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Can Rational Minds Prevail in the Iran Accords

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By Mohammad Amirkhizi

After more than a decade of negotiations, military threats, sanctions and diplomatic rifts, the Geneva talks between Iran and the P5+1 have produced an historic interim agreement. Although the focus is ostensibly limited to placing restrictions on Iran's nuclear program, these negotiations have implications far beyond the technical atomic issues. They offer the opportunity to overcome years of mistrust and broken promises between the parties and the hope for a new beginning in relations between Iran and the West.

The gist of the agreement is that Iran will freeze its nuclear program for six months in return for a partial lifting of sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy. Specifically:

- Iran has agreed to halt uranium enrichment above 5%, dismantle equipment that can be used to enhance uranium above 5%, refrain from further enhancement of its 3.5% stockpile, dilute its 20% enriched uranium, limit the use and installation of its centrifuges, cease construction of the Arak nuclear reactor and provide IAEA inspectors with daily access to the Natanz and Fordo sites.
- The West has agreed to Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program, to pause efforts to further reduce Iran's crude oil sales, suspend US and EU sanctions on Iran's petrochemical exports, suspend US sanctions on Iran's auto industry, permit the importation of spare parts for civil aviation industry, suspend the introduction of new UN, US and EU related sanctions, introduce financial channels to facilitate humanitarian trade and provide access to \$7 billion of its approximately \$100 billion in frozen foreign exchange.

If all goes well, the interim agreement will establish a level of trust and lay the groundwork for the negotiation of a final agreement in six months.

Of course, critics of normalization in both the West and Iran abound and there are plenty of opportunities for miscalculation-some which could result in Iran emerging as a greater regional threat than it is today.

But the choice is clear. If the West does nothing or if the interim agreement fails, Iran will continue to develop its nuclear weapons capability unabated and there is a substantial risk of a military response from the West or its allies. Few reasonable critics believe that military action would stop Iran's nuclear production in the way that Syria was stopped by the attack on its al-Kibar reactor in 2007. The only winners would be the few that benefit from the imposition of sanctions. But if the accords succeed and a baseline of trust is established, then Iran's nuclear development program will be dramatically slowed if not entirely stopped and the aspirations of average citizens on both sides will prevail.

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For now, the accords seem to have popular support in the West. A recent [Ipsos poll](#) shows that by a two to one margin, American's support the idea of a negotiated settlement. And even if negotiations fail, 49% of Americans want the US to increase sanctions and 31% think there should be further attempts to establish a diplomatic solution. Only 20% are in favor of a launching a military strike in the event of failure.

A majority of Iranians also appear to favor the accord. Immediately following the announcement, the value of Iranian gold coins and foreign currencies fell (a common harbinger of optimism), the government controlled newspapers issued a raft of images showing Zarif and Kerry shaking hands and crowds of people joyfully mobbed the returning negotiators.

Iran has a population of almost 77 million of which two thirds are under the age of 30. Its 2012 GDP was more than \$500 billion and its adult literacy rate is more than 82%. Moreover, it possesses almost 10% of the world's oil resources and is the fourth largest producer of oil and gas. No matter the outcome of these accords, Iran has been and will continue to be a dominant player in the region. The only question is whether they can be legitimately co-opted into playing a more constructive strategic role within the international community by curtailing their nuclear enrichment program and making it fully transparent in exchange for sanctions relief, or whether the talks will succumb to the increasingly desperate efforts of extremists on both sides to smother the voices of optimism in exchange for another decade of political and nuclear brinkmanship.

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