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## Is US-Iran Détente Possible?

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On September 27, 2013, Barack Obama and Hassan Rouhani briefly spoke on the telephone. This was the first time the presidents of the United States and Iran had spoken since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 turned the two allies into nemeses. Five weeks after that historic call, a vocal throng congregated in front of the former US Embassy in Tehran to celebrate the 34th anniversary of the hostage taking. The frenzied crowd at this state-sponsored circus shouted “Death to America,” desecrated the US flag, and burned Obama in effigy.

What do these diametrically contradictory signals from Iran reveal? They are in fact emblematic of the Islamic Republic’s highly factionalized and polarized system, which is at war with itself as Iran struggles to decide whether it would be desirable to establish normal relations with the United States—an introspective moment it has not gone through since its founding more than three decades ago. Where exactly does Rouhani stand in the labyrinth of Iran’s opaque system? Is he genuinely interested in détente with the United States and resolving Iran’s nuclear impasse with the West? Or is he a “wolf in sheep’s clothing,” a deceitful Islamic apparatchik tenaciously pursuing a charm offensive to persuade the West to lift its crippling sanctions while buying time for Iran to become a nuclear power?

### TENSE AND RESTLESS

In the power pyramid of the Islamic Republic, the popularly elected president is the second most powerful figure, after the supreme leader, who is the ultimate “decider” and commander of the armed forces. Although the president is constitutionally subordinate to the supreme leader, he controls the

state’s colossal bureaucracy, exercises substantial authority over the distribution of oil revenues, appoints many key officials, and plays a vital role in the formulation of domestic and foreign policy. This is why presidential elections are so important, even though the unelected Guardian Council vets all candidates and may disqualify them. Once candidates leap over this antidemocratic hurdle, elections become competitive and contentious.

In 2009, Mir Hussein Mousavi challenged the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—an icon of insensitivity to the sensibilities of other countries. Mousavi pledged to liberalize politics and moderate Iran’s foreign policy. He was supported by former presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, leaders of the country’s pragmatic and reformist factions, respectively.

Ahmadinejad promised to continue with his populist agenda to redistribute wealth, increase government subsidies, and advance the nuclear program. His agenda, with its strong nationalistic ingredients, resonated with the poor, the working class, and a portion of the middle class. He was backed by the conservative faction and the Revolutionary Guards, who supported the status quo and believed in “resistance” against the West.

During the campaign, the rivals exchanged unprecedented vitriolic barbs. Ahmadinejad ruthlessly criticized Mousavi’s record as prime minister during the 1980s, mocked him as a puppet of Rafsanjani’s venal “financial aristocracy,” and questioned his devotion to the Revolution. Mousavi denounced Ahmadinejad for repression, mismanagement, and corruption, and for pursuing a puerile foreign policy that undermined Iran’s interests.

Even before the ballots were fully counted, both Ahmadinejad and Mousavi claimed victory. When the government proclaimed Ahmadinejad the winner, millions of Mousavi supporters took to the streets, accusing the government of staging an electoral coup. Demonstrations gradually

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became larger and even violent. They shook the Islamic Republic to its core, and gave birth to the Green Movement.

Eventually the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, intervened. He declared that he would not tolerate unauthorized demonstrations, and rejected the allegation of electoral fraud. His endorsement of Ahmadinejad created a deep fissure within the ruling establishment and enraged millions of voters who felt cheated. Many prominent leaders, including Rafsanjani and Khatami, were distraught that Khamenei legitimized Ahmadinejad's victory before the alleged fraud was investigated. They, like millions of Iranians, believed Khamenei had abandoned his role as a neutral referee in the ongoing factional rivalries.

The government undertook a brutal crack-down on the Greens and their supporters, placing Moussavi and another presidential candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, under house arrest. It portrayed the Greens as agents provocateurs for a "velvet revolution" concocted by the United States and Israel. Hundreds of activists, bloggers, and journalists were jailed or silenced.

Ahadinejad's confrontational and paranoid style of politics caused major cracks within the ranks of the conservatives, too. His disputes with the Majles (parliament) and the judiciary grew so rancorous that Khamenei demanded that both sides refrain from publicizing their grievances. Ahmadinejad occasionally confronted the supreme leader, but always capitulated.

On the eve of the June 2013 presidential election, political power had decisively shifted toward the right. The conservatives, though divided among themselves, controlled all the major organs of command. But the fissure among the elites threatened the stability of the Islamic Republic. The pragmatist and reformist factions were marginalized, and tension between the state and civil society had reached an explosive level. The crippling sanctions imposed by the West, mismanagement, and corruption had seriously damaged the economy. Ahmadinejad's confrontational foreign policy and his incendiary denial of the Holocaust had isolated Iran. In short, Iran was tense, restless, and desperate for change.

