What’s the Deal With IRAN?

A new agreement with the U.S. and its allies limits Iran’s nuclear program. But critics say Iran can’t be trusted. BY PATRICIA SMITH

There are two Irans and they couldn’t be more different: Many young Iranians love the United States and crave improved ties after decades of hostility. But the hardline Islamic clerics who run Iran still detest the U.S., which suspects Iran is trying to build nuclear weapons to threaten America’s allies.

So it wasn’t surprising that a diplomatic deal in November to temporarily halt Iran’s nuclear program led to a mixture of hope and fear. Critics fear Iran’s leaders, who claim the nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, can’t be trusted to follow through on their promises. At the same time, ordinary Iranians hope the deal might lead to a thaw in relations and an easing of the economic sanctions that have made their lives so hard.

“After I read the comments saying a deal was made, tears started rolling down my cheeks of happiness,” says Asal Khalilpour, 29, one of many young Iranians who took to social media after the nuclear agreement was announced.

Under the deal signed by Iran, the U.S., and five other nations (Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China), Iran agreed to pause its nuclear program for six months and allow international inspections while negotiators try to reach a more long-term agreement. In exchange, the U.S. agreed to ease the sanctions that have crippled Iran’s economy and probably pushed its leaders to the negotiating table.

President Barack Obama says the deal is proof that diplomacy can work in the Middle East.

“Today that diplomacy opened up a new path toward a world that is more secure,” Obama said when announcing the agreement. He spoke of “a future in which we can verify that Iran’s nuclear program is peaceful and that it cannot build a nuclear weapon.”

But others disagree, including some members of Congress and U.S. allies in the Middle East, like Israel and Saudi Arabia. They have criticized Obama for compromising with a dangerous foe.

Because Iran has threatened Israel repeatedly over the decades, Israel considers Iran an “existential threat.” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calls the deal “a historic mistake.” Saudi Arabia, a Sunni Muslim nation, has long feared Shiite Muslim Iran getting a nuclear bomb. The violent rift between Sunnis and Shiites dates back 14 centuries to shortly after Islam’s founding.

The deal also faces criticism from hardliners in Iran who don’t trust the U.S. or
the West. But Iranian President Hassan Rouhani was elected last June largely because he favored negotiations to ease the effects of the sanctions, which have made it almost impossible for Iran to export its oil or import foreign goods.

“It’s now time for action,” said Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister. “This is an opportunity for the West to make efforts to restore trust in the Iranian nation.”

To secure a permanent deal, the U.S. and Iran will have to overcome a long history of suspicion.

The average Iranian loves everything American [and] the freedom that America represents.”

American Hostages

It’s been 35 years since Iran’s 1979 revolution, in which radical Shiite Muslims, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini,
overthrew Iran’s monarchy and imposed strict Islamic rule on what had been a Western-leaning country (see Key Dates).

Then a group of militants seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, holding 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. Blindfolded, terrified captives were paraded before TV cameras, making the U.S.—and President Jimmy Carter—look weak and helpless.

The U.S. and Iran have been at odds ever since, and tensions have risen in the past decade amid Iran’s defiance of the international community over its nuclear program. Iran has done other things to anger the West. It has armed groups like Lebanon’s Hezbollah, which the U.S. considers a terrorist organization. Iran’s government has also jailed hundreds of political prisoners, according to Human Rights Watch.

Iran does hold elections, but real power is held not by the elected parliament or the president, but by the country’s religious leaders (see “Who’s in Charge?”), who try to enforce rigid social rules. Mingling between men and women is officially restricted, women must veil themselves in public, and alcohol is banned.

But young Iranians are increasingly testing the limits of their conservative society and demanding more freedoms from their government. While the government blocks Twitter and Facebook, many tech-savvy Iranians find ways to get around the restrictions.

In addition, says Amir Sassani*, an Iranian-American who lives in New York City, “the average Iranian loves everything American [and] the freedom that America represents.” Sassani, who moved to the U.S. before the 1979 revolution and regularly visits family in Tehran, adds: “If Iran and the U.S. didn’t have [political disputes], these two countries would be super close.”

**Persian Pride**

Iran, historically also known as Persia, has a long and proud heritage.

“If you want to understand Iran,” says journalist Robin Wright, who’s been traveling to Iran for 40 years, “take your most chauvinistic Texan and add 5,000 years. Then you begin to understand how strong Persian nationalism is.”

This national pride is part of what brought Iran to the negotiating table, says Gary Sick, an Iran expert at Columbia University in New York. “This is a group of people who have absolutely been appalled that Iran has been relegated to the position of a minor power and a pariah state,” he says.

According to the November agreement, Iran will limit its enrichment of uranium, the element that fuels nuclear reactors and can be used to make nuclear weapons. Critics say it’s only a matter of time before Iran is able to put a nuclear warhead on a missile and launch it toward Israel or Europe.

But some Iran watchers hail the deal as a potential breakthrough.

“No matter what you think of it, this is a historic deal,” says Vali Nasr of Johns Hopkins University. “It is a major seismic shift in the region. It rearranges the entire chess board.”

Nasr explains that Iran could be helpful to the U.S. in dealing with both Syria—where Hezbollah is fighting alongside President Bashar al-Assad’s government—and Afghanistan, where Iran could help

*This is a pseudonym. Fearing that his family in Iran would be harassed, he asked that his real name not be used.
broker a deal with the Taliban to stabilize
the country as U.S. troops withdraw.

Any permanent deal on Iran’s nucle-
ar program will be hard to get past
some lawmakers in Congress, who still
don’t trust Iran. Even President Obama,
who called the initial deal “an impor-
tant first step,” has said a final deal
“won’t be easy, and huge challenges
remain ahead.”

A Permanent Deal?

A final agreement on Iran’s nuclear
program will also require the
support of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s
top cleric, who has long been a harsh crit-
ic of the U.S. Iran has good reasons to seek
a deal—both to reduce its isolation in the
world and to ease the burden of sanctions.

“The people who suffer the most are
the average people,” Sassani says.

With shortages resulting from the
sanctions, he explains, something as
simple as buying bread can take up to
three hours as people go from place to
place and wait in lines. Anything import-
ed, including medicine, is hard to find.
Before he visits Iran, Sassani stocks up
on items like Sudafed for his relatives.

Despite the challenges that remain,
Gary Sick is optimistic that the U.S. and
Iran can reach an agreement.

“Having crossed that line where the
U.S. is willing and able to talk to Iran
about issues of mutual significance,
then all kinds of things are possible,”
Sick says. “My guess is that momentum
is not going to stop.”

Who’s in Charge?

Iran is a theocracy, with unelected
religious leaders wielding a great
deal of power

UNELECTED

Supreme Leader
Ayatollah Ali Khamenei
The Supreme Leader is
commander-in-chief of the
military and appoints the
head of the judiciary and
six members of the Guardian
Council. He serves for life.
Ayatollah Khamenei was appointed
in 1989 to succeed Ayatollah Ruhollah
Khameini, who led Iran’s Islamic
revolution in 1979.

Guardian Council
Made up of six Islamic clerics and
six jurists, the council must approve
all laws passed by parliament and
all candidates for parliament and
president. In 2013, it approved only
eight presidential candidates out of
more than 700 who applied to run.

ELECTED

President
Hassan Rouhani
Presidents are
elected by the
people and serve
no more than
two consecutive
four-year terms.
Despite being
the public face of
Iran, their powers
are limited.

Parliament
The 290 members of the parliament,
known as the Majlis, are elected by
popular vote every four years. All bills
they pass are subject to approval by
the Guardian Council.