

My prayer: Iran deal will help millennials in U.S. and Iran bridge the divides

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(RNS) I woke up Tuesday to buzz after buzz on my phone — texts flooding in from young Iranians I had met in June, celebrating the historic nuclear agreement that had just been announced.

Only a few weeks have passed since I visited Iran with a select interfaith U.S. delegation, where we worked to break down the cultural and religious barriers that separate us and Iran.

I am hopeful that this deal will empower many of the brilliant young leaders in Iran to steer their country to a better, more inclusive place.

When many Americans think of Iran, they generally envision conservative Muslim religious and political leaders who articulate a strict and unyielding adherence to their version of the teachings of the Quran.

This appearance of religious conservatism leaves the impression that the people of Iran fully subscribe to the religious and political beliefs of their nation's leaders.

However, as I came to know the Iranian people, particularly Iranian millennials, what I experienced was strikingly similar to my day-to-day interactions with Americans, especially students here at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

From the streets of Tehran to the bazaars of Isfahan, we met young people who would smile and hug us as Americans, and who were eager for conversations. It was as if cousins who hadn't seen one another for decades were finally having a chance to sit down and share a meal.

Like my students at Union, young Iranians have grown up with the Internet; thus, the world they are discovering feels much smaller and more interconnected. They listen to a lot of the same music that Americans do, watch a lot of the same shows on Netflix, do yoga, text constantly and seldom speak on the phone.

They followed Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, all while they are deeply suspicious of religious and political authorities as demonstrated through the 2009 Iranian Green Movement.

As with U.S. millennials, this suspicion leads them to test the boundaries of the traditions they have received. One of the most obvious manifestations of this trend is the loosening of headscarves on the heads of young Iranian women. Those scarves barely hang on the tops of their ponytails as the young women walk the streets of even the most traditional cities.

Iranian young people are more secular in their religiosity. They claim their Shiite heritage and celebrate the major holidays, all the while questioning some of the traditional values espoused by the ayatollahs.

Indeed, they question the very motives of the ayatollahs, wondering whether their teachings are rooted in the purest reading of the Quranic text, or if their doctrines are designed to maintain the ayatollahs' status, wealth and power.

Iranian youth share many of the same problems of American youths. Drug and alcohol abuse is rampant behind closed doors, we were told. Cosmetic surgery is as common in Iran as nearly anywhere in the world. Eating disorders and abuse of diet pills are even more common than in America.

Over 60 percent of Iran's population is under 30 years old, so young people's relevance to the political and religious life of their country is growing quickly. That is one of the main reasons this deal gives me great hope. In the next 15 years, Iran has a chance to flourish as a thriving, pluralistic state, strongly influenced by energized and active Iranian millennials.

With the policy of mandatory conscription, Iranian millennials are transforming the national army. We may see changes in the military more quickly than we see changes more generally.

Very little is certain about the future of Iran, but I applaud President Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, the Iranian government and the five other involved nations for this deal. My prayer is that it will give the new generation the space to create a world where they can bridge the divides that have plagued our world for generations. May God bless them and carry them and us toward true freedom and peace.