

IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL

New US approach to Middle East

MAHMOOD HASAN

IS the nuclear deal between US and Iran, signed on November 24 in Geneva, a sign of real rapprochement? Washington has termed it an "historic agreement." Israel rejected it. Why are the Gulf States nervous about this deal? What does this agreement actually contain? What are its implications for the region?

A perusal of the 4-page document called "Joint Plan of Action" makes it clear that it essentially contains 'confidence building measures' (CBM). The deal is certainly not a breakthrough in containing Iran's nuclear programme. While John Kerry said that the deal will stop Iran from enriching uranium, Iran's Javed Zarif insisted that Iran can go ahead with enrichment.

The main conditions are: it is for a period of six months; Iran will never develop nuclear weapons; Iran can enrich uranium up to 5% only (90% enriched uranium is needed for making bomb); daily IAEA monitoring of Iranian nuclear facilities; US and EU will ease sanctions to enable Iran to repatriate \$7 billions export earnings held up in banks abroad; allow Iranian exports of petrochemicals; UN, US or EU will not impose new sanctions on Iran. In short, Iran will cap its nuclear programme in return for lifting of crippling sanctions.

It is a simple document of intentions. The P5+1 (UNSC permanent members plus Germany, also known as E3+3) will monitor how Iran behaves for the next six months. If Iran honours the agreement—a "comprehensive solution" will be negotiated after six months.

To recall, President Obama in his 2009 inaugural speech said that he would open contacts with Iran. That initiative did not go far because President Ahmedinejad was reelected for a second term and continued with his anti-US tirades. However, President Obama did not take his eyes off from the issue. Contacts between senior US and Iranian diplomats continued, away from the media.

Secret nuclear negotiations between US and Iran began in 2011. The final breakthrough came in September 2013 when President Hassan

Rohani went to attend the UN General Assembly. After conciliatory speeches by both Obama and Rohani, and some high drama at the United Nations, President Barack Obama spoke to President Rohani over phone. That set the stage for direct talks in Geneva between P5+1 and Iran.

After three rounds of talks at Geneva the deal was signed on November 24. It was the first direct agreement between the West and Iran since the 1979 revolution. If the CBMs work for both sides more agreements are expected towards further normalisation of relations. Speaking in Washington after the deal, President Obama cautioned: "In these negotiations, nothing will be agreed to unless everything is agreed to. The burden is on Iran to prove to the world that its nuclear programme will be exclusively for peaceful purposes."

As was expected, the agreement sparked negative reactions in the region. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu termed the deal a "historic mistake" and vowed to defend Israel alone against Iranian threats. Israel has always felt secure under Washington's military umbrella. That umbrella has suddenly folded. Israel now is nervous that US-Iran relations are thawing. Netanyahu's repeated threat to go alone against Iran is a bluff. Israel without US military backing will not dare take on Iran. President Obama has clearly shown that there are limits to Israel's ability to influence and shape US policy.

The Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, are peeved with the agreement. Saudi Arabia even refused to take the UN Security Council seat protesting US policy in the Middle East. President Obama called King Abdullah on November 27 to "reiterate the firm commitment of the US to its friends and allies in the Gulf." Riyadh was deeply annoyed when in August Obama's threat to bomb Damascus turned into an international agreement to destroy Syria's chemical weapons. Riyadh sees 'pariah' Iran's return to the international fold as a threat to its preeminent position in the region.

The rift between Iran and the Gulf States runs along religious line—Persian Shias versus Sunni Arabs. Besides, the Gulf States are autocratic—reluctant to make democratic reforms. The

minority Shia communities in these states have been demanding democratic rights. Iran, though a theocratic state, has instituted systems to change governments through elections—unknown in the Gulf States.

Iran has always challenged the Gulf States and has tried to establish its hegemony over the region. The Iraq war led to the downfall of Saddam Hossain's Sunni government and is now replaced by a Shia-led regime. Iran's influence over Baghdad is well known. Syria's Bashar Assad (Alawite Shia) is still holding out because of Iranian support. The Hezbollah in Lebanon is a force to be reckoned with. Naturally the Arabs are extremely suspicious of Iran's motives.

