

WORLD IRAN

## Is Iran Finally Ready for Change?

Karl Vick/Tehran @karl\_vick | Nov. 5, 2015

### What the country will look like in 2025

The politics of Iran may be relentlessly convoluted, but for years it was possible to judge at least the general direction of things by doing a little girl watching. Or, at least, trying to. Hijab—the Muslim headscarf that can be worn snug as a nun’s wimple or loose as a suggestion—was of immense importance to Iranian hard-liners, who like Romantic poets and Miss Clairol equated hair with sensuality, a quality strictly forbidden in public. “A strand of woman’s hair emerging from under the hijab,” former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani once famously pronounced, “is a dagger drawn towards the heart of Islam.” As a rule of thumb, the less you saw peeking out from under scarves on the streets of Tehran, the stronger the hold of the theocracy’s most rigid elements.

If you went by appearances alone today, the Islamic revolution could be declared doornail dead, its perforated heart buried in the desert deeper than any nuclear facility. A visitor might even think Iran has already joined President Barack Obama’s “community of nations,” black tresses flowing as free as those of the young woman playing badminton in the twilight of Tehran’s Laleh Park, headscarf not around her head but around her neck, like a bandanna.

What’s changed? Only Iran—which, for all its reliability as America’s enduring archvillain, never holds still. But now the pace and direction of change stand to determine whether the landmark nuclear deal reached on July 14 prevented a war or merely postponed one. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the agreement with the U.S. and other world powers is



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A woman in Tehran wreathed by the smoke of an herb burned during festivities marking the death of Hussein, the third Shi’ite imam.

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actually referred to in Iran, took formal effect Oct. 18, and the clock is ticking. The pact rolls back some elements of Iran's ambiguous nuclear program and freezes others—but not forever. In just 10 years, Iran becomes free to use newer, far more efficient centrifuges, enriching uranium perhaps 16 times faster. And in 15 years, it can enrich as much as it likes as fast as it likes, bringing a bomb back within easy reach—should those who rule Iran decide to sprint for one.

In a 110-page document written in dense technical language, the clearest assumption—that over time Iran can grow more trustworthy—remains a leap of faith. “Enemies promise that #Iran will be totally different in 10 years,” Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatullah Ali Khamenei, tweeted on Sept. 16, amid a series of speeches framing culture war as the next phase in the competition between the Islamic Republic and the West. “We must not allow such evil prospects.”

A decade is a long time, but the first developments are not cause for optimism. Security services have been arresting dual nationals in Iran like Jason Rezaian, the Washington Post reporter held for more than 15 months. Khamenei gives speech after speech ruling out any further contact with Washington. And the reason hair is no longer so certain a marker for politics? After Khamenei's security forces brutally crushed the 2009 Green Revolution, which began as a protest over election fraud, the regime struck a tacit bargain with ordinary Iranians, universally understood here: “Don't interfere in politics and you can do whatever you want,” says Alireza Rezakhani, 42, a restaurateur in Tehran.

Thus the lush show of bangs under Elham Dezfouli's headscarf works both as fashion and safety valve. “We have no freedom of speech,” says the 35-year-old medical student, “so perhaps the way we have of showing dissent is by the way we wear our clothes and things like that.”

But stand back just a bit and the picture shifts—and appears to brighten. The arrests of prominent Iranian Americans are widely interpreted inside Iran as hard-liner provocations, an attempt to sabotage an agenda that is about to slip from their grasp for good. The larger trends—including a youthful population eager to engage the outside world—favor the moderates. By

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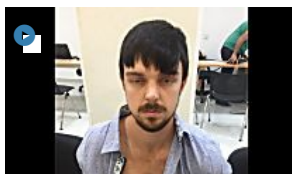
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agreeing to delink hijab from politics, Iran's rulers surrendered a central tenet of the ideology they claim to serve. Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has noted that hijab was one of two issues that, decade after decade, Khamenei held dearest.

Another inviolable tenet? Contempt for dealing with the U.S. That's not looking so firm either.

