

Is Iran Indeed More Moderate?

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Iran's "charm offensive," launched when Hassan Rouhani took office as president in August 2013, sparks the question: has there been a qualitative change in Iran's policy toward greater moderation, or are we seeing a mere tactical maneuver meant to advance Iran's strategic goals on the nuclear issue and consolidate its position as a regional power? Rouhani spearheads the new approach, but in the Iranian political system the President is not the highest authority, rather one among the system's many loci of power competing to shape policy. After formulating a consensus among the political elites, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is the final arbiter; the President then executes the policy. Still, the institution of the presidency and the personality of the person in office bear weight in the policy shaping process, albeit difficult to quantify, as evidenced by changes in Iran's conduct under the different Presidents since Khamenei assumed his position in 1989. The Iranian arena is also characterized by deep rifts – ideological, institutional, and personal – between the rigid conservative hardliners and the more pragmatic camp. The conservatives experienced a setback when Rouhani was elected, but they control a host of power centers, first and foremost the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij militias, the parliament, the Guardian Council of the Constitution, the judiciary, and many economic institutions. Khamenei tends to the conservative side, but he maintains a strict divide-and-conquer policy and a balance between the sides to safeguard his own supremacy.

Rouhani is cut from the same cloth as the regime and is a member of Khamenei's inner circle. His public activity and statements during the two

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decades preceding his election as President show him to be mostly pragmatic, but nonetheless totally committed to the regime's interests and Iran's national goals. Therefore, it was unrealistic to expect that his election would result in quick or dramatic changes in Iran's policy. On the other hand, one cannot dismiss the changes that have already taken place in Iran, and certainly not the possibility that Rouhani's moves, regardless of their initial objectives, have created dynamics that can generate a more profound change in Iran's policy. Rouhani was elected thanks to his emphasis on "moderation" and "reason," in contrast to the extreme and polarizing approach of his predecessor in office, Mahmod Ahmadinejad, and, more importantly, thanks to his promise to rehabilitate Iran's economic and international position, which would necessarily require some compromise on the nuclear issue. In this sense, the election results were an unequivocal message by the Iranian public to its leadership: the two candidates who spoke about the need for greater openness to the world – Rouhani, and to a lesser extent Mohammad Bakar Ghalibaf, mayor of Tehran – together won some 67 percent of the vote (50.71 percent and 16.5 percent, respectively). By contrast, Saeed Jalili, who took the hardest line against the West and urged Iran to adopt an "economy of jihad," i.e., pay the heavy economic price to avoid any compromise with the West, won only 12 percent of the vote. In other words, the Iranian electorate made it clear that it was not prepared to suffer a starvation economy or siege despite its support for the regime when it came to "Iran's inalienable rights" to advance a nuclear program "for peaceful energy needs." Even an authoritarian regime such as Iran's cannot ignore so manifest a message in so sensitive an area as the economy, especially in light of the regional upheavals of the Arab Spring.

The political struggle in Iran hinges on several interrelated issues: when it comes to the country's nuclear program, what is the compromise or extent of concession to the world powers that can lift the sanctions crippling the economy? Would a nuclear compromise lead to a warmer relationship with the West, especially the United States? What is the desired connection between a more pragmatic foreign policy and the regime's domestic policy?

The Nuclear Issue

From the Israeli perspective, the interim deal signed with Iran in November 2013 is a bad agreement because it grants Iran the status of a nuclear threshold state and does not prevent the possibility of Iran breaking out toward a

bomb should it choose to do so. For its part, the Iranian political elite is also critical of the agreement, saying it represents a blow to the nation's dignity and interests. These critics have used what they view as Iranian concessions as a vehicle to attack Rouhani on other political matters.¹