Normalisation of relations with Iran is likely to bring lucrative business for the Europeans. France can sell more arms to Iran, Gulf States and Saudi Arabia. Germany and Britain may be vying for energy contracts from Iran, the fourth largest producer of oil in the world. Western Europe would like to reduce dependence on Russian gas supplies. Russia and China are satisfied with the deal as it will open opportunities for more business.

The reasons why P5+1 and Iran sat across the table to sign the deal are convergent. Sanctions had wrought havoc to Iran's economy. It was thus imperative for President Rohani to get out of the mess by striking a deal with the West. P5+1 believed that Iran was fast approaching the threshold of breakthrough in assembling the bomb. However, the news of the accord helped Iranian 'Rial' to regain some of its lost value against the dollar.

President Obama opted to resolve the Iran issue peacefully through diplomacy instead of military conflict. For Washington, a friendly Iran is crucial for resolving the Syrian crisis and stabilising the situation in Iraq. A neutralised Iran is also important for Israel's security.

Washington's nuclear diplomacy to contain North Korea failed. Obama's new approach towards Iran shows signs of progress. The next 6 months will tell whether Washington can trust Iran—the "axis of evil"—and whether Tehran can rely on US the "great Satan."

Mahmood Hasan is former ambassador and secretary.

The passing of Nelson Mandela

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THERE was humility in him, the kind that comes to men whose greatness has been engendered by experience and empathy for the sufferings of others. It did not matter that he suffered for years, for close to three decades in the darkness of apartheid. The world was his oyster, in which lurked much pain. He meant to change that world. And he did.

Nelson Mandela would rise every time a visitor stepped into his room, offer his hand to make his guest comfortable. His politeness was all. His voice, for all its softness, was the very epitome of grit and determination. He used it to extraordinary effect—at the Rivonia trial, on Robben Island before his guards, in conversations with global leaders. Prison was his school, the place where bitterness ought to have locked itself into his consciousness, where radicalism should have been an angry harvest in the heart and the mind. For Mandela, though, prison was a world of enlightenment. It burnished his reputation for non-violence. He remembered Gandhi. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., he imbibed the lesson from the great Indian that the best way to disarm your enemy is to respond to his cruelty with love, to his cunning with religiosity.

Mandela's was a world of impeccable moral authority that had little place for parochialism or tribalism. And that certainly was a factor, the most significant, behind his natural readiness to treat his tormentors, the very men who in the name of apartheid had for years thrown indignity his way, with a certain respect. Recrimination and revenge, the astute politician in him knew, could not be the means of shap-



ing a new universe. And statesmanship called for inclusiveness, of the various strands of ideas and of the diverse spaces of belief. For him, black majority rule in South Africa was a historical and moral necessity. But majoritarian rule could only be fruitful if it did not ignore the minority, the fringes, the old tormentors. It was these principles that were to lead to the emergence of Mandela's Rainbow Nation, one his successors have assiduously upheld in their time.

In our fractured world of parochial politicians, Nelson Mandela proved through his resilience and his expansive vision that modernity did not have to be emblematic of mediocrity, that greatness could be the heritage of every age and every culture.

Mandela was a great man, the soul of our times. We will miss him. And yet he will be with us, as he was with us through his darkness on Robben Island, in his luminosity as a statesman across the wide reaches of the globe.

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Power import and the prospect of a Saarc grid

ABDUL MATIN

POWER import from India reached 500 MW on December 3. It may be recalled that Bangladesh started importing 175 MW of electrical power from India through a 100-km 400-kV transmission line from Baharampur in India to Bheramara in Bangladesh on October 3. The import of power from India is a very significant event in the history of power development in Bangladesh. An attempt to import electricity from India was initiated in 1997 but it did not bear any fruit.

The interconnection of electrical grids through high voltage transmission lines across international boundaries is a common practice all over the world. The largest interconnected grid is the synchronous grid of Continental Europe (UCTE) with over 670 Giga Watts (GW) of electrical power. Hundreds of thousands of Mega-Watt-hours (MWh) of electricity are exchanged per day through the European Energy Exchange (EEX). The Eastern Interconnection has a generating capacity of 610 GW and covers eastern US and Canada. The widest area is served by the IPS/UPS system with a generating capacity of 337 GW serving the countries of the former Soviet Union. Other major interconnected grids include the Western Interconnection serving western US, Canada and north western Mexico (160 GW), Nordic countries synchronous zone (93 GW), and Ireland and Great Britain synchronous zone among others.

