

# Geneva Action Plan: Its Nature and Implications

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## Abstract

The adoption of the Geneva Accord between Iran and the P5+1 (the US, UK, France, Russia, China plus Germany) to resolve issues related to Iran's nuclear program on November 24, 2013, brought about a series of debates in political circles. In many ways, it could be considered a historic event with international and regional implications and also ushered in a new chapter in Iran- U.S. relations. At the international level, it could have a great impact on the ways in which world affairs are managed. In fact, it was a victory for diplomacy, multilateralism and a thrust towards a multi-polar international system after more than a decade of unilateralism and military interventionist policies with all its catastrophic consequences. At the regional level, by fostering new alignments, it may have a positive impact on current problems; be it elimination of weapons of mass destruction or countering terrorism and extremism that is now expanding beyond the region. The Accord in Geneva also fosters hope for solid and productive relations between Iran and the U.S. after more than three decades of estrangement. Considering that a new geostrategic situation is unfolding in the region, this article tries to answer the questions related to its international and regional implications, as well as its impact on the very delicate issue of Iran-U.S. relations. At the end, some of the major challenges that lay ahead in the implementation of the Accord are examined.

**Keywords:** Geneva Accord, Iran's Nuclear Dossier, U.S. Foreign Policy, P5+1 Group, Iran-US Relations, Sanctions

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(Received: 26 January 2014 Accepted: 12 March 2014)

## **Introduction**

The Geneva accord between Iran and the P5+1 (the US, UK, France, Russia, China plus Germany) to resolve issues related to Iran's nuclear program on November 24, 2013 brought about a number of debates in political circles. In many ways, it could be considered a historic event since it would have international and regional implications. It also ushered a new chapter in the Iran- U.S. relations. At the international level, it could greatly impact the ways in which world affairs are managed. In fact, it was a victory for diplomacy, multilateralism and a new thrust towards a multi-polar international system after more than a decade of unilateralism and policies of military interventions with all their catastrophic consequences.

At the regional level, it may have positive effects on regional disarmament and countering terrorism and extremism by fostering new alignments, considering that a new geostrategic situation is unfolding in the Middle East region. Also, during the negotiations leading to Geneva Accord, an opportunity was provided for the initiation of a dialogue between Iran and the U.S. at the foreign ministers level, creating hope for a breakthrough in solving deep-rooted differences between the two sides which would be undoubtedly helpful in the settlement of many existing regional disputes.

As indicated in the Joint Plan of Action of the Geneva Accord: "The goal for these negotiations is to reach a mutually-agreed long-term comprehensive solution that would ensure Iran's nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful." Indeed, the agreement as it

stands should comfort all those who were concerned about Iran's nuclear program, although Iran has never sought nuclear weapons. However, some hardliners in the U.S. and Israel as well as certain Saudi royals and senior officials who fear that a final deal between Iran and the U.S. will eventually result in a friendship or even an alliance between the two in the future, with the consequence of accentuating Iran's geopolitical significance, expressed their opposition to the Accord. In fact, "the real concerns of the opponents of this Accord seem to be the long-term balance of power in the Persian Gulf and Middle East which they perceive will be tipped toward Iran". (Saghafi-Ameri, December 7, 2013) Among the opponents of the Geneva Accord, aside from some groups in Iran and the U.S. who are ideologically motivated, there are others that have established an interest in the 'sanction policy' against Iran.

This article tries to answer the questions, as to why could the Geneva Accord be considered as a historic event due to its international consequences? To answer that question, first, we shall present an overview of the previous rounds of nuclear negotiations and explain why it was not possible to reach an agreement then, and why this time, the two sides succeeded in making a breakthrough. Then, we shall study the international and regional implications of the Geneva Accord, and its repercussions on U.S. – Iran relations, and finally, we shall explore challenges facing the implementation of this Agreement.

### **I. Past Negotiations**

In a short examination of the negotiations on Iran's nuclear file that stretched from 2002 to 2010, it could be said that little progress was achieved. In the course of those negotiations, to alleviate any suspicion on its nuclear intentions, Iran went as far as agreeing, in February 2004, with the three European powers —Britain, France and Germany (EU3) — in Brussels to suspend its uranium enrichment and halt building the centrifuges used in enrichment



activities. But in 2005 after it became clear that the ultimate goal of the Western powers through their three European interlocutors is to achieve a permanent halt to enrichment activities in Iran, Iran renounced that policy and after almost two years of postponement, it restarted uranium enrichment activities. It is worth mentioning that when President Ahmadinejad came to power in 2004, it coincided with a deadlock in nuclear negotiations with the EU-3. Problems arose after EU-3 introduced its proposals on Iran's nuclear issues, which Iranian officials considered unacceptable and inconsistent with previous negotiations between the two sides. (Saghafi- Ameri, September 12, 2006)

Facing a deadlock in the nuclear talks, in June 2006, the United States, Russia and China formally joined the three European negotiators, offering a variety of incentives in exchange for complete suspension of uranium enrichment which Iran rejected. Following those events, the United Nations Security Council passed six consecutive resolutions calling on Iran to suspend all its uranium enrichment activities.