Since the agreement was signed, Rouhani, and to a lesser degree Khamenei, has made a point of declaring that Iran does not want nuclear weapons, first and foremost from an ethical and moral standpoint. Rouhani has often quoted a *fatwa* (Islamic religious ruling) attributed to Khamenei that forbids the development, manufacture, and stockpiling of such weapons, considered an anathema to the Islamic worldview, and therefore having far more validity than any agreement Iran could sign with the world powers.² One can dismiss these declarations as part of the tactic of deceit Iran has used in recent years – a tactic condoned by Shiite law. One can point to the fact that Khamenei's supposed *fatwa* has never been published, a fact that raises serious doubts about its existence, and the fact that such *fatwas* are never valid for all eternity and can be lifted at a moment's notice or be overridden by a contradictory *fatwa* justifying the development of nuclear weapons for some existential reason or another. On the other hand, one cannot rule out the possibility that Rouhani is personally opposed to nuclear weapons development and that he would prefer that Iran remain a threshold state, based on the rational consideration that this would protect Iran against any external threat but also allow it to reconstitute its economic ties with the United States and attract significant investments from abroad essential to Iran's economic vitality. In addition, Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons could well set off a nuclear race in the Middle East or push the Gulf states much deeper into the arms of the United States.

Hence, it may be that the alleged *fatwa* is, first and foremost, a tool for resisting the circles pressing for the bomb. Perhaps Khamenei himself has yet to decide whether or not to go all the way, and that he too finds it convenient to cloak his indecision in a moral mantle that will leave him room to justify a change in his approach should he decide to go the nuclear weapons route. Without exaggerating the importance of announcements and declarations of various sorts, one could argue that Iran's repeated assertions that it has no intention of developing nuclear weapons and using religious reasons to bolster them have the power to create an atmosphere or internal dynamic that will make it difficult for the Iranian leadership to do an about-face and work overtly on developing a nuclear weapons system.

Retaining the Revolutionary Identity or Opening up to the West?

The nuclear question is inextricably linked to a much broader issue touching on the regime's revolutionary character. Hostility to the United States and Israel has been one of the ideological mainstays of the Islamic regime since its inception. In the view of the conservative camp, any compromise with the United States is tantamount to admission of the revolution's defeat and sliding down the slippery slope that would expose Iran to the West's cultural influence, which could in turn topple the regime. One manifestation of the conservative attitude was the insistence of retaining the "death to America" slogan, or in Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati's words, "The United States is the Great Satan yesterday and today... 'death to America' is the first option on our table."³

By contrast, Rouhani and his supporters are interested in a thaw in the relationship with the United States as a means to improve Iran's failing economy. When speaking with foreigners, Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif stress Iran's desire to promote economic cooperation with the United States. It is difficult to believe they do not understand that this means a price to pay in terms of Iran's conduct.⁴ Khamenei, as is his wont, has adopted a middle road that allows him to maneuver between the two factions. On January 17, 2014, he expressed his support for continuing the nuclear negotiations, but took pains to note his pessimism on the chances for reaching a permanent agreement because of what he called fundamental hostility by the United States toward Iran and the ongoing desire to overturn the Islamic regime. On February 19, 2014 Khamenei went further still, calling for the establishment of "a resistance economy" in order to cope with additional sanctions should the talks fail.⁵ Similarly, he made it clear that talks with the United States must be limited to the nuclear issue, and that he would be opposed to any sort of broader compromise in relations, especially on cultural matters. As of the time of this writing, Iran operates on the basis of Khamenei's restrictive parameters.

Another area in which there is apparent continuity of Iranian policy is in the Middle East, where activity is informed by strategic considerations of Iran's interests and its national and ideological self-image as the leader of the Muslim world and the political hegemon in the Persian Gulf. If former President Rafsanjani and Rouhani himself were shocked by the use of chemical weapons against civilians in Syria on August 21, 2013, it appears that they got over it. Iran continues to provide much aid to the Syrian

regime and backs its murderous war against the insurgents, because this is an Iranian interest par excellence. Iran even senses that the change in the US approach, which views the Assad regime as the lesser evil compared to various organizations associated with al-Qaeda, makes it easier for Iran to continue to support Assad.

