The implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—negotiated over many years and finally agreed upon by Iran, the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) plus Germany) heralds a new era for the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as the region. Over the past decade, by resisting unprecedented economic as well as political pressure and ignoring UN Security Council resolutions, Iran managed to significantly advance its nuclear program while avoiding a major military conflict. More recently, despite mounting opposition from critics in Tehran, Washington, and elsewhere, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani and lead U.S. negotiator John Kerry, as well as President Obama, have now overcome historically deep-rooted problems and perils, arriving at the JCPOA.

The nuclear deal’s significance in the Islamic Republic’s history is comparable only to UN Security Council Resolution 598, in 1987, which called for a ceasefire between Iran and Iraq after eight years of bloody war. If Iran and the P5+1 comply with the JCPOA for the next fifteen years, Iran's economy will become fully integrated into the global economy and its peaceful nuclear program will then be thoroughly legitimized. What happens after those fifteen years depends on many factors and actors. It is likely that Iran will have a new Supreme Leader, given Khamenei’s age (he was born in 1939); however, it is impossible to predict whether a significant political shift will accompany this leadership change. Iranian society is also changing rapidly, a reality that further complicates these considerations.
For Iran’s immediate future, the most urgent questions relate to the nuclear deal. The JCPOA’s sustainability is uncertain, and all parties need to identify parameters to strengthen the agreement’s implementation. Since the JCPOA is neither a treaty nor a convention, Rouhani’s government does not understand it to be legally binding, and as a result, to require the approval of the Majlis, or Iranian parliament. This approach to the JCPOA by both sides reduces issues of compliance and enforcement to a question of political will, which means Iran and the United States need to gradually build confidence after decades of no diplomatic ties. Bolstering political will is tricky, however, since it is a force that can go either way; political will helped bring about Iran’s nuclear program in the first place, so using it to ensure the JCPOA’s success is uncertain. But it is the key to the agreement’s future.

**Khamenei’s View of the United States: An Evil Par Excellence**

President Rouhani’s election in 2013 fueled global aspirations for a significant change in Iran’s nuclear policy, after several years of frustration caused by Iran’s defiant and uncompromising attitude under President Ahmadinejad. Since assuming office, President Obama offered both publicly and privately to hold unconditional negotiations with Iran. His private initiative consisted of letters to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, probably the first letters sent by a U.S. president to Khamenei since he became Supreme Leader in 1989. After only two months in office, President Obama recorded a Nowruz message (commemorating the Iranian spring holiday), contrasting himself with his predecessor, who identified the Iranian regime as a member of the “axis of evil.” Obama’s reference to the “Islamic Republic of Iran,” a first for a U.S. president, showed his belief in Tehran’s political legitimacy and that the administration did not have a policy of regime change.

“For nearly three decades, relations between our nations have been strained,” Obama reminded his audience. “But at this holiday, we are reminded of the common humanity that binds us together.” The president added that “this process will not be advanced by threats,” hinting that perhaps Americans as well as Iranians needed to follow this lesson. “We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect.”

In his speech in Mashhad the following day, the Supreme Leader responded by providing an extensive accounting of U.S. animosity toward Iran, animosity that had left an indelible memory for the nation: “They had such a behavior with the Iranian people; now the new U.S. administration says we are willing to negotiate with Iran, let’s forget about the past, we extend hands [of cooperation] to Iran. Well, what is this hand? If it is an extended hand that is made of cast-iron but covered by a velvet glove, it does not bode well.” He said that adopting new
rhetoric would not deceive the Iranian people, and that only a change of behavior would be meaningful. He insisted: “Where is this change? Why is it not visible? I say this to everybody. American officials and others should know: it is not possible to deceive or intimidate the Iranian people.”

The Green Movement’s Lasting Effect

Understanding the current Iranian political scene requires traveling back a few years. In particular, the political turmoil that followed Iran’s rigged 2009 presidential election—which re-elected Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—created a difficult situation for the United States and Iran alike. Ahmadinejad gained notoriety during his first presidential term for inflammatory statements about the United States and spoke of wiping Israel off the map. For Obama, Ahmadinejad’s re-election and the manner in which he won made it difficult to defend an Iran policy based on reconciliation.

