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**CONSEQUENCES OF US-IRAN
RAPPROCHEMENT**

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CONSEQUENCES OF US-IRAN RAPPROCHEMENT

Abstract:

The negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program let to be optimism, despite the French blockade. The agreed end of the Civil War in Syria and the political estrangement between the United States and Saudi Arabia are factors to be taken into account in these negotiations.

Keywords:

Iranian nuclear process, Iran, United States, Saudi Arabia, France, Syria Civil War, 5+1.

NEGOTIATIONS REGARDING IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

Several events have suggested the mutual benefits of restarting negotiations regarding the Iranian nuclear programme: Iran's current economic deterioration, partly caused by international sanctions, the inauguration of the new President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, member of the moderate faction, as well as tensions between Israel and Iran –which suggested that military measures could be taken against Iranian nuclear facilities in the summer of 2012.

In this sense, we should take into account Obama's "historic" call to President Rouhani, regardless of the diplomatic secrets needed to make the call, recently revealed by the US press¹.

The need for negotiation was materialised in Geneva last week, as it was considered indispensable by both the Iranian regime and its main critics in order to avoid crises that seemed imminent for weeks.

Senior representatives of the P5+1 (formed by the UK, France, Germany, China, Russia and the US) have held meetings with their Iranian counterparts in Geneva. Comments by some of them have nurtured hopes for days. They highlighted a more constructive spirit than in previous and fruitless rounds, in which Iran just seemed to be buying time.

Even the Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran, Abbas Araghchi mentioned a possible agreement on three essential aspects: an objective defined in the agreement, a first phase to start immediately, and verification criteria for the objective, which could be agreed upon in a few days. This was a significant progress from previous rounds, focused on formal details but without tangible progress.

Nevertheless, and surprisingly enough, France has been the hardliner in this negotiation, eventually rejecting the agreement that was being arranged and would apparently be accepted by the US. In fact, some members of the Republican Party have welcomed this approach as opposed to that followed by the Obama Administration.

France has become a leader of this process, as confirmed President Hollande's visit to the Palestinian territories and Israel, where he stated: *"So long as we are not certain that Iran has renounced nuclear arms, we will keep in place all our demands and sanctions."*² Israeli

¹ Jay Solomon, Carol E. Lee, *U.S.-Iran Thaw Grew From Years Of Behind-the-Scenes Talks*, The Wall Street Journal, November 7, 2013.

² Ari Rabinovitch, *France's Hollande assures Israel on Iran nuclear deal*, Reuters, November 17, 2013.

[<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/17/us-israel-usa-kerry-idUSBRE9AG06720131117>]

press welcomed the statement, even considering the French President as Israel's best friend, compared to the more accommodating approach towards Iran followed by Obama and his representatives.

Thus, we should wonder about the motivations behind not only the French, but especially the American stance in Geneva. Note that one year and a half ago, the US threatened with a military intervention if Iran attempted to block the Strait of Ormuz.

POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES REGARDING SYRIA

One of the main motivations behind the American moderate stance in Geneva is finding a solution to the Syrian Civil War. Iran's unequivocal support to Al Assad and its influence on Hezbollah's actions, which equally support the Syrian Government, make Teheran the key to reaching any solution to the conflict in a forum of negotiations.

Thus, it is no surprise that conversations regarding Iran's nuclear program are surpassing their limits into a wider process, in an attempt to re-stabilise the region. Thus, concessions regarding the nuclear programme, followed by the progressive cancellation of the economic sanctions imposed on the Iranian regime, would entail a relative reduction of Teheran's support to Damascus. This could rebalance the military situation, currently advantageous to Al Assad and his allies, and unavoidably lead him, to give up the fight and start negotiations.

This option, in spite of the undeniable advantages for the Syrian question, does not seem to convince Israel, which still considers Iran as the main threat to its security. More surprisingly, it will not convince France either.

THE COOLING OF SAUDI-AMERICAN RELATIONS

There is also another aspect to consider; the cooling of relations between Saudi Arabia and the US, whose Administration and public opinion are changing their views of their traditional regional ally.

Regarding this matter, recent studies by analyst Fareed Zakaria are very relevant. Besides being admired in professional circles, Zakaria relies on his popular television programme. Articles like "*The Saudis Are Mad? Tough!*" in Time magazine, or "*Why upsetting Saudi Arabia may not be a bad thing*" in CNN World would be inconceivable some time ago.

The US is increasingly concerned about Saudi Arabia's support and funding of several Syrian rebel groups, among which are some of the most radical, and the continuous funding for

decades of the efforts aimed at spreading Wahhabism as the dominant doctrine within Sunni Islam.

Saudi activities like these are not new, but in the international political arena, they have always been “offset” by the heavy dependence on Saudi oil. However, as the US shows sustained progress towards energy self-sufficiency, the interdependence between the two countries seems to wane. We should note that this is not applicable to the EU nations like Spain, which will continue to be heavily dependent on Saudi oil for decades.

POSSIBLE CHANGE OF ROUTE IN US PRIORITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

All of the above suggests a readjustment of US policy towards the Middle East, which appears to be seeking a more balanced position between the regional powers. Thus, the US would relax its demands on Iran, clarify its support to Saudi Arabia and seek an agreed solution in Syria, while ensuring the security of Israel. In short, the US would abandon its clear stance in this scenario in favour of a more ambiguous one.

This is clearly not an easy move. The Obama Administration will have to make use of all its diplomatic capacity to achieve these new goals of US policy in the Middle East.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the unexpected setback during the negotiations in Geneva, there is a certain degree of optimism, as shown by the Kremlin’s announcement last 18th of November, in which Putin allegedly stated Rouhani his conviction that the Syrian conflict could actually be stopped. Despite this setback, neither of the two parties will find reasons to withdraw from the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme, if we lay aside the specific parts and points of the agreement. Thus, we should expect new –and to a certain extent, fruitful– negotiation rounds.

In these negotiations, there will be other relevant matters, whether raised openly or discreetly. These will likely include seeking Iran’s complicity for bringing the Syrian Civil War to a negotiated end and the cooling of US-Saudi Arabia relations, all of this under the close watch of an increasingly-reticent Israel.

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