

The shadow of Iran

By David Gardner

■ Executive summary

The tumultuous events of this summer in the Middle East, from the coup in Egypt to August's nerve gas attack in Damascus, have reshuffled the balance of power across a region in turmoil – in no way more so than the mutual overtures about detente between the U.S. and Iran, the by-product of the almost accidental Russian–U.S. initiative to destroy Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. The shadow of Syria still looms over the region, including the slim prospects for a deal between Israel and the Palestinians. But looming even larger, and with greater possibilities of change, is the shadow of Iran.

About this time last year, Khaled Meshaal, the political supremo of Hamas, looked as though he was contemplating becoming paramount leader of the Palestinians. While Mahmoud Abbas, the beleaguered president of the Palestinian Authority and leader of mainstream nationalist Fatah, was struggling to win an upgrade in Palestine's UN status to observer state, his Islamist rival Meshaal was being feted internationally.

In Cairo, Meshaal appeared alongside President Mohammed Morsi – the Muslim Brotherhood leader who had just negotiated a ceasefire for Hamas after a short war between Gaza and Israel – his confident body language confusing any casual observer as to which one of them was the leader of Egypt. In Ankara, the head of the Hamas politburo was the star guest at the annual congress of the ruling Justice and Development Party, lionised by Tayyip Erdoğan, the neo-Islamist Turkish prime minister, whose success at home and embrace of the Arab Spring abroad had made him the most popular figure in the region.

With the backing of gas-rich Qatar, Meshaal had repudiated the Syrian dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad and relocated from Damascus to Doha. This meant a breach with the Islamic Republic of Iran – the principal ally of Syria and Hizbullah, Hamas's paramilitary stablemate in Lebanon – and a bold bet on the political future of the pan-Islamic Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas was originally the Palestinian chapter.

How things change.

Morsi and the Brotherhood were brought down this summer by their obtuse sectarianism, removed by the army after being rejected by millions of Egyptians. A new emir was unveiled in Qatar, who pulled in the city-state's international horns. Erdoğan's image was dented by June 2013's mass protests in Turkey against his intrusive authoritarianism; his Arab policy, essentially a bet on the fall of the Assads in Syria, lies in ruins. Hamas is penned back into Gaza, while the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has eclipsed the movement's prospects across a region in ferment. Over the summer Saudi Arabia moved decisively to back the army coup in Egypt, while Iran and Hizbullah threw everything into the Syrian fight to save the Assads from mainstream Islamist rebels, who are now losing ground to Sunni jihadi extremists.

These momentous events, but above all the ebbs and flows of the Syrian conflict, cast a shadow over everything else in the Middle East – beginning with the painfully resurrected and halting negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. As I argued in a NOREF analysis in September,¹ the chance of these talks succeeding is thin. Yet it is worth examining how they fit into the wider picture, dominated by Syria.

The discomfiture of Hamas makes the enfeebled Mahmoud Abbas theoretically stronger, and may even foster

1 D. Gardner, "Between the river and the sea: Oslo at 20", NOREF Expert Analysis, September 2013.

reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, one of many preconditions for successful negotiations to set up a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Israeli opposition to this outcome, spearheaded by the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and his irredentist allies, may even be tempered, some speculate, by the dangerous swirl of events in Syria and beyond. The possibility of a Sunni jihadi victory in Syria, in this view, poses such a threat to Israel, Fatah and Hamas that might induce them to make common cause.

Proponents of this line of reasoning further speculate that Netanyahu and President Barack Obama may have agreed some sort of trade: Israel moves on Palestine if the U.S. moves on Iran. But Obama *has* moved – and Netanyahu is up in arms.

How things change.

The U.S. and the West's dithering and improvised responses to the dizzying dynamics of an Arab world in upheaval have paradoxically transformed the gravest events in Syria into an opportunity for rapprochement with Iran. This is a much bigger deal for Obama than Syria is, as well as fitting the president's horror of any further military entanglement in the broader Middle East after Afghanistan and Iraq.

For some days after the August 21st 2013 nerve gas attack that killed over 1,000 people, many of them children, in rebel-held suburbs north-east of central Damascus, it seemed certain the U.S. and some of its allies would launch cruise missile strikes against Assad regime forces. Suddenly, Russia conjured up a plan to strip Syria of its chemical arsenal, and Obama was off the hook. This barely credible initiative, which gives the Assads legitimacy while enabling them to keep slaughtering their people so long as they do not gas them, equally suddenly became the springboard for possible détente with Iran, which is evidently looking to settle the nuclear controversy under its new president, Hassan Rouhani, backed by Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader.

Before the gas of August, three scenarios seemed possible in Syria: prolonged stalemate; the Assads win; the rebels win. Under the second two options:

- The Assads cannot regain control over Syria, but they can hang on in a Balkanised country in which Iran – which already calls a lot of the shots, along with Hizbullah – consolidates its position in the eastern Mediterranean.
- The rebels, fragmented and poorly armed, cannot dislodge the Assads. Even if they did, there would be a second civil war against the jihadis. Where Israel would line up in this is not clear, since until now it has concentrated its fire on Hizbullah – bombing Syria at least three times this year to interdict what it says are Iranian arms convoys destined for the Shia paramilitaries.

After the Lavrov–Kerry initiative, however, it is the shadow of U.S. détente with Iran that looms over Syria – and over Israel-Palestine.

Such are the walls of viscera separating the U.S. from Iran that it will be very difficult to settle all their differences, let alone constrain Tehran's ambiguous nuclear ambitions. But the balance-of-powersheet in the region as of now includes the following:

- The hesitations of the U.S. and its allies on Syria (and before that, on Israel-Palestine) amount to a drain of credibility for the United States and its friends, including Israel, and a net gain for Iran, which had lost prestige among the Arabs after the suppression of the Green Movement in 2009 and its sectarian response to the Arab Spring. That is partly why the Saudis have become unwontedly vociferous about the wimpishness of the U.S., their historical protectors.
- Yet there is nothing positive for the Palestinian cause in Saudi support for the restoration of the Egyptian security state or Iranian support for Syrian despotism, however much Riyadh and Tehran profess their support for the Palestinians.
- But the prospect of the U.S. and its European allies reaching a deal that brings Iran back into the international fold – however slim – really shakes up the equation. This could unlock cooperation with Iran over a range of conflicts, including Syria and Israel-Palestine. That would increase the likelihood that some Iranian influence in Syria (which Tehran currently all but runs) will survive the eventual fall of the Assads. A Western deal with Iran could also redound to the advantage of the Palestinians, reducing internal divisions that Tehran exacerbates and making it safer in Western eyes to force a resolution of the two-states question.

The Netanyahu government clearly sees any Western deal with Iran – even one that places Iranian uranium enrichment under close international supervision – as a threat to Israel's regional hegemony. Yuval Steinitz, Israel's minister of international relations, elided possible talks between the warring sides in Syria and U.S.-led international talks with Iran – both in Geneva – when he said Israel “does not want Geneva 2013 to turn into Munich 1938” – a crude attempt to tar Obama with the brush of appeasement. However, even discounting this overblown Israeli rhetoric, it is visibly the shadow of Iran more than Syria that looms over Israel-Palestine. ■

■ THE AUTHOR

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