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# Iran's Uncertain Course After the Deal

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There have been four major political realignments in the Islamic Republic of Iran's short history. The first was the coalescing of revolutionaries behind Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the initial years after the 1979 ouster of the shah, driving out other contenders for power. The second came after the death of Khomeini and the end of the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq war, when President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and his economically liberal supporters allied with conservative political elites to neuter the radical wing of the Islamic Republic's battle-forged leadership. Many of the radicals went into the political wilderness; they emerged a few years later, using a new vocabulary and identifying themselves as reformists.

The third realignment occurred during the late 1990s and early 2000s under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami. His circle of reformists increasingly sought common cause with Rafsanjani's technocratic-minded posse under a vague rubric of modernization. Conservative members of the political elite, mostly housed in unelected state institutions or the security apparatus, petulantly rebelled. Legislation and reform was blocked by fiat from above, while fresh recruits were mobilized from below for the conservative cause.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an unknown engineer and war veteran, rapidly rose from the mayoralty of Tehran to the commanding heights of the state in this environment of self-perceived conservative crisis. Vertical patronage networks and clever machine politics lifted him up alongside a new generation of right-wing political entrepreneurs. Partly rehashing the radical language from the early 1980s and partly stealing the modernizing bromides of his opponents, Ahmadinejad served as president from 2005 to 2013. He solidified his support from conservatives while pushing the reformist-technocratic coalition almost completely out of the political order.

The fourth realignment began in 2009 with a wave of postelection popular unrest known as the Green Movement. This realignment accelerated from 2011 to 2013 under increased international sanctions and an economic downturn. Conservative solidarity fractured, and the reformist-technocratic coalition regrouped in the fissures. Another wave of electoral mobilization and a dose of luck in 2013 propelled Hassan Rouhani to the presidency. He was known as a Rafsanjani confidant whose career up to that point had largely progressed through backstage politicking.

The key to Rouhani's subsequent success, whether in negotiations with Western powers or domestic policy battles, has been his skill at keeping conservatives divided while inviting old-guard segments into his own coalition. As a result, what was unmentionable in Iranian conservative political discourse a decade ago—direct negotiations with the United States and the acceptance of strictures over a symbolically important but militarily insignificant nuclear program—is now authorized and justified by Iran's top mandarins, including Leader and Supreme Jurist Ali Khamenei.

Today, conservatives remain divided, while reformists could also fracture into radical and pragmatic wings in the run-up to parliamentary elections in 2016. We are witnessing something new in Iran's postrevolutionary coalitional politics. The edges of the spectrum are divided, while the center holds.

## EMPTY THREAT

This outcome was universally unforeseen by Washington's Iran watchers, who tend to herd safely together and thus are caught off guard by political surprises. To be fair, who could have predicted such a shift? Certainly not those who participated in it, on either the American or the Iranian side. The nuclear accord came about through apprehensive interaction, clandestine diplomacy, and a byzantine set of improvised technical fixes.

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It was a herculean effort, to be sure, but future gains beyond the settlement remain unclear. The agreement is already under strain amid geopolitical chaos in the Middle East, which has dramatically widened over the past decade to make the region the world's preeminent zone of military intervention and destructive conflict. Chaos can be defined as the unraveling of a regional geopolitical order without any foreseeable replacement on the horizon. Given the protean nature of coalitional politics in the Islamic Republic, we should consider the possible consequences of this geopolitical chaos for Iranian domestic change, and vice versa.

First is the dire projection of many of the deal's opponents: Iranian ascent to "hegemony" in Central and West Asia. Is there really such a threat? If by hegemony one means a projection of Iranian power that is also accepted by most regional states as collectively beneficial, then even with the lifting of sanctions the threat is minimal. Iranian influence may be embraced in southern Iraq or western Afghanistan. More likely it is simply tolerated, given the lack of plausible sponsorship alternatives for local leaders.

