

ABSTRACT

September 27th 2013 was a remarkable day; it was when President of the United States Mr. Barack Obama made a 15 minute phone-call to newly elected President Hassan Rouhani of Iran at 02:30PM (18:30GMT) after the U.N. General Assembly that took place in New York (Charbonneau, 2013). It marked the highest level of contact to have taken place between the two nations since 1979; when Iran's then US ally Sha Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was removed from power, fled to the US and the US embassy hostage crisis followed in Teheran.

The phone call was the result of several rounds of talks between the P5+1 and Iran starting in February, taking place in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Next round in April they met again in Almaty after high-level talks in Istanbul Turkey in March. The latest meetings took place in Geneva, one in October 2013 and the last in November 2013 when an agreement was reached. The meetings were chaired by Baroness Catherine Ashton, EU high representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

As these talks are revolutionary, the whole world is looking at the process and what the possible outcome may be with different feelings. Mainly positive from Western Allies, some with mixed and others close to hostile from Nations such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Whenever there is broad media coverage of an event, especially a high level and revolutionary process such as this, it is always important to look at what is not being covered, what is being forgotten or left unmentioned, asking oneself; what is missing? While the world has been focusing for years on peaceful processes of disarmament and regulation of Nuclear weapons with dismissal programs, such as the new START treaty, which took effect in 2011, a whole new field of war has been developing and a subsequent arms race has already begun with relative little attention.

This research examines Iran's shift from the ambition of acquiring nuclear weapons, to developing offensive cyber capabilities. Posing the question: what should we really be worried about? As the nuclear interim agreement reaches the end of its 6-month trial, this study investigates what is happening in the meantime with the development of Iran's offensive capabilities, how the agreement and the Iranian offensive cyber program are linked and what we can expect from the near future. After examining the global shift towards the fifth cyber domain in modern warfare techniques, case studies of examples of usage and the history of those are laid bare, in order to understand what lies ahead. The easing or lift in sanctions will result in greater access to Iran's assets abroad and will open up ways to revive their struggling economy. This thesis will look closer at what this means for the already large military budget allocated to cyber, as Iran has already released statements of increasing their military expenditures, despite the interim agreement. The future of modern warfare is already here. The focus of this thesis, is whether we are still putting too much emphasis on the conventional arsenal, ignoring the real threat that new technologies and covert cyber operations of rogue states and actors pose today.

The findings in this study highlight how Iran is getting the best of both worlds with the nuclear interim deal, reached with the five permanent Security Council members plus Germany. While maintaining a nuclear research program, sanctions are lifted allowing them to invest more in other capabilities such as cyber. Iran has made a significant effort in the cyber domain, becoming a tier-one cyber power in less than four years with the help of, amongst others, Russia. While the global response has been positive, towards the established diplomatic ties, the regional less so, with most notably Israel remaining a strike capability against Iran. The main incentive is that instead of getting carried away on the 'success' of a dialogue with a rogue state, strong measures should be kept in place, and the progress of Iran in the cyber domain closely monitored. Once sanctions are lifted, they are very hard to put back in place, especially with Russia, Iran's friend leading the Security Council this term.