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Iran's 'Deep State' Has the Most to Lose from Opening to the West

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The comprehensive nuclear agreement [4] between Iran and the P5+1—the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany—was signed on July 14. A few days later, the United Nations Security Council issued Resolution 2231 [5] endorsing it. October 18 was “adoption day [6]” for the agreement, the day both sides began laying the legal groundwork for carrying out their obligations under the agreement. In particular, the European Union and the United States began the legal process of lifting economic sanctions against Iran.

Led by President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's moderates and pragmatists have been trying to open their country's gates to the outside world. Believing that the shadow of war has been lifted, they are trying to attract foreign investments, normalize Iran's relations with the West and in particular the United States, and move the nation's political system toward a more inclusive and open one.

Iran's deep state [7], the security and intelligence forces and their hardline supporters that hide behind Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, does not want Rouhani to accomplish his goal of normalization of relations with the West. While it does want lifting of the economic sanctions imposed on Iran, it also abhors opening Iran to the world. The reason is clear: normalization of political and economic ties to the West will lead to a loosening of the deep state's grip on political power. Loss of political power will inevitably lead to the loss of economic might and privileges that the deep state and its supporters enjoy.

If the deep state succeeds in keeping Iran isolated, it will once again squander a golden opportunity for using Iran's strategic importance to the West to protect, expand and advance its national security and interests.

For a time, it had appeared that the deep state might follow Khamenei and be open to the possibility of limited rapprochement with the United States. This created the hope that the two countries could address some of the crises in the Middle East that have set the region on a path of destruction and bloodshed. The evidence for this was provided by a speech on April 9, when Khamenei declared [8]: "If the other side [the United States] sets aside its bad behavior, this will become a new experience for us, one that will tell us that, well, we can also negotiate with them about other issues."

But after the nuclear agreement, Khamenei began backtracking. In speech after speech, he has been lashing out at the United States, accusing it of trying to gain undue influence in Iran. His supporters have been fiercely attacking Rouhani, Zarif and the reformists.

After Zarif shook President Obama's hand on September 29 on the sidelines of the annual meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, Khamenei fiercely attacked the United States in a speech on October 7, declaring that he has banned any negotiations [9] with the U.S. over any issue other than the nuclear agreement. Accusing the U.S. of trying to gain influence in Iran, he said, "Negotiations with the United States open the gates to its economic, cultural, political, and security influence. Even during the nuclear negotiations they tried to harm our national interests." Taking a jab at the Rouhani and his nuclear negotiators, Khamenei added, "Our negotiators were vigilant, but the Americans took advantage of a few chances." The Supreme Leader divided the proponents of rapprochement with the U.S. into two groups, the thoughtless—those who do not care about Iran's national interests—and the nonchalant—those who do not understand the depth of the issues and their complexities—and implied that Rouhani and his administration are in the second group.

Then, in a press conference on October 11, Gholamhossein Mohseni Eje'i, the hardline deputy to the judiciary chief Sadegh Larijani, accused, without naming [10], some members of the Rouhani administration of trying to open the door to greater United States influence in Iran. At the same

time Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari [11], the IRGC chief, said that some officials want to transform the Islamic Revolution to an Islamic Republic, meaning transforming Iran to a normal, non-revolutionary state. The Revolutionary Guards, Jafari said, “will never allow that.” Gholam-Ali Haddad Adel, a senior adviser to Khamenei and father-in-law of his son Mojtaba, said on October 15 [12] that “we are concerned about some officials opening the way for U.S. influence in Iran,” widely interpreted as referring to Rouhani and Zarif.

During a debate over the nuclear agreement in Iran’s parliament, the Majles, on October 10, Ruhollah Hosseinian [13], a Tehran MP and former official of the intelligence ministry, threatened Zarif and Ali Akbar Salehi [14], President of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, saying, “If the nuclear agreement is approved by the Majles, we will murder you, bury you in the Arak [heavy-water nuclear] reactor and pour cement on you,” a reference to Iran’s obligation under the agreement to remove the core of the reactor and fill the hole with concrete.

Meanwhile the judiciary, which is controlled by the deep state, has been cracking down on human rights advocates, university students and journalists even more harshly than before. Two young poets, Fatemeh Ekhtesari and Mehdi Moosavi, have been sentenced [15] to nine-and-a-half years and eleven years of prison respectively, for “insulting the sacred”—expressing social criticism in their poetry. Labor activist Shahrokh Zamani died in prison [16] of a stroke on September 13, 2015, days after prison authorities refused him medical treatment.

Bahareh Hedayat [17], a courageous women’s and students’ rights activist, should have been released by the end of June, after serving a sentence of five years for “acting against national security and publishing falsehoods.” But she has remained incarcerated, because the judiciary decided [18] to enforce a previously suspended sentence for an additional two years in prison, even though its statute of limitations had expired in 2012. Prominent human rights advocate Narges Mohammadi [19], who has been arrested and imprisoned several times, is currently in jail, and the authorities continue to deny her proper medical treatment for worsening neurological problems. Her trial has been postponed three times without any explanation.

