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Iran's Nuclear Program: Winning the Long Game

Is it possible to dissuade Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons over the long haul? Not if the West ignores the importance of the current nuclear program to the Iranian people, says Jarrod Hayes. That's why Western policies must 1) downplay the program's significance; 2) normalize its presence in the global arena; and 3) encourage Tehran to develop other high-tech industries.

By Jarrod Hayes for ISN

While Russian activity in Ukraine, migrants at sea in the Mediterranean, and the renewed possibility of a Greek exit from the Euro have claimed the headlines, the confrontation and negotiations between the permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) along with Germany (+1) and Iran over the latter's nuclear program continue. On April 2, 2015 the parties agreed upon a broad framework that left many questions unanswered, particularly relating to verification of Iranian compliance. Many of those answers are due to be delivered—or not—by the June 30 deadline for a technical framework agreement. Thus, while the situation may have taken a backseat in the current news cycle, it remains critically important—and contentious. While the Obama Administration in the US projects an upbeat assessment, others are more pessimistic. French leaders are [highlighting concerns](#) over verification. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been outspoken in his opposition and [visited the United States](#) in March 2015 in an effort to undermine U.S. domestic support. Several political figures, from Saudi Ambassador to the United States Adel al-Jubeir to U.S. Senator John McCain to former Defense Intelligence Agency director retired Lt. General Michael Flynn have sought to link the nuclear deal with Iran's [broader regional behavior](#), implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) arguing that the nuclear deal should not take place until Iran becomes a better international citizen.

These debates along with the looming deadline for a technical framework agreement should open up a broader discussion in the United States regarding the underlying assumptions of U.S. policy towards Iran. Without doing so, the broad framework agreed in April is likely to be a brief but quickly extinguished flash of hope. All too often, U.S. policy regarding Iran's nuclear program focuses on the leaders of that country, seeking to change their political calculations. As a consequence, policy discussions in the United States pay scant attention to the political conditions that Iran's nuclear program operates within. These conditions set the stage for political action, restraining potentially pragmatic leaders like Rowhani while empowering agitators like former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The social psychology of the Iranian nuclear deal

A critical component of the political context is the social significance of the nuclear program. Indeed, by failing to understand what the nuclear program means to Iranian society, U.S. policy has made the development of nuclear weapons more, not less, likely. Why more likely? By disregarding what the nuclear program means to Iranian society, the United States has pursued policies that make it impossible for pragmatic leaders to alter the trajectory of Iranian policy while giving hardline politicians the political fuel to push the nuclear program into dangerous territory. U.S. policy does so by highlighting the international importance of the nuclear program while simultaneously denying Iranians other avenues for asserting national success and establishing a positive international status. The increased focus on tying a nuclear deal to Iran's purported regional behavior compounds this problem.

It might be easiest to understand the counterproductive effects of U.S. policy by examining what the nuclear program means for Iran's status in three areas. The first is Iran's place as a modern state. Despite the fact that nuclear technology is now 70 years old, it remains the case that developing a complete nuclear energy program is a significant technological feat. By successfully pursuing nuclear energy, Iran stakes a claim as a modern, technologically advanced country. The role of the nuclear program in asserting this identity is all the more significant because of the relative poverty of the rest of the intellectual economy. While sanctions have gutted much of Iran's economy, the nuclear program stands as a shining example of the intelligence and capability of the Iranian people and thus as a source of national pride. Work in social psychology, specifically Social Identity Theory, is very clear on the importance of positive distinctiveness as a basis of social cohesion. Put another way, social collectives, like the individuals that comprise them, want to feel good about themselves. The drive for that positive distinctiveness can fuel conflictual behavior, as in the case of rival nationalisms. In the Iranian case, we should understand the nuclear energy program as tied to the image of positive distinctiveness held by Iranians about themselves

The second area of significance relates to Iran's turbulent history of international relations in the 20th century. While most Americans are oblivious to the history of the United States in the region, Iranians are not so quick to forget American foreign policy that was central in overthrowing a rightfully elected prime minister (Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953), supporting an oppressive regime (the Shah), and aiding an aggressor (Iraq) in a war that killed at least 300,000 Iranians and saw the use of chemical weapons against Iran. The United States has also imposed economic sanctions since 1979. I raise these points to highlight the legitimate feeling of victimization held by Iranians. The nuclear program thus stands as a break with this history. While victimization suggests weakness and a loss of control, the nuclear program projects strength and control over the country's destiny.

Finally, the nuclear program serves as a signal that Iran is on par with the leading states of the international system. Again, in the context of marginalization by the United States, the significance of this for Iranian society is difficult to overstate. Economic sanctions have diminished much of Iran's economic capabilities. The country is politically isolated. For any society, the natural response to a sense of marginalization or diminution is to find ways to assert self worth. Positive distinctiveness enters the picture again. Groups seek to assert their collective positive distinctiveness, particularly when others deny it. There are few things that so obviously establish positive distinctiveness as a nuclear program. In the Iranian context, where there are few other options for establishing distinctiveness, the nuclear program assumes even greater social weight.

Setting a new path

U.S. policymakers have failed to appreciate these social dynamics, and in doing so exacerbated them. The Bush Administration focused almost exclusively on the nuclear program and emphasized 'sticks' in its policy. By making the nuclear program the primary basis of engagement, the Bush Administration amplified the first and third social dynamics, while the use of coercive penalties fed

into the shared Iranian sense of victimization. The Obama Administration has done little better. The efforts to extend sanctions and tie a nuclear deal to Iran's regional behavior further exacerbate the problem of positive distinctiveness. Policymakers might argue that external pressure creates political fissures, thus undermining the political leadership and the nuclear program. These arguments have been shown to be faulty. Rather than generate political tensions internally, the external pressure reinforces social dynamics that push the nuclear program forward. The popularity of the program is such that even the Green movement that erupted in the aftermath of the contested 2009 presidential election supported Iran's nuclear program. U.S. policymakers are overdue for a rethink of the basic assumptions on which policy is predicated.

What, then, does the Obama and future administrations need to do? Admittedly, the problem will not go away quickly. Thus, the kinds of policies needed are the type that pay off long after politicians leave office. Still, there are things the Obama Administration can do now to begin addressing the social dynamic within Iran. First, enable the development of Iran's intellectual economy. Expand opportunities for Iranian students to study in the United States. Permit investment by engineering, science, and technology firms in Iran. Reduce or eliminate sanctions on technology and engineering exports. Second, address the history of victimization. Apologize for past mistakes. Retarget sanctions to focus on the political leadership while minimizing the impact on society. Downplay the significance of the nuclear program in U.S.-Iran relations. Third, treat Iran like a significant player in the international system but oppose it where it works to destabilize neighboring countries. Address its nuclear program through the same international institutions that other states abide by. Offer an immediate shift in policy predicated on Iranian accession to the Nonproliferation Treaty's Additional Protocol. That is, treat Iran's program not as something exceptional, but instead as something normal and governed by existing international institutions. These and other policies addressing the social underpinnings of the nuclear program are the only hope the international community has of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons in the long term.

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