Additionally, many people in Iran and the United States expected Obama to support the Iranian protesters of that election, rooted in what became known as the Green Movement, and to increase pressure on the Iranian government to share power with reformists and stop the violations of human rights and suppression of political and social freedom. For 30 years, the United States had refused to recognize the Islamic Republic. It hardly made sense to keep a hand extended when millions of the country’s citizens had taken to the streets to question the regime’s legitimacy and dictatorial tendencies. Khamenei viewed these events as the latest episode of U.S. hypocrisy: on one hand, the United States was offering to negotiate, while on the other, it was pursuing regime change by aiding domestic and international opposition.

After his reelection, Ahmadinejad sought to raise his domestic and international profile through direct talks with the United States, but Khamenei was firmly opposed to these talks. The Supreme Leader and the Islamic Republic’s political tradition shared Ahmadinejad’s anti-Western and anti-Israel rhetoric, so Ahmadinejad publicizing his desire to talk with the U.S. president went too far, beyond his authority and outside of his official talking points. His domestic critics lit into him as a result. Today, the regime remains fearful of the Green Movement, as demonstrated by the continued pressure on its main figures: two main rivals of Ahmadinejad in the 2009 elections, Mir-Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi—along with Zahra Rahnavard, Moussavi’s wife and a prominent figure in the Green Movement herself—have been under house arrest since February 2011. Dozens of political activists and journalists are still in prison, and two

After the 2009 election, Khamenei was firmly opposed to direct talks with the United States.
significant reformist groups, Mujahedin of Islamic Revolution Organization and Islamic Iran Participation Front, are banned.

After the popular uprisings starting in 2010 known as the Arab Spring led to the collapse of regimes in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, as well as suppression of Shiite protesters in Bahrain and the outbreak of war in Syria, Iran became much more concerned. The war in Syria presented a particular problem: if Bashar al-Assad’s government joined the list of those ousted, Iran would lose its only Arab government ally and face a changing regional power dynamic vis-à-vis its powerful Arab neighbors like Saudi Arabia. It could also lose its strongest leverage against Israel by losing its pathway to Lebanese Hezbollah, a military organization founded and funded by Iran but with effective facilitation by the Syrian regime. In return, Hezbollah has provided increasing levels of support to Assad in Syria and has established supply lines direct from Syria into Lebanon.4

Following the Arab Spring developments, a decisive alliance between Israel and Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) formed to increase political and economic pressure on Iran. Less hopeful at this point of persuading Iran to engage in serious negotiations, the United States designed a new regime of economic sanctions to target Iran’s crucial military and financial entities, in particular those associated with Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—not only for their nuclear-related activities but also for allegedly supporting terrorism and violating human rights. Toward this end, the United States built a broad anti-Iran alliance, successfully facilitating four unanimous UNSC resolutions to implement multilateral sanctions, despite China and Russia’s strong financial ties with Iran.

Ahmadinejad, who initially had appeared to be Khamenei’s favorite president, noticeably in his second term started to further defy the Supreme Leader’s authority—beyond his statements about talks with the Americans—undermining the interests of his allies. Ahmadinejad’s initial supporters in the political system were hardliner Islamists, but in order to regain his lost popularity and disputed legitimacy after the controversial 2009 election, he resorted to a nationalist discourse glorifying pre-Islamic tradition against pan-Islamism. Ahmadinejad added the nationalist elements to apocalypticism, which was the main characteristic of his rhetoric in his first term. In an Iranian political context, both apocalypticism and nationalism are perceived as anti-clerical, an irreconcilable ideology with Iranian Islamism. Ahmadinejad also started to undermine Khamenei’s authority, especially regarding the intelligence apparatus of the country, as well as to defy the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp’s economic interests.5 Despite sanctions on Iran’s finance and oil sectors, high oil prices substantially increased revenue. Yet, economic mismanagement and corruption under Ahmadinejad spiraled out of Khamenei’s control and led to pressing problems including unprecedented inflation. The government’s deep fear of a revitalized popular opposition...
movement increased after disturbances in small towns related to food shortages, including a chicken shortage in Neishabour. Some IRGC officials warned of possible further unrest after the spread of more economic dissatisfaction.