Iran rejected the offer for complete suspension of uranium enrichment and reasoned that the program is necessary for its energy security. It further argued that arrangements proposed by the West were unreliable, and would deprive it of its inalienable right to peaceful nuclear technology as stipulated in the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In rejecting the P5+1 proposal Iran was apparently also concerned, like many other non nuclear weapon states, that the proposal for zero enrichment would lead to the monopolization of nuclear fuel production by few world powers. Iran's suspicions were likely not misplaced, since the six members of the P5+1 together comprise the world's major source of enriched uranium. Their efforts to limit the enrichment capacities of other nations therefore come across as an effort to preserve their own commercial interests. (Nicoullaud, December 31, 2013). Furthermore, the countries expressing concern about the nuclear capacities of

others and their potential weaponization, are the same ones allowed by the NPT to retain their nuclear arsenals. It has thus been tempting to interpret their efforts to limit the development of nuclear programs of other nations as an attempt to consolidate their own strategic advantage, especially as they have shown limited enthusiasm for following through on their own NPT commitments regarding nuclear disarmament. (Nicoullaud, December 31, 2013)

In November 2013, a six-month interim accord was reached in Geneva in which world powers agreed not to pursue sanctions against Iran for six months and allowed some relief from sanctions, but more importantly they abandoned their insistence that Iran should halt all enrichment activities. In return Iran agreed to stop enrichment above 5 percent, not to install more centrifuges and not to increase its stockpile of low-enriched uranium.

The success of this round of negotiations depended on some considerations related to the shifting U.S. policy due to changes in the international geostrategic arena and Iran's new orientation in its foreign policy. In general, the shift in global patterns since the end of the Cold War and especially after 9/11 has been staggering: the aftermath of Afghanistan and Iraq invasion by the U.S. and its allied forces, changing Sino-American relations, tensions in U.S.-Russia relations, Arab Spring, etc. (Bacevich, December 6, 2013) Also, in Iran, changing internal and external environments created new exigencies. In the following sections, we shall explore the elements affecting the approach of the two sides and thereby making this round of negotiations successful.

Europe and especially Asia are going through a transitional phase. It is said that while the 19th century belonged to Europe, the 20th century belonged to the U.S. Some observers believe that the 21st century belongs to Asia, and that Asia will occupy the centre stage in world strategic and economic affairs in the 21st century. In 2011, the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the western hemisphere's influence in the world was rapidly waning, and the U.S.

was shifting its focus from Europe to Asia. (Clinton, October 11, 2011) Apparently, this was the idea behind the U.S. strategy that is now known as the 'Asia Pivot'. The strategy is not yet defined clearly but China suspects it is a plan for its containment, though Washington denies this.

There are other indications that tension is brewing between the Western powers and China. The ongoing dispute over the ownership of an island in the South China Sea between China and Japan is one example. The rising Chinese economy is another concern of the U.S. and other Western powers. China overtook Japan as the world's second most powerful economy in 2010. China enjoys a high economic growth and holds over trillion dollars in foreign exchange reserves. Meanwhile, Chinese companies have pumped billions into Africa to secure access to natural resources. The same process is taking place in the strategically important region of the Middle East. The trade relations between Iran and China are expected to grow enormously, amounting to 100 billion dollars (Keck, March 22, 2013) thanks to the unilateral sanctions imposed on Iran by the West. Iran as an Asian country has always cherished its ancient ties to the countries in this continent. That policy was stressed in the 'Look to the East' policy of Iran adopted in 2004 and at the beginning of the presidency of Ahmadinejad when relations with the West went sour due to the nuclear file. (Saghafi-Ameri, 2008)

On the other hand, relations between the U.S. and Russia have reached their lowest point in recent years. The latest event signifying tense relations between the two countries came when Moscow revealed it had moved about 10 Iskander nuclear-capable missile systems in its Kaliningrad enclave - wedged between Poland and Lithuania in response to the US-led deployment of a disputed air defense shield. The Kremlin had warned in 2011 that if the NATO goes ahead with its planned missile defense program, it could station the short and medium-range ballistic missiles along the European Union's eastern frontier. Moscow fears the NATO's system - whose

components include missile-positioning satellites - could be turned into an offensive weapon that targets Russian soil.

