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Hybrid government is at work in Iran

By Sean Foley

Other Views

Since his inauguration in January, few nations have presented President Obama with greater challenges than Iran.

On the one hand, Iran is blessed with abundant oil supplies, a young and highly educated population, a vast presence on the Web and a vigorous civil society. Americans and Iranians have close cultural ties, and Iranians have made tremendous contributions to American life, including here in Tennessee. A hundred Iranians alone voted in their nation's elections at a special polling station in Brentwood.

Over the past decade, Iran's importance to the U.S. has grown after Washington sent tens of thousands of soldiers to Iran's neighbors, Afghanistan and Iraq. Iran's influence from Central Asia to the Mediterranean has also grown markedly in this period. Indeed, the presidents of Afghanistan and Iraq were among the first leaders to congratulate Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, when he was declared the victor in Iran's elections.

Because of Iran's geographic position and wide influence in the Middle East, it will be difficult for Obama to realize many of his core diplomatic objectives — withdraw forces from Iraq, secure Afghanistan and Pakistan, and resolve the Palestinian-Israeli dispute — without Iran's assistance.

A difficult task

On the other hand, securing Iran's assistance will be difficult. Iranians still regularly refer to America's role in overthrowing their democratically elected government in 1953, U.S. support for Iran's former monarch (Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi), and Washington's policies in the Middle East. Americans criticize Iran's seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979, Tehran's alleged links to terrorist groups, Iran's nuclear program, and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's remarks on the Holocaust and Israel.

To further complicate matters for Washington, Iran maintains a hybrid form of government in which popularly elected leaders serve as the public face for a system dominated by clerics, particularly the supreme religious leader, the Ayatollah Khamenei. He sets government policy regardless of who holds elected office. This system reflects the ideas of the leader of the 1979 revolution, the late Ayatollah Khomeini, and is not accepted by many Muslims outside of Iran.

Given these differences and the aftermath of the elections, can Obama still find common ground with Khamenei? Khamenei recently stated that he makes decisions based on calculations and not emotion. And he has good reasons for improved ties with Washington. Iran is not a wealthy society (its GDP is equivalent in size to Alabama's), and its oil industry needs new investment. It is not in Iran's interests for U.S. forces to remain in Iraq or to begin a regional arms race. Many of Iran's neighbors already have nuclear technology, are far wealthier than Iran and have or could

get nuclear weapons. A vocal portion of Iranian society, from clerics to students to prominent athletes, desires better relations with the West, and Khamenei would be wise to take their views into account.

Even Israelis — whose leaders have warned that Iran may attack them with nuclear weapons — may support a compromise. A recent poll in a leading Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, found that 80 percent of Israelis do not believe that a nuclear-armed Iran would attack Israel or markedly affect their lives.

If Israelis can accept a nuclear-armed Iran, perhaps Washington and Tehran can reach a deal.