Thus, crippled by a mix of unprecedented sanctions, debilitating corruption, and economic mismanagement, the Islamic Republic found itself in its most difficult period since the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War. Abroad, the Arab Spring threatened ripple effects: Assad’s government in Syria was tenuous, putting at risk Iran’s bridge to Lebanon, and Israel and the Sunni Arab powers had never been so aligned in their anti-Iran policy. In all respects, Iran’s position appeared similar to its experience during the final year of the war with Iraq, which involved military fatigue and reluctance to engage in a confrontation while facing international isolation, a crisis of legitimacy, the government running out of money, and society suffering from uncertainty about the future. All of these trends worked to convince Khamenei that a change needed to be made.

The Catalyst for Nuclear Talks

Contrary to popular belief, the official change in policy toward nuclear talks was made not by Rouhani in 2013, but by the Supreme Leader in 2011 in Muscat, Oman, probably without then-President Ahmadinejad’s full knowledge. John Kerry, then-Senator, and Ali Akbar Salehi, then-Foreign Minister (2010–2013), were behind it; and the main negotiators were William Burns, the Deputy Secretary of State, and his counterpart Ali Asghar Khaji. On June 23, 2015, Ayatollah Khamenei himself publicly revealed how the talks began with the Americans in a major speech to government workers, delivered just as the last round of nuclear talks was getting underway in Vienna: “I would like to present a short history of these negotiations… Our negotiations with the Americans are, in fact, different from our negotiations with the P5+1. The Americans themselves asked for these negotiations, and their proposals date back to the time of the [Ahmadinejad] administration.”

Of course, the later Western enthusiasm to see a new “moderate” president Rouhani in Iran with whom decent and fruitful negotiations could take place is understandable. Yet no one knew better than the Obama administration that the Supreme Leader controls policy, and neither a hardline president like Ahmadinejad nor a moderate like Mohammad Khatami (president from 1997–2005) could cross his red lines. While direct negotiations between Iran and the United States commenced in 2011 with Khamenei’s permission and without
the president’s involvement, Rouhani’s election offered a great opportunity for both Khamenei and Obama to publicly justify a new round of talks.

Khamenei, for his part, needed to justify the change of policy without letting people think he had capitulated. “Resistance” is a sacred word in his vocabulary. “Compromise,” especially in the face of threats, means nothing but giving up. For Khamenei, a policy change should not damage the Islamic Revolution, nor should it allow the enemy’s success in bringing the country to its knees. Additionally, in order to restore his legitimacy—diminished by his earlier support for an ultimately insubordinate Ahmadinejad—the Supreme Leader needed to disassociate himself with the former president. In 2013, candidates selected by Khamenei’s appointees in the Guardian Council (the ultimate authority in qualification of candidates, observing and endorsing all four elections in Iran) had different views, but shared a loyalty to the Supreme Leader and recognized his authority, especially on military and nuclear policies.

Rouhani’s strength lay not only in his reputation as a good diplomat but also in the public perception of him as an “insider.” He helped found the Supreme National Security Council in 1989 per Khamenei’s order, leading it from its inception to 2005 and representing the Supreme Leader in the council from 1989 until 2013. For the first time in the Islamic Republic’s history, in June 12, 2013, Khamenei asked all Iranians, “even those who do not support the government, to participate in the election for the sake of the country.”

Usually Ayatollah Khamenei portrays people’s participation in any election as a sign of their re-endorsement of the entire political system. Asking non-supporters of the regime to participate in the election implies that, in his view, what was at stake went beyond protecting the political system to protecting the whole country. In his speech, he emphasized that the maximal participation in the election is “the most important issue for the country.” “Some people,” he said, “for whatever reason, may have no desire to support the Islamic regime, but [everyone certainly] wants to support her/his country. All [people] should come.”

Khamenei also knew very well that if those who were not loyal to the Islamic Republic, and even those who blamed him for his strong support of Ahmadinejad and his policy of suppressing the Green Movement, would be interested in participating in the election due to economic hardship and a desire to help Rouhani win and thus alleviate sanctions. Their priority now might not be democracy and human rights, but rather economic prosperity. In his first speech after the
election, Khamenei thanked voters and said those who “are not the regime's supporters” still care about national interests, and have “trusted the regime” in this election.\(^{11}\)

In 2013, Rouhani won with just 50.71 percent of the vote, the smallest winning margin as compared to previous presidents.\(^{12}\) According to Salehi, who now heads Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization (2009–2010 and 2013–present), Rouhani expressed surprise after he was briefed on the two years of direct talks with the Americans. Unlike the general perception created by Western and Iranian media, the main architect of the new negotiation policy was not Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iranian Foreign Minister, or President Rouhani, but Salehi operating with Khamenei’s blessing.\(^{13}\)

