

Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs

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Israel and Iran in the Age of Trump: Israeli Perspectives

On 2 March 2019 Pugwash held a roundtable in Tel Aviv in cooperation with the Israeli Pugwash Group and the Alliance Center for Iranian Studies, University of Tel Aviv. More than 25 participants including former officials, academics, and members of civil society attended, including a small number from Europe, the US and Russia. Discussion broadly focused on the situation in the Middle East and the role of the United States and Russia, as well as China, and with a particular focus on Iran's nuclear and missile programs.¹

Many Israelis continue to have serious concerns regarding the entrenchment of Iranian influence and the extent of their force projection toward the Levant. Equally, many Israelis were keen to understand the nature of the Russian-Iranian relationship, most acutely expressed through their cooperation in Syria in recent years, and how the direction of US policy appears to be evolving in the region. In general, it was observed that the prevailing tensions in the region – with ongoing conflict in Syria and Yemen, the isolation of Qatar amongst many Arab countries, and the deepening rivalry between Iran and other countries – should be viewed through the lens of the lack of communication between officials and non-officials across the spectrum of complex issues.

The Syria conflict and external actors

According to one participant, the crisis in Syria appears to have three levels: while there is the domestic conflict between the Assad regime and the various opposition groups, there is also the regional dynamic pitting Iran against a number of other countries, and lastly a more international dimension involving Russia, the United States and its allies, and to a lesser extent China. Nonetheless, it was noted by many that the situation in Syria has transitioned toward playing out the Israel versus Iran conflict, with a high number of Israeli strikes against Iranian forces around the Golan Heights. There was a significant level of concern that Iran is steadily building a long-term presence in Syria not just through military and security services but through a 'penetration of Syrian society' – as in Lebanon through its continued support to Hezbollah – quite unlike the Russian intervention. While Russia has consistently built up, supplied and trained Syrian government forces, Iran's power

¹ This report was prepared by a rapporteur, Poul Erik Christiansen, Projects Manager at the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, to capture the discussions. Please note that the views presented here represent a range of opinions expressed in the meeting, and they do not necessarily reflect the personal views of the rapporteur, nor of the Pugwash Conferences as an organization; however, a large majority of the participants was from Israel, and this is reflected in the views contained in this report. The meeting was held according to traditional Pugwash/Chatham House rules to enable an open exchange of perspectives and exploration of creative possibilities for ways forward. Thus, the substance of the discussions can be reported out, but no item discussed can be attributed to any one individual. There was no attempt to seek consensus, and in fact the sharing of diverse views was encouraged.

projection has extended toward buying land, buildings and a more concerted effort to consolidate its influence beyond regime support.

These issues frame the question of what Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria holds in the longer term. Participants reflected that, although not straightforward, Russia has a deep set of relations with Iran and are ‘doomed to cooperate’ across a range of shared interests in the Middle East and Central Asia. For Russian observers the intervention in Syria has been largely successful: the campaign has not cost them too much in relative terms and they have created a market for their weapons and weapons technology. The calculation for Putin, however, is becoming more complex, with one participant suggesting that the Russian military were unhappy at the increase of Israeli military actions into Syria that affects Russian forces. Nonetheless, there was a certain feeling that a number of regional states had welcomed Russia’s involvement in the Middle East, not least as a counterpoint to the uncertainty of US policy in the region. Unlike the US, Russia has had an historical role in the region and will continue to do so according to strategic and geopolitical interests – it was noted that Israeli policymakers need to grasp this and plan accordingly.

Participants felt that foreign policy under the Trump Administration does not appear to have a clear strategic vision, beyond strong support for Israel and Saudi Arabia and hostility toward Iran. It was noted that Trump himself has a long-standing anti-interventionist streak, with withdrawal from foreign conflicts a strong preference, and so in Syria this became policy in December 2018. Although an about-turn has left around 400 US troops with the stated mission to defeat ISIS, the President’s more recent claims that ISIS has now been defeated hint that he is ready to remove them and ‘leave the mess to the Russians.’ There then remains a key issue of contention surrounding the future of the Kurdish forces, with one participant feeling that the remaining US forces would act as a ‘tripwire’ against any Turkish action against the Kurds. Indeed, the role of Turkey was pointed to as a critical factor for the near future: participants understood that both Russia and the US feel that something ‘must be given to’ the Kurdish forces who have cooperated in the North of Syria in defeating ISIS, yet this is in sharp contrast to the vision and interests of President Erdogan, who not only opposes a Kurdish state but has the overwhelming problem of Syrian refugees inside Turkey in need of resettlement.