"Change is unstoppable," says Mohammad Basir, a software worker sipping tea with a female companion beside a man-made lake in Tehran's booming western reaches. "Even during the sanctions it was going on. The lifting of sanctions will just speed it up. It will be much faster and widespread."

Whatever else it's been, Iran is not a hermit kingdom. The enveloping black chador encouraged by religious conservatives and irresistible to photographers obscures, among other things, perhaps the most cosmopolitan population in the Middle East. There are 15 daily flights between Tehran and Istanbul, gateway to the West. When it was known as Persia, Iran produced both Islam's golden age and the poet Hafez, who asked, "What/would/happen if God leaned down/and gave you a full wet/kiss?" Even clerics quote him, which helps explain why Iranians' behavior, in public and private, persistently undercuts an official line that not even the officials pretend to observe. Khamenei maintains a Twitter account in Farsi even though Twitter is barred in the Islamic Republic, just like the satellite television watched in millions of homes.

Today that routine hypocrisy—"the mellowing of the revolution," as one self-described hard-liner put it—means underground music, art and publishing thrive, while government statistics show young people are growing more sexually active. English classes are popular, and three months after the nuclear deal the "Death to America" motif was almost impossible to find in Tehran. "Almost all the things that are happening are not in the regime's favor—and they know it," says Abbas Milani, a Stanford professor teaching a seminar titled *Aesthetics of Dissent: The Case of Islamic Iran*. "They have utterly failed at what they call cultural engineering."

Milani posits that the private realm will inevitably bleed into the public, redeeming Iran's politics. It's a point of debate taken up one evening outside the Tehran gallery where artist Barbad Golshiri has an exhibit called "Curriculum Mortis," a collection of photos and actual headstones that includes graves of people killed for opposing the Iranian regime.

The gallery's owner, Nazila Noebashari, finds hope not only in the exhibit's being permitted by President Hassan Rouhani's government but also in the robust civil society that has persisted in Iran since the 1905 Constitutional Revolution established parliament. Yet today activists are lying low; even efforts to provide medical care for Afghan refugees and stop the shooting of stray dogs bring intense scrutiny from intelligence agencies.

"The Persian personality is to count on the seasons," says Noebashari, accounting for her optimism. "The spring will come. It is in our DNA to hope for the best possible thing."

Golshiri shakes his head. "It's not in my DNA," he says, reaching for a copy of his exhibition catalog, which opens with a quote from *The Waste Land*. "'April is the cruellest month,'" the artist says. "So. That's my spring."

Fifteen years ago, he was writing for several of the 100 newspapers that sprang up with the Reformist movement, every one of which the state shut down. He believes that since the trauma of 2009—when millions went into the streets to protest the evidently stolen re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, resulting in dozens of deaths, hundreds of arrests, and torture that allegedly included rape—people have no aspiration beyond pain avoidance and a certain level of personal comfort.

"This is how palliative care works," he says. "It's Waiting for Godot."

Yet hard-liners do soften, every so often. Rafsanjani is the most famous example. Less than three years after decrying the danger of visible hair, the onetime authoritarian was running for President as a relative libertine. When a television interviewer in 2005 asked how far dress codes might be relaxed were he elected, the cleric replied with a raised finger and a roguish smile. "No nudity!" he chirped—proof enough that not only does Iran change, so do the people running it. The Reformist movement, which in 1997 stunned conservatives by winning the first of a series of landslide elections that empowered the people to push back against a smothering state, actually drew several of its leaders from the students who took over the U.S. embassy in 1979.

"The revolution is slowly going," says one aging former Revolutionary Guard. "Better that we die. Our time is over. For us, for me and my generation. I, for example, always follow my son. Finally, we have to withdraw and to follow them. On everything."

But the System, as even insiders call the unelected, supremely powerful side of Iran's theocracy, also generates new believers. The walls that 27-year-old Mehdi Khanalizadeh breached were around the British embassy, overrun Nov. 29, 2011, by the equally zealous and thuggish regime loyalists known as Basij. Khanalizadeh works for the right-wing news agency Raja and tells me, with a genial smile that's as unusual as the feeling of being spun by a Basiji, that he's "as hard-line as they come." He remains privately proud of breaking liquor bottles in the Brits' diplomatic quarters, though as a good Basiji he is obliged to conform with the later statement of Khamenei, who officially regretted the action, which caused the British to close their embassy. In August they returned.