The takeover of large parts of Iraq in June 2014 by the extremist Sunni organization ISIS has brought the internal Iranian dilemma and struggle – between adherence to ideology and the possibility of compromise with the West – into sharper relief. The dissolution of Iraq into ethnic units and the establishment of a radical Sunni entity on Iran's border would constitute a strategic problem for Iran. On the other hand, this development has strengthened a growing tendency in the United States to see a congruence of interests between the United States and Iran in their joint opposition to the extreme jihadist Sunnis in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Rouhani and a few of his supporters have spoken openly about possible cooperation with the United States if this “would fight terrorism.” By contrast, the hardliners have accused the United States of being behind ISIS. Iranian Chief of Staff Hassan Firouzabadi went so far as to declare that “cooperation between Iran and the United States will never happen; the concept is meaningless.”⁶ Khamenei had initially expressed his opposition to renewed US involvement in Iraq, accusing it of seeking to regain the hegemony it lost there. However, in view of the growing threat by early September 2014, he reportedly agreed to limited cooperation with the US against ISIS. This turnabout does not seem to reflect a strategic, let alone ideological, shift in Iran's position, as Khamenei simultaneously reiterated his deep resentment and suspicion at the US, and his belief in its inevitable decline. In addition, Iranian parliament members accused the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia of creating ISIS.⁷ Rather, in accordance with Iran's old practice of advancing its interests through proxies, it appears that Iran prefers to let the US shed its blood in the fight against radical Salafi-jihadi organizations. At the same time, while the United States believes that the reconciliation of the Sunnis, especially the tribes that do not support ISIS, is critical to the stabilization of Iraq, Iran seems more determined to preserve the Shiite hegemony of Iraq out of both strategic and ideological considerations.

One area in which initially there was a semblance of change in Iran's attitude was the attempt to rebuild its relations with its Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf. The upheavals of the Arab Spring exacerbated the Saudi-

Iranian enmity to the point of an indirect political-strategic confrontation violently conducted by proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. After signing the interim deal with the United States, Iran worked on assuaging the concerns of the Gulf states. Foreign Minister Zarif toured four of them, and declared that improving relations with the Gulf states was a major goal of Iran's foreign policy.⁸ Still, it is hard to believe that there has been a fundamental change in Iran's strategy of striving for hegemony in the Gulf. Indeed, Zarif has labored to persuade the Gulf states to agree to a significant Iranian role in ensuring collective security in the Gulf – a vision that means distance from the United States and secured Iranian hegemony. Moreover, the events in Iraq, which have escalated the rhetoric between Iran and Saudi Arabia, exposed the depth of the ideological and strategic enmity in the region, as Iran accused the Saudis of backing the radical Sunni organizations in Iraq. The common fear of ISIS might lead the two countries to deescalate their rivalry, but genuine rapprochement between them is less likely to take place in the short run.⁹

Strategic continuity with a somewhat different tone is also notable in Iran's attitude to Israel. Rouhani has adopted a more sophisticated approach, departing from the deluge of anti-Israel and anti-Semitic rhetoric that typified Ahmadinejad's term in office. During his media-hyped visit to the United States in September 2013, Rouhani explained that he is no historian and that therefore he could not express an opinion on the scope of the Holocaust. He condemned criminal acts perpetrated in World War II against Jews and all other groups, but immediately compared them to Israel's actions against the Palestinians.¹⁰ Zarif limited the Holocaust denial in Iran to the former President, and in an interview with German TV in February 2014 even called the Holocaust "a genuine tragedy." Zarif added that if a true resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is found, Iran would not oppose it.¹¹ In response, the Iranian media denied that Rouhani had acknowledged the Holocaust and that Iran had previously avoided denying the Holocaust. Furthermore, his statements aroused the ire of members of parliament who summoned him to a hearing, often the first step of being removed from office. Under pressure from the conservatives, Zarif denied the statements attributed to him.¹² At the same time, Khamenei continued to deny Israel's right to exist, calling Israel, among other names, the "mad, polluted dog" of the region.¹³ The interception of the weapons-bearing ship *Klos C* shows that Iran persists in its adamant campaign against Israel via proxies. Here too, events in Iraq

heated up the anti-Israel rhetoric, and even Rouhani charged that Zionists not only rejoiced at the tragic events in the region but also protected Sunni terrorist organizations.¹⁴

