

THE IRAN PROJECT

# Iran and the Arab World after the Nuclear Deal

Rivalry and Engagement in a New Era



HARVARD Kennedy School

BELFER CENTER

FOR SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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**The Iran Project**

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# Ibrahim Fraihat

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*Room for Containment?*

*The Iran Deal and the Neighboring Arab States*

A prominent theory regarding the impact of the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 on the Arab region has been that it will only increase Iranian involvement in domestic Arab affairs, given that the deal would give Iran access to substantial financial resources. Already, Iran has funded at least two civil wars in Syria and Yemen while under strict international sanctions – one can only imagine what they would do with tens of billions of additional dollars.

This theory is gaining even more ground in the region now that the deal has been signed. Saudi Prince Bandar Bin Sultan, wrote that the deal will “wreak havoc” in the Middle East. While the concerns of Arab countries are valid, Iran can still take this deal as an opportunity to foster better understanding and closer collaborations with its Arab neighbors. The impact of the Iran deal ultimately depends on how Iran and various Arab countries treat it going forward: will it serve as the basis for more intense violence or provide new ground for future mutually beneficial cooperation?

To begin with, Arab countries do not oppose the nature of the deal between Iran and the West. A credible nuclear agreement will spare a region already saturated with civil wars the risk of an even more destructive war, one that would that will devastate

not only to Iran but neighboring Gulf States as well. As prominent Saudi commentator Jamal Khoshaggi argues, we should generally welcome the nuclear deal but will pay extremely close attention to how Iran behaves politically after the deal is signed and the sanctions are lifted.

Arab concerns over Iran acting an increasingly destabilizing force did not emerge from a vacuum. First, Arab countries were left out of the negotiations, which created high-level suspicions about the true intentions of Washington regarding security arrangements in the Gulf. In particular, the Gulf states became highly concerned that the deal was made at the expense of their alliance with the United States.

Second, Arab countries still remember how President Obama behaved towards his “red lines” with the Assad regime regarding the issue of the use of chemical weapons. The West in general and Washington in particular sorted out a deal that served their own agenda by stripping Assad of his chemical weapons, which gave him a free hand to continue slaughtering the Syrian people through, among other ways, the use of barrel bombs. Arab countries are concerned that the West would make similar arrangements by sorting out Iran’s nuclear project to serve their own agendas and in return let Iran go on a rampage in the region, starting additional civil wars and sustaining existing ones. It is very likely that the Gulf states especially will act based on their concerns as well as perceptions of the ramifications of the deal. By so doing, an aggressive arms race – in addition to additional proxy wars – could prove the natural outcome. However, Iranians and Arabs should not submit to the resulting escalation of the signing of the nuclear deal. There is ample room to change the subject in question from a threat to an opportunity.

But first, Iran and Saudi Arabia need to engage directly. They need to have a genuine conversation not only over pressing needs for conflict de-escalation in the region, such as in Syria and Yemen, but also regarding their bilateral relations for after the nuclear agreement. President Obama already called for a “practical conversation” between Iran and the Arab States. Future security arrangements and collaborations should be at the core of this conversation. To do this, Iran will have to first undertake a sincere initiative that genuinely addresses the concerns of neighboring countries, especially in Syria, Yemen, and the Gulf. Serious engagement entailing political solutions to the region’s conflicts that respects the independence, sovereignty, and integrity of conflict-affected states will be a first step towards a comprehensive understanding and conflict de-escalation. The alternative to this is unprecedented levels of violence as proxy wars absorb Iranian financial resources freed up by the signing of the nuclear deal, spilling more blood in the Arab region. Iran’s economy certainly needs these resources, of course, yet enough Arab blood has been spilled. Until Iran takes such an initiative the ball will remain in its court.

# Biography of Contributors

**Ibrahim Fraihat** (also known as Ibrahim Sharqieh) is a Senior Foreign Policy Fellow at the Brookings Institution's Doha Center and an International Conflict Resolution Professor at Georgetown University in Qatar. His writings appeared in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Financial Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and elsewhere. He is the author of the upcoming book *Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring* (Yale University Press). Fraihat is the recipient of George Mason University's Distinguished Alumni Award (2014) for his achievements in the field of Conflict Resolution.





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