

ORSAM REVIEW OF REGIONAL AFFAIRS

NO.45, JULY 2016



CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN IRANIAN POLITICS AFTER THE NUCLEAR DEAL

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Controversies over the nuclear program of Iran were solved diplomatically through an agreement between Iran and P5+1 countries on 14 July 2015. However, many pundits viewed this agreement as a step to transform Iran and the region through its political, economic, and regional implications, rather than an agreement simply over the 'nuclear issue.' This study reviews continuity and change in Iranian politics a year after the nuclear deal. Parliamentary elections of February 2016 and the presidential elections to be held next June created heated debates in Iran. While addressing the debates in Iran, this study highlights three issues including the state of relations with the West, basic economic policies and cultural policies that come into prominence. In fact, those issues are main sources of contention and differences in Iranian politics since the revolution. Hence, it could be stated that there is no considerable change in Iranian politics a year after the nuclear deal.

Months-long negotiations between Iran and P5+1 (or EU3+3) which started soon after the inauguration of Hojatoleslam Hassan Rouhani as president and aimed at finding a diplomatic solution for the international controversy over Iranian nuclear program, ended with an agreement on 14 July 2015.¹ The deal, entitled Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), envisaged the removal of the UN, US, and EU sanctions that were imposed on Iran due to the nuclear controversy in return for Iran's opening of its nuclear sites for international inspections. Moreover Iran would constrain its nuclear activities at certain levels for certain periods.

The nuclear deal is widely regarded as a turning point for contemporary political history of Iran. Although it has primarily aimed at addressing the controversies

around the nuclear program, the deal was also expected to make significant changes, both in domestic and foreign policies of Iran due to its economic and political consequences. Hence, there is a general trend in most analyses of Iranian politics to address 'post-nuclear deal' developments as a new period. There are plenty of evaluations that have been made in this respect. This study will address major debates in Iran during the one year after the nuclear deal and will review its effects on Iranian politics.

'Post-Nuclear Deal' Iran

The nuclear deal that has been called as '*barjam*' in Iran after the Persian acronym of JCPOA and the removal of sanctions are still fervently debated issues in Iranian politics. Above else, the deal has been discussed by Iranian public opinion for a long time and has received

different reactions.² Those favored the deal compared Foreign Minister M. Javad Zarif, the chief Iranian negotiator, to Dr. Mosaddeq, the legendary nationalist leader of Iran, because he assured the recognition of Iran's nuclear rights and the removal of sanctions. Opponents of the deal charged Zarif with 'treason' because of the constraints on Iranian nuclear program and conditions for the removal of sanctions that were envisaged by the deal.³ The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, did not adopt a clear view on the deal, which led to the intensification of criticisms. He called the deal in his various speeches as "neither good, nor bad" and underlined his view of untrustworthiness of the West. Moreover, he claimed that the 'enemy' would seek out new tactics and would try to "infiltrate" into Iran by exploiting the deal. That is why he forbade further talks

with the United States after the nuclear deal.⁴ Despite all criticisms, the Iranian parliament approved the deal on 13 October 2015.

Having been approved by the parties, the deal is formally 'adopted' on 18 October 2015. Subsequently, a number of technical negotiations were held between Iran and IAEA. Yukiya Amano, General Director of IAEA, reported on 16 January 2016 that Iran took necessary measures and did its responsibilities for the implementation of the JCPOA. Consequently, the 'implementation' of the nuclear deal has begun. This development signified the removal of UN, US, and EU sanctions that were imposed on Iran for its nuclear program.

Debates around the nuclear deal have not ended even after the start of the implementation phase. In his speech in Mashhad on 21 March 2016, on the occasion of Iranian new year, *Norouz*,

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Ayatollah Khamanei stated that the nuclear deal crossed certain red lines of Iran, and he claimed that the sanctions were still effective, and the West failed to fulfill its responsibilities envisaged by the deal. Since then, similar criticisms have been voiced in Friday prayers across Iran, and it is asserted that the deal has remained inconclusive.⁵

Indeed, it has been more than six months since the nuclear deal is implemented, and yet there are still problems with the sanctions relief. The European Union

extended its sanctions against Iran by one year, due to the claims of violation of human rights. Likewise, having lifted its sanctions imposed on Iran exclusively for the nuclear program, the United States still continues to impose sanctions on Iran due to its policies towards Syria, alleged support for terrorism, and violations of human rights etc..⁶ Early in April 2016, Jacob Lew, US Secretary of the Treasury, said in his statement that the US financial system would stay closed to Iran. Likewise, both US and Iranian authorities confirmed that

Iran only received \$3 billion of its assets outside the country, which is supposedly around \$100 billion.⁷ Moreover, the US court ordered to give \$ 2 billion out of the Iranian assets that were frozen in American banks to the relatives of the victims of the attack against American marines in Beirut in 1983 because of the alleged Iranian role in the incidence. It has incited strong reactions in Iran, which are mostly directed against the Rouhani government.