Curiously, after the Geneva Accord, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov suggested that a deal with Tehran to curb its nuclear program would make the NATO shield unnecessary since its stated propose was to deal with a threat posed by Iran. But in reaction, the U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel has told his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu in a meeting that a preliminary nuclear deal with Iran "does not eliminate the need" for the NATO shield. (AFP, December 17, 2013)

Nevertheless, despite their current rivalries, all powers including the U.S., China, and Russia are facing a common threat resulting from the Wahhabi, Takfiri, and Salafi terrorism and extremism that is growing in the Middle East. To counter this threat, all of them need to cooperate to make the region more stable, and this could only be possible through concerted efforts for ridding the region of the ongoing sectarian violence. Here, the role of Iran as a regional power with genuine interest for restoring regional stability becomes more evident. Clement Therme, from the Paris-based School for Advanced Studies is among many who believe that "the West is obliged to co-opt Iran to attain regional stability." (Rama, June 12, 2013)

After major failures of the U.S. policies in the Middle East, a desire for withdrawal is dominant among the U.S. leadership and the public. When President Obama in his second inaugural address said that "enduring security and lasting peace do not require perpetual war," he was in fact acknowledging the folly and futility of the enterprise in which U.S. forces had been engaged. Having costing vast amounts of blood and treasure and giving Americans little to show in return, that enterprise is now ending. (Bacevich, December 6, 2013).

The Pew Research Center reported that 52 percent of Americans think the U.S. should "mind its own business internationally", the highest such total in the nearly 50-year history of this query (Pew Research Center, 2013). Many observers believe that



the United States is experiencing fatigue with regard to the crises in the Middle East. They concluded that "the United States is tired of endless Middle East wars, which have brought nothing but grief and debt. It will not undertake military operations in the region unless its direct interests are at stake". (Seznec, 2013) In addition, the events called the Arab Spring showed that while the U.S. prefers not to directly intervene in the Middle East affairs; it is seeking to strike a balance in the region to cope with the sectarian violence which has been the direct consequence of unrests in some Arab countries, especially in Syria. In general, it appears that the earlier policy pursued by the U.S. following the collapse of the Eastern bloc, to replace communism with an ideology often referred to as "political Islam" or "Islamic fundamentalism" as the new enemy has lost its appeal. Under these circumstances, it is likely that the U.S. would come to realize that reconciliation with Iran is the best option to fend off the dangers of extremism emanating from the ideologies of *Takfiri* jihadist that destabilizes the region

The sanctions, especially those initiated outside the UN Security Council resolutions and commonly known as unilateral sanctions, have always been criticized and considered illegal by Iran. One of the negative aspects of the U.S. sanctions policy against Iran concerns the U.S. sanctions regarding Iran's civilian aviation industry that puts the lives of passengers at risk. (Flightglobal, October 26, 2006) Iran Air's US-based attorney, Thomas Whalen, argues that the sanctions imposed against Iran have undermined safety in international air transport, the principal objective of the Chicago Convention of 1949. In 2005, a report prepared for the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) said that the US government had, by imposing the sanctions, ignored international treaties and put passengers on Iranian aircraft at risk.

The sanctions on Iran have not been without consequences for peace and security of the Middle East. With three of Iran's neighboring countries; Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq engulfed in

instability, daily terrorist attacks, and internal strife; the soothing role of Iran for diminishing the tensions and restoration of stability in this crisis ridden region became more challenging with the sanctions. (Saghafi-Ameri, 01 May 2011)

On the trade related matters, the sanctions have encouraged barter agreements between Iran and its major trade partners such as Russia, India and China resulting in a serious blow to petrodollar transactions. The sanctions have also created an environment desirable for the activities of smuggler rings and other criminal groups whose activities transcend national borders. The case of the recent corruption scandal in Turkey that has impaired the normal function of the government in that country is a case in point. In general, it is perceived that the spread of unlawfulness that is encouraged by the 'sanction regime' would only benefit the outlawed radical groups, who are becoming stronger and more active in the region.

