



IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
Radicalism and Reform in Islamic Republic of Iran

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A SLACKENING OF IDEOLOGICAL BONDS

Iran's clerics are sounding the alarm over the changing lifestyles of ordinary Iranians. Pernicious societal trends like female empowerment and "global lifestyles," they say, are responsible for a variety of ills, among them a drop in the national rate of marriage. These trends, moreover, are gathering strength despite the extensive presence of religious organizations and association tasked with promoting religious values. More than 19,000 such associations, as well as 162 religious cultural centers and 715 spokesmen, are currently estimated to exist in the greater Tehran area alone.

The Iranian regime, meanwhile, is placing the blame squarely on the West - and in particular on the United States. According to the chairman of Iran's Islamic Propagation Organization, lifestyle changes among Iranians are the product of an "invasion of Iranian society by liberalist plots," and the presence in Iran of NGOs that promote ideas - like female equality - that disrupt the "balance" of Iranian society. (*Radio Farda*, August 9, 2019)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Such sentiments are hardly new. Iran's regime has long railed against the threat of "Westoxification," which it believes holds the power to undermine the appeal - and perhaps even the legitimacy - of clerical rule. Back in 2016, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself warned publicly that "[t]he enemies have infiltrated the country and have been networking using sexual attractions to make Iranian youths think in the same way that Americans think." Such fears, it seems, are rising in proportion to stepped-up pressure from the West and a decline in religiosity among ordinary Iranians.]

TEHRAN EYES THE SOUTH CAUCASUS...

Amid ongoing pressure from the United States and Europe, the Iranian regime is expanding its ties to regional neighbors in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The most recent object of Tehran's attention is the government of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian. During a recent state visit to the Armenian capital of Yerevan to attend a summit of the Eurasian Economic Union, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani expressed his desire to deepen bilateral relations between the two countries. Concretely, Rouhani committed to expanding Iran's current supply of 500 million cubic meters of natural gas to Armenia, as well as completing a third electrical transmission line linking the Armenian electrical grid more closely with that of Iran. (*Radio Farda*, October 1, 2019)

...AS BEIJING BUCKLES A BIT

Iran's strategic relationship with the People's Republic of China, meanwhile, is showing new signs of strain. Last month, rumors circulated that Beijing and Tehran had come to terms on a mammoth new deal under which China would invest more than \$250 billion in the Islamic Republic's oil, gas and petrochemicals sectors. But subsequent assessments have cast doubt on the accuracy of that report, and warned that the economic ties between the two countries "should not be overestimated."

That second, more circumspect view of the Sino-Iranian strategic relationship tracks with a new study just released by Israel's Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. "[D]espite the recent establishment of a formal comprehensive strategic partnership between the two, Beijing's economic, political, and strategic interests remain too complex and self-contradictory to permit a close alignment with Tehran," notes the report, authored by analyst Mordechai Chaziza. "In the post-JCPOA era, China is likely to remain Iran's top economic partner in the coming years, but it is a mistake to overestimate the Sino-Iranian partnership. The US's anti-Iran policy and the sanctions that accompany it could prevent the emergence of a more solid partnership."

Recent moves by Chinese multinationals suggest that this is indeed the case. The China National Petroleum Corporation, citing U.S. pressure, has just announced that it has decided to withdraw from a massive \$5 billion project to develop Iran's South Pars natural gas field. (*Petroleum Economist*, September 3, 2019; *Bourse & Bazaar*, September 20, 2019; Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, October 2, 2019; Doha *Al-Jazeera*, October 7, 2019)