The principal expectation of Iran from the nuclear deal was the removal of sanctions related to the nuclear program. In fact, the exclusion of Iran from international money transfer system, i.e., SWIFT, and EU and US sanctions on all kinds of transactions of the Central Bank of Iran, dealt a heavy blow to the international transactions and trade of Iran. Though these sanctions are now officially

lifted, banking transactions in Iran still have not gone back to normal, due to technical problems and the complex situation of the sanctions. Also European banks and large conglomerates are operating extremely cautiously when it comes to transactions with Iran, because they somehow still fear of being exposed to the US sanctions. Thus, although many political delegations and businessmen have flown into Tehran since the deal was reached, there is no noticeable steps taken to invest in Iran. There are many memoranda of understanding and preliminary agreements between Iran and international corporations, such as the ‘agreements’ with Airbus and Boeing, which envisaged Iran’s purchase of nearly a hundred passenger planes, however, only few of them could be brought to bear, which may take some additional time. Consequently, Iranian economic expectations from the

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deal have not been realized until today.⁸ Sharing these concerns, more than a hundred Iranian deputies wrote a letter addressed to Rouhani, calling for ceasing the implementation of the deal.⁹

Against all criticisms towards the deal, President Rouhani called the nuclear deal as a “success to be remembered proudly” by the Iranian nation. He stated that just as “the restoration or reconstruction of a ruin take some time”, Iran also needs some additional time to reap the benefits of the deal; however only few time has passed since the start of the implementation. Additionally, he reminded that Iran had “returned to the 19th century” in terms of banking activities because it was isolated from international financial networks. He also recalled that Iranian oil exports have turned pre-sanctions level, which was almost ceased before the deal, and many foreign investors

have been considering to invest in Iran.¹⁰ Likewise, high-level diplomats led by Foreign Minister Zarif and bureaucrats repeatedly met American and European officials to clear problems in the implementation and to assure foreign investors.¹¹

Another debate with related to the nuclear deal has revolved around its implications on security of Iran. Both President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Rouhani repeatedly claimed in their various talks that “the deal has disbursed clouds of war over Iran and made it more secure.” Such statements invited the reaction of security elites, particularly the Revolutionary Guards. Some IRGC commanders argued that “it is not negotiations, but the deterrence capacity of Iran” that has provided its security.

February Elections

Dual elections held in Iran in February 2016 for the

parliament and the Assembly of Experts were another lively debate in the Iranian politics after the nuclear deal.¹² Reformist and pragmatist candidates associated with President Rouhani run in the elections held on 26 February under the 'List of Hope' led by Mohammad Reza Aref. The List of Hope won 120 seats out of 290 in the parliament. The 'Grand Coalition of Principlists' (*Osoulgarayan*) consisted of vocal opponents of Rouhani government took 83 seats, whereas independents and other small groups secured 81 seats in the parliament.¹³ All of the 30 seats reserved for Tehran went to the List of Hope. As a result of the elections, leading figures of the *osoulgarayan* coalition such as Ahmad Tavakkoli and Gholamali Haddad Adel, in addition to some outspoken critics of the Rouhani government like Esmael Kowsari and Ali Reza Zakani, lost their seats in the parliament.

Elections for the Assembly of Experts, which is in charge of selection of the new leader in case of worsening health conditions or death of current leader Khamenei, and composed of ulama elected by people for eight years, also drew considerable attention. The alliance between reformists and pragmatists was also effective for the elections for the Assembly of Experts. This alliance led by President Rouhani and Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani (the Experts of People) won the 15 out of the 16 seats reserved for Tehran.¹⁴ One of the principal aims of this coalition was to block election of 'radical' ayatollahs Mesbah Yazdi, Mohammad Yazdi and Ahmad Jannati and to weaken their power. Only Jannati out of the trio could succeed to enter into the new assembly.