Many observers believe that these sanctions have not only been ineffective in stopping the advancement of Iran's nuclear program, but are also causing many negative side-effects including the impairment of free trade, and in general, having a negative impact on the wellbeing of the population in Iran despite claims by the U.S. and other Western countries that they are not targeting them. It took some time for the U.S. to realize that the sanctions have not worked to halt Iran's nuclear program. In fact, the sanctions are a blunt instrument and there has hardly been any example of the sanctions changing the political behavior of the target country. (Jahanpour, 2014) Iran's behavior over the last decades clearly shows that there is no inevitable or linear causal relationship between applying "more pressure" and obtaining "more concessions," as many sanctions advocates claim. Sometimes, as was the case in the 2003-2005 period, the threat of sanctions motivated nuclear compromise; but at other times (2006 to mid-2013), the actual imposition of sanctions appeared to have the opposite effect" (Kahl, December 31, 2013). A report by the EU Non-Proliferation Consortium assessing the European

Union's sanction policy against Iran concludes that "the sanctions have not achieved their stated goal of stopping the Iranian nuclear program. Many point to this as a failure of the policy, and perhaps rightly so". (Esfandiary, 2013)

Apparently, after it became clear to the U.S that Iran's nuclear infrastructure was so advanced and expansive that no military strike would be able to destroy it; the option of diplomacy became more attractive. The stubborn policy by the West to confront Iran's peaceful nuclear program resulted in nothing but turning Iran into a nuclear threshold state similar to some other countries like Japan and Germany, enjoying a 'nuclear deterrence' without having the bomb. After the Geneva Accord, Peter Beinart wrote in the Atlantic that "deal or no deal, Iran will be a threshold nuclear power, able to build a nuke relatively quickly whenever it wants" (Beinart, January 6, 2014). In this context, it is worth mentioning that the U.S. intelligence community concluded long ago that Iran had the scientific, technological and industrial capacity to build a bomb if it wished to do so; but they emphasized that Iranian leaders had not decided to do so. Also it should not be forgotten that Iran unlike Israel has no nuclear weapons and as a committed member of the NPT has placed all its nuclear activities including its 16 existing nuclear sites under constant 24 hour monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In fact, in number of available reports, including the ones issued by the U.S. intelligence community, attest to the fact that there is "no evidence" of a nuclear weapons program in Iran. Although the U.S. and its other Western partners are not conceding this point in public, the fact that Iran, as a nuclear capable country for some years, has not moved toward weaponization is comforting and attests to the peaceful nature of the program. Thus, it was not surprising that the U.S. quietly began negotiating with Iran in 2011. Negotiations that accelerated after the June 2013 election of President Hassan Rouhani who won the Presidential elections on a platform of ending Iran's international isolation and obtaining relief from

international sanctions. (Katzman and Kerr, 2013:18)

Meantime, Iran had its own motivations to start negotiations to achieve a successful end game. While Iran steadfastly resisted, and boldly defied the American-Israeli-led sanctions, assassinations, industrial sabotage and explicit military threats for over a decade, it wanted to close this file once and forever. Apparently, that gained priority when it became evident that the nuclear issue was overshadowing other critical security problems that were developing in the region and their confrontation needed closer cooperation with other countries especially the U.S. The threat of extremism and terrorism was not only threatening Iran but also other major powers including the U.S.. This appeared to be the opportune moment for Iran to solve the nuclear issue, restore confidence, and to rebuild its relations with the West.

## II. New Approach

Since the beginning of the nuclear talks with the three European countries (EU3) in 2003 there were criticism by many Iranians about the tactics and management of the nuclear negotiations that finally broke down in 2005. In the 2013 Presidential debate in Iran, once again the lack of diplomatic professionalism was mentioned as the cause of stalemate in the Iran and P5+1 nuclear talk. In a nationally televised debate the then head of the Iran's nuclear negotiation team, Dr. Jalili who was also a candidate for the Presidency came under criticism for mishandling the negotiations by the former Foreign Minister, Dr. Velayati, another Presidential candidate. The wide and public discontent with the diplomatic approaches in the nuclear negotiations was soothed when Rouhani became President and when he selected Zarif, a seasoned diplomat to take the helm at the Foreign Ministry, raising hope for a final settlement of the nuclear file.

The sanctions have generated pressure and had a negative effect on the Iranian economy and people's livelihood. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that sanctions have had some effect on Iran's



decision to look for an early end to its nuclear file. But it would be narrow sighted to solely attribute the recent diplomatic breakthrough to the sanctions policy. In the view of many experts the nuclear file has been a pretext and that the real purpose of Western confrontation with Iran should be sought in the deep mistrust that exists between the two sides. In this regard, Dr. Zarif believes that, "Americans put forward Iran's nuclear dossier in the international scene to prevent Iran's emergence as a regional power." (Zarif, 2013: 151).

