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Analyzing the Iran Deal: An Interview with Thierry de Montbrial

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November 25, 2013 Written by Chrisella Sagers Herzog, Managing Editor

In a victory for diplomacy, world leaders announced early Sunday that a deal had been struck with Iran over its disputed nuclear program. In what U.S. President Barack Obama called an “important first step” toward addressing the world’s concerns over Iran’s motivations and actions and opening a path out of a three-decade long standoff, the deal will curb Tehran’s nuclear ambitions away from a bomb and toward a civilian capability, in exchange for limited relief—for now—from strict sanctions that have devastated the Iranian economy.

The *Diplomatic Courier* sat down with Thierry de Montbrial to discuss the ongoing negotiations with Iran, the impact of any deal on their nuclear program, and U.S. strategy in the Middle East. Mr. de Montbrial is a French economics and international relations

specialist, President of the French Institute for International Relations, and the founder of the World Policy Conference.

[Diplomatic Courier:] The negotiations with Iran were greeted in the U.S. with some cautious optimism. Is that the general mood in Europe as well?

[Thierry de Montbrial:] The interesting thing in Europe—particularly in my country, France—international questions are much less debated than in other countries. These issues are more left to specialized groups. There is not much public debate. Also in Europe, there are so many internal problems like slow growth, unemployment, and so on, that international questions are not on the front page. This being said, I think that there is very cautious optimism. After more than three decades—35 years—trust between Iran and Europe has been totally destroyed. You cannot restore trust overnight. The best that can be achieved—and which I hope will be achieved would be first a Geneva agreement which would stabilize the relationship in the short term, and then a long term process. I personally like the comparison with the situation in Europe at the end of the Cold War. The Helsinki process and the concept of confidence building measures would ultimately limit the risk of catastrophic destabilizations—the butterfly effect syndrome—without impeding the possibilities for gradual change and improvement within Iran itself. I do think that the Iranian regime is not there to last forever.

[DC:] After President Rouhani returned from the United Nations General Assembly having spoken with President Obama on the phone, he was greeted in his country with protests. How are the current talks being received within Iran?

[TM:] I think it's a very complex issue. First we should never forget that Iran is a great country with a very long history and very proud people; the nuclear issue is not identified with the current regime. It originally started under the Shah of Iran, when he wanted to get nuclear weapons.

On the other hand it is true that the general public in Iran wants a better life; they are very much hit by the sanction process. Sanctions usually hit the poor—that was the case in Iraq, and one should never forget that the sanctions imposed on Iraq under Saddam Hussein hurt the poor people. They want to improve their lives. It is likely that the majority of the Iranian people would be happy to be delivered from the regime, but at the same time they are nationalists, they would not like to see the country humiliated.

Third, even if the regime is criticized internally, it is still supported by very significant segments, which are ready to fight. I think that its important from the Western point of view to understand that they too have their internal political situations to deal with. Obama has to deal with Congress; in Iran, Rouhani, Zarif, and others also have to deal with other forces, other actors. It's important to understand the whole picture, because if we do not, the risk is to fail in the search for agreement. If the diplomatic efforts fail it will be a tragedy for everyone.

[DC:] Do you think that the sanctions were a big motivation in these most recent talks, or do you think there were other forces at play?

[TM:] Although of course they would never recognize it—at least officially—yes, I think the sanctions have played a role. It is interesting because there are not so many examples, at least not that I am aware of, where the process of sanctions was so successful. Whoever remembers South Africa during apartheid, sanctions did not work; on the contrary, they developed devices to get around the sanctions, producing synthetic oil and other things.

In this case the sanction process worked well, and to a large extent because of the progress in technology and communication. For instance, if I'm not mistaken, there are maybe \$100 billion in Iranian assets frozen outside Iran precisely through the process of sanctions. This kind of isolation was just not feasible 20 years ago. It is really the progress of technology that allows these kinds of sanctions to be effective, but they would not be likely to recognize it.

Also, in Iran, even within the regime, there are a number of people who are intelligent, wise, intellectual, educated—I'm convinced that you have many influential people in Iran that would like to get out of this ridiculous situation, especially as historically speaking Iran has never been anti-West, never been anti-Israeli. On the contrary, historically Iran has been relatively close to Israel. The traditional enemies of Iran are not the West or Israel—that's the Arabs, especially the Sunnis. That is why Saudi Arabia and others are so wary about the possibility of Western reconciliation with Iran.

[DC:] What challenges do you foresee, if any, in an agreement that allows Iran a nuclear capability?

[TM:] Well, first of all, I do not expect a final agreement in this round of negotiations; at best, we could have a temporary agreement. The issue is so deep and sensitive that a quick final agreement is unlikely. What I think is important is at least to have some partial agreement which helps to create a little bit of confidence and to help to create a beginning of new dynamics. When I say new dynamics, it is just a way of speaking, because there have been no dynamics at all since the revolution.

[DC:] What is your assessment of the U.S's approach not only to this with Iran but to the Middle East region as a whole?

[TM:] First of all I must say that I admire Obama because he was the first president, to my knowledge, who tried to tackle the Middle East issue—specifically the Israel-Palestine issue—during the first term of his presidency. Historically, it is usually in the second term that the president tries to tackle this issue seriously. The typical situation is to reach an agreement in the last month of the second term, and usually it doesn't work.

In that sense I admire Obama; unfortunately, this did not work. I wonder if there is a chance for Obama to end his presidency with any result at all, and if we think along this line, that takes us back to the Iranian issue. If the Iranian deal fails it would probably mean the entire failure of Obama in the Middle East, and since his domestic position is quite weak, I suspect that he is going to try very, very hard to get some results. What is

attainable is an agreement with Iran, and if there were real agreements with Iran that would allow a fresh start of a new process—a little bit like ‘ping pong diplomacy’ between the U.S. and China under Nixon in 1972—that might be enough to save his presidency from the viewpoint of the Middle East and foreign policy.