

FROM FROZEN TIES TO STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT: U.S.-IRANIAN RELATIONSHIP IN 2030

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The ongoing nuclear talks between Iran and P5+1 following the most stringent sanctions against Iran to date have opened new prospects for relaxation of tensions between Tehran and the West and for a U.S.-Iranian détente in the long run. The coming to power of new presidential administrations in both the United States and Iran, the additional sanctions, sweeping geo-economic and geo-political trends, and U.S.-Iranian cooperation imperatives, all contributed to these dynamics. Some now view the negotiations as a new beginning in U.S.-Iranian ties, which could herald the emergence of a U.S.-Iranian strategic relationship in the next 15 years.

This monograph, written in late-2014, develops and examines three possible strategic relationships between Iran and the United States that could emerge by 2030: 1) strategic engagement involving a nuclear weapons-capable Iran; 2) comprehensive cooperation following a “Grand Bargain”; and, 3) incremental strategic engagement after a nuclear deal. These relationships deliberately focus on constructive engagement, skipping the status quo and a strike on Iran as other possible outcomes. While it does not identify the winner, this monograph assesses the plausibility and likelihood of each relationship emerging and recommends policies to cultivate and prepare the United States, Iran, and their partners for a strategic change.

A resulting U.S.-Iranian relationship would probably rest on common policies on select issues rather than look like a full-blown strategic partnership, which is unlikely in the next 15 years as the parties need to rebuild trust and realign policies with their allies and partners. Such a relationship would thus likely rest on the principle and practice of selective engagement, but with an understanding and direc-

tion to a more full-fledged strategic relationship in the longer term.

If accomplished by 2030, a U.S.-Iranian détente would advance external integration of the Greater Middle East, aiding the U.S. strategy of fostering global connectivity. It would promote relaxation of tensions, resolution of conflicts, and development and reconstruction of countries ravaged by wars and sectarian violence. It would also enable the United States to deploy select regional military assets to other locales, such as Asia and Europe, to deal with other challenges while repurposing its remaining assets to address new threats in the Greater Middle East.

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