The results of the elections have empowered to some extent the position of

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President Rouhani in Iranian politics and pleased the government. Mohammad Bagher Nobakht stated, “2016 elections complemented 2013 presidential election.”¹⁵ President Rouhani said that the Iranian nation “exhibited its will and power of choice again to give all the servants and especially the people-elected government more credibility and authority.”¹⁶ Notwithstanding their success in the elections, the allies of President Rouhani could secure an absolute majority neither in the parliament, nor in the Assembly of Experts. Because the List of Hope was almost a ‘coalition’ including peoples with different

orientations and because the independents have won considerable number of seats in the parliament, the reformist-pragmatist alliance was not as powerful as they wished. As a matter of fact, M.Reza Aref, one of the prominent reformists and leader of the List of Hope, lost race for the speaker of the parliament to ‘traditional conservative’ Ali Larijani. Likewise, Ayatollah Jannati, whom Rouhani-Rafsanjani alliance tried to block, was chosen as the Head of the Assembly of Experts. These developments have underscored how the Rouhani government is still weak and fragile.



In the same vein, Rouhani, in his Norouz message, called again the nuclear deal as a historic success to be remembered proudly. He also said that “a national plan of action, a second *barjam*” had to be developed in order to address the financial and political problems of Iran, which already began with the elections.¹⁷ In his speech in Mashhad on 21 March 2016, Khamenei underlined some concerns related to the nuclear deal. He added, “those who propose a second, third *barjams*” as a solution for the problems of the country “...are playing with fire.”¹⁸ He believes that “second *barjam*” means negotiating with the USA and changing some of Iran’s fundamental policies in order to solve Iran’s economic, social and political problems. According to Khamenei and his close associates, there are three reasons why “second *barjam*” is dangerous: Above else, demands of the USA will never end.

Second, if Iran changes its regional politics and steps back as demanded by the United States, the revolution will lose its meaning. Finally, as experienced recently, the US government, which fails to fulfill its own obligations, cannot be trusted. After Khamenei’s harsh criticisms, Major General Ali Jafari, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards Corps, said that “the nuclear deal has never been considered a document to be proud of, and the people reluctantly supported it.”¹⁹

Political Dynamics in Iran: Continuity and Change

There are three aspects of the rising political tension that apparently revolves around the nuclear deal. The first one is related to Iran’s relations with the West. Rouhani’s foreign policy strategy aimed to enhance Iran’s relations with the West after the resolution of

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the nuclear dispute. In this regard, diplomatic relations between Iran and the United Kingdom, which was cut off in November 2011, were restored right after the deal. The British Embassy in Tehran resumed its activities on 23 August 2015 with a ceremony attended by Philip Hammond, the UK's Secretary of State.²⁰ Likewise, after a 16-year interval, Rouhani paid visits to some European capitals as the president. However, conservative and radical factions suspiciously approached the policy of improving relations with the West. In this

regard, Khamenei said "I do not favor cutting ties with the West, but we must know whom we are dealing with ... we must have relations with the whole world, except for the USA and the Zionist regime, but the world is not limited to the West and Europe."²¹

The second aspect of the political dynamism in Iran is related to the reconstruction of the Iranian economy and its opening up to the outside world. President Rouhani became first Iranian leader after a long period to attend the World Economic Forum in Davos, where he invited

international companies to invest in Iran.²² The policy of integrating Iran with global economic system faced with strong reactions. While President Rouhani proposed a “second barjam,” Leader Khamenei proposed a “resistance economy” in their Norouz messages.²³ Khamenei designated the new Iranian year (1395) that began with Norouz, as the year of “Resistance Economy: Action and Implementation”. The term resistance economy was initially put forward, when Iran faced with the sanctions. The utilization of this term for the economy of “post-sanctions Iran” is rather meaningful. The resistance economy, which means ongoing enemy threats and an attempt to minimize Iran’s weaknesses on the economic field, is completely different from Rouhani’s view of economic integration with the outside world; since the resistance economy is based on the idea of self-sufficient economy

and restraining engagements with the West. Khamenei and his conservative supporters believe that sustaining economic relations with the West would harm the economic independence of Iran and that the West might try to increase its political and cultural influence on Iran through foreign investments.²⁴

