

Iran's Last Chance to Join the International Community

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Successive White House administrations have tried to weaken the Iranian mullahs' grip on the country through war, sanctions, and diplomatic isolation. Each policy has failed eminently, and a considerable list of U.S. officials expects more of the same from President Obama's new strategy of 'veiled' diplomacy, which attempts to foster better diplomatic and political relations with Iran via the nuclear agreement. But the common conviction that Iran sponsors terrorism and threatens American allies may be as unshakable as the mullahs' grip on power. When State Department officials next visit Tehran, there still will be no photo-ops of Iranian presidents embracing high-profile American diplomats. Such is the rapprochement with Iran – an awkward, one-armed embrace.

Nevertheless, successful marathon negotiations that ended the nuclear stand-off prompted the world to optimistically praise "moderate" Iranian politicians yearning for better ties with the West. A reputable American magazine recently profiled "friends" U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif as they worked together to secure the release of the Americans sailors detained after accidentally drifting into Iranian territorial waters.

But the article and its many brethren present a fairytale view of Iranian politics. By suggesting that Iranian politicians like Zarif's lack of personal or political enmity towards the United States is demonstrated by fluency in English and a good understanding of American culture, the articles ignore the realistic explanation that learning the language and culture of an adversary is a classic tactic to shrewdly manage and wage conflict.

In fact, Iranian politicians of all ranks and levels of moderation are handpicked by the hard-line Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his deputies. Iran's political system drove this point home when hundreds of more liberal candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections, including Ayatollah Khomeini's grandson, were disqualified by Khamenei and only recently re-allowed to even participate. In other words, only the politicians vetted by Iran's conservative establishment succeed.

The true Iranian moderates are the citizens calling for a political overhaul through the replacement of mullahs with technocrats, who would possess the skills able to repair Iran's economy and international ties. These lower and middle class Iranians hope that when trade resumes, small to midsize business owners and skilled practitioners will prosper, indicating that in Iran, economics and moderation go hand in hand. The recent nuclear deal could indeed pave the way for Iran to resume trade in many industries and boost its oil output by more than 75 percent. But it is

unlikely that the Iranian government will give up power in exchange for a more prosperous Iran.

In a sign that the radical mullahs oppose alterations to Iran's centralized economy, the supreme leader has insisted in the aftermath of the nuclear agreement that Iran will not tolerate any Western-style economic or cultural reforms. Emphasizing this point, Iranian police shut down a knock-off of the American fast food restaurant KFC the day after the signing of the nuclear agreement, accusing the eatery of "undermining Islamic values."

Instead, the establishment has attempted to bolster international interest without visible reforms. During the last two weeks of January, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani visited various Western capitals in order to sign new trade deals. Rouhani's secondary mission was to woo European companies into investing in Iran. The president characterized Iran as the "safest" and "most stable" country in the Middle East, a statement that is only partially true. Similar to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Iranian citizens are too scared or weak to oppose the Iranian government and police, ensuring a stability of fear. For the average citizen, breaking even petty laws can result in lengthy imprisonment via one of the world's most corrupt judicial systems. But the Iranian government cannot simply bully Western businesses into conducting transactions in a black-market managed by Iran's paramilitary forces. Western businesses will only begin to operate in Iran if mullahs can demonstrate that they have made the reforms necessary to ensure safe and unfettered business operations.

If Iran's government does follow through on its attempts to modernize and moderate the country's image, Iran's fortunes will truly change. If mullahs ease moderates into the political process, relinquish some power, and ease social restrictions, these reforms will have huge ramifications. They will curb the considerable powers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and weaken the violence of the Quds Corps in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Iran might begin to act as a responsible international actor, seeking better ties with Sunni states and redefining hegemonic relationships with Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

But if Iran fails to alter its current course, rapprochement between it and the West will most likely fail miserably. Unfortunately, recent evidence points to the latter path. The Islamic Republic's history of attacking diplomatic missions and taking foreigners hostage shows no signs of ceasing. Iran allowed 'demonstrators' to ransack and torch the Saudi embassy after the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. The supreme leader has not ordered his people to get rid of anti-American graffiti or silence the "death to America" chants. Khamenei recently told the press that he "does not trust" America and that America "needs" Iran. This recent behavior makes it doubtful that the supreme leader will use new-found economic ties with the world to prove that Iran is serious about being a responsible political actor, partner, and friend.

Iran is rich with potential: it has both the resources and human talent to become a major economic gateway into Southern Asia. Yet this potential will remain untapped if its ruling elites prioritize short-term power over long-term gains. It currently seems that Iran, while it remains in a position of strength, will continue to provoke and jab the West. Faithful implementation of the nuclear agreement may be the mullahs' last chance to prove that they are serious about joining the international community, but the chance to provoke on the nuclear front may be too tempting to ignore.

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