Khanalizadeh says the Americans could too—on a couple of conditions. "One, accept the Islamic Republic as a legitimate government. It's not sitting on bayonets. It's legitimate.

"Two, admit it's not nuts. It's not crazy. It's not Gaddafi. It's not North Korea. It's logical, complex, maybe more moderate on some issues, rigid on others. This is not me saying this, this is the Leader, the head of state."

So it is. But Khamenei says a lot of things, not always consistent. In April it was: "Of course, the negotiations on the nuclear issue are an experience. If the opposite side gives up its misconduct, we can continue this experience in other issues." Yet since the experience ended in a pact he personally approved, Khamenei now insists there can be no more talks, forbidding contact with the U.S. even as Iran's Foreign Minister meets with John Kerry.

The contradiction may be expedient, familiar to anyone following the U.S. presidential primaries, where candidates must fire up their most hardcore supporters. "They need this radicalism for local consumption," says Saeed Laylaz, a Reformist economist and analyst who was jailed for a year in 2009. "When they are talking about the U.S., Israel, mainly they are speaking to their base," firming it up in advance of two key elections, both set for February. One will install a new parliament, where Khamenei fears that public exuberance over the nuclear pact will benefit moderates at the expense of conservatives.

The other ballot, held the same day, is a more exclusive affair: voters will select members of the Assembly of Experts, the ossified group that chooses the Supreme Leader. As a practical matter, Khamenei likely has the job as long as he's alive, and rumors about his ill health—he had prostate surgery in 2014—are batted away by insiders. But at 76, he is actuarially unlikely to be Supreme Leader when Iran is free to start spinning more centrifuges. And he has groomed no successor.

Election returns show about 20% of Iranians support the regime come what may. The core appears to have survived even Ahmadinejad, who left office in 2013 deeply unpopular. But for now, the moderate wing led by Rouhani is on the rise, propelled by enthusiasm for the accord that promises to end Iran's

status as international pariah. A new English-language newspaper cheerfully covers the (still preliminary) commercial negotiations that keep Tehran's best hotels filled with visiting executives who hope to take advantage of the end of sanctions. The sign outside the Parsian hotel in Tehran reads: One billion tourists, one billion opportunities.

Rouhani, 66, is as Establishment as they come in Iran. Unlike any Reformist, who hard-liners fear will abandon theocracy, he has a long-standing relationship of trust with Khamenei, for whom he headed the Supreme National Security Council, which handles Iran's most sensitive issues. But Rouhani is vulnerable elsewhere. Economists say Iran's economy is running on euphoria. "Unfortunately, the expectations are too high," says Mostafa Beheshti Rouy of the private Bank Pasargad. Sanctions remain in place until the U.N. confirms that Iran has complied with the pact, likely before spring, but even their end will provide scant immediate relief, partly because while they were in place, some countries that formerly bought Iran's thick, sulfurous oil refitted their refineries to process lighter crude from less politically problematic countries. The bigger threat is an economy that was in shambles even before sanctions cost it \$160 billion in lost oil revenues alone since 2012, never mind the billions poured into a nuclear program with no beneficial side effects.

Much depends on the price of oil—which archrival Saudi Arabia appears happy to keep near its currently low \$45 to \$50 a barrel, knowing the consequences for Iran. Laylaz reckons oil would have to reach \$70 or \$80 a barrel to generate revenues sufficient to free the state from greater accountability to its people, whom otherwise it will have to tax more and heed more. Cheap oil constrains the regime.