## ROUHANI'S CONSTITUENCY

Considerable anxiety and apathy marked the start of the 2013 presidential election season. While the Islamic Republic's leaders were determined to avoid a repetition of 2009 and conduct

an orderly and peaceful election, many voters, including reformists, were still enraged about the last election and threatened to boycott the upcoming one. Some 680 candidates submitted their applications to the Guardian Council. Among those rejected was Rafsanjani, chairman of the Expediency Council, which resolves institutional conflicts. The astounding disqualification of one of the founding fathers of the Islamic Republic increased the suspicion that the regime was once again planning to rig the election.

The Guardian Council approved the applications of only eight candidates. Six of them were known members of the conservative faction, one was a reformist, and one, Rouhani, was regarded as a protégé of Rafsanjani. Rouhani is the ultimate insider, having served, among other positions, on the Assembly of Experts for Leadership, which appoints the supreme leader, and the Supreme National Security Council, which determines foreign policy. He had also been Iran's chief nuclear negotiator. He had a reputation as a problem solver, uninterested in factional bickering.

The conventional wisdom was that the die was cast in favor of one the conservatives, and that Rouhani was only a token candidate to appease Rafsanjani. Early polls showed Rouhani to be far behind the front-runners. He began his campaign as a centrist, but gradually became a champion of change and reform. He recognized that the Iranian youth, women, and modern middle class formed the core of a large constituency that was indispensable for his victory.

Iran has nearly 80 million people, with a literacy rate of 85 percent and a large middle class. The country is young and dynamic, with 63 percent of the population under the age of 30. Young Iranians have a modern outlook and no recollection of the 1979 revolution. There are more than 3.8 million students in the institutions of higher learning, with 120,000 earning doctoral degrees. More women attend universities than men. Some 73 million mobile phones are in use. More than 33 million people, or about 42 percent of the population, have internet access, putting Iran among the top 20 wired countries.

Rouhani connected to this constituency, which gave his campaign considerable energy and vitality. That Rouhani is a graduate of Qom's traditional seminary and a polyglot with a Ph.D. in law from Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland, and was endorsed by Rafsanjani and Khatami, increased his appeal. But ultimately it

was his message that endeared him to this constituency.

During the campaign, Rouhani harshly criticized Ahmadinejad's mismanagement of the economy, which was damaged by the sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union. Inflation was rampant and unemployment high, and many industries were idle or operating below full capacity. The currency, the rial, had been drastically devalued. Rouhani promised to negotiate with the West to lift the sanctions, and to revive the economy. He promised to end what he called "the securitized political environment," respect civil rights, open up the political process, and free most political prisoners, including Moussavi and Karroubi.

Rouhani was equally critical of Ahmadinejad's foreign policy, complaining that Iran had become isolated, created enemies, and lost some of its credibility in the Islamic world. He promised to end the nuclear impasse with the West and establish normal relations with Western countries. He emphasized that when he was chief nuclear negotiator, he brought the foreign ministers of Germany, France, and Great Britain to Tehran in October 2003 to sign a nuclear agreement. Iran agreed in that year to voluntarily suspend its uranium enrichment activities and allow intrusive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This permitted Iran to continue its nuclear program without sanctions. Rouhani promised to do the same as president.

Rouhani won the election with about 51 percent of the vote, with a voter turnout of 73 percent. That the electorate voted for the least conservative of the candidates showed pervasive dissatisfaction with the conservative faction. It was a call for change.

One of the consequences of Rouhani's victory is that the balance of power in Iran's factionalized polity has started to shift toward the moderate center, and the wounds of 2009 are beginning to heal. It appears that rival factions have established a truce. Rouhani is a cautious man who understands that change can only come slowly and methodically. He has tried not to alienate the conservatives, and included four of them in important positions in his cabinet. In the first 100 days of his presidency a number of political prisoners have been released, and censorship of the press and

social media has been relaxed slightly. Still, he has not delivered on his campaign pledge to release Moussavi and Karroubi.

## INTERNAL RESISTANCE

Perhaps the most important change in Rouhani's first 100 days was the public discussion of the costs and benefits of restoring diplomatic ties with the United States. Today, it is no longer politically taboo to talk about establishing normal relations with Washington. Some prominent figures, such as Rafsanjani, have publically declared that the slogan of "death to America" has lost its relevancy. Considering that anti-Americanism has been a pillar of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy since 1979, such unprecedented open discussion demonstrates that we are on the verge of a possible shift in Iran's strategic thinking. Even more encouraging is that poll after poll has shown that a large majority of the Iranian population favors normal relations with the United States. It is no exaggeration to suggest that America is more popular in Iran today than it is in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, or Egypt, the three major US strategic allies in the region.