While, rightly or wrongly, a quid pro quo has been established with regard to the 'sanctions' relief versus the 'enrichment' levels in the Geneva Accord, it is important for some politician especially in the U.S. Congress not to be confused about the efficacy of sanctions. In other words, they should refrain from pushing for more sanctions with the illusion that more sanctions on Iran will force a better deal. In fact, the sanctions have reached its ultimate goal and further relying on sanctions will kill any prospect of building confidence and reaching the final solution.

After a decade facing confrontationalism from the West, Iran sought a "comprehensive solution that would enable it to fully enjoy its right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes under the relevant articles of the NPT. Although the language used in the Joint Plan of Action allows the United States to claim that it has not endorsed the right of enrichment for Iran, that does not change the fact that "the enrichment right has prospectively been conceded; it will never be rescinded, nor will it ever again form the basis for a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Iran". (Ignatius, November 25, 2013)

For its part, Iran is demonstrating a formidable self confidence in engaging major powers. By opening up its nuclear installations for wide ranging inspections, Iran is definitely taking some perceivable risks., For instance, Iran is risking these sites becoming potential military target in the future or or target of espionage. However, through this initiative, Iran is simultaneously displaying proudly its homegrown and indigenous technological advances that have been

achieved despite over thirty years of sanctions.

But the real momentum came when the U.S. finally acknowledged that Iran is a key player in regional affairs and should be part of any solution involving regional problems. Engaging Iran through the nuclear negotiations proved that this country could be an invaluable asset for solving regional disputes due to its unique geopolitical position.

As modern historical evidence shows, after every world war a change in the international system has occurred. The occurrence of the First and Second World Wars during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century led respectively to the creation of the League of Nations and the United Nations. With the end of the Cold War, in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, President George H. W. Bush, put forward the idea of "the new world order" under the leadership of the U.S. Meantime, there were some prospects for the restoration of a multi-polar world. However, the war in the Balkans proved the inability of Europe to emerge as an independent pole in the international politics. A uni-polar order found more serious adherents especially among the Neocons in the U.S. after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> in 2001. The unilateral policies that followed resulted in the U.S. military adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The failures of the unilateral policies of the U.S. in different parts of the world including Iran became more evident with the passage of time. In fact "the issue of Iran helped the process of U.S. transition to multilateralism during the second Bush administration. Americans felt that their unilateral policy towards Iran had brought about undesirable effects and Iran had managed to show itself as the rightful side in the international community" (Zarif, 2013:327).

From the perspective of diplomacy, the Geneva nuclear accord is not only considered a win-win deal for the two parties but represents a victory for the paradigm of diplomacy that was largely forsaken in the aftermath of the Cold War and as a peaceful means to resolve international disputes. This shift in the U.S. approach became



quite clear when President Obama emphasized diplomacy by stating that "Today, that diplomacy opened up a new path toward a world that is more secure — a future in which we can verify that Iran's nuclear program is peaceful and that it cannot build a nuclear weapon" (White House, December 15, 2013).

The geopolitical significance of the Geneva Accord has been analyzed by many experts. In general, it is viewed as a positive development that allows Iran to play a more constructive role in dealing with many crises that the region is now facing. The process that started in Geneva could be considered a game-changer in geopolitical terms, and with its final conclusion in a year or so, a more stable geopolitical environment can become possible.

While Iran enjoys a unique status in the region, its country cannot be categorized in any regional ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic groupings. These features give Iran a potential for playing a special regional role. In addition, Iran is involved in a discourse with global dimension. Relying upon this potential, Iran can become a greater regional power. (Zarif, 2013:366)

At present, the region is facing major challenges; the political situation in the region is too complex and prone to instability. The resurgence of al-Qaeda in Syria, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere in the region, is alarming. In an intelligence report attributed to the U.S. State Department it is estimated that 5500 foreign fighters are operating with al-Qaeda's affiliate, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. According to Gen. Mohammed Farid el-Tohamy, the head of the Egyptian intelligence service, Al-Qaeda is even putting down roots in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula (CNN, December 1, 2013).

The growing sectarian schism between Sunnis and Shiites is another major concern. For example, in Syria, it is reported that the Saudis have provided substantial support in arms, money, and perhaps unwittingly manpower to the more extreme groups. It seems that any group, however extreme in its Islamism, is an acceptable party for Saudi support. These groups promote a rabid anti-Shia and

anti-Christian ideology (Seznec, 2013). The consequences of this situation could also threaten the national security of Western countries, as Zarif explained, "We believe that if the sectarian divide that some people are trying to fan in Syria becomes a major issue it will not recognize any boundaries. It will go beyond the boundaries of Syria. It will go beyond the boundaries of this region. You will find implications of this on the streets of Europe and America" (World Time, December 9, 2013).

