

Bandar Abbas: Iran's 'Economic Capital'

Bandar Abbas was transformed from an isolated corner to Iran's "economic capital," as the locals like to call it, and potentially, the hub for land and seaborne transportation between Asia and Africa, due to its connection to the Eurasian railway network through the Bandar Abbas-Mashad-Sarkhas (Turkmenistan to land-locked Central Asia) route at the beginning of this century. Trade between Central Asia and the rest of the world through this Persian Gulf outlet has become a major strategic advantage for Iran, which has been besieged by economic sanctions and political pressure from the West. However, the conditions are shifting in a positive direction since the election of President Dr. Hassan Rouhani in August 2013, and the successful negotiations Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif conducted with the major world powers (the U.S., the U.K., France, Russia, China, and Germany) on Iran's disputed nuclear program, that led to the signing of the Geneva Interim Agreement. That agreement lifted some of the crippling trade and financial sanctions that were imposed on Iran. The effects of this move on Iran's economy are still small, but contribute significantly to the general sense of optimism in the country.

Virtually every day since the Agreement was signed last November, foreign ministers, diplomatic, political, trade, and commerce delegations have been flying into the country from all over the world (except from the U.S.). Iran's previously starved, but enormous market, with 75 million people (the majority below 30 years of age), is clearly one of the very few export markets for industries in Europe, which are facing a collapsing economy at home. How-

ever, what is more interesting about Iran, is its future potential as reflected in the ambition of its population and leaders, and its strategic position as a bridge connecting three continents.

The hardliners and conservative forces are still warning against opening to the West, pointing to previous disappointments caused by the West responding to such open initiatives, as former President Mohammad Khatami's efforts to start a "Dialogue among Civilizations," with more sanctions and demonization of Iran by the U.S. and Europe. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei repeats, in most of his speeches and sermons, that Iran does not, and will never trust the U.S. and Britain, but he and the Iranian nation have offered President Rouhani and his team a small window for a limited period to prove the contrary!

Given President Barack Obama's behavior in international affairs (like his Administration's intervention on behalf of the anti-Russia Nazi coup in Ukraine, and the attempt to ring China militarily), and that of the EU governments in Ukraine and Syria, Rouhani's task is evidently a Herculean one.

—Hussein Askary



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The elegant entrance to the Research Center. The university campus is entirely designed on the concept of the marriage between the ancient pre-Islamic Iranian and Islamic architecture, reflecting the contemporary Iranian culture as a combination of the two.