There are, of course, powerful forces that vehemently oppose détente with the United States. Some of them hold the ideological belief that

Iran can never maintain and protect its sovereignty if it establishes relations with the United States, which is much stronger than Iran. They believe that Washington will not rest until the Islamic Republic is overthrown. There are also those who profit from the Western-imposed sanctions, which have forced Iran to find new trading routes and partners, and have created huge black markets.

Some elements of the Revolutionary Guards may also oppose détente. The leadership of this elite military force has warned Rouhani not to be deceived by Washington. One of its leaders criticized Rouhani for his telephone conversation with Obama, calling it a "tactical mistake." However, the Guards are accountable to the supreme leader and will follow his directives.

Ultimately, it is Khamenei who will decide whether to continue the status quo or change Iran's relations with Washington. Time and again, he has accused the United States of hypocrisy and a desire to overthrow the Islamic Republic. After Rouhani's victory, however, he called for "heroic

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flexibility” in dealing with the West, which in the convoluted language of revolutionary Iran means willingness to compromise with the United States. He has publically stated that, while he supports Rouhani’s diplomatic initiative, he is not optimistic about its prospect of success. Whereas Khamenei seems willing to resolve the nuclear impasse with the West, he is not that enthusiastic about normalizing relations with the United States. He clearly is separating the two issues.

Finally, non-state actors could sabotage détente. Thirty-four years ago, when the Provisional Revolutionary Government sought to improve relations with the United States, a group of delusional radical students stormed and occupied the American Embassy and took its personnel hostage. That blatant violation of international law and human decency turned the United States and Iran into bitter enemies.

## THE NUCLEAR IMPASSE

Iran and America have been engaged in a strategic competition that stretches from Central Asia to the Levant. They became enemies long before Tehran began its nuclear program. Still, it is inconceivable for the two countries to improve relations without resolving the nuclear impasse.

During Ahmadinejad’s presidency, Iran made significant strides in its nuclear program. The number of spinning centrifuges increased from a few hundred to over 19,000. Iran substantially added to its stockpile of low-enriched uranium. New centrifuges were installed at Fordow, an underground facility fortified to withstand aerial bombardment. Iran also proceeded with the construction of a heavy water reactor in Arak that could, upon completion, produce plutonium. Ahmadinejad boasted that Iran had joined the small club of nuclear powers by indigenously mastering the nuclear fuel cycle.

The West continues to believe that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons. Multiple reports by the IAEA have concluded that the agency is unable to confirm either that Iran is building a bomb, or that its program is entirely for peaceful purposes.

Iran has paid heavily for its nuclear program. In 2006, the United Nations Security Council imposed severe sanctions and demanded the cessation of uranium enrichment. More devastating were the unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States and the EU, targeting Iran’s oil and natural gas industries and its banking system. As a result, Iranian oil exports have declined substantially in

the past two years. The Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication deprived Iran of its services, vital to conducting international financial transactions.

The nuclear dispute has also intensified the covert war between the United States and Iran that began in 1979. Iran blames America and Israel for the assassinations of several of its nuclear scientists, as well as sophisticated cyberattacks that sabotaged its nuclear facilities. Iran also blames them for supporting Iranian terrorist groups, such as Jundallah, which claims to fight for the Sunni Muslim Baluchi ethnic group. Washington, in turn, has accused Iran of supporting terrorists and militias that killed US soldiers in Iraq. Israel accuses Iran of carrying out terrorist attacks on Israeli citizens in India, Thailand, and Bulgaria.

On the day before the telephone conversation between Obama and Rouhani, US Secretary of State John Kerry met with Iran’s foreign minister Javad Zarif, an American-educated and polished diplomat. In that important meeting, they agreed to give urgency to the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the five members of the UN Security Council plus Germany. In November, Iran and the 5+1 group came very close to signing an interim agreement at Geneva. After that failure, there were calls for imposing more punishing sanctions on Iran. Doing so could derail the negotiation process and push Iran and the United States closer to war.

Washington must have a realistic assessment of how far Rouhani can go without inciting a backlash from the conservatives at home. He has promised more transparency in the nuclear program and more intrusive inspections. Some speculate that he might agree to halt enrichment at the 20 percent level and reduce stockpiles of enriched uranium. But he has emphasized that Iran has an inalienable right to enrichment on its own soil. It would be political suicide for any Iranian leader to accept zero enrichment.

The Rouhani administration presents the best opportunity for the West to strike a nuclear deal with Iran and move in the direction of normalizing relations. After 34 years of mutual demonization, Washington and Tehran seem to have concluded that they must find a way to establish a normal relationship. But decades of mistrust and animosity will not disappear overnight. Both the United States and Iran must have strategic patience as well as strategic imagination to move toward détente. It is in the interest of the West to help Rouhani succeed in Iran. ■