Indeed, the spread of extremism is the result of the current situation in the region. "Those who have supported extremist elements have already paid a big price for that and, if insist on this policy, they will continue to pay for it in the future. The new initiative of President Rouhani at the UN General Assembly for mobilizing the world against violence and extremism was a clear signal from the Iranian side which was welcomed by the international community".(Dolatyar, 2013)

Under these circumstances, the interim deal between Iran and the P5+1 was considered as a monumental move by many observers that could lead to a shifting balance of power and change the current dynamics in the whole region. Obviously, the West has realized that Iran can play a constructive role in resolving regional disputes and in striking a balance of power in a region which is increasingly becoming polarized. It seems that "what the Americans wanted was an understanding with the Iranians, whereby their role in the region would be balanced against those of other countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, the Arabian emirates and to some extent Israel." (Friedman, December 3, 2013)

Another important issue is that the Geneva Accord could create fertile ground for the realization of a long-awaited Middle East that is free from weapons of mass destruction. There are two noticeably positive developments in this field. First is the reconfirmation of the fact that Iran's nuclear program is peaceful and that the Iranian government is not seeking to build a bomb. Second is Iran's recent



cooperation with Russia and the U.S. in dismantling Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles. This initiative can serve as a model for other countries in the region. The creative formula that saved Syria from an attack by the U.S. represented a win-win approach initiated by Iran and Russia. In a division of labour, Iran gave its support and encouragement to the Syrian government for accepting the deal while Russia took the task of handling the issue at the United Nations Security Council and engaging the U.S. and other Western powers through diplomatic channels. Evidently, in that successful win-win diplomacy, Iran, Russia and the Syrian government (for agreeing to give up its chemical weapons) displayed a very constructive effort as far as the disarmament of weapons of mass destruction are concerned.

The successful disarmament of Syria's chemical weapons is now to have two positive outcomes. First, it would stop the spread of chemical weapons in Syria and prevent it from falling into the hands of rebel groups; although, there are reports that indicate some of rebel groups are already in possession of chemical weapons in Syria. Second, it would encourage other countries in the region to give up their chemical weapons; a step that could be considered as a step forward regarding the establishment of the WMDFFZ in the Middle East. (Saghafi-Ameri, November 4, 2013)

The status of Iran-U.S. relations overshadows many political events in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. One key issue in this relationship has been U.S. efforts to confront Iran regarding its nuclear program. The U.S. played a central role in challenging Iran's nuclear program, making military threats and most recently, imposing the so-called 'crippling sanctions'. (Gienger, April 22, 2009) Similarly, the role of the U.S. in any successful negotiation in the framework of the P5+1 is undeniable. After the Geneva Accord, the focus on Iran and U.S. relations has increased significantly. There had been unconfirmed reports of some back channel talks between Iran and the U.S. to facilitate the process of reaching a lasting settlement

regarding Iran's nuclear file, parallel to the P5+1 talk in Geneva. It is reported that "A back channel was provided by the sultan of Oman, an eccentric character worthy of a spy novel, who learned the arts of clandestine activity from the masters, the British. These covert contacts accelerated when Hassan Rouhani was elected president last June, but they were blessed first by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei" (Ignatius, December 15, 2013).

There are also many speculations about a major breakthrough in Iran- U.S. relations after the Geneva Accord. In a rare interview, Ayatollah Rafsanjani who heads Iran's influential Expediency Council is quoted as saying that "Part of it [the breakthrough in Geneva] was because talking to the US was a taboo. That taboo could not be easily broken and nuclear talks could not move ahead without the U.S.... it was breaking the ice; the second stage will be more routine" (Iran Daily Brief, November 26, 2013).

Indeed, the Geneva Accord may break the long spell of estrangement and hostility between Iran and the United States. Although, at the official level, any connection between the current nuclear talks and bilateral relations with the U.S. is denied in Iran, but it is undeniable that these diplomatic overtures would positively affect Iran's relations with America and other major powers.

