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How Could the Nuclear Deal Change Iran?

The nuclear deal with Iran could lead to desecuritization domestically.

By Maysam Behravesh

July 14, 2015

Most opponents of the nuclear agreement with Iran cite its great potential to strengthen the hand of a revisionist autocracy. According to them, an Iran deal and the consequent lifting of sanctions will provide the Islamic Republic with much-needed resources to promote its expansionist agenda abroad on the one hand and suppress the democratic aspirations of its people at home on the other. In their grand narrative, Iran is basically portrayed as a revolutionary misfit run by extremists, an inherently **reform-proof** regime that must either be uprooted once and for all by force or be consistently incapacitated into conformity.

This is a flawed argument, stemming from a partial and decontextualized understanding of Iran as a nation-state, particularly its domestic politics and society. It is no wonder, therefore, that some opponents of the accord go as far as misrepresenting, if not deliberately distorting, realities on the ground to square the circle. “Two years into Rouhani’s tenure, his government stands as one of the most repressive in the post-revolutionary period,” **wrote** Ray Takeyh, a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, in *The Washington Post* on June 28.

Yet conversely, by virtue of facilitating substantive interaction with the global community, a nuclear deal holds unrivaled potential to improve state-society relations inside Iran toward a more inclusive and democratic politics. And by virtue of creating economic opportunities related to the outside world and partly independent of the state, the reconciliation can empower the Iranian civil society and educated middle classes into a force to reckon with in the political sphere.

When External Security Catalyzes Internal Desecuritization

Perhaps one entirely neglected corollary of the nuclear resolution, backed up both by international relations theory in general and Iranian history in particular, is its desecuritizing impact inside Iran. From a political psychology perspective, once a state feels threatened externally and perceives its survival in danger from external forces, it may tend to tighten its grip internally and securitize the domestic sphere to better control the territory it rules. The opposite may as well hold true, in the sense that reduction of external threats to survival and mitigation of threat perceptions can persuade the state apparatus to gradually desecuritize the internal sphere and allow for a more inclusive and democratic politics to emerge, not least if such an opening promises to consolidate its interests in the long run. The logic applies to all rational actors in the international system that are driven by *will to survive*, be they status quo, revisionist, or revolutionary. Iran is no exception.

Historically, a version of this dynamic, albeit in a subdued fashion, took place after the end of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) when the focus shifted from securitization to desecuritization of domestic politics and normalization of state-society relations. The change of governance approach under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani at the time manifested itself primarily in economic reconstruction and foreign policy reconciliations with regional and global powers while meaningful opening in the socio-political sphere took time to materialize and bear fruits. Indeed, it was the incremental growth in power of the civil society and middle classes during the post-war “construction period” that set the stage for the full-blown emergence of the “reform movement” marked by the election in 1997 of President Mohammad Khatami.

A nuclear deal with the West, which would almost immunize the state against external aggression and open up Iran to the global economy, can set in motion a similar dynamic, this time perhaps far more effectively than in 1990s, thanks in important part to extensive public access to information and communication technologies. It is noteworthy that some hardliners and “principlist” ideologues have sternly **warned** about such desecuritizing, if not democratizing, effects of nuclear reconciliation, which may lead to “**changes in Iran’s power structure.**”

The Hardliner Backlash

These prospects notwithstanding, there is no room for unbridled optimism. The powerful conservative groups in the Iranian establishment will certainly put up a ferocious fight to maintain their share of political power, which has started to shrink in the wake of Rouhani’s election and will likely be further undermined after the nuclear deal. Indicative of counterbalancing attempts by hardliners in response to Rouhani’s moderation project, the frequency of executions has soared and the crackdown on civil liberties has intensified during his presidency. By the same token, fear of losing the upper hand in the post-war period in 1990s provoked a number of hardline quarters in the intelligence-security apparatus to adopt extraordinary measures to repress dissent — including the “chain murders” of nonconformist intellectuals — while paradoxically the body politic on the whole was creeping toward domestic desecuritization — that is from “extraordinary” to “ordinary” politics.

Securitizing moves of varying severity may arguably be pursued with even greater zeal in the post-deal era.

Yet over time, expanded social and economic exchanges with the outside world, which can **enhance** the operational capabilities of civil society, are likely to convince the ruling establishment that it needs to adapt to the changing circumstances. This transformation may well be assisted by the emerging perception that externally enforced regime change or domestically induced revolution is out of the question now. The perception is gaining ground not only because an agreement will remove the military option from the table, but also because such militarized revolutions in the region as the Syrian civil war, with all its catastrophic consequences, have set an enlightening example for the Iranian opposition to consider.

The non-violent struggle for a better political, social, and economic life is a long-term process that has already started in Iran, but a rapprochement with the West can help trigger a systematic advance in that and indeed catapult it to an elevated level.

Who Is the Major Winner After All, the State or the Nation?

Those who dismiss the nuclear deal on the grounds that the state (regime) rather than the society (nation) will be the major beneficiary should think twice about their assumptions. Such a view, which in principle renounces any arrangement that may prolong the life of the Islamic Republic, is ultimately aimed at regime change and underpinned by narrow-minded adherence to “relative” gains rather than “absolute” ones. If this sort of calculation is to serve as the guiding principle of Iranian civil forces and **reformers**, no sociopolitical action will be plausible lest it benefit the regime in one way or another.

This logic also ignores the negative attitude of the majority of Iranians toward radical and revolutionary politics. As indicated, the tragic example of Syria under Assad, which is Iran’s sole strategic ally in the Middle East, suggests that such regimes are not ready to give in without a fierce fight but willing to impose a huge collateral price on their constituencies if they see it necessary for their survival. After all, the Islamic Republic has proven its resilience over the past four decades in the face of various challenges including war, economic hardship, and political unrest. So dismissal of the nuclear deal in the hope that its absence may accelerate the collapse of the regime and thus save the Iranian people is merely delusional.

Actually, it does not matter if detente with the West benefits the state more than the society. What matters is that a confrontational state of affairs, marked by economic sanctions and international isolation, hurts the society more than the state, partly due to the “complex interdependence” between them.

In sum, Iranians are caught up between a rock and a hard place, so to speak. By virtue of a nuclear resolution, the softening of one may lead to the softening of the other. But even if it does not, so be it. Any degree of softening from any side will definitely do no harm.

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