Artist and civil activist Atena Farghadani, incarcerated since January, went on a hunger strike recently to protest verbal abuse by the prison staff. Farghadani is the recipient [20] of the 2015 Courage in Cartooning Award from the Cartoonists Rights Network International [21]. She was sentenced in June to twelve years and nine months in prison after drawing a cartoon of Majles deputies on her Facebook page.

Omid Kokabee [22], a physicist at the University of Texas at Austin, was arrested in Tehran in January 2011 while visiting his family. He has been sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment on charges of “communicating with a hostile government [the U.S.]” and “illegitimate/illegal earnings,” whereas in reality he is in jail because he refused to work on military projects in Iran. He has been declared a prisoner of conscience [23] by Amnesty International, and received the 2014 Andrei Sakharov Award [24] from the American Physical Society and the 2014 Scientific Freedom and Responsibility Award [25] from the American Association for the Advancement of Science, both for his refusal to work on military projects. In October 2014, twenty-five Nobel laureates asked [26] Khamenei to order the release of Kokabee, but their appeal was ignored.

At least five journalists [27] have been arrested over the past week and accused of being “agents of American influence.” They include Isa Saharkhiz, the courageous journalist [28] who spent four years in jail after the Green Movement of 2009–2010. Foreign nationals and the Iranian-Americans with dual citizenships have also been targeted. Nizar Zakka, a Lebanese national who has U.S. residency and was attending a conference in Tehran in September, was arrested by the IRGC and accused of being a U.S. spy [29]. Siamak Namazi, an Iranian-American businessman who has advocated better relations between the two nations and was opposed to the economic sanctions against Iran, has also been arrested [30]. Jason Rezaian, the *Washington Post* correspondent in Tehran, has been “convicted” of espionage [31] on charges that appear to be totally baseless. He is simply a victim of the power struggle in Iran. This is while both Rouhani and Zarif have been trying [32] to get Rezaian freed. The deep state appears to be in a state of panic.

These represent only the tip of the iceberg. After Rouhani’s election in 2013, there was hope that the political prisoners would be released and the political atmosphere would open up. Not only has that not happened yet, it has gotten worse in some respects.

In an unusually strong statement on November 4, Rouhani harshly criticized the recent arrests [33], saying, “Let us not go and arrest one person here, another there, based on an excuse and without any reason, and then make up a case and aggrandize it, and finally say this is an infiltration movement.” He decried the use of “U.S. influence” as an excuse for the crackdown on the opponents of the deep state. Tehran’s maverick MP, Ali Motahari, also criticized the new wave of repression [34]. But it remains to be seen whether Rouhani and his supporters can turn back the deep state’s counterattacks.

At the same time, Khamenei acts as if he is oblivious to what the deep state is doing. In a speech on October 14 Khamenei asked the highly educated Iranian youth [35] not to leave Iran, but rather to stay and help their homeland. Iran has been suffering from a great brain drain [36], and Khamenei seems to finally recognize the high cost of the drain. This is the same leader who said several years ago that he has no problem with young educated Iranians leaving their homeland. But his appeal is hollow as long as the judiciary continues to crack down hard on those same young Iranians, and as long as the deep state that hides behind him opposes any relaxation of the tight security environment.

Why is the deep state so terrified? First, it was opposed to the nuclear agreement and was hoping that the red lines that Khamenei had set would prevent reaching any agreement. That did not happen; instead, the Rouhani administration crossed some of the red lines and signed the agreement with the P5+1.

Second, the reformists led by former President Mohammad Khatami, and the moderates led by Rouhani and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (also a former president), are popular with the middle and upper class in Iran. Any significant improvement in the economy will also strengthen their popularity even among the lower class and the poor.

Third, nationwide elections for the Majles and the Assembly of Experts (a constitutional body that appoints the Supreme Leader) will be held on February 26, 2016. There is already a fierce

power struggle [37] over the outcome of the elections. Given that Khamenei has been ill, it is quite likely that the next Assembly will have to appoint his heir [38]. By attacking the United States, the “naïve defenders of negotiating with the U.S.” and “agents of U.S. influence,” the deep state is trying to prevent supporters of Rouhani, Rafsanjani and Khatami from playing any role in appointing Khamenei’s heir, or taking control of the Majles.

Fourth, once Western companies can do business in Iran, the economic empire of the IRGC will not be able to compete with them. It is simply not equipped with the latest technology and know-how, particularly in the areas of oil and natural gas. The Rouhani administration has not granted it billions of dollars in oil and gas projects, the way former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad did [39]. Thus, the empire will be gradually marginalized. Loss of economic might will inevitably lead to loss of political power.

For the first time since the 1979 Revolution, there is no shadow of war over Iran, and tensions between Iran and the West have abated significantly. Given the bloody chaos in the Middle East and Iran’s strong influence in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, there is a golden opportunity for Iran to play a constructive role in the region, which will ultimately serve its national security and economic interests. But for that to happen, Iran’s political system must open up, the moderates and the reformists must take firm control of the nation and the deep state must be marginalized. The national elections in late February 2016 are the first step toward that goal.