It is difficult to envision a reconstituted geopolitical order in the Middle East with Iran at the helm, even under the most benign of circumstances. This was not possible during the prerevolutionary Pahlavi monarchy, which also made efforts to project power into neighboring countries and beyond, and it is not possible today. Even if the entire political establishment inside the Islamic Republic agreed on Iran's proper role in the region—which it does not—neither the ideological package nor the patronage flows offered by Tehran are enticing enough to win over most states or their populations. Recent public opinion polls in Arab countries from Egypt to Saudi Arabia show Iran to be rather unfashionable. There will be no slippery slope from détente to domination.

## INTO THE VACUUM

Then there is the problem of the geopolitical vacuum. Fewer and fewer states are still functioning in the Middle East. Iran is accused of sowing chaos in the region's shatter zones, from Yemen to Iraq to Syria. Iranian politicians reply that other states have instigated and propelled the vari-

ous conflicts, while Tehran is merely protecting its national interest and fostering a pathway to regional stability. In reality, the prevailing order had already been ruptured by the US invasion of Iraq, popular uprisings, civil wars, and the weaponization of previously innocuous ethno-religious identities. All functioning Middle Eastern states are now pressing out into the regional vacuum to keep the maelstrom away from home and to establish a stake in whatever order arises next. In doing so, they are being further dragged into additional theaters of conflict, no matter what their original intention was.

Military historians have long noted that a state enjoying the advantage of a "marchland" position (one with enemies on fewer fronts close to its home territory) may eventually overexpand and engage in confrontation with other expanding states. The ensuing conflict on multiple fronts can cause geopolitical strain. The farther from home military forces are dispatched, the higher the costs in terms of logistics, transport, and reputation.

Iran had very few soldiers on the ground in Syria one year ago. Now it is clear that the country is losing blood and treasure in foreign wars, just like the countries that Iran's leaders love to harangue.

It is highly unlikely that the recent and growing deployment of Iranian troops in Iraq and Syria flowed from a grand strategy. Iran's military tactics since the 1979 revolution were designed to asymmetrically compete with nations possessing high-tech weaponry and larger defense forces. Direct forays into Iraq and Syria are thus uncharacteristic of Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy. One thing is certain: Continued Iranian expansion without hope of exit into regions engulfed in geopolitical chaos will expose the limits not the strengths of such tactics.

## POISONED CHALICE?

These entanglements create risks and opportunities for domestic politics in the Islamic Republic. If Iran continues to push, or allow itself to be pulled, into new zones of regional conflict, the risk of a major military defeat increases. This is not necessarily cause for celebration by its adversaries. A defeat, if widely acknowledged as such, could unify conservatives at home. In a renewal of the scenario of the late 1990s, they might perceive

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all political choices to be existential ones, not grounds for compromise.

A military defeat could, conversely, further divide conservatives and propel more political capital toward Rouhani. A major defeat would give domestic moderates an opportunity to depict themselves as more patriotic than the old guard, and to claim that reform is the required path to restoring national honor.

In either scenario, a heightened crisis of national legitimacy will force political factions to renew their contest against each other. The struggle sometimes occurs with a groundswell of popular mobilization, and at other times with the sharpening of long knives for political infighting. This is how Iranian coalitional politics has lurched forward, backward, and sideways in the past. Given the unpredictability of such struggles, the United States cannot do much about the process by overtly supporting one side over another. That has always been the kiss of death for internal reform in Iran.

The Islamic Republic is not going to disappear, nor will it loom over the region as a new hege-

monic overlord. Once we recognize the geopolitical limits to Iran's influence, the best program of action for all countries is to collectively staunch the violence and then reverse the chaotic direction of the region. For the moment, this seems unlikely. Peace sells, surely, but who's buying? Regional states are still expanding outward without yet reaching their limits. But it is only a matter of time.

The last realignment in Iranian politics produced a major diplomatic accord. True, the entente between the United States and Iran has partly given the latter an opportunity to reenter the regional geopolitical arena, but this hardly means handing over the Middle East to the Islamic Republic on a platter. Instead, it could be a poisoned chalice for whichever political side in Iran is blamed for any future upheaval. We can make at least one prediction. More than ever before in the short history of the Islamic Republic, the next coalitional shift in Iran's domestic sphere will be driven by a deepened coupling of the Middle East's geopolitical chaos and political rivalries at home. ■