With the understanding that Assad has seemingly survived the protracted conflict, stabilization and reconstruction were identified by participants as the two key issues for Syria. Although Russia was viewed as having created a ‘winner’ in Assad, there was some sense that they are not tying themselves to his regime and would consider that any political settlement which brought stability would be optimal for their interests, particularly the maintenance of their military bases on Syrian territory. However, there appears no desire from Assad to forge any kind of political settlement, particularly where it concerns any form of power-sharing or constitutional changes, and one issue is that the opposition remains fragmented. Lastly, a number of participants felt that Russia has no clear end strategy to the Syrian conflict and that they will in fact need the US. Indeed, neither Russia nor Iran were seen as having the desire or means to participate in reconstruction, leaving any significant effort to the Western countries – this conundrum therefore contrasts those who are willing to see Assad’s survival against those who are able to rebuild the country but who do not accept the legitimacy of the regime. Such uncertainty leaves Israeli policy in an uncomfortable position.

Iran and the region

A key issue for Israeli audiences continues to be the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and whether this arrangement can be said to constrain Iranian ambitions. Although one Israeli noted that the JCPOA has been an important tool for addressing Israel's strategic situation, many other Israelis viewed it as not strong enough, and for a number of reasons found it unsurprising that Iran continues to adhere to the deal. First, they saw that the JCPOA has provided 'breathing space' for Iran to pursue its 'regional behaviour' particularly in Syria, Yemen, as well as Iraq. There was a perception amongst Israeli participants that Iran is intent on seeking to exploit weak governments in order to promote favourable regimes that would permit extended force projection against Israel, for example, missile bases in western Iraq. However, there was still some significant debate over what exactly Iran is trying to achieve in the region, with some participants pointing out that Iran feels 'under siege' and has over a number of decades consistently been seeking to protect Shiites everywhere, from its more recent intervention in Yemen to pre-Revolution support for Shiite communities in Syria that has evolved into an alliance with Hezbollah. Viewed through this prism, it was noted by one Israeli that Iran does not have an exclusively 'expansionist agenda' but rather has been focused on building communities and spreading their idea of resistance. Indeed, one Israeli participant noted the similarities between Israel and Iran in respect of their historical civilizations and an apparent inability to 'cope with success' of their strategic actions in the region.

Second, the JCPOA was seen by some Israelis to allow Iran to maintain a nuclear 'breakout capability' that verification will not prevent. Common opinion was that the 'nuclear archive' of Iranian documents seized by the Mossad provides critical evidence that the basis of the JCPOA negotiations was false, insofar as Iran had explored weaponization and were quite far along research and development of a nuclear weapons program. Nonetheless, it was pointed out that, in fact, the nuclear archive shows that the crucial element that was missing from the Iranian program was fissile material and that the JCPOA explicitly and comprehensively addresses this dimension, providing not only for the overwhelming reduction of enriched uranium (UF₆) stockpiles to below 300kg, but enhanced and intrusive verification by the IAEA that enrichment beyond 3.76% is not currently being pursued.

Thirdly, participants were concerned that the JCPOA and accompanying UN Security Council Resolution 2231 does not prevent Iran from developing ballistic missiles that would eventually carry nuclear weapons. Combined with a perception that the IAEA verification regime is deficient, for many Israelis, the missile program should have been at the heart of what a 'better deal' could have looked like in 2015. In this context, participants raised a significant dilemma: what does a 'better deal' actually look like, taking into account what limitations can reasonably be expected of Iran to accept? In light of the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and application of secondary sanctions to other countries and businesses, participants discussed the current Iran strategy of the Trump Administration and what it may herald. The central platform appears to be an assumption that sanctions will eventually cripple Iran to the extent that they will come back to the table to negotiate a new agreement, and that this would present the opportunity to take a more expansive agenda from an American perspective.

However, one participant raised twin concerns in the Israeli establishment: first, assuming that the Trump plan fails and Iran would not come back to the table to negotiate, they would instead resume

their nuclear activities and that this drastically limits the options for addressing the nuclear program. Along these lines, it was also observed that this scenario may suit other elements in the Trump Administration who appear enthusiastic for regime change as the ultimate ambition. Secondly, assuming that the Trump plan succeeds, Iran would come back to negotiate a new set of arrangements but that the Trump team is in fact not as good as it presumes itself to be (as the recent experience with the DPRK might illustrate). Ultimately, one participant expressed a serious concern that the Trump approach might simply 'leave Israel alone with the Iran issue', citing Trump's attitude toward Syria in which he was adamant that Israel can take care of itself.

The Pugwash position, shared by some Israelis, was that the JCPOA continues to be an important instrument for limiting proliferation in the Middle East and avoiding the possibility of future conflicts. Furthermore, a more comprehensive approach is contained in the objective of a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone, which has recently come back to the fore and, it was noted, also addresses the issue of Israel's nuclear weapons. The majority of participants recognized that the deficit of communication between regional actors – official and non-official alike – was a problem that can exacerbate existing political conflicts, and participants were supportive of the idea of a location for all Middle Eastern actors to meet for dialogue without constraints.