But in a quirk of history, the sanctions had a moderating effect on some of the hardest hard-liners—the clique around Ahmadinejad. Elected as a populist, he governed as a cash machine, doling out lunch money to constituents and millions to political allies, many of whom made fortunes privately peddling oil that Iran had been forbidden to sell as a state. A lot of Porsche Cayennes were sold to what Laylaz calls a new political class: the nouveau riche hard-liner. It's a contradiction in political terms that economists say actually serves Iran's gradual moderation. "If you don't have anything, then you can become a hard-liner, because you don't have anything to lose," says Rouy. "But if you have something, one, you want to keep it, second, you want to increase it."

Capitalism offers no guarantee of political freedoms. Look at China (which Iran's regime has studied intently). But it offers an alternative to radicalism.

And radicalism is what Iran's entire ruling apparatus now claims to be against. Since Rouhani replaced Ahmadinejad, Tehran has happily ceded the position of Middle East's public enemy No. 1 to ISIS, the Sunni extremist group that both Iran and the U.S. are battling in Iraq and Syria. ISIS genuinely alarms Iranians, who have watched it slaughter thousands of fellow Shi'ite Muslims. The country is on high alert for infiltration by would-be suicide bombers. But ISIS is also a convenient bogeyman, allowing Tehran to cast itself as a responsible power in the Middle East. The role was useful in the nuclear talks and remains so in Iran's increasingly ugly regional competition with Saudi Arabia, a longtime incubator of Sunni extremism—and a longtime U.S. ally. Iranians both in and out of government make a point of suggesting that Iran would make a more suitable partner for the U.S. than Saudi Arabia going forward, supporting the argument with everything from their shared alarm over extremism to the Shi'ite propensity for order to pride in ancient Persian civilization. "Money is good," says merchant Farsheed Ahmadinia, alluding to Saudi wealth. "But those who have long histories, for 2,000 or 5,000 or 7,000 years, means they know how to make good friends. They are better friends than the Saudis."

But it's Khamenei who really requires convincing if the relationship with the U.S. is to change for good. "We need more positive gestures from the Americans," says Sadegh Kharrazi, a former Iranian diplomat who wrote a

proposed 2003 “grand bargain” with the U.S. In that secret document, Iran promised nuclear transparency and an end to support for Palestinian militants if Washington vowed to abandon regime change in Tehran. President George W. Bush brushed the letter aside. “We know the positive gestures from John Kerry and President Obama,” says Kharrazi, who is close to Khamenei. “But we do not have high confidence what will happen after President Obama leaves office.”

Meanwhile, trust is encouraged both privately and publicly. Five weeks after the nuclear deal was signed, Ahmed al-Mughassil, the mastermind of the 1996 Khobar Towers bombings that killed 19 U.S. troops, was arrested, having suddenly lost the protection of Hizballah, Iran’s proxy in Lebanon. And on Oct. 30, Iran joined peace talks on Syria, something Washington previously opposed. The diplomatic channel opened between governments for the nuclear talks could help avert crises that might not otherwise be avoided.

And crises that still can’t be avoided? Israel, a key point of contention, has been on the back burner, brought up by no Iranian in a week of interviews, though several made sly references to AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby, as a supposedly all-powerful force in American policymaking. “We believe the U.S. is really pursuing regime change,” says Abdullah Ganji, managing director of Javan, the newspaper most closely associated with the Revolutionary Guards. “We still think that.”

“Another problem,” he adds, “is the West always tries to promote its culture and beliefs, and we resist that.”

If a culture war is indeed where this contest is headed, it’s starting with the West dominating what’s really a global battlefield. Khamenei’s new warnings of cultural “infiltration” echo his predecessor Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s alarm over “Westoxification.” But scan the shelves of Morteza Mohammadi’s toy store in northwest Tehran—it’s all Hello Kitty, SpongeBob, anything Pixar. Defa Lucy is a Chinese knockoff of Barbie, which remains banned in Iran, but the shopkeeper doesn’t even stock Sara, the alternative once vigorously promoted by the System. Kids, he says, didn’t like how her hijab got in the way of playing with her hair.

“If they want to survive, they’ll be forced to live both with the world and with their people,” Mohammadi says, when I ask what Iranians will be like 10 or 15 years from now. “They’ll be less ideological.”

—With reporting by KAY ARMIN SERJOIE/TEHRAN

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