Report of the fifth Käte Hamburger Dialogue

Iran after the Nuclear Deal: Cooperation Partner for a Peace Settlement in the Middle East?

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In his introductory remarks, Prof. Dr Tobias Debiel, Director of KHK/GCR21 and INEF, spoke of Iran as a possible cooperation partner for a multilateral peace settlement in the Middle East. Afterwards, Backfisch began the dialogue by referring to past and upcoming Vienna conferences on a peace settlement in Syria, which brought together traditional adversaries: Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as Russia and the US. He asked Steinbach whether or not this meeting of regional players creates a ‘climate of hope’, as described by German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier.

Careful Iran and a Long Way to Peace

In his initial remarks, Steinbach criticized the general optimism as premature. Despite coming a bit late, he considered the decision to include Iran as correct. Steinbach emphasized Iran’s essential role in conflict resolution in Syria and Iraq. To him, the inclusion of Iran opens new possibilities for cooperation and potentially new arrangements. In order to further analyse Iran’s possible new role, the first puzzle to be solved, according to Steinbach, is how sanctions should be lifted and then implemented. This question is also crucial against the background of resistance to the Nuclear Deal both in the U.S. Congress and its allied international community. He continued by summarizing the divergent positions that arose in Iran as the deal was substantiated. On the one hand, there certainly was strong pressure, both in terms of economic and political necessity, on Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, to come to an agreement. On the other hand, political and religious leader Ali Khamenei, who effectively backs Foreign Minister Zarif and President Hassan Rouhani, limits cooperation to only this agreement. Further policies, deemed mostly beneficial to US/the West’s interests, are less likely to be pursued. ‘Iranian foreign policy will be very careful’, Steinbach noted.

Steinbach expressed careful optimism that after the Vienna conferences Saudi Arabia and Iran were trying to come closer together and cooperate. Yet, it remains to be seen if the commitments made during the conferences can be
understood as a new policy approach or just window dressing. He stressed the distinctly increasing confessionalization of the situation in the Middle East; e.g. Saudi Arabia reacts with suspicion to any policy involving Iran. This constitutes a serious problem for cooperation on the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon, because this confessionalization creates an environment of mistrust. Steinbach closed his speech summarizing that the Nuclear Deal is a step in the right direction. However, he finds there is still a long way to go to find balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran in order to solve major conflicts in the Middle East.

External Forces Cannot Implement Peace

In order to discuss the role of Iran in the regional conflict resolution, Hippler started his opening remarks by providing the audience with background information on the development of ISIS. According to Hippler, the rise of ISIS (or IS) can neither be explained by its military strength nor by outside interference. Rather it represents a political vacuum in Iraq and Syria. With discredited governments and fragmented opposition in both countries, marginalised Sunni-Arabs were looking for an alternative group to counterbalance the Shia-majority government. This gave way to the early formation of ISIS, which without military superiority managed to take ownership of this political vacuum. As summarized by Hippler, ‘It is a war where a society has broken into pieces and these pieces are fighting each other. External governments try to make profit with this conflict through exploiting and ideologizing’.

Contrary to general belief, Hippler underlined that ISIS power can be traced back to the lack of legitimacy and functioning statehood in the region and is not the cause of it. The solution is ‘to cure the problem not the symptom’, Hippler emphasized. Effective and legitimate regimes in both countries will drive ISIS to eventually dry out. While military strikes might accelerate this process, it will not address the root cause and nor will it offer a genuine solution.

Temporary Regional Coalition and the Maintenance of Sovereignty

Backfisch led over to Saeidi asking how she would assess the hope of Western countries that the Nuclear Deal might not only lead to economic progress in and cooperation with Iran but might also open up Iranian society. More interestingly, Backfisch also rose the question of how many Iranians are actually open to political transformation and which changes would be brought to the region. Saeidi explained that she has observed an ongoing process of cooperation among Iranian population in which different political groups work together. She, however, expressed scepticism regarding the question of whether or not all
Iranians support the government meeting the interests of the United States through the Nuclear Deal.

Saeidi noticed that regional coalitions in the Middle East have been built on temporary common visions around the notion of sovereignty. Commonalities between the United States and Arab leaders exist; they all aim to maintain their own interests in the region. Beyond the fact that the US is driven by security objectives while the Arab states’ leaders want to preserve their power in the region, the reasoning behind their involvement can be traced back to self-interest. Iran derives its regional influence from governments in neighbouring states that need Iran’s support to counterbalance other powers and maintain their sovereignty. The same view is shared by the population in the region who pledges their support to Iran and in return expects Iran’s assistance in fighting off a Western invasion. In this context, Saeidi doubted that Iran would continue to have this significant role in the Middle East if US foreign policy and the perception of other Arab state leaders change.

