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Iran's Electoral Strategy

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Only with significantly greater cohesion in the United States and Israel will Iran's leaders even consider accepting a compromise on their nuclear program.

Negotiations over Iran's nuclear program have again hit a wall, but the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, appears unconcerned. Indeed, Khamenei seems convinced that neither the United States nor Israel will attack its nuclear facilities -- at least not before the US presidential election in November.

Ironically, while Khamenei is no fan of democracy, he relies on the fact that his principal enemies are bound by democratic constraints. Khamenei controls Iran's nuclear program and its foreign policy, but the US and Israel must work to reach consensus not only within their respective political systems, but also with each other.

Iran's leaders, who closely follow Israeli political debates, believe that Israel would not launch an assault on their nuclear facilities without America's full cooperation, because unilateral action would jeopardize Israel's relations with its most important strategic ally. Given that an Israeli offensive would need to be coordinated with the US, while an American assault would not require Israeli military support, Iran would consider both to be American attacks.

But Iran's leaders remain skeptical of either scenario, despite America's official position that "all options are on the table" to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons capability. So far, they simply do not feel enough pressure to consider a compromise. In fact, Iran's leaders continue to deride Israel from afar, calling the country an "insult to humanity," or a "tumor" in the region that must be eradicated.

Meanwhile, Iran's citizens -- including clergy in the holy city of Qom, near the Fordow nuclear facility -- are deeply concerned about the consequences of an attack. Ayatollah Yousef Sanei, a former attorney general and a religious authority (marja), has asked the

government to refrain from provoking Israel.

Indeed, critics of the government believe that its incendiary rhetoric might lead to a devastating war. But, from the perspective of Iran's leadership, the taunting has tactical value to the extent that it reinforces the view among the Israeli public that Iran is a dangerous enemy, willing to retaliate fiercely.

In fact, anti-Israel rhetoric reflects Iranian leaders' confidence that Israel will not attack -- a view that is bolstered by the situation in Syria. They are convinced that, even if Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime falls, Iran will be able to destabilize the country in such a way that would pose a major security threat to Israel. According to this view, it is Israel that has an interest in refraining from further antagonizing Iran, not vice versa.

Recent editorials in *Kayhan* -- the hardline Iranian newspaper that serves as a mouthpiece for the Supreme Leader -- indicate that Khamenei is looking forward to the US presidential election. Regardless of the outcome, he foresees no threat of military action, at least through next year. A victory by Obama would reinforce America's unwillingness to attack Iran and renewed efforts to rein in Israel. And, if Republican challenger Mitt Romney is elected, he will need months to form his national security team and assemble his cabinet, leaving him unable to attack Iran immediately.

That said, since the Islamic Republic's emergence in 1979, Iran's leaders have generally preferred Republican presidents to Democrats: despite their harsh rhetoric, Republicans have been more willing to engage with Iran in practice. Indeed, given that Iran has so far survived severe international sanctions, its leaders believe that they could get an offer from the US after the election -- particularly if Romney wins -- that recognizes their right to enrich uranium.

In fact, it is far from certain that Iran will be able to withstand current sanctions-related pressures indefinitely. But its leaders' confidence that they can remains a crucial element of their strategy, and the West cannot afford to ignore their perceptions. America, whether led by Obama or Romney, must understand that Iran will not negotiate seriously on its nuclear program until it perceives a clear, convincing, and unified consensus in the US and Israel on an approach that addresses both Iran's ambitions and Israel's concerns.

Achieving such a consensus in the context of an American presidential election will be no small feat. Nor is it easy to create consensus in Israel, especially as its political parties prepare for elections next year. But only with significantly greater cohesion within the US and Israel will Iran's leaders even consider accepting a compromise on their nuclear program.

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