If Obama and his European allies wanted to make the new round of negotiations, started in 2011 in Oman, succeed, they needed to make serious compromises. Having a less incendiary president in Tehran, one who didn’t goad the West and Israel, certainly helped. Yet while the Obama administration and other P5+1 members were well aware of the Supreme Leader’s actual role, they portrayed the negotiations as occurring between world powers and a new “moderate” government in Tehran.\(^{14}\)

Today, the negotiations have succeeded, but their sustainability depends, as we have seen, on political will. Khamenei generated the political will to drive Iran’s policy change in 2011, but whether he—or his successor—will maintain this in the future is open to speculation.

**Challenges to the Deal’s Sustainability**

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action represents a remarkable compromise among nations, however it still faces challenges in several key areas, including the dual nature of Iran’s government, growing public dissatisfaction in Iran, and the dilemma of Iran changing its nuclear policy while maintaining its regional policy. Any of these could negatively impact the JCPOA’s effectiveness over the long-term. Furthermore, the conflict of interests between those who benefit from the sanctions regime and those within the IRGC or other influential organizations in the Islamic Republic who benefit from sanctions relief may change the dynamic against the deal. Neither President Obama nor President Rouhani can provide a guarantee to secure the deal’s implementation path after they leave office in 2016 and 2017 (if Rouhani does not see reelection), respectively. It is also difficult to determine what the future Iranian leadership and policy toward the nuclear issue might look like if Ayatollah Khamenei leaves the political scene.
The Duality of the Government in the Islamic Republic

The Iranian political and legal structure has two sources of legitimacy: divine and democratic. The Supreme Leader’s legitimacy stems from the Shia ideological principle of the Guardianship of the Jurist (velayat-e faqih)—meaning Islam gives a faqih, or Islamic jurist, custodianship over the people—while the president is elected via a direct vote for a four-year term and is limited to serving two consecutive terms. Although the president is the highest popularly elected official and functions as the executive, he does not have full control over foreign policy and must answer to the Supreme Leader, whose authority supersedes his own.

This duality, embedded in the constitution, forces the government to compete with itself and to divide into endless factions with contradicting economic and political interests, and consequently leads to massive corruption, mismanagement, and political inefficiency. Nor is the duality of this system straightforward: the Supreme Leader’s legitimacy is divine, but he is appointed by the Assembly of Experts, whose members are elected every eight years in a national vote. This duality significantly diminishes the president and Majlis’s authority on all policy matters, including those related to the military and nuclear program.

In this arrangement, the Supreme Leader uses ambiguity to his advantage. After the 2003 and 2004 set of nuclear talks, Khamenei avoided making public statements so that he could walk away without suffering public damage. When Ahmadinejad came to power to implement the new nuclear and foreign policy, Ayatollah Khamenei openly criticized the negotiations and agreement that could not have taken place had he opposed it. After Rouhani, who was the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS) and the head of the Iranian negotiation team in 2003 and 2004, found himself engulfed by storm of criticism by Ahmadinejad and Ali Larijani, Rouhani’s successor in the SCNS, Rouhani published a book justifying his record, responding to accusations about giving up so much too easily, and proving that whatever had been done was with Khamenei’s approval.15

Similarly, after the JCPOA was signed in Vienna, Khamenei continues to deliberately refer to it not as a “deal” but as a “drafted text.”16 This kind of hedging on the agreement leaves him room to maneuver if he wants to alter his commitment in the future. Indeed, whenever the regime desires, it can downplay the Supreme Leader’s political role or hide him behind democratic institutions. For instance, when Iran decided to decrease tensions with the West after the Salman Rushdie fatwa of 1989—wherein previous Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called for Rushdie’s death after the author published...
The Satanic Verses—Iran declared that the fatwa was a “religious fatwa” and therefore not part of the government’s agenda. The regime made the opposite argument in the case of the “nuclear fatwa” of October 2003—wherein Khamenei stated that Islam forbids the production, stockpiling, or use of weapons of mass destruction—which was cast as a government-based and not only a religious decision. The system’s duality not only hinders policy decisions and implementation but also makes Iran’s behavior unpredictable.