Efforts are underway to interconnect the US Eastern and the Western Interconnections and form a mega grid. Similarly, the Central and East European countries intend to form another mega grid. European grids operate on a system fre-

quency 50 Hz whereas North American grids operate on 60 Hz. Though grids with the same operating frequency are normally interconnected, it is possible to link systems with different frequencies through DC transmission lines or variable frequency transformers.

Interconnection of regional power grids improves stability and reliability of power supply, reduces the requirement of expensive cold and spinning reserves and allows the construction of larger and more economical central power plants, resulting in overall improvement of economy of the systems.



In our region, discussions were initiated for building a Saarc power grid in 1998. It was reported in December 2011 that Nepal and Bhutan agreed to export 2,000 MW of electricity to Bangladesh, 1,000 MW each from Saptokoshi project in Nepal and Sankosh project in Bhutan. The grids of Nepal and Bhutan are already connected with the Indian grids. India also took initiative to lay an undersea power cable to link its grid with that of Sri Lanka. If both

countries agree, it will be possible to interconnect the grids of Pakistan and India also.

"A South Asian power grid that allows free flow of electricity between producers and importing nations in the region is a top priority and will hugely benefit Bangladesh," said Farooq Abdullah, India's renewable energy minister, in October. He added: "This regional grid will help Bangladesh import more power, because then it can turn to Bhutan and Nepal apart from India."

Nepal and Bhutan have huge hydro potentials estimated at 83,000 MW (42,000 MW economically viable) and 30,000 MW of electricity, respectively. At present, only a very small fraction of these potentials are being utilised. According to the Central Electricity Authority, Northeast India has a hydro power potential of 58,971 MW (excluding Sikkim), of which only 2.13% is utilised and another 4.82% is under developed, leaving over 93 % still untapped. Tripura Chief Minister Manik Sarkar said that his government was more than willing to offer 100MW of power from its Palatana plant that was made possible by transportation of heavy equipment through Bangladesh.

If the hydro potentials of the Saarc region are exploited through joint collaboration, a Saarc power grid will be highly rewarding for the participating countries. For this purpose, Bangladesh should build more transmission lines to the north to connect with the grids of Bhutan and Nepal, to the east to connect with the eastern states of India and, if possible, to the south-east to connect with the grid of Myanmar which has good deposits of natural gas, though Myanmar is not a member Saarc as yet. The interconnections will help Bangladesh to import electricity from all the neighbouring countries.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission and author of "Rooppur & the Power Crisis."

By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Sun block ingredient
- 5 Intimation
- 9 Molecule makeup
- 11 Bakery workers
- 13 Suggest
- 14 Namely
- 15 Industrial one
- 16 1977 Peter Frampton hit
- 18 Pooh-pooh
- 20 Peculiar
- 21 — Gay (historic plane)
- 22 Rocker Glenn
- 23 Pool need
- 24 Stir-fry vessel
- 25 Ship part
- 27 Urban oases
- 29 Wing
- 30 Dry wine
- 32 Grounds for a 15-yard penalty
- 34 Charged particle
- 35 Dick's veep
- 36 "I surrender!"