In the view of Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski "This is more or less an American- Iranian negotiation. If it fails, it's going to be an American- Iranian showdown." (Philips, 2013)

The U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has had substantial interaction with Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif over the past several months; the Iran-P5+1 talk in 2013 have consistently included extensive bilateral meetings between the two chief diplomats. However, the officials of both countries have sought to downplay prospects that the interim nuclear deal will produce a dramatic breakthrough in relations. U.S. and Iranian officials have denied that the Geneva bilateral talks discussed broader issues beyond the nuclear issue. (Benari, November 27, 2013)



However, some experts suggest that the interim agreement could cause the United States to look for ways to cooperate with Iran on regional issues, such as Syria, where the two countries are supporting opposite sides in the civil war. (Katzman and Kerr, 2013: 18) There has been reports that the U.S. and Iran have already been engaged in their second stage of rapprochement in fighting together to crush Al-Qaeda terrorist groups in Iraq. (Press TV, January 5, 2014)

But there also is a predominant view that "so far tactical moves have not been instrumental in bringing about a breakthrough in Iran-US relations, on the contrary, they have fueled suspicion and misunderstanding between the two sides. They could only be useful when there is a general understanding on the future of relations." (Zarif, 2013: 360)

Considering the above facts, it seems that nuclear negotiations can pave the way for the normalization of the Iran-US relations, and also that any rapprochement between Iran and the United States would help the success of nuclear negotiations.

### **III. Challenges Ahead**

The implementation of the Joint Plan of Action and the reaching of a final status agreement will be difficult. Challenges facing the Accord are consisting of two elements: first, political forces opposing any rapprochement between Iran and the U.S.; and secondly, the existing sanctions and its supporters.

Many countries, as well as many groups inside Iran and the U.S. have expressed their opposition to the Accord. The opponents of this process are mainly hardliners in Israel and their supporters in the U.S. Congress, and also some Arab governments in the Persian Gulf region. In Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu and other hardliners want to ensure that sanctions are only fully removed in return for a verifiable end to Iran's nuclear enrichment capabilities. On the other hand, Netanyahu hates the U.S.-Iran talks not because of nuclear weapons

but because of the strategic shift of the United States (Friedman, December 3, 2013). There is also lingering skepticism and fear among US allies in the GCC, led by Saudi Arabia, about a “grand bargain” where Iran and the U.S. could settle all their differences and cooperate on security issues in the region. The Turkish daily Today Zaman captured it by stating that “the Saudis are angry at the US, whereas Iran is seeking ways to bury hostilities with Washington”(Al Shaiji, December 8, 2013). Although Saudi Arabia cannot accept a new regional landscape in which its archenemy, Iran, has more room to project power (Stratfor, October 29, 2013), their real concern is that after over a decade, they may finally be investigated for their connections to those who conspired to conduct the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001.<sup>1</sup>

Among other governments who displayed resentment towards any opening between Iran and the U.S., the opposing stance of France in the last hours of reaching an accord in Geneva is noticeable. France's opposition was interpreted as representing its desire to maintain its waning status as a major power reliant on nuclear weapons and preservation of the "nuclear club"(Saghafi-Ameri, 2012: 120). Other motivations attributed to the French regarding their conduct include the desire to retain regional ambitions in the Levant, which has been seriously challenged by Iran, its deep political and economic ties with the Persian Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE, its close relations with Israel, and its fear of being deprived of its political and economic opportunities regarding Iran. (Izadi, November 12, 2013) It is worth mentioning that U.S. sanctions "which bans selling, providing goods and services to the Iranian automotive sector, without any exemption, is actually hitting French automotive industry as France is the main foreign actor in this sector. It seems this has especially upset the French after rumors emerged about General Motors engaging the Iranian automotive industry in order to pave the way for their future industrial cooperation(Malbrunot, October 4, 2013).



In general, there is a “collaboration and alignment” of certain countries, working against Iran. They have also clearly indicated their opposition to President Obama’s policy on Iran and are against a peaceful and political solution to Iran's nuclear issue. In fact, a united front has been formed against the nuclear deal with Iran consisting of Israel, some conservative Arab countries and France. "The commonality of interests between Saudi Arabia and Israel has given rise to a de facto alliance between the Saudi monarchy and the Jewish government of Israel. Though historically enemies, Israel and Saudi Arabia are now on the same page in backing Egypt’s military regime, in viewing Iran as their principal adversary, and in wanting a rebel victory in Syria" (Parry, December 31, 2013).

It is worth mentioning that there are also certain political groups inside Iran who feel that the present process of nuclear negotiations and the Geneva Accord do not serve Iran's national interests. These critics are against any kind of reconciliation between the Islamic Republic and the United States and consider the path of diplomacy as leading to a “compromise” with the West. They argue that the West’s animosity against Iran emanates from a profound ideological conflict and can be only defined within framework of the confrontation between two powers. As a result, it can be only resolved through elimination or total defeat of one of those powers or its total submission to the other power. As such, the solution to Iran-West differences, in their opinion, is only conceivable through confrontation (Qasemzadeh, 2013).

