

## Nuclear deal yields fruit on Iran's reform

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Iranians have voted for a new parliament (Majlis) as well as so-called Assembly of Experts. Moderate reformers did well in both bodies, vindicating the Obama administration's decision to try diplomacy after years of confrontation with the Islamic republic.

America's relations with Iran long have been troubled. In 1953 the U.S. helped engineer a coup that turned power over to the authoritarian and corrupt Shah. He was overthrown by a broad revolution which ultimately led to a radical Islamist government.

The seizure of the American embassy in November 1979 turned the new Islamic republic into one of Washington's bitterest enemies. Washington ultimately responded by imposing sanctions on and threatening war against the Iranian monster that it helped create.

In the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion Tehran offered to negotiate, but the triumphalist Bush administration refused. Iran responded by ramping up its nuclear program. President Barack Obama turned to negotiation, yielding perhaps his most important diplomatic achievement.

The most important objective with the nuclear agreement was to stop movement toward a nuclear weapon. There never was any reason to believe the GOP uber-hawks who argued that the U.S. need only maintain sanctions while huffing and puffing a little more to make Tehran surrender to American dictates.

When Washington rejected previous Iranian overtures Tehran added centrifuges. The deal was struck because it was a deal, which meant Iran's government received benefits too.

The accord ended any potential nuclear weapons program for now. And so far Tehran is living up to the accord.

Another line of attack against the settlement was that the deal did not cause the Islamic republic to turn itself into a liberal democracy, adopt unilateral conventional disarmament, abandon regional security interests, and accept Saudi dominance. But no nation, including America, would voluntarily surrender to its greatest potential military adversary.

Moreover, most of these demands have little to do with America's own security interests. For instance, Syria is a humanitarian tragedy, but the U.S. gains nothing from ousting President Bashar al-Assad, which likely would turn more of the country over to the Islamic State.

Iran's election confirms that the administration was right to negotiate. One of the chief criticisms of the agreement is that it is temporary and dependent on transformation of the Islamic regime. Actually, the accord depends on offering enough benefits to convince whoever rules Iran that they do better by not building nuclear weapons.

Still, President Obama expressed his hope that the agreement "would serve as the basis for us trying to improve relations over time." The possibility of such a transformation is why Trita Parsi of the National Iranian American Council called these "the most consequential non-presidential elections in Iran at least for the last two decades."

No surprise, resistance from Iranian hardliners has been strong. The Guardian Council disqualified many reformist candidates.

But, noted author Hooman Majd, "No matter how undemocratic and how compromised the system is, there's no question that the elections matter." Moderates have prospered despite their manifold handicaps. The regime will face greater challenges.

Of course, change remains uncertain and will take time. Indeed, many "moderates" seem reasonable only in comparison with hard-liners who have run the nation into the ground. However, the alternative favored by American hardliners, especially Neocons who think of nothing other than continued economic sanctions and military threats, would ensure no domestic change in Iran.

Washington has no magical ability to reach inside Iran and install a friendly regime. It isn't 1953 again, and that play ended badly. Moreover, intensifying threats against Iran would increase the likelihood of Tehran cracking down domestically while reactivating its weapons program.

Washington should play the long game. More than 60 percent of the population is under 30 and many younger Iranians already favor the West and its liberal values.

America needs to encourage a welcoming international environment that benefits Iran and draws Iranians outward. Particularly important is sustained economic growth reaching rural and working class people as well as more Western-oriented elites.

There is, of course, no guarantee for the future. However, the nuclear accord appears to have triggered or at least accelerated a process which offers the best chance for the future.

U.S. policy in the Middle East has been a catastrophic failure. Yet Washington appears largely oblivious. One positive step has been the nuclear accord.

The future remains uncertain. But administration critics offer only the likelihood of more antagonism and conflict. So far the agreement has pushed Tehran back from developing nuclear weapons and triggered a stronger fight for reform in Iran. That's a much better start than many observers expected.

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