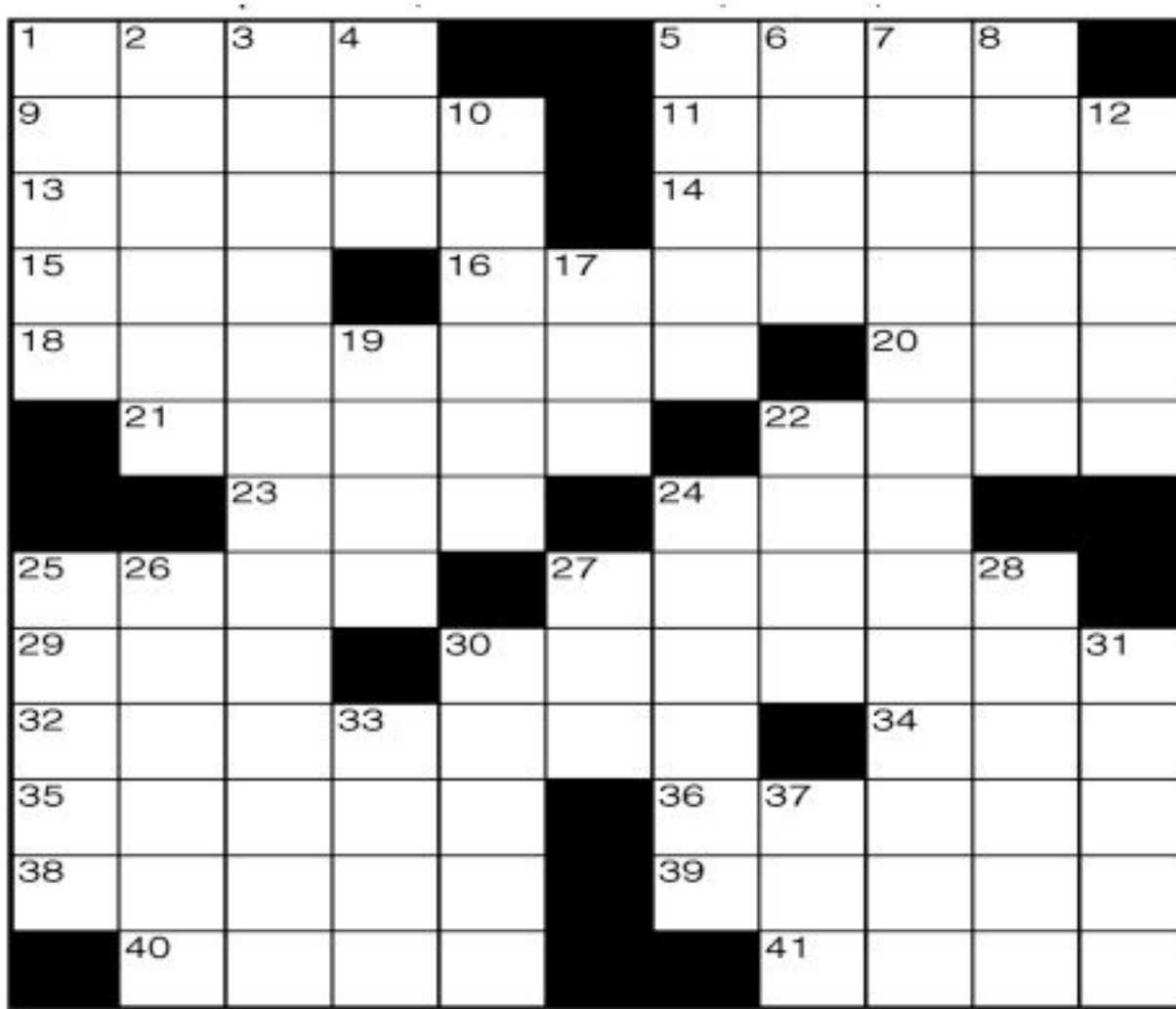
38 Film prize

- 39 Cheap-skate
- 40 Villa d'—
- 41 "Hey, you!"
- DOWN
- 1 Irene of film
- 2 Immediately
- 3 NBA team
- 4 French friend
- 5 Words to the maestro
- 6 Clickable picture
- 7 NBA team

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Yesterday's answer

- 8 Electron tube
- 10 Suppress
- 12 Scrutinize
- 17 Calf cry
- 19 Ref's call
- 22 Thrown — loop
- 24 "Don't leave yet"
- 25 Ashton Kutcher's
- "That '70s Show" role
- 26 Go by
- 27 Frat letter
- 28 Fancy wraps
- 30 Task
- 31 Static
- 33 Part of QED
- 37 Wee bite



11-8

QUOTABLE Quote

"Power, in a nutshell, is the ability to get things done, and politics is the ability to decide which things need to be done."

Zygmunt Bauman

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