As mentioned above, on the domestic front, Ayatollah Khamenei controls elections through the IRGC and Guardian Council from start to finish. After elections, he uses four major tools to weaken elected officials: radio and television (which are government monopolies run by his appointees), as well as the judiciary, intelligence, and military forces. The president and Majlis lack influence over these institutions—even crucial ministers such as minister of Intelligence, Foreign Affairs, and Defense, which nominally are appointed by the president and work under him, but should be pre-approved by the Supreme Leader, and usually directly report to him. Parallel intelligence bodies also exist outside the government under Khamenei’s supervision. Such mechanisms help Khamenei prevent any election from becoming transformational.

In the dispute between hardliners and the Rouhani team about what institution should approve the deal in order to make it legally effective, Khamenei publicly took the hardliner’s side and asked the government to let the parliament—and not the SCNS—review and approve it. The main reason behind such decision is that the parliament’s bill would not require the Supreme Leader’s endorsement, while SCNS decisions do need his signature. Avoiding leaving any footprint on the deal allows Khamenei to sidestep any responsibility for its potential failure and blame either Rouhani or the Americans, as we saw both in the case of 2003 and 2004.

The deal could fall apart in many ways, including the IRGC’s refusal to let the IAEA inspect military sites that seem to host suspicious activities. The IRGC is fully under Khamenei’s control; neither the parliament nor the president has any say. The P5+1 might interpret such an act as a violation of the deal and suspend the JCPOA. In another scenario, if Iran engages in a more aggressive policy toward Syria or backs Hezbollah in a potential confrontation with Israel—and if the United States subsequently imposes further sanctions on Iran—this might encourage Ayatollah Khamenei to stop complying with the deal after accusing the United States of cheating. For him, the main purpose of negotiation was to end the sanctions; if sanctions remain or increase, he would see no point in complying with the JCPOA. Retaining Khamenei’s support is thus critical to the success of the deal.
Mounting Popular Dissatisfaction

Recent studies show that, despite broad support for the JCPOA, a great portion of the Iranian population do not have a realistic understanding of its implications. For instance, a study by the University of Maryland’s Center for International and Security Studies reveals that 77 percent of Iranians have false beliefs about the timing of sanctions relief, and only 30 percent of Iranians are aware that U.S. sanctions unrelated to Iran’s nuclear activities would continue even if Iran fully complies with the JCPOA.\(^\text{19}\)

It is also hard to imagine that the economic gains hoped for by many Iranians will materialize before the February 2016 Majlis election. This delay will strengthen hardliners, who not only opposed the deal but also accused Rouhani of exaggerating the deal’s importance and potential to solve the country’s economic crisis. With economic relief slow to emerge, hardliners will be well positioned to argue that Rouhani’s willingness to make economic improvement dependent on sanctions relief has not only spurred nuclear compromises that threaten Iran’s national security but also revealed his management deficiencies and inability to fight economic corruption.

Moreover, Khamenei’s firm positions on Islamizing culture and society as well as fighting “cultural invasion” will have continued to flout the president’s desire to allow more social and cultural freedoms. Such stasis will counter the middle class’s expectation that the nuclear deal is only the first step toward bigger societal changes. Additionally, the ongoing suppression and restriction of activists, political parties, organizations, and NGOs continue to frustrate and disillusion many citizens about Rouhani’s ability to bring domestic reforms. A similar fate threatened the Iranian moderate middle class in 2005. After eight years during which President Mohammad Khatami failed to bring about promised reforms, he was succeeded by Ahmadinejad. Failures at reform could presage a similar, troubling transfer of presidential power in 2017.

As the country approaches February 2016 elections for both the Majlis and Assembly of Experts, Rouhani, his team, and his allies—including former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (in office 1989–1997)—have begun to criticize the Guardian Council for its “illegal” initiatives according to which previous candidates were disqualified. Criticizing the Guardian Council—which consists of six powerful ayatollahs, appointed directly by the Supreme Leader, and six lawyers, suggested by the judiciary and approved by the Majlis—amounts to challenging the Supreme Leader’s most powerful electioneering tool.

