

Seminar Report: Challenges Facing India's Iran Policy

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata and Middle East Institute, New Delhi, organised a one-day seminar on *Challenges Facing India's Iran Policy* on Monday, 3 March 2014 in association with Indo-Iran Society. It was hosted by the India International Centre, New Delhi. The day-long deliberations focussed on recent internal, regional and international developments pertaining to Iran, particularly in the wake of the surprise election of Hassan Rouhani in the June 2013 Iranian presidential elections and the interim nuclear deal between Iran and six global powers in November 2013. A number of issues such as the Syrian Crisis, Iran's strategic ambitions, stand of the GCC countries, Saudi-Iranian rivalry, role of International actors especially the US, Iranian nuclear programme and India's response to these issues and policy options available to it were discussed. Eminent international and Indian scholars shared their views while participants including students reacted with questions and counter-views leading to an interactive day of brain-storming.

In the first session Joseph Kéchichian, Senior Fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, Riyadh and Mr. Emile Hokayem from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Manama spoke on *The Iran Challenge*. The speakers poignantly put contemporary Iran with the regional and international perspective evoking eager responses from the participants. Kéchichian argued that the Iranian economy has been in shambles due to sanctions and international isolation. On the one hand, it has tried to build an economy of resistance based on Khomeini's ideological convictions and tried to diversify its external linkages to improve the financial problems. He also opined that Rouhani who has won a free and fair elections is termed as 'moderate' but he is the choice of the regime that has been forced to come to terms with international concerns over its nuclear programme. Another important issue that was highlighted by him was the pragmatic nature of Iranian foreign policy despite ideological leanings. Kéchichian argued that Iranian ambitions in the region make its Arab neighbours uneasy which is the reason for Saudi-Iranian rivalry and clash of interests over numerous issues including the Syrian crisis. According to him, Syria is crucial to Iran's policy in the Middle East and hence its support for the Assad regime. He further argued that the only way Iranian march in the region can be countered is through an alliance between Turkey, another regional heavyweight, and the GCC states.

Hokayem highlighted the importance of experience, expertise and strategic patience that provides Iran an advantage over its regional rivals when it comes to dealing with international politics. He felt that Iran has always kept the nuclear option open while it has an ambitious missile programme. Moreover, he was of the opinion that calling its nuclear programme as peaceful is farce because it does not take much time and effort to develop a bomb when Iran already has the capability and expertise. Hokayem was not convinced with the prospect for a deal following the Geneva talks and the interim deal arguing that both Iran and the West wish to buy time. Furthermore, he highlighted the limitations of diplomacy in resolution of international problems saying that there always looms a danger of worsening of the problem if diplomacy fails. He was of the opinion that Iran has not performed to its potential when it comes to economy and that it is struggling with the revolution; while the people wish to embrace globalisation, the regime has defiantly holds

on to revolutionary ideals. Hokayem argued that the Arab neighbours look at Iran with suspicion when it comes to regional security thus looking for internationalisation of Gulf security, while Iran wishes to keep international actors out that will give it an advantage on strategic issues. He concluded by saying that the chances of a nuclear deal between Iran and the global powers are remote despite signing of the interim deal.

Dr. Anita Sengupta from the MAKAIAS initiated the discussion highlighting the importance of important regional and international players for stability in the region, which was followed by a number of comments and questions from the participants and from the floor. Issues such as failure of war in resolving international issues, internal problems in Iran, security in the Persian Gulf and role of Saudi Arabia were discussed during the question and answer session. Prof. Gulshan Dietl, chair for the session, summed up the discussion by highlighting the need for all the stakeholders to come to terms with the realities which can pave the way forward to deal with the emerging situations.

The post-lunch *Round Table on Policy Options for India* witnessed a number of eminent speakers sharing their views on various aspects of India's Iran policy. Ambassador Arvind Gupta, Director IDSA, speaking on the strategic challenges, highlighted the need for a balanced policy that takes into account India's interests in the region. He was of the view that India needs to play a balancing act when it comes to other players in the region particularly Saudi Arabia and Israel. Gupta argued that Iran is of immense strategic importance for India both with respect to the Middle East and Central Asia. Moreover, he opined that the need for cooperation with Iran increases manifold due to India's Afghanistan policy. On the Saudi dimension of policy challenges, Ambassador Ishrat Aziz said that both Saudi Arabia and Iran are equally important for India and that India can continue to remain neutral as far as regional rivalries are concerned and maintain friendly relations with all major countries. Articulating the need for an inclusive security structure for peace and stability in the region, which according to him is of paramount importance for Indian interests, he argued that India does not have the luxury to take sides.

Prof. K P Vijaylakshmi, while speaking on American dimension of challenges, argued that India is at an important juncture and historical spot with respect to its options in international politics. She was of the view that Iran's engagement with the US is deeper than it appears and that most of the regional and international players including the US, wish diplomacy to succeed in resolving regional issues. This, she observed is in the interest of most of these actors.

Speaking on the energy aspect of challenges, Prof. Girijesh Pant argued for the need to reconstruct India's Iran policy as Iran offers huge potential for engagement. He was of the opinion that when it comes to Iran, nuclear issue is not the most important issue and that the recent move of the West to engage with Iran is an indication towards strategic move to bring back Iran in contention. He also argued that energy is pivotal but not the axis of bilateral relations between India and Iran. He further raised the question for the need to reconsider India's priorities in the region. Dr. Meena Singh-Roy, IDSA expressed her reading on the Israeli aspect of challenges facing India's policy towards Iran. She pointed out that Israel looks at a nuclear Iran as a security threat. India, according to her, has to do a tight-rope walking when engaging with Iran and Israel and that it can learn a few lessons from the Chinese way of closed-door diplomacy and balance relations between regional rivals. Prof.

Rajesh Rajagopalan outlined the nuclear issue and how it poses a challenge for India's policy towards Iran. He was categorical in challenging the 'peaceful' nature of nuclear programme saying that there is no such thing as peaceful when it comes to nuclear enrichment. What it takes to make a bomb is higher level of enrichment and argued that it would be in the interest of India to tread with caution the Iranian nuclear ambition as it can lead to a complex situation in the region.

The discussion that followed included numerous questions and observations on various aspects of India's policy such as Pakistan's importance to India's policy towards the region, need for cooperation with Iran over Afghanistan and Central Asia, role of global powers, Chinese angle, security challenges and regional issues. The need for India to develop further expertise on the region to seek better policy was the underlining thrust of the deliberations. Prof. P R Kumaraswamy chaired the session and highlighted the need for clarity and careful handling of India's policy vis-à-vis Iran.

Prof. Mushirul Hasan gave the keynote address and expressed concern over lack of scholarship over Iran in India, given historical linkages between the two nations and its importance in the world. He also argued that ideology does play a role in shaping the policies in developing countries implying that both India and Iran are no exceptions. Dr. Sreeradha Dutta, Director MAKAIAS chaired the session. Md. Muddassir Quamar gave the vote of thanks on behalf of the organisers.

Report prepared by Md. Muddassir Quamar, doctoral candidate at Centre for West Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.