

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Iran: Is a Deal on Nuclear Talks Possible?

As of this writing, the United States, other Western powers and Iran have agreed to extend negotiations on a nuclear deal for seven more months. The “red line” date of 24 November never seemed very sacrosanct; this “deal” to extend the deal negotiations shows that. It is quite easy to be cynical about all this, but it does point to a deeper reality about Iran, the Middle East and the US.

- First of all, a brief overview of Iran and the changes underway in that nation. Iran has consistently insisted that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only. No one believes that and nations such as Israel and Saudi Arabia fear a nuclear Iran—Israel because it is an existential threat to its survival; Saudi Arabia because the world’s leading Shiite nation would have nuclear armaments. If Iran succeeds, Saudi Arabia would then need to develop its own nuclear weapons program. Iran has been ruled by bizarre leaders, many of whom have denied the Holocaust and have tortured and murdered their own citizens. But, as a recent issue of *The Economist* has demonstrated, Iran is changing. Here are a few of the changes highlighted by *The Economist*:
 1. The revolutionary fervor of Iran has diminished and it is desperate for trade and the need to sell its oil: “Globalization trumps puritanism even here.”
 2. Among many Iranians, there is an apparent desire to be accepted again in the world. There are Reformists who seek to open up the nation and participate in far wider trade and global engagement. But they are discouraged because in 2009 they challenged the government over an election that was clearly rigged—and they lost. The Arab Spring has scared even Iran and the one thing everyone seeks is stability. Even though the revolutionary fervor has waned, the legitimacy of the 1979 Revolution is not challenged. *The Economist* observes that “Not being Arab, Turkic or South Asian, they feel friendless among their neighbors. This is vital to understanding Iranian foreign policy and helps explain why the nuclear program enjoys widespread support despite the pain that sanctions have inflicted. Many regard it as a symbol of national strength at a time of perplexing social changes.”
 3. Iran has devoted more time and money to developing its infrastructure. Tehran, the capital, has new tunnels, bridges, overpasses, elevated roads and pedestrian walkways. Even smaller Iranian cities evidence this commitment to development and growth.

4. Prosperity has inspired an obsession with technology that even governmental restrictions in terms of access have not dampened. Facebook and Twitter both enjoy widespread support, despite being banned. In addition, uncensored news is readily available.
 5. The hunger for information is fueled as well by rising education levels, comparable to those in Western nations. In 2009, 34% of Iranians in the relevant age group went to Iranian universities. By 2013, that number has swelled to 55%. The vastly expanded education system, which makes particular efforts to reach the poor and rural families of Iran, has acted as a catalyst for independent thinking. The world of the arts, including film, has thereby opened up.
 6. The size of the population has doubled since the 1980s but the number of births has halved. Although there are no reliable figures, experts guess that birth rates are now 1.6-1.9 children per woman, making Iran broadly in line with European nations. In short, Iran is becoming a middle-aged country.
 7. President Rohani has surrounded himself with pragmatic technocrats rather than fanatical messianic Shiites, as the former president, Ahmadinejad, had done.
- Second, despite all of these changes, there remains the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is a “paramilitary force rolled into an intelligence agency wrapped in a giant business conglomerate with security-related interests. It is directly controlled by the country’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, who is chosen by regime insiders for life and outranks the elected president.” The IRGC is dedicated to a strong Iran, both at home and abroad. The means they use often involves funding terror groups and the exploitation of sectarian tensions, all in the name of revolutionary change. For example, The Quds Force, a special operations unit, fights on Iran’s behalf outside the nation. They are aiding Assad in Syria, sponsoring Hamas and Hezbollah, and nurturing rebels in Bahrain and Yemen. The IRGC, most importantly, oversees the nuclear-weapons program. The IRGC would seem to be the major barrier to any kind of nuclear deal with the West. It is currently impossible to know how much flexibility the IRGC actually has or can muster. All of the IRGC rhetoric argues that the compromises necessary for a nuclear deal would undermine the radical Islamic Republic established in 1979. Listen to the words of Khamenei: “On the nuclear issue, the United States and European colonialist countries gathered and applied their entire efforts to bring the Islamic Republic to its knees, but they could not and they will not.” The current debate going on within Iran is between the IRGC and forces that look back to Iran’s revolutionary past and the need for a post-revolutionary future. In the words of Henry Kissinger, Iran must decide “Whether it is a nation or a cause.” Columnist David Ignatius correctly concludes that Rohani wants a pragmatic deal on the nuclear issue, while Khamenei represents the cause and continues to resist compromise. Khamenei famously declared that “I am not a diplomat. I am a revolutionary.” Such logic, Ignatius maintains, can lead people to walk away from agreements, even those in their national interest.

The Bible speaks much of the instability of the Middle East as a marker for the matrix of world issues that will characterize the eschaton. No matter what the world does in Asia, Africa or in Europe, the primary focus of world affairs remains the Middle East. The ideological tug of war currently occurring within Iran between Iran's revolutionary past and the need for a more flexible post-revolutionary Iran is not settled. Right now the touchstone of that tug of war is the nuclear issue. It is quite difficult to believe that the pragmatists will trump the deeply entrenched and powerful IRGC. It is virtually impossible to envision what will occur if no nuclear deal is reached. Will Israel strike Iran? Will the US and/or Europe? Any such military action would undeniably lead to a much broader conflict in the Middle East. May God give our leaders wisdom and the tenacity to do the right thing with Iran.

See *The Economist* (1 November 2014), "Special Report on Iran" and David Ignatius in www.washingtonpost.com (26 November 2014).