Ayatollah Khamenei’s candid response to Rouhani’s criticism of the Guardian Council shows that he is determined to maintain his uncompromising election policy and preempt everyone to believe that a nuclear compromise could be a prelude for the government’s compromise over non-nuclear policies.\(^\text{20}\) Ayatollah Khamenei believes that the main U.S. motivation behind the nuclear negotiation
was to penetrate Iran’s economy, culture, and politics. In a recent speech, he said the U.S. “intention was to use the deal as a tool to penetrate the country. We blocked their way and we will definitely block their way. We would not allow Americans economic infiltration, neither their cultural, political infiltration, or presence.” Kayhan newspaper, run under the direct supervision of Ayatollah Khamenei, published another editorial on August 30, 2015, entitled “The Infiltration’s Holes,” further elaborating the Supreme Leader’s concerns. According to the editorial, the “enemy” (which means the United States) can influence Iranian high-ranking officials’ perceptions about important issues and “infiltrate into the country’s management network,” which suggest the United States is trying to support those officials who may advance its agenda or help such elements to gain power in the elections. So just as advocates in Washington hope that the JCPOA will empower moderates in Tehran, Iranian hardliners are in their own way concerned about this potential and are determined to inhibit Rouhani’s political efforts.

Hardliners note that Rouhani’s campaign against the Guardian Council started after the JCPOA was signed in Vienna, demonstrating that Rouhani’s aspirations for the deal transcend the nuclear issue. The West is not only hoping moderates gain politically in a post-deal Iran, this thinking goes—the same West has been trying to subvert Islamic Revolutionary principles and promote regime change for the last four decades and is now attempting to achieve regime change through the nuclear deal.

It seems that implementation of the deal will widen the gap between Rouhani and his hardliner critics over pivotal cultural, political, and economic issues. If history is of any indication, the Supreme Leader will lean toward hardliners and use his effective tools to weaken the president, while the president is unable to rely on his social power base—due to the weakness of civil society and the absence of free, dynamic political parties—and ultimately find himself defenseless surrounded by active enemies and passive friends and allies.

If history is any indication, Rouhani may still find himself defenseless against Iranian hardliners.

Changing Nuclear Policy while Maintaining Regional Policy
Sanctions on Iran are partly meant to address Iran’s support for terrorist groups. So even after the sanctions relief from the JCPOA takes effect, Iran will continue to suffer from terror-related sanctions if it does not change its regional policies. The Obama administration hopes Iran will change its regional policy as a result of its successful and encouraging experiences during the nuclear negotiation. Ayatollah Khamenei hopes for something like the opposite—that the United States
decreases its attention on Iran’s regional policies as well as its human rights violations.

On this front, Tehran assumes the United States will gradually become less interested in intervening in the Middle East and, in turn, cede more space to regional actors on issues like confronting ISIS. Such perceptions are buoyed by U.S. efforts to decrease its dependence on Middle East energy and to move its business focus from the Middle East to Asia. Another perception, or hope, in Tehran is that the U.S. foreign policy success embodied in the deal will discourage Washington and other Western capitals from vigorously enforcing existing non-nuclear-related sanctions or imposing new sanctions in response to increased Iranian aggressiveness in the region, such as increasing its military presence in Syria or any initiative in Iraq, Yemen, or Bahrain that could be interpreted by Saudis as an immediate grave threat to Persian Gulf countries. In other words, while the U.S. administration is hoping this deal will be transformational, the Iranian leadership also hopes so—though not in transforming Iran’s regional behavior, but in transforming U.S. policy in the Middle East.

In order to make the agreement work, the United States and its negotiating partners agreed to address the nuclear program while excluding all other disputed issues between Iran and the West. Abbas Araghchi, a prominent negotiator under both the Rouhani and Ahmadinejad governments, emphasized that the nuclear deal would not affect Iran’s regional policies, saying:

*We told [Kerry and the P5+1 negotiators] that we cannot cease providing weapons to Hezbollah, and we would not make Hezbollah the victim of our nuclear program. Therefore, we continue doing what we are doing. If you want to make arms sanctions part of the deal, let it be. We negotiated long on this subject … Finally they themselves said, ‘We’re separating the nuclear deal from the [UN Security Council] resolution—we will include the arms sanctions in the resolution, not in the deal, so if you violate it, it would not be a violation of the deal.’*23

This isolation of Iran’s nuclear policy from its regional policy played a significant role in reaching a nuclear agreement. This is because the P5+1 correctly presumed that Iran would more readily change its nuclear policy than its regional policies. This separation, however, seems at odds with the U.S. administration’s defense of the deal based on the possibility that it could gradually affect Iran’s regional behavior. In Iran, the negotiators strongly argue to the contrary in reassuring their critics. They contend that this deal will not force Iran to change its existing policy toward Lebanese Hezbollah, the Arab–Israeli conflict, Shiite militias in Iraq, or the situation in Yemen and Syria. While Obama’s critics are deeply skeptical about the transformational implications of the deal, Iranian hardliners are themselves deeply concerned about such a possibility.