The Limits of Liberalism

The ongoing tension between the Iranian public's expectations for liberalization in culture and politics, which rose after Rouhani's election, and the conservatives' determination to prevent it, fearing the regime's collapse, has gained relatively little attention in Israel compared to the nuclear issue. However, in the long term, this tension is what may have an effect on Iran's regional conduct, because a more open Iran may also mean a less aggressive Iran. During the election campaign, Rouhani made do with modest promises for domestic relief. Since assuming office, some junior political prisoners have been freed and there are reports of a certain easing of media restrictions. Still, there has been a significant increase in the number of executions, a sign that the power of the oppressive mechanisms has not weakened.¹⁵

Rouhani is not a liberal. It seems that he is intent on avoiding the serious mistakes made by reformist President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). A schism with Supreme Leader Khamenei left Khatami politically neutralized; his focus on individual freedoms and rights, instead of on improving the economy, led to his loss of widespread public support and the embrace of Ahmadinejad's populism. Rouhani prefers to focus on the reconstruction of the economy, based on the understanding that this is the most important issue on which he will be judged. According to several sources, he has actually formed a secret pact with the Supreme Leader, whereby Khamenei will support Rouhani's efforts to reach an agreement with the world powers on the nuclear issue in exchange for Rouhani's abstention from any attempt at liberalization.¹⁶ Nonetheless, either because he understands Iranian society's high expectations or because of his deepening political struggle against the hardline ideological faction, since May 2014 Rouhani has come out with bold statements about the need to allow people "to choose their own path to Paradise, because it is impossible to bring people to Paradise against their will or by force." This declaration – a challenge to the fundamental notion of the Islamic regime forcing Islam's values on others – aroused a wave of irate responses by hardliners.¹⁷ Moreover, past experience in Iran does not bode well for Rouhani in this regard. It is hard to imagine how, without

sufficient pressure from below, the ruling establishment will agree to make fundamental concessions in what it perceives is the most critical field, both in ideological terms and in terms of its survival mechanism.

When it comes to the economy, Rouhani also faces a host of challenges. The nuclear interim deal and the release of some of Iran's frozen assets and, above all, the hope for a full lifting of sanctions if and when a final agreement is signed have created high expectations in the Iranian public for a significant and rapid improvement in the country's difficult economic situation. Similarly, Rouhani is aware of the desire of a large part of his electorate for greater cultural and even political openness. On the other hand, Rouhani faces formidable elements such as the Revolutionary Guards, intent on defending their economic empires and undermining the nuclear talks. In addition, a retreat from Ahmadinejad's populist policy that would entail the continued abolition of subsidies for basic staples and reduced compensation for rising costs because of the abolition of the subsidies will exact a steep toll of the population, at least in the short run. Such steps are liable to erode Rouhani's public support and play into the hands of the conservatives waiting for him to stumble.

Conclusion

It is hard to talk about any essential or strategic moderation in Iran's conduct to date. Moreover, political and ideological struggles make such a change hard because of the existing connection in the conservative perspective between progress on the nuclear question and Iran's improved relations with the West and internal processes of liberalization.

On the other hand, one cannot dismiss what has happened in Iran as irrelevant. Iran's desperate economic state requires the leadership to conduct itself with caution when it comes to the nuclear issue and even postpone, at least for some time, the progress to military nuclear capabilities, and adopt a more restrained foreign policy in order to advance economic partnerships. Against the rigidity of the conservatives, intent on preventing or at least reducing any openness to the West, one may point to the public's high expectations of an improved economy. Given the current atmosphere in the Middle East after the Arab Spring, it is hard for regimes to blatantly avoid such trends of public opinion.