After Vienna Conferences: Steps towards Transition in the Middle East and The Problem of Fragmentation

Steinbach doubted if the results of the conferences can be considered a significant step towards a solution at this point. Aside from other ongoing conflicts between different dyads in Syria, the most urgent problems are the IS and the regime in Damascus. The solutions, according to Steinbach, are therefore to keep IS down entirely and to simultaneously cause a regime change in Damascus. The underlying difficulty for this solution is the completely different existing constellations of alliances. Against IS, the formulated alliance shares the same stances and would therefore have a high military capacity. This will enable opposition/regional players supported by selected European powers and the United States to form a joint military pact. Steinbach emphasized that this military approach is necessary to defeat IS. On the other hand, when it comes to the regime in Damascus, the parties/states are deeply split on what should be done. Russia and Iran support the regime in Damascus, while the US, France and Germany could not fathom a final solution including Assad. Responding to Backfisch’s question of whether resistance among some Assad’s opponents became subdued and more open compromise, Steinbach agreed that the opponents are weakened by the multiplicity of conflicts which arose in the last few years. While Steinbach is convinced that the end of the conflict will see Assad’s departure, this closure might take longer time than initially thought. The disagreements between the various parties will make it very difficult to find a solution, Steinbach concluded.
Agreeing with Steinbach on the issue of fragmentation, Hippler also recognized this problem not only at the international level but also the local level. He argued that the main problem of opposition in Syria is their inability to negotiate. This is because the opposition is made up of around 300–500 groups of different strength and direction. A possible negotiation brokered by outsiders might merely bring about joint military action and victory which will lead to new and bigger problems in the long run. To solve the conflicts in the Middle East, Hippler stressed that Syrians and Iraqis are key players in building bridges between different opponents. Once pre-conditions for peace are agreed upon within the country, the international community can contribute to rebuilding the society. Without this agreement, external actors can only provide humanitarian support to alleviate widespread suffering.

Returning the subject of Iran, Saeidi highlighted that Iran is currently sending mixed messages. Iran, on the one hand, leaves no doubt that their alliance with Assad is a strategic one; yet on the other hand, does not conceal its preference for the alliance to US intervention in the region.

**Iran and the Regional Alliance**

Beyond the problem of fragmentation, establishing a legitimate regime in Damascus, defeating IS, and solving other problems in the Middle East, a regional alliance with the support of the West must be organized. Steinbach elaborated on the interdependence among countries in the Middle East. Since Saudi Arabia is currently experiencing economic problems and involved in military operations in Yemen, a pragmatic cooperation with Iran for economic and political reason is necessary despite their incompatible religious problems. Successful cooperation under similar conditions can already be observed between Iran and Turkey. If the Saudis and the Iranians do not start to cooperate with each other, the prospect of them regaining control from IS will dwindle, Steinbach noted.

Saeidi added that Iran has extensive ties to Islamic movements in the region, although it is not clear whether the reasoning behind this is based mainly on ideological solidarity or military strategy. She also restated that the regional relations and exchanges have only started recently since Arab nations are concerned with their territorial sovereignty vis-à-vis external interventions.

**International Actors: Humanitarian Front and Supporting Indigenous Preferences**

Steinbach argued that current conflicts are not comparable to traditional ones or the Cold War, because conflict dyads no longer are restricted to states.
Furthermore, alliances between states are not formed bipolarly. Additionally, ideology is not the only reason behind the conflicts.

In partial agreement with Steinbach, Hippler advanced a realistic view. Rather than worsening the situation, external actors could contribute more to the humanitarian front until conditions on the ground have led to a situation where the international community can become active.

Saeidi emphasised on the importance of internal sovereignty. International actors need to support indigenous preferences and allow the people of the respective regions to make their own decisions. In line with Hippler’s comments, Saeidi cautioned against interference of the international community and advocate for support for a solution from within the countries themselves. ‘Most of the interventions are in truth not for peace, but rather because of strategic interests’, Saeidi noted.

Discussion with the Audience

The discussion that followed revolved around the current situation in the Middle East, especially the conflicts and the role of Iran in the region: which connections can be drawn between the different conflicts in the region, which options are available in the future, and how can history inform us about the current conflicts?

At the end of the dialogue, the three speakers gave their long-term forecasts of the conflicts in Middle East. Steinbach was convinced that democratic states will start to develop in the Middle East in ten years. With less optimism, Hippler expected it to take another thirty years for pluralistic democracies in the Middle East to develop. Reluctant to forecast, Saeidi argued that the international community should recognize that people in the Middle East have their own visions and that the interference should finally stop.