In his meeting with Rouhani and cabinet members, Khamenei, referring to the nuclear talks, urged Iranian officials not to do anything that helps the “enemy.” He
elaborated: “When I say enemy, it is not out of prophecy, dream, or delusion, but rather facts before our eyes … we should not forget [their] animosity.” He had also previously said that this animosity, whether from Israel or the United States, has increased, not decreased. He also warned about the enemy’s plot to “infiltrate the country’s culture and economy through various means.” In this meeting, Khamenei instructed Iranian officials to talk explicitly and bluntly about the enemy and its animosity. Khamenei himself does not hesitate to call the United States “the enemy par excellence,” representing the “world domination order,” as well as calling the Holocaust a “myth” and Israel a “cancerous tumor.”

A few days after Khamenei’s speech, his official website published an article by Mohammad Hossein Vezarati, a hardline analyst close to the Supreme Leader’s office and a frequent contributor to Khamenei’s website, titled “American Middle East: From Order to Anarchy.” The author’s main argument is that the nuclear negotiations showed that, unlike the Islamic Republic of Iran, the U.S. objective is beyond the nuclear issue. Raising the issue of Iran’s support to the resistance groups in the region, Iran’s missile program, Yemen and Syria developments, and the U.S. attempt to include them in the negotiations shows that [the United States] is trying to promote its policy in the region either through transforming the Islamic Republic of Iran to the ‘global village’s good boy’ or erecting strategic barriers around Iran.

The author quotes the Supreme Leader’s recent speech in which he said, “They [Americans] want to infiltrate the region and have a presence here and follow up on their objectives. By God’s help, we can prevent this from happening as much as we can. Our policies in the region are in contrast with U.S policies.”

Excluding Iran’s regional policy from the nuclear negotiations played a key role in reaching a breakthrough deal, but does not necessarily guarantee the deal’s survival. On the contrary, if Khamenei blessed the negotiation and the deal based on the assumption that the United States would stop resisting Iran’s increasing influence in the region and start treating Iran like a partner (by effectively containing ISIS or contributing in the stabilization of Iraq), then the nuclear deal may actually backfire by increasing Saudi and other U.S.-allied activity in the region, intensifying the sectarian war, and worsening the human catastrophe in Syria. This by itself may potentially force the United States, especially under the next administration, to increase its pressure on Iran by enforcing existing sanctions more effectively or applying new sanctions. As shown earlier, one should not have the delusion that this deal is made between the P5+1 and a “moderate” president. The negotiation and the nuclear deal would not have taken place had it not been blessed by Khamenei. He might not be an omnipotent leader but certainly he and institutions
under him have spoiling power and the ability to sabotage the implementation of
the deal through very sophisticated mechanisms.26

Both Iran’s internal politics and regional policy have their own logic. As it is
hard to imagine that a military attack or economic sanctions could have an
immediate and substantial impact on Iran’s political structure, it would not
be realistic to hope that the nuclear deal would change the internal dynamics
in Iran in the short term or encourage Iran to take a different direction in its
attitude toward the Middle East and redefine its strategic interests in the
region.

Different Expectations

The question has long hovered over the enigmatic Islamic Republic: Is it a cause or
a country? If the government cared more about its national interests, it would more
willingly project a rational attitude toward the international community; it would
likewise value its economic interests over its quest for regional power and ideologi-
cal influence. But if Iran continuously shows its pan-Islamic and anti-imperialist
principles to trump its desire for greater national prosperity, then confronting its
defiance will prove tougher.