The third issue of lively debate in Iranian politics is the control of cultural policies and media. The Rouhani government that effectively utilizes social media has striven for expanding freedom of the press and relaxing the ‘state control’ over cultural activities. However, the conservative and radical factions believe that the nuclear deal did not end or lessen the enmity of the United States towards the ‘Islamic Iran.’ They believe, the enemy tries to infiltrate in Iran through media and culture, hence, the cultural onslaught and threats are too

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critical.²⁵ That is why, they insist on regulating social life according to the ‘Islamic measures.’ For instance, the Intelligence Organization of the IRGC arrested five journalists for their alleged membership in a “network of influence affiliated with the United States and Britain.” President Rouhani strongly reacted to the arrests. He argued that security officials could not act like press judges, and he asked that the warnings of Leader for the ‘infiltration of foreigners’ should not be abused.²⁶ Likewise, a secret police unit consisting of 7,000 persons was established in Tehran, in March 2016 in order to report those violating *hejab* (Islamic clothing) and disturbing the society to the police headquarters. Rouhani criticized the establishment of the secret police unit, and asserted that they needed cultural activities in order to overcome cultural problems. He also said that the privacy of people is more important

than the religion.²⁷ However, reactions of Rouhani in similar situations remained limited to the criticisms, and he deliberately avoided from increasing tensions through confrontation.

Conclusion

There is no remarkable change in Iranian politics or economy within a year after the nuclear deal. Above all else, Iranian expectations from the removal of sanctions were not fully realized. However, in addition to the nuclear deal, the elections for the parliament and the Assembly of Experts held on February 26, relieved President Rouhani to some extent. His supporters could not secure an absolute majority in the parliament or the Assembly, but they did well in comparison to the *osoulgar-ayan* (principlists) that heavily criticize the nuclear deal and policies of the Rouhani government. Having been encouraged by the election

results, Rouhani wants the nuclear deal to be the beginning of a new chapter in Iranian politics. His call for ‘second barjam’ actually reflects the search for a new ‘social contract’ in Iran after the deal.²⁸ However, major dynamics in Iranian politics have not changed much after the nuclear agreement.

The differences of opinion with regard to the state of relations with the West, basic economic policies and cultural policies have been major faultlines in the Iranians politics since the revolution. The differences over these issues are regarded as the main reasons for the

divergence of conservative/ radical and reformist/pragmatist factions, and constitute main bases of struggle for power between competing political factions. This long-term struggle has nowadays turned into a dispute and competition over the continuation of the power of President Rouhani. Both the uncertainties in the implementation of the nuclear deal and the next presidential elections to be held in June 2017 will likely lead to the intensification of this struggle. Hence, any development in Iran needs to be evaluated within this framework.

Timeline of the Nuclear Deal of Iran

6 August 2013	President Hassan Rouhani called for resuming nuclear negotiations between Iran and P5+1 group.
26 September 2013	Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif met with ministers of foreign affairs of P5+1 countries in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.
24 November 2013	Iran and P5+1 agreed on Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) (6-moths interim agreement) in Geneva.
20 January 2014	Implementation of the Joint Plan of Action began.
19 June 2014	Talks in Vienna remained inconclusive, but the JPOA was extended for 6 months.
24 November 2014	JPOA was extended at the end of talks in Vienna until 1 July 2015.
2 April 2015	The parties declared the agreed points in Lausanne and envisioned to reach Comprehensive Joint Plan of Action (JCPOA, permanent agreement) until 20 June.
14 July 2015	The parties agreed on JCPOA in Vienna.
20 July 2015	The UN Security Council endorsed the JCPOA by adopting Resolution 2231(2015).
13 October 2015	Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran approved the JCPOA.
Adoption Day	
18 October 2015	The JCPOA was officially adopted.
Implementation Day	
16 January 2016	Implementation of JCPOA, which envisaged the removal of nuclear-related sanctions on Iran, has began.
Transition Day	Transition Day will occur eight years from Adoption Day or upon receipt by the Security Council of the report from the IAEA stating that the IAEA has reached the Broader Conclusion that all nuclear material in Iran remains in peaceful activities. The Transition Day will permanently remove remaining sanctions.
Termination Day	Ten years from Adoption Day, provided that the provisions of the previous Security Council resolutions have not been reinstated in the interim, all the provisions of resolution 2231 (2015) shall be terminated and the Security Council will have concluded its consideration of the Iranian nuclear issue.

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