomats and experts from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. But probably the most intriguing fellow conference speaker was a senior Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps commander—a founder of Hezbollah, a key player in the Iran-Contra hostage scandal, and Iran’s former ambassador to both Syria and Lebanon. He also spoke in a special session devoted to the JCPOA nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1, which includes China as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

My main takeaways about China’s own policy in this arena are as follows: a strong intent to preserve the JCPOA, despite President Trump’s recent withdrawal from it, and a clear desire for a UN-led “political settlement” in Syria—both to avert wider regional conflict and to benefit from the country’s eventual reconstruction effort. The first point is sure to find a friendly reception from Rouhani next week; the second, maybe less so. Moreover, some Chinese participants expressed an implicit acknowledgment of Israel’s security concerns regarding potential spillover from the Syrian conflict but cautioned against any further military escalation by any party.

A few choices paraphrased from the host officials will elaborate a bit on these basic points. A senior Chinese diplomat warned of the specter of military confrontation on a much larger scale in Syria and beyond. For this reason, he gravely intoned, we need cooler heads to prevail. He stopped short, however, of specifying how or even whether he believes this goal could actually be achieved. Similarly, Xie Xiaoyan, China’s Special Envoy for Syria and a former

ambassador to Tehran (2002-10), was cited in China Daily saying that “the Syrian issue is far more than a domestic problem, but has affected the security and stability of the region and the entire world.”

More broadly, speaking of Syria in the context of the region as a whole, a senior Chinese academic official offered China’s vision for the Middle East. The UN, he said, must seize the initiative in stopping all the meaningless foreign disputes in that part of Asia. Fortunately, regardless of Syria’s special problems, the Mideast overall is turning away from radicalism, and toward a greater focus on internal issues. China encourages this positive trend, and desires to play a larger role in it (somewhat paradoxically, I suppose). The new priority for the region should be “development, rather than democracy.” There could hardly be a clearer statement of China’s own priorities, both at home and abroad.

From my Iranian counterpart at the conference, I was struck by his repeated insistence on close coordination with both Russia and Turkey regarding Syrian policy. These three countries together are in charge of developments in Syria today, he argued, of course in consultation with the local authorities. Notably, this was a sentiment that the representatives of Russia and Turkey seemed to fully reciprocate, despite recurrent reports of tactical differences among the three forces on Syrian soil.

Also noteworthy was the Iranian’s consistent but carefully worded hostility to any American or Israeli presence in Syria—or, for that matter, anywhere else in the region. He made no explicit threats of retaliation for Israel’s attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah bases in Syria, which featured prominently in the early discussion at the conference. But Israel, he said, wants regime change in Damascus, and is therefore afraid of any political settlement that would stabilize Syria—and Israel is dragging the U.S. into this quagmire, precisely in order to prolong the crisis. He did not explain how this squared with his own promise that if Syria does stabilize, Iran’s army would leave the country—a prospect at the very top of Israel’s current desiderata.

Still, the Iranian’s interaction with other speakers was not without its humor. At one point I congratulated him for saying that Iran does not want to remain an occupation army in Syria—adding that I wished this would come true, despite my deep doubts about Iran’s veracity. This met with chuckles and smiles all around. The Iranian hastened to clarify his claim that, for now, Iran is rightfully in Syria at the invitation of the legitimate host government. But then he doubled down on the offer to leave eventually, asserting that if the Syrian government requests it, we hope that Hezbollah will also go home to Lebanon.

But in the past few days, Iranian military commanders have publicly denied that they have any intention of leaving Syria. And other Iranian spokesmen—like Hadi Mohammadi on al-Ittihad TV on June 1—have asserted that the “resistance,” supported by Iran, will remain on “the front lines” even on Syria’s southern borders, regardless of any tactical deals. Those assertions gain extra weight from credible news reports that thousands of Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias are simply shedding their foreign uniforms and putting on Syrian ones instead.

The whole exchange strikes a pointed contrast with the latest declaration by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, in a Russia Today television interview on May 31, that “we do not have Iranian troops” in Syria—only “Iranian officers who work with the Syrian army to help.” This smokescreen was foreshadowed very vocally in Shanghai by a Syrian official at the conference. In fact, he was alone in declaiming that the Syrian government (not “regime,” he insisted repeatedly) and the Syrian army were full, firmly, and finally in control of all developments in their own country. “Any kind of political settlement,” Syrian Ministry of Information adviser Bassam Abu Abdullah told China Daily, “should come from the Syrian people and represent their voices and interests.”

At the close of the conference, a senior UN official summarized the proceedings, putting a relatively positive spin on them. He noted what he termed a few points of consensus, notwithstanding some very clear differences among the parties. Participants, he averred, generally agreed that a political settlement is the best way forward for Syria; that

the UN should take the lead in promoting it; and that such a settlement was urgently required to avert a wider regional war, address the humanitarian emergency, and begin the process of Syrian reconstruction.

No one argued against these platitudes, and the Chinese participants, in particular, applauded them. Ye Qing, for instance, vice president of the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, was quoted in China Daily as follows: “Although there are different views and perspectives, participants believe that the Syrian issue must ultimately be resolved by the Syrians and cannot be replaced by foreign forces.” Yet the overall tenor of these discussions, and especially of the Iranian interventions, showed just how distant the realization of that supposedly shared objective of the “international community” remains today. ❖

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