

# Why the Nuclear Deal Hasn't Softened Iran's Hard-Line Policies

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**As the election process and continued regional aggression have shown, the regime won't change what it's doing at home or abroad until the price for such behavior is made clear and unmistakable.**

Iranians may want to reform and open up economically, but what's become clearer since the nuclear deal was signed is that culturally and socially almost nothing has changed. Nor are these, or Iran's broader policies, likely to anytime soon. The supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, continues to rail against "American influence" and engages in a war of words with the Saudis -- and backs the aggressive use of Hezbollah and other Shiite militias to extend Iran's reach throughout the region. It is Qassem Soleimani, the leader of the IRGC Qods Force, not the more moderate president, Hassan Rouhani, who shapes and implements Iran's policies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, and the sudden granting of \$7,000 to every Palestinian "martyr."

True, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action may have strengthened Rouhani politically -- or at least made him more popular with the Iranian public. Perhaps, that will mean something over time. For now, however, the key centers of power in Iran have not been weakened. If we truly want to see Rouhani and the more pragmatic constituency in Iran strengthened over time, we need to raise the costs to Iran for its destabilizing and threatening policies in the region -- we need to show that what Soleimani is doing around the region is costing Iran and blunting its future development.

Ironically, the recent elections offer more evidence of the limits of change in Iran. Weeks before the elections for the parliament and the Assembly of Experts, the Guidance Council -- a body of 12 that determines who can be candidates -- excluded nearly all those identified as reformers and moderates. Reports at the time indicated that out of 760 reformers who had registered to run in the city of Tehran only four were permitted to stand as candidates for

parliament; in all of Iran, out of 3,000 who registered, fewer than 300 were allowed to run for Iran's legislative body. And yet, when the parliamentary elections were held, the big story was that "the moderates had made big gains in the elections."

How can one square these seemingly contradictory reports and the outcome of the elections? The most likely answer may be that Iranians, especially the middle-class voters, were voting against rather than for candidates. Since so many of the reformist or moderate candidates were disqualified, they chose to vote against those they knew to be conservative opponents of Rouhani's nuclear deal and his efforts to improve the economy and open Iran to the outside world.

Iranians voted to continue those efforts. They voted against the hard-line candidates who favor more restrictions on social liberties internally and confrontation externally. But that should come as no surprise -- every time Iranians have had a chance to express themselves politically, that is the way they vote. Consider who has actually won the presidential elections since 1996; even Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in 2005 may not be an exception to the rule as he ran as a populist against corruption and privilege -- and in 2009, the real winner, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, was denied his victory. If Iranians could vote for genuine reform, they would do so; unfortunately for the Iranian public, opening up the political system, liberalizing social strictures, limiting the power of the mullahs and the Revolutionary Guard, enhancing the rule of law and stopping aggressive and costly support for Shiite militias in the region are never on the ballot.

And when a reformist or pragmatic president is elected, he is clearly constrained. We saw that with Mohammad Khatami. Similarly, Rouhani has been unable to introduce any significant domestic or social reforms. Khamenei remains the chief decision-maker. Rouhani does not control the judiciary or the leading security organs, including the Revolutionary Guard. If one needs any proof that his powers are limited, one need look no further than his inability to release from house arrest the two leading presidential candidates from the 2009 elections -- Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi.

While there are other indicators of his limited powers -- executions are up and journalist arrests are increasing -- the fact remains Rouhani was able to conclude the nuclear deal notwithstanding the opposition of the leading conservatives. Clearly, he retains the support of the supreme leader. Khamenei remains deeply antagonistic to the United States, but he apparently accepts Rouhani's argument that the Islamic Republic needs to modernize if it is to retain its legitimacy and avoid alienating so much of the public as to threaten the sustainability of the regime. Khamenei may continue to call for a "resistance economy" but has granted Rouhani the license to improve it by getting sanctions lifted and bringing in significant investment from the Europeans, Chinese and others. Economic openings may be one thing, but, clearly, social and cultural liberalization is quite another.

Going forward, if we want to see more favorable change within Iran and less aggressive policies in the region, we need to apply the same logic we employed to bring the Iranians to the negotiating table on the nuclear issue: Make the Iranians pay a high price for bad behaviors even as we offer them a way out -- a pathway where an Iran that does not employ terror, use the Shiite militias to subvert and coerce its neighbors, reject Arab-Israeli peace and demand regional dominance is an Iran that can achieve economic success, gain respect and play a role in the security architecture of the region.

But for that to happen, the price for what the Revolutionary Guard is doing in the region must be clear and unmistakable. Pragmatists and reformers won't be empowered, and the nuclear deal may not even be kept, if Soleimani's Qods Forces can expand Iranian influence and pay no price for doing it.

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