A main argument made to explain Iran’s change of policy, and engagement
in direct talks, was that the heavy sanctions had convinced the leadership that
the country’s prosperity should not be sacrificed for the sake of advancing its
political agenda—a sacrifice North Korea now makes. By similar logic, some
argue that if the West offered tempting economic incentives, then Iran would
likewise give up its transnational revolutionary ambitions and become a
normal member of the international community. A related argument made by
some analysts is that some of the most influential IRGC commanders are
now motivated more by financial profit than by ideology. If the IRGC controls
about a third of Iran’s economy, and many of its powerful factions are driven by
economics and not ideology, then helping absorb Iran into the world economy
would automatically dissuade it from continuing to pursue an anti-Western
ideology and agenda.

Montesquieu eloquently made such a distinction between moneymaking and
the quest for power, considering the first the more innocent drive. Later,
Keynes elaborated on such an idea by arguing that moneymaking requires a
healthy and secure environment, but that in the absence of this environment
the drive for money can be redirected in harmful ways.27 For Iran, thoroughly sep-
arating economic interests from political ambitions would be very difficult. Kha-
menei and his predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, are revealing
examples. Like the former Supreme Leader, Khamenei has a modest, pious, and even puritan private lifestyle while using the country’s wealth through legal and illegal means to advance his ideological agenda. He is not interested in making money for the sake of money, but does seek money to expand his influence throughout Iran and abroad. In other words, money is a necessary means for an ideological end and does not reflect a conscious sacrifice of ideological principles.

The future of relations between Iran and the United States is highly uncertain. Since 2011, both Ayatollah Khamenei and President Obama have permitted foreign ministry officials to hold direct meetings and engage in communication. Such openness facilitated negotiations and made reaching an agreement possible. Realistically, though, one should not expect the nuclear deal to lead to normalized bilateral ties in the near future. President Obama will not put forth such an initiative during his remaining tenure, and even if the deal is going well under the next president, paving the way toward normalized relations will still be painstaking.

Meanwhile, the absence of diplomatic relations creates many restrictions. For instance, U.S. inspectors cannot accompany the inspection teams in visiting Iranian nuclear or non-nuclear sites. If one of the deal’s main objectives is to build mutual confidence, the diplomatic barrier hinders confidence-building, and the lack of direct communications may increase misunderstanding during the deal’s implementation.

Regardless of whether the JCPOA succeeds, Iranian society is undergoing substantial changes. Even though the influence of Islamic ideology is weakening, the Islamic Republic grows stronger. Against this backdrop, women and minorities are becoming more aware of their rights and are trying to pursue them through innovative and effective means, but the public sphere remains strictly closed to any activities potentially seen as a threat.

Given this strong-state approach, the government’s ideological legitimacy loses relevance and its ability to provide security and opportunity becomes the public’s main concern. While ordinary Iranians are regularly exposed to systematic institutionalized violence, the society as a whole opposes any idea of foreign intervention or political revolution. A very dynamic society that aspires to become as modern as Europe but exists under a sophisticated autocratic regime—one that cracks down harder than ever against attempts at political change—means Iran’s future is likely to defy even the most careful predictions.

One should not expect the nuclear deal to lead to normalized bilateral ties in the near future.
Notes

5. In 2011, for example, Ahmadinejad claimed that IRGC used its military ports to smuggle cigarettes: “The value [of cigarette smuggling] makes any first class international smuggler greedy, let alone our very own ‘smuggler brother.’” Speech on YouTube [in Farsi], July 4, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxusPYQ50ls.
6. In 2012, there people in Neishabour, a city in northeast of Iran, protested against the rising price of chicken, which created crisis in the city for few days. For a report [in Farsi] on this issue see: http://www.entekehab.ir/fa/news/70737
7. See, for example, the May 18, 2013 warning by Rasoul Sanaee Rad, the head of IRGC’s political office. For a report [in Farsi] on his speech delivered in Qom, see: http://www.radiofarda.com/content/o2_irgc_election_/24990283.html
10. See full transcript of his speech [in Farsi]: http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=22900
12. For a comparative statistic study [in Farsi] on the nine presidential elections in Iran see: http://www.fardanews.com/fa/news/83120/%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A6%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1%8C.
16. For instance, in his July 18 speech, Khamenei said “the prepared draft should be approved through the legal procedure.” See [in Farsi]: http://www.leader.ir/langs/fa/index.php?p=contentShow&id=13440.


18. For the transcript of his speech [in Farsi] see: http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=30653


27. John A. Hall, The Importance of Being Civil, the Struggle for Political Decency (June 23, 1015), p. 38.