

Political Mann

Only Politics News from World

Iranian Vote Affirms Obama Administration Nuclear Deal

Doug Bandow

March 22, 2016

Iranians recently voted for a new parliament (Majlis) as well as Assembly of Experts, tasked with choosing the successor to supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. 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 against democratically elected Prime Minister Mohamed Mossedegh. For a quarter century Washington backed the authoritarian and corrupt Shah, who built up Iran's military, began a nuclear program, suppressed peaceful opposition, and forcibly modernized his traditional society.

The result was a revolution with broad support, but unfortunately Islamic hardliners led by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini won control. The seizure of the American embassy in November 1979 after the Shah entered the U.S. for medical treatment turned the new Islamic republic into one of Washington's bitterest enemies. As a result, the Reagan administration supported Iraq after the latter invaded Iranian territory; the U.S. mistakenly shot down an Iranian passenger plane in 1987 while patrolling the Persian Gulf. Tehran, at odds with Israel and its Gulf neighbors, engaged in subversion and restarted the Shah's nuclear program.

Washington responded by imposing sanctions on and threatening war against the Iranian monster that it had done so much to create. The U.S. also more closely embraced such countries as Saudi Arabia, actually more repressive and supportive of radical Islam than Tehran. Indeed, Saudi backing for fundamentalist Wahhabism fomented violent extremism around the globe.

In the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion Iran offered to negotiate, but the triumphalist Bush administration refused. Tehran responded by ramping up its nuclear program. As Iraq turned into a debacle Washington's leverage ebbed. U.S. threats grew as Vice President Richard Cheney and others pressed for war. Although the Obama administration reiterated that "all options" were on the table, it turned to negotiation, yielding perhaps its most important diplomatic achievement.

Despite criticism from Neocons who saw destroying Israel's adversary as America's duty, the nuclear deal allowed the U.S. to escape the policy cul-de-sac within which it had been stuck. There now is increased if restrained hope of better bilateral and regional relationships with Tehran as well as more moderate political dynamics within Iran.

The most important objective with the nuclear agreement was to stop any movement toward a nuclear weapon. Although Western intelligence believed that Tehran had halted its program, Iran retained an obvious incentive to move forward. Israel, already a nuclear power with a sizeable arsenal, threatened to attack Iran. Most of Tehran's Gulf neighbors were hostile; Saudi Arabia spent lavishly to build up a military directed at Iran. Most important, the globe's singular superpower, having dismembered Serbia and imposed regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya continued to threaten military action.

An accord was reached. No doubt, the West would have preferred Tehran to blow up its nuclear facilities, shoot its nuclear engineers, and exile its extremist supporters, but that never was going to happen, even under President Hassan Rouhani, a dramatic change from his hardline predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Nor was there 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. The International Atomic Energy Agency affirmed it had "verified and monitored Iran's implementation of its nuclear-related commitments." No new construction, no production of uranium pellets, heavy water was shipped, no reprocessing, and centrifuges remained in storage. None of which would have occurred without the agreement.

Another line of attack against the settlement was that the negotiation over Iran's nuclear program 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. Even some supporters of the nuclear pact worry about Tehran's missile program. Sen. Chris Coons (D-Conn.) argued "We're going to have to be clear that we're not going to tolerate their bad behavior, and we're willing to punish Iran."

But no nation, including America, would voluntarily dismantle its political system and sacrifice its safety at the insistence of another country, especially one which long posed its greatest military threat. Iran cannot be blamed for acting militarily when its neighbors and America do so as well. Indeed, why should Tehran supinely accept not only American but Saudi hegemony, including violent regime change in long-time neighboring ally Syria? One can imagine Washington's reaction to a similar threat against Canada or Mexico. In fact, in Bahrain and

Yemen Iran is opposing oppression and violence, while in Syria Tehran's conduct is no worse than those who have backed Islamist radical insurgents.

Moreover, most of these demands have little to do with America's own security interests. 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. Lebanon's chief occupation is avoiding another bloody break-up, not acting as an Iranian proxy. Tehran's influence in Iraq has risen—as an inevitable result of America's ouster of Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein. Iran's support for Houthi rebels in Yemen is a partnership of convenience triggered by Riyadh's attack and doesn't much concern America.

In fact, Saudi Arabia's regional influence is equally if not more malign. It has turned a lengthy insurgency into a bloody sectarian conflict in Yemen, used military force to preserve a repressive Sunni monarchy in majority-Shia Bahrain, and underwritten Egypt's brutal military dictatorship. To reject an agreement constraining Tehran's nuclear options because it did not further strengthen totalitarian Islamic rule in Riyadh would be bizarre in the extreme.