The conservative worries are well-founded. Iran's history has shown that openness, even if limited, has generated many more significant processes

of change than its initiators had in mind. It is impossible to dismiss the possibility – or the hope – that expectations of improvement from below, as well as cautious moves toward openness to the world on the economic level will in the long run create the dynamics that will force the Iranian regime to change its conduct and become more moderate in an authentic and fundamental way.

Notes

- 1 For a more extensive discussion of the agreement, see Michael Segall, “The Internal Iranian Struggle in the Aftermath of the Geneva Nuclear Agreement,” *Jerusalem Viewpoints* No. 599, JCPA, January-February 2014.
- 2 See, e.g., Rouhani’s essay published in the Saudi newspaper *al-Eqtisadiah* on December 19, 2013, at Memri: Special Dispatch Series No.5574, December 23, 2013 – <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/7685.htm>; Hassan Rouhani, “What Iran Wants in 2014,” <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/hassan-rouhani-on-iran-s-new-moderation>.
- 3 Memri, “Senior Members of Iranian Regime on Revolution Day 2014: ‘Iran is Eager for the Fateful War against the United States,’” February 28, 2014, http://www.memri.org.il/cgi-webaxy/sal/sal.pl?lang=he&ID=107345_memri&act=show&dbid=articles&dataid=3587.
- 4 Scott Peterson, “At Davos, Rouhani Says Iran is Open for Business,” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 23, 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2014/0123/At-Davos-Rouhani-says-Iran-is-open-for-business>.
- 5 See note 3. For an expanded discussion of Khamenei’s approach, see Mehdi Khalaji, “Ayatollah Khamenei: Pessimistic Negotiator, Optimistic Strategist,” *PolicyWatch* 2212, Washington Institute, February 21, 2014.
- 6 For an overview of the various approaches, see A. Savyon and Y. Menasherof, “The Iranian Dilemma in Iraq: Cooperation with the United States against the Sunnis or Adhering to the Anti-American Ideological Line,” Memri, June 24, 2014, http://www.memri.org.il/cgi-webaxy/sal/sal.pl?lang=he&ID=107345_memri&act=show&dbid=articles&dataid=3657.
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- 8 For a discussion about Iran’s emerging policy on the Gulf states, see Chelsi Mueller, “Arab-Iranian Relations in the Persian Gulf after the Geneva Interim Agreement,” *Iran Pulse* No. 66, March 2014, <http://humanities.tau.ac.il/iranian/en/iran-pulse/10-iran-pulse-en/285-irapulseno66>.
- 9 *Resalat*, June 18, 2014; Ragheda Dergham in *al-Hayat*, September 5, 2014.

- 10 “Rouhani Recognized the Holocaust, Within his Limitations,” *Iran-Israel Observer*, September 25, 2013, <http://iran-israel-observer.com/2013/09/25/rouhani-recognized-the-holocaust-within-his-limitations/>.
- 11 Laura Rozen, “Iran’s Rosh Hashana Twitter Diplomacy Stirs Amazement, Disbelief,” *Back Channel*, September 5, 2013, <http://backchannel.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/09/6144/iran-fm-presidents-rosh-hashana-twitter-diplomacy-stirs-amazement-disbelief/?utm>.
- 12 “70 MPs Seek to Question Zarif over Holocaust Remarks,” *Press TV*, <http://presstv.com/detail/2014/02/15/350801/mps-seek-questioning-zarif-on-holocaust/>.
- 13 Remarks by Khamenei on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=568866203186318&set=a.415551031851170.95270.415541435185463&type=1>.
- 14 Fars News Agency, <http://farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13930331001554>.
- 15 “Iran: Abuses Persist Under New Government,” Human Rights Watch, January 21, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/01/21/iran-abuses-persist-under-new-government>.
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