



### HOPE: ANALYZING IRAN'S NEW PEACE INITIATIVE

By  
**Fatima Raza**  
*Research Associate*

Edited by  
**Najam Rafique**

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



**At the 74<sup>th</sup> session of United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on September 25, 2019, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani presented an initiative for peace and stability in the Gulf dubbed the Hormuz Peace Endeavour or HOPE.<sup>1</sup>**

Being hyped in the Iranian state media preceding the UNGA session, HOPE was officially announced by President Rouhani at the General Assembly session, while its detailed briefing was given by the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif. Key points of the peace initiative as detailed by Mr. Zarif include: Dialogue, Confidence-building, Freedom of navigation, Energy security, Non-aggression, and Non-intervention.<sup>2</sup>

Unveiling this plan at the UNGA in the backdrop of the recent developments seems like an Iranian attempt to broker peace with the regional countries. In a bid to end its regional isolation, an ostracized Iran has brought forth this peace initiative for the littoral states of the Hormuz region; Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE. Several questions come to mind regarding this initiative such as why has Iran presented this plan to the world at a point in time when its neighboring countries seem most uneager to team up with it?

HOPE may be a recent announcement, but it is based on Iran's old policy preferences that aspire to a regional system of collective security for all Persian Gulf states sans foreign interference, particularly

<sup>1</sup> "At UN, Iran proposes 'coalition for hope' to pull Gulf region from 'edge of collapse". *UN News*, September 25, 2019. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472>

<sup>2</sup> Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Iran's Counter-Discourse Of Hope", *Lobe Log*, October 3, 2019. <https://lobelog.com/irans-counter-discourse-of-hope/>

that of United States. Time and again, Iran has conveyed to its neighboring states that 'security' cannot be bought externally which refers to the individual security arrangements that its neighboring countries have signed with the Western powers. These arrangements have been a norm in the Gulf region, increasing US interference in the region which has troubled Iran for a long time now. Thus, it has always irked Iran to see the surrounding GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) nations making security arrangements with United States. This is what causes the frequent US-Iran posturing in the Persian Gulf waters as well. With this new initiative, Iran hopes to achieve a regional security arrangement that is based on the principles of non-intervention and non-aggression, or so it says.

The timing of this endeavor is interesting as it comes when Iran is striving to keep afloat despite heavy sanctions, economic standstill, unemployment and other domestic socio-economic woes. Announcing a regionally inclusive arrangement for security is indicative of Iran's desperate need to convince regional players to reduce their dependence on the United States. It also shows Iran's attempt to revitalize ties with its neighbors in order to garner political and moral support as opposed to Israel's increasing proximity with the Arab nations. It is true that the regional countries like Saudi Arabia have security arrangements in place with United States by paying exorbitant amounts. Saudi Arabia is currently the largest foreign military sales (FMS) customer of US with over \$129 billion in active cases.<sup>3</sup> It is most obvious why this bothers Iran and endangers its very existence in this region.

Such alliances between a foreign rival power and its neighboring states have made Iran insecure as a country that is already isolated from the regional bloc. Offering this initiative is Iran's way of inviting regional countries for a dialogue on Gulf security and disruptive role played by foreign superpowers. Iranian FM Mr. Javad Zarif further emphasized that the 'HOPE' initiative aims at uprooting terrorism from the region to ensure free flow of energy and overall stability.<sup>4</sup> Being dubbed the 'state sponsor of terrorism' by US; Iran asserts that its efforts to eradicate the threat of ISIS from the region have been fruitful to a great extent. Thus, by adding anti-terrorism efforts to the peace initiative, Iran is trying to project itself as an important regional actor that is capable of spearheading counter-terrorism efforts as opposed to its infamous terrorism-sponsoring image touted by US and its allies.

The other important aspect of this peace initiative given by Iran is that of maritime security in the Persian Gulf. The Gulf waters have remained turbulent marked by US-Iran posturing for many months now. United States deployed its B-52 bombers, Patriot missiles and aircraft carriers in the

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State. "U.S. Security Cooperation With Saudi Arabia". May 21, 2019. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-saudi-arabia/>

<sup>4</sup> News Desk, "Support for Hormuz Peace Plan Will Ensure Middle East Peace", *Financial Tribune*, September 28, 2019. <https://financialtribune.com/articles/national/100086/support-for-hormuz-peace-plan-will-ensure-middle-east-peace>

Gulf waters to counter Iran's oil tanker attacks and its threats to close the Strait of Hormuz. The situation became even worse after the drone attacks on two Aramco oil facilities in Saudi Arabia on September 14, which even provoked France, Germany and the United Kingdom (UK) along with US and other Middle Eastern countries to blame Iran. Iran's HOPE initiative stresses the importance of freedom of navigation for oil transport which also puts it up for competition with the US International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC). IMSC aims to "increase overall surveillance and security in key waterways in the Middle East", according to US Deputy Secretary for Defense Michael Mulroy.<sup>5</sup> What puts Iran at a disadvantage is that from within the Gulf region; Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and UAE have already joined the IMSC.

Iran's initiative, on paper at least, seems like a promising venture as an indigenous effort to build up a front against unwanted foreign interference. However, it is also important to analyze HOPE's connection with the larger Gulf security plan envisaged by Russian President, Vladimir Putin. Following its substantive involvement in Syria; Russia wishes to ensure its own regional relevance in the Middle East. Russia's Gulf security concept hinges primarily on Moscow-Tehran-Ankara alliance in Syria and seeking a 'non-American' future for the Middle Eastern region.<sup>6</sup> This is what puts the HOPE initiative close to the Russian concept of Gulf security. However, the two countries have not yet admitted to any connection between their respective initiatives so far.

Iran's HOPE may resonate with the larger Russian idea of Gulf security, particularly due to its 'de-Americanization' quality. But in the long run, these two may run even contrary to each other as their end goals are quite different. Iran's idea of non-intervention from any foreign power must also apply to Russian overtures in the region. The two may have sided with one another in Syria, but their alliance is not meant to last long as Russia does not share Iran's fervor to keep Bashar-al-Assad's rule intact in Syria. Apart from this, there are other methodological and policy differences between the two. Thus, at the moment it seems like Iran's HOPE initiative is its singular effort to appease regional countries. However, Russia has welcomed Iran's efforts to rally support for a more stable Middle East.

Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) has undoubtedly come at a time when the Gulf region is fraught with instability and divide. Getting acceptance from regional countries, therefore, will be an uphill task for Iran. Although Qatar has welcomed Iran's idea; other Gulf states shall be extremely difficult

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<sup>5</sup> News Desk, "Putin's Gulf security plan depends on Trump", *Al Monitor*, August 16 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/08/putin-gulf-security-plan-trump-iran-uae-saudi-arabia.html>

<sup>6</sup> Sergei, Lavrov. Interview with Ibrahim Hamidi. *Asharq Al-Awsat*. October 3, 2019. <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1929496/lavrov-asharq-al-awsat-putin%E2%80%99s-visit-ksa-promotes-partnership-new-level>

to convince.<sup>7</sup> Plagued by mutual distrust and augmented by third-party interference; Iran's ties with its regional countries will take time and concerted efforts to normalize. They will also require a constructive and unifying role of foreign powers like United States and Russia; former more than the latter, to promote peace among all regional countries. However, as long as there is a strong will to resolve mutual differences; there may still be hope for HOPE to work for the region.

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<sup>7</sup> "Qatar says 'Coalition for Hope' initiative shows Iran's willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue for regional security", *Tehran Times* October 2, 2019. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/440731/Qatar-says-Coalition-for-Hope-initiative-shows-Iran-s-willingness>