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. Wrote Eli Lake: “the only way it can be considered a success is if, over time, Iran really does undergo reform and its leaders abandon the revolution that threatens the rest of the Middle East.” Actually, the accord is dependent on offering enough benefits to convince whoever rules Iran that they do better by not building nuclear weapons. Washington could help by moderating the hostile security environment created by constant U.S. military threats and Saudi military build-up. Indeed, Riyadh has spent more than \$80 billion each of the last two years on defense, by some estimates more than Russia. Iran's expenditures were only \$26.5 billion and \$30.5 billion, respectively, in 2014 and 2015

Still, the administration helped sell the nuclear pact by claiming that the latter would help open up Iranian society and promote a more liberal politics. 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. Muhammad Sahimi argued that “the deep state is also terrified by President Rouhani's high popularity in the aftermath of the nuclear accord” and end of sanctions. The Guardian Council disqualified many reformist candidates, including the Ayatollah Khomeini's grandson. The supreme leader decried “a U.S. infiltration plot” and “foreign meddling.”

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. Opined Maryam Rajavi of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, the result will “aggravate internal tensions, thereby socially isolating the regime further while jeopardizing the political and economic advantages of the nuclear agreement. In a word, the regime will become even more vulnerable.”

Of course, change remains uncertain and will take time. Indeed, many “moderates” seem reasonable only in comparison with the hard-liners who have run the nation into the ground. However, the alternative—call it massive resistance—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, turn conservative Muslims into Western liberals, and install a regime friendly to America. It isn’t 1953 again, and that play actually ended badly. If international social engineering abroad was so easy, Presidents Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and Bush would have fixed the problem long ago.

Moreover, intensifying threats against Iran would increase the likelihood of Tehran cracking down domestically while reactivating its weapons program. After all, a regime under siege is less likely to risk opposition on any grounds and more likely to use foreign hostility to justify greater repression. A patriotic public told to choose between unpleasant domestic leaders and hostile foreigners is likely to select the domestic devil they know as the least bad alternative. The end result would be some combination of greater regional instability, a nuclear Iran, conflict between Tehran and Saudi Arabia or Israel, and, worst of all, an American attack on Iran. A democratic, nuclear free Iran would be about the least likely outcome.

Washington should play the long game. Hardliners, whether believing Islamists or ambitious cynics, recognize that increased engagement with the West threatens their power. More than 60 percent of the population is under 30 and many younger Iranians already favor the West and its liberal values. The accord has empowered President Rouhani and energized outward-looking citizens. The noteworthy failure of forces of repression to stifle reform currents, buttressed by increasing economic opportunities, likely will encourage greater reform activism. Noted Reza Marashi of the National Iranian American Council: “After these elections there will be a more diverse range of voices, and that will better reflect the will of people. It’s not perfect, but will be better.”

America needs to encourage a welcoming international environment that benefits Iran and draws Iranians outward. As more of the population gains from peaceful engagement, finding both prosperity and security, Tehran is more likely to maintain the same path even after expiration of the nuclear accord. Particularly important is sustained economic growth reaching rural and working class people as well as more Western-oriented elites. No wonder President Rouhani is hoping for \$50 billion in foreign investment annually. Whoever is in charge, a more liberal political and social environment is likely to develop in an Iran which has reentered the oil

markets, benefited from Western money, and traded with the world. A move back to Islamic radicalism and isolation would become less likely.

There is, of course, no guarantee for the future. There are no reform programs or timetables, no transformations or end states which inevitably will result. After a few years Iranians and Westerners alike might be greatly disappointed. 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 oblivious. Secretary of State John Kerry opined that the U.S. was “not going to stand by while the region is destabilized or while people engage in overt warfare across lines, international boundaries and other countries.” Yet it is America which overthrew a democratic Iranian government, sustained decades of dictatorship in Egypt, backed Saddam Hussein’s attack on Iran, intervened disastrously in the Lebanese civil war, subsidized an oppressive Israeli occupation over millions of Palestinians, placed a garrison on sacred Islamic soil in Saudi Arabia, ousted Iraq’s secular dictatorship, overthrew the Libyan government, backed the overthrow of Syria’s secular regime, supported Saudi Arabia in opposing democracy in Bahrain and attacking indigenous rebels in Yemen. Washington’s own policies have done much to release the virulent forces of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

One positive step in the opposite direction has been the nuclear accord. The future remains uncertain. The way forward remains difficult. But at least there is a path toward a more democratic and peaceful future for Iran, which would benefit the Middle East, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, and America. In contrast, 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.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.