Why Can't Iran and the US Just Get Along?

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This week Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) will meet for the first time since negotiations broke down in Moscow in June of 2012. Although the P5+1 claim to have a stronger proposal to offer Iran than the one they put forth last summer, there is little optimism that anything substantial will come from the talks.

It's important to understand that the divisions between the two sides have little to do with the formal diplomatic issues on the agenda. Rather, the reasons talks are unlikely to break new ground are almost entirely political in nature.

The first obstacle is the domestic politics of both Iran and the United States. The notoriously fractured elite of the Islamic Republic is even more bitterly divided than usual ahead of the June Presidential election. In fact, the intra-Conservative feud between President Mahmoud Ahmadinjead and the other Principlists, led by the Larijani brothers, while nothing new, reached new heights earlier this month when Ahmadinejad released videos appearing to show Fazel Larijani, brother to Majles (Parliament) Speaker, Ali Larijani, asking for political favors and offering bribes. This was followed by the temporary arrest of Ahmadinejad protégé, Saeed Mortazavi, who appeared with Fazel in one of the videos, as well as Ahmadinejad supporters interrupting a speech by Ali Larijani and throwing shoes at him.

Although Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appears to have reined in the factions for now, none of this is encouraging for the P5+1. Indeed, in 2009, elite infighting in Iran led Khamenei to reject a deal Ahmadinejad's negotiating team concluded with the P5+1.

The recent controversy over Chuck Hagel's nomination to be the next U.S. secretary of defense also undoubtedly undermined the confidence Iran has in President Obama's ability to deliver a deal that includes the removal of any U.S. sanctions. If the president just barely got a war hero and Republican confirmed in the Democratic-led Senate because of the nominee's views on Iran, there is little reason to believe that the Republican-led House will agree to remove sanctions against Iran.

Although domestic politics certainly complicate the negotiations, the larger issue preventing a deal is that the U.S. and Iran often stand bitterly opposed on issues in which they are largely in agreement. Nothing better demonstrates this than the proxy war they fought in Iraq despite agreeing on every major issue.

For instance, given its weakened state after Operation Desert Storm, by the time of the second Iraq War the U.S. and Iran were perhaps the only two countries that still viewed Saddam Hussein's Iraq as the state posing the largest threat to their security. For Iran, this fear was the product of Saddam's past invasion of Iran and his extensive use of chemical weapons against Iranian troops and civilians. As Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mahmoud Vaezi later confided: "We knew that as long as Saddam was in power, he would do all he could to seek revenge."

In Washington, the concern over Saddam's Iraq was similarly widespread, going beyond the Neoconservatives in the George W. Bush administration to include many Democrats. In fact, it was under Bill Clinton's Democratic administration that regime change in Iraq became official U.S. policy.

Not only did Tehran and Washington both agree that Saddam needed to go, but they also agreed on the manner in

which it should be carried out. The U.S. invaded Iraq intending to implement Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's light footprint approach, which consisted of quickly overthrowing Saddam, placing a new Iraqi in charge, and swiftly withdrawing U.S. forces. Although doubting that the U.S. really wished to extricate itself quickly from Iraq, Iran certainly preferred that the U.S. did not establish a long-term presence on Iran's borders as it had done in Afghanistan.

Both sides were also of the same mind when it came to the nature of the post-Saddam Iraqi political system. The U.S. insisted that a post-Saddam Iraq be democratic, which the Bush administration believed would inspire other populations in the region, including Iran's, to overthrow their leaders and establish democracies in their own countries.

From this perspective, the U.S. refused to believe Iranian leaders when they claimed to also favor a democratic Iraq. But Tehran did not view the Bush administration's vision of a democratic domino effect in the Middle East as realistic. It also had compelling strategic reasons to want Iraq to become a democracy, including the fact that Shi'ites, as the majority of the population in Iraq, would almost certainly hold power under such an arrangement. Furthermore, Iraq's deep ethnic and sectarian divisions ensured a democratic Iraq would be a weak state unable to threaten Iran as Saddam had done.

