Syria as a Spoiler in Iran's Foreign Policy

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Brief Analysis

If Tehran continues its unwavering support for the Syrian regime, it could dash President Rouhani's hopes of reducing Western pressure on Iran.

Since winning Iran's June election, President Hassan Rouhani has put much of his energy into foreign policy in the hope of gaining enough leverage to sustain his social power base and resist pressure from his hardliner critics. In particular, he and his team have frequently reiterated that the key to solving the economic crisis is to design a more effective and less costly nuclear policy. Yet Tehran's seemingly nonnegotiable support for the Syrian regime has exacerbated tensions with other regional actors and helped increase the chances of U.S. intervention against Bashar al-Assad. Even if Rouhani were inclined to change that stance, his hardliner critics may decide to sabotage any such foreign policy shifts in order to defeat him in domestic politics.

INTERNAL AND REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Rouhani has already compromised with hardliners in forming his cabinet: although he chose someone well known and respected abroad (Mohammad Javad Zarif) as foreign minister, he left the political, cultural, and intelligence ministries to conservatives. Even so, hardliners have still criticized him for linking foreign policy and the economic crisis. As a recent article on the hardliner website Raja News put it, "Experience shows that [the West] is trying to tie the domestic economy to foreign policy in order to establish effective leverage for pressuring Iran." The site also argued that Western pressure is more likely to increase than decrease in response to Rouhani's approach.

In addition to Western sanctions related to the nuclear program, Tehran is facing many significant challenges in the Middle East. The Islamic Republic has a long history of mistrust with its Arabian Peninsula neighbors, and the trend seems to be intensifying. Ali Jannati, the new minister of culture and Islamic guidance, was Iran's ambassador in Kuwait for seventeen years but was forced to leave in 2005 after local authorities discovered an Iranian spy web. And last month, the United Arab Emirates deported many Iranians -- including businessmen -- who had lived there for decades, without offering any explanation. Meanwhile, banks and financial institutions in Kuwait and the UAE no longer accommodate Iranian businesses like they once did, due in large part to Western sanctions. In Bahrain,

authorities have accused Tehran of supporting the island's Shiite opposition. Similarly, Yemen has accused it of supporting Houthi rebels in the north, and an Iranian diplomat was kidnapped in the country last month. Relations with Saudi Arabia have also deteriorated, partly due to Riyadh's support for Salafists in Egypt and its intervention against the Shiite opposition in Bahrain and Yemen.

Rouhani's foreign policy team seems intent on easing these tensions, particularly with Saudi Arabia. Doing so would become more practicable if opposition activities died down in Bahrain and Yemen. In Bahrain as in many countries, the Syrian and Egyptian crises have cooled down the passion for regime change by demonstrating that the alternative to authoritarian rule could be disorder or civil war. Furthermore, the Bahraini opposition knows that Iran's pro-Shiite propaganda has hurt them, providing the government with justification for more crackdowns and encouraging Saudi intervention. If Tehran adopted a more neutral policy toward the island's political crisis, it would bolster both Iran's reputation and the Bahraini opposition. As for Yemen, Iran's support to the northern rebels will become irrelevant if they succeed in maintaining a long-term peace with the government. More important, Iran could significantly diminish Saudi concerns and, in theory, improve relations with Riyadh if it changed its policy toward Bahrain and Yemen.

SYRIAN CRISIS OVERSHADOWING ALL OTHER ISSUES

Yet even if Tehran takes steps to address the above differences, its financial, intelligence, and military support for the Syrian regime will continue to undermine its standing in the Middle East. Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the region's two main powers, are especially sensitive about Syria -- Ankara has vociferously opposed the Assad regime since the uprising became an all-out war on its southern border, and Riyadh has lent considerable support to the rebels. Iran's backing of Assad has also antagonized many of its former allies, such as Hamas in Gaza and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere. In addition, Hezbollah's deployment to Syria has tarnished both the group and Iran's image in Lebanon, even within the Shiite community. Foreign intervention against Assad would likely increase Tehran's tensions with these players.

The seriousness of the problem has been greatly magnified because Iran's Syria policy seems nonnegotiable. In contrast with the nuclear issue -- which some Iranian officials have shown at least a rhetorical willingness to resolve through negotiations -- Tehran's approach to Syria might be a matter of consensus among the elite. Even Rouhani may fully agree with the policy of unconditionally supporting Damascus; after all, he represented Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in the Supreme National Security Council for more than two decades prior to becoming president.

More important, Rouhani probably could not change Iran's approach to Syria even if he wanted to. There are some indications that Tehran's Syria policy is designed and implemented by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and therefore not fully under the president's control. For instance, last week, an official in the Assembly of Experts announced that Qasem Soleimani -- commander of the IRGC's elite Qods Force -- had been invited to speak on the current situation in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt. This was quite an unusual invitation, indicating Soleimani's central role in policy toward these countries. In addition, several IRGC leaders and veterans have spoken out about the importance of supporting Assad. Deputy IRGC commander Gen. Hossein Salami recently stated, "America's strategy is to contain Iran, prevent Iran from implementing its policy in Syria, and diminish Iran's influence." And Yahya Rahim Safavi, former IRGC commander-in-chief and current military advisor to the Supreme Leader, described Syria as a battleground in which Turks and Arabs are fighting against Assad on behalf of Israel and America. Other authorities have argued that letting Assad fall would encourage Washington or Israel to attack Iran's nuclear facilities.

Indeed, Iran sees the prospect of Western intervention in Syria as a game-changer that would make the military threat against its nuclear program more credible. Iran's leaders may therefore believe they have a vital interest in

defeating the Syrian opposition. For his part, Rouhani seems convinced that if the rebels falter, he would gain leverage in his nuclear negotiation with the West. This helps explain why Foreign Minister Zarif told his Turkish counterpart that the rebels carried out last week's chemical strikes in Damascus in order to cover their recent battlefield failures and justify foreign intervention.

Of course, this does not mean that Tehran approves of chemical attacks. Iran's preferred style of cracking down on opposition is more subtle and nuanced -- in contrast with Assad's brutal tactics, which have significant ramifications not only for the Syrian regime, but also for Tehran.

CONCLUSION

Even if one sets aside widespread skepticism regarding Rouhani's ability to drastically change Iran's nuclear policy and reach a significant agreement with the West, the Islamic Republic's foreign policy challenges cannot be reduced to the nuclear issue. In fact, Iran's Syria policy may become so problematic that it moves to the top of the West's priority list. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine Tehran compromising on its support for Assad, particularly since the Syria portfolio is not entirely under the president's control. This dilemma may cripple Rouhani's efforts to make progress in nuclear negotiations while strengthening the position of Iran's hardliners.

Ideally, the United States could find a way to press Tehran into changing its Syria stance. But there are no obvious ways to do so. In theory, Washington could use the UN Security Council ban on Iranian arms exports as leverage, since Tehran appears to be lending direct military support to Assad despite repeated denials. Yet enforcing that ban would require active cooperation from Iraq, which seems unlikely to make this a priority. Similar practical problems would limit Washington's ability to halt Iranian financial support and oil shipments to the Syrian regime.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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