Inside the U.S., hardliners, mostly Republican Congressmen and personalities who are under the influence of Jewish lobby, oppose the deal reflecting Israeli stances and pushing for new sanctions on Iran. The Obama administration tried to convince U.S. lawmakers to hold off on new Iran sanctions and give diplomacy a chance. Dozens of senators and representatives had called for tightened sanctions ahead of the last round of talks in Geneva. (The Iran Primer, November 4, 2013)

Besides the political groups, there are certain economic groups in Iran, the U.S. and other countries who are thriving on sanction policies. With the successful nuclear negotiations and the end of sanctions insight, those groups find their interests jeopardized, thus they oppose any accord that would end the sanctions.

The second major challenge facing the Accord was the new proposed sanctions against Iran like the one introduced by U.S. legislators on December 19, 2013, affecting oil and financial sectors in Iran. "Proponents of the bill note that the proposed sanctions would only come into force if Iran violates the Geneva agreement or fails to move toward a final deal, and would not kick in for months. But the White House warns that enshrining new economic threats in law now runs counter to the spirit of the Geneva pledge of no new sanctions during negotiations, and risks empowering Iranian forces hoping to scuttle nuclear talks. The legislation also defines congressionally acceptable parameters for a final deal that Iran experts almost universally believe are unachievable, namely the requirement that Iran completely dismantle its uranium enrichment program. For these reasons, the administration believes the bill represents a poison pill that could kill diplomacy, making a nuclear-armed Iran or war more likely" (Kahl, December 31, 2013). In a stern reaction, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif has warned that new sanctions are in violation of the Geneva agreement signed by Iran and the world's six major powers on November 24. He said "new Congressional action would kill diplomacy" (Iran Primer, January 10, 2014).

While Iran has already paid tens of billions of dollars in direct costs; lost more than \$100 billion due to sanctions; suffered cyber-attacks, seen the assassination of key scientists and engineers, and lived under the perpetual threat of war to protect its self-proclaimed right to enrich uranium, there is no reason to think that more sanctions or military strikes would change Tehran's current stance. (Perkovich, January 15, 2014)

In fact, the Geneva Accord is considered a process of



confidence- building and any sign of the violation of the spirit of the Accord by each side may lead to suspicion and the dissolving of the whole process. Sirius Nasser, a former Iranian nuclear negotiator, cautions that "when the two sides of an agreement do not trust each other, the implementation of the agreement will run into trouble." He warned against the repetition of the scenario in which Iran, due to the non-compliance of the other side (EU-3), ended its temporary suspension of nuclear activities in the summer of 2005, resumed enrichment at Natanz in early-2006, and stopped voluntarily implementing the Additional Protocol (Arman Daily, January 7, 2014).

Thus, any hostile act by the U.S. Congress in the form of new sanctions against Iran could provoke an Iranian reaction at this extraordinarily delicate moment for diplomacy. This could strengthen the hands of those in Iran that believe "the Geneva accord has been devised on a biased basis and should not be considered legally binding in the Islamic Republic of Iran's view." (Keyhan, December 2, 2013) Indeed, nearly one hundred hard liner Iranian parliamentarians have already drafted legislation that would mandate escalating enrichment to 60 percent level if more U.S. sanctions are imposed. Given the thirty-five year history of distrust between Tehran and Washington, it would not take much perceived bad faith by either party to reverse the modicum of confidence built at Geneva. It is difficult to imagine negotiations surviving such a tit-for-tat retaliatory cycle (Kahl, December 31, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

The final status nuclear accord between Iran and the P5+1, once concluded, would have a great impact on regional and international scene. The challenges this accord faces are formidable, ranging from the ideological opposition in the US and Israel on one side and in Iran on the other side. The opposition to any deal with Iran also stems from certain regimes in the region that fear Iran regaining its rightful place in the geopolitics of the region. Added to that are interest

groups both in the US and Iran, as well as some groups in the international business community that have established major interests in the sanction regimes imposed on Iran. Despite those challenges and the upheaval that the preliminary nuclear accord might face in the future, its finalization on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013 in Geneva will be remembered in history for what it achieved using diplomacy, both defusing a crisis that had the potential of deteriorating into a regional or global war, and also offering a positive prospect with regards to cooperation for the purpose of peace in the region and moving toward a long awaited plan for a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction.

## Notes

1. With the Deepening Of Differences Between The U.S. And Saudi Arabia, the U.S. Judiciary Has Reopened the File of Saudis' Role in September 11 Events. <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/9-11-families-shot-suing-saudi-arabia-article-1.1553620#ixzz2oBJY6Wf6>.

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