The current standoff over Iran's nuclear program exhibits the same dynamics. The U.S. is primary interested in Iran not acquiring a nuclear weapon. Besides the threat a nuclear-armed Iran itself would pose, Washington fears Iran's nuclear acquisition would spur a nuclear arms race in the volatile Middle East.

Iran itself has repeatedly stated that it does not want nuclear weapons, with Supreme Leader Khamenei issuing a fatwa (religious decree) against doing so in 2005, which he has repeatedly reaffirmed, including earlier this month. More concretely, Iranian leaders have said that they don't believe having a nuclear weapon would improve their security, perhaps because they too fear a regional nuclear arms race.

U.S. politicians don't believe these claims, however. In fact, fifteen Republican U.S. Senators wrote to President Obama last week expressing their grave concern over "Iran's relentless drive to obtain nuclear weapons." That being said, Iran's claim is hardly unthinkable, given that the best U.S. intelligence is that Iranian leaders have not decided to acquire nuclear weapons and may never choose to do so.

On the other hand, Iran first and foremost wants the P5+1 powers to recognize its right to enrich uranium as a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and remove the sanctions that have been imposed because of its nuclear program. Although the Obama administration has thus far stopped short of publicly recognizing Iran's right to enrichment, insider reports have long suggested it is willing to do so long as Iran agrees to stronger IAEA safeguards. The U.S. also maintains close ties to numerous other non-nuclear countries that maintain indigenous enrichment or reprocessing capabilities, including Japan, Brazil, and Germany.

More generally, the Islamic Republic wants the U.S. to accept that Tehran has a role to play in regional affairs. Since the Iranian hostage crisis, Washington has actively sought to deny Iran a place in the Middle East. Most notably, when Washington brought together over 40 nations to establish a new regional order at the Madrid Conference in 1991, the only two regional states to be excluded were Iraq— which recently lost the Gulf War— and Iran.

When asked why the George H.W. Bush administration had chosen to exclude Iran from the conference, Brent Scowcroft— national security advisor at the time of the conference—replied that, "Iran simply had nothing to contribute" to the Middle East peace process or the state of affairs in the region. This assumption has proved dead wrong ever since, as Iran has complicated or helped facilitate every major initiative the U.S. has undertaken in the region, starting with the Israel-Palestine negotiations under the Oslo framework during the 1990s.

Nonetheless, for years the U.S. has refused Iran's requests to broaden the P5+1's agenda to include other regional issues, claiming that Tehran is merely attempting to buy time to advance its nuclear program. Although not impossible, this does not seem unlikely given that the Islamic Republic hasn't pushed forward with its nuclear

program with any sense of urgency over the last thirty years.

The more likely scenario is that Iran believes it would be foolish to surrender its nuclear program without changing the overall adversarial nature of its relationship with the U.S, especially given Washington's hobby of using military force to change regimes it dislikes. On the other hand, it's difficult to imagine Iranian leaders being more inclined to ultimately decide to seek nuclear weapons if they reached a genuine rapprochement with the U.S., rather than a more narrow deal on the nuclear program.

The U.S. also increasingly has an interest in a rapprochement with Iran given its need to pivot to Asia even as it cuts defense spending. The Middle East would be the optimal place to find additional forces for Asia. Moreover, after it withdraws from Afghanistan at the end of 2014, Iran will be the only major reason for the U.S. to have a sizeable military presence in the greater Middle East, given that growing domestic energy production is eroding the strategic necessity of maintaining access to Persian Gulf crude.

Although Iran doesn't have the capabilities to project offensive conventional military power, it could play a crucial role in regional stability. Furthermore, if history is any guide, a U.S.-Iran rapprochement would likely reduce Israeli-Iranian tensions and even potentially see Iran become a positive force in negotiations over a two-state solution.

In short, although talks this week are unlikely to result in any substantial breakthrough, the two sides already agree on the major issues.

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