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Arab World Split Over Iran Nuclear Deal

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The agreement between world powers and Iran over its nuclear program provoked sharp reactions Tuesday across the Arab world, with some hoping the diplomatic success would reduce tensions and others fearing it would empower Iran and increase instability.

The deal added a new, unpredictable factor to a region where many major players are closely allied with or supported by either Shiite Iran or Sunni Saudi Arabia, and any gain by one is often seen as a loss by the other.

For decades, the United States has been closer to the Saudi camp, so the agreement – and the great effort President Obama invested in reaching it – led parties on both sides to suspect it marked a strategic realignment, with the United States moving away from its traditional Sunni allies.

That feeling has caused alarm in Saudi Arabia, which has long counted on its alliance with the United States for security.

Saudi Arabia and its regional allies see Iran as the driver of much of the region's violence, pointing to its deep support for President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militias in Iraq and Houthi rebels in Yemen.

In its focus on reaching a nuclear agreement, many Saudis say, the United States effectively ignored Iran's destructive policies.

"Iran is an aggressor," said Jamal Khashoggi, a veteran Saudi journalist who has advised government officials. "It has ambitions and plans that it is implementing in the region, and it is using force, not diplomacy."

His fear, shared by many of Iran's adversaries, is that sanctions relief for Iran will give it greater resources to fund its militant proxies.

"Iran under sanctions was a pain in the neck for the Saudis, and it will be more of a pain in the neck without sanctions," he said. "There is no sign that the Iranians are going to change and bring peace."

American officials have expressed hopes that the deal and the economic benefits it could bring to the Iranian people will empower the country's moderates in a way that could make it easier for the United States to work with them on regional issues.

Whether Iran is interested in changing its regional posture remains an open question.

Iran has long branded itself as the lodestar of the "resistance," by which it means the regional forces opposed to the United States and Israel. While most members of this alliance are Shiite, Iran has also supported Palestinian groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which are Sunni. And it has spent years investing in proxy forces such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shiite militias in Iraq, groups whose rallies are punctuated by chants of "Death to America!" and "Death to Israel!"

For more than four years, Iran has also shown no sign of decreasing its support for Mr. Assad in Syria, despite his growing international isolation because of his brutal efforts to put down an uprising against him.

More recently, Iran and its allies have tried to cast themselves as bulwarks against terrorism, noting that they are fighting the extremists of the Islamic State on the ground in both Iraq and Syria.

Some of Iran's supporters saw the intense American interest in the nuclear agreement as a de facto recognition of Iran's strength. They also said the rise of the Islamic State as well as Qaeda-linked groups like the Nusra Front in Syria had led the United States to see Iran as a necessary partner.

The president spoke on Tuesday about the agreement between Iran and world powers, saying it was a "comprehensive long-term deal with Iran that prevents it from obtaining a nuclear weapon."

“The deal shows that the U.S. decided to outsource fighting terrorism to Iran,” said Ahmad Moussalli, a professor of political science at the American University of Beirut, who is close to Hezbollah.

Referring to extremists known as takfiris, Dr. Moussalli said, “They found that only Iran can fight the takfiris since the Americans are not longer ready to put their soldiers on the ground.” This would give Iran a greater role in the region, Dr. Moussalli said.

Like many of Iran’s regional allies, Mr. Assad lauded the nuclear agreement, calling it “a great victory” and a “historic achievement,” according to the Syrian state news service, SANA, which ran a photo of Mr. Assad next to images of Iran’s president, Hassan Rouhani, and its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

“We have no doubt that the coming days will see momentum for the constructive role of the Islamic republic of Iran to support the rights of the people and strengthen the bases of peace,” Mr. Assad said in a message to Mr. Rouhani, according to SANA.

Even some who doubt Iran’s motives cautiously supported the agreement, but said its true significance would depend on implementation.

“On the technical side, it is a good deal, and should be welcomed,” said Abdulkhaliq Abdulla, a political science professor from the United Arab Emirates. “But there is a huge gamble, and you are betting that Iran will fulfill all of its obligations.”