



Tehran's Views on U.S. Politics, Nuclear Talks

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Iran's ruling regime pays close attention to American politics in its own calculations about how to negotiate with Washington—and how to game the new diplomatic effort. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his inner circle, for example, believe that President Barack Obama needs to talk to Iran, but they also sense that the U.S. president will be unable to make any concessions because it might endanger his reelection bid.

So Tehran has concluded that Obama needs to prolong the talks and achieve minor goals to demonstrate that talks are making progress.

The regime also believes that reaching an agreement with Washington before the presidential election will be futile, since a new administration could change U.S. discourse and any agreement that is reached before the election.

As a result, the regime has concluded that both sides will benefit in delaying any substantive agreement until after the U.S. elections in November.

In the meantime, Khamenei continues to believe that neither the United States nor Israel is willing to attack Iranian nuclear facilities, at least before the U.S. election. So rather than seek a solution to the standoff, Iran's short-term goal is to decrease diplomatic pressure, or at least prevent new sanctions before the election.

Historically, the Islamic Republic has viewed Republican presidents more favorably than Democratic ones. In 2008, nuclear negotiator Hassan Rowhani said publicly that Iran would prefer that a Republican win the presidential election because Democrats incessantly pressured Tehran. In trying to game diplomatic talks in its favor, Iran could even employ the nuclear issue to influence the U.S. presidential election—in an attempt to replicate the impact of the 1979-1981 hostage crisis. President Jimmy Carter's inability to resolve that crisis contributed to Ronald Reagan's victory.

Khamenei's calculations are based on his belief that resisting U.S. demands is the most effective response. His conclusion is based on the patterns of past diplomacy. Every time Iran has demonstrated flexibility or willingness to compromise, the West has pushed for even more concessions. But in recent years, Iran's defiance and uncompromising positions have scared the West and forced it to consider Iran's demands.

Khamenei also believes that if the West pressures Iran economically, then Iran should pressure the West in its own way—such as making direct and indirect threats to U.S. allies. On May 20, Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, the Revolutionary Guards commander, warned that Israel was a serious danger to stability in the Middle East. And with a team of senior military officials, he traveled to three disputed islands in the Persian Gulf also claimed by the United Arab Emirates, an oil-rich sheikhdom and close U.S. ally.

Khamenei apparently wants to influence Western perceptions about diplomatic prospects by reactivating a former team of negotiators allied with Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was president from 1989 to 1997. Khamenei's office may be encouraging them to publically engage in debates abroad about the nuclear issue to appear as if he is consulting with a broad range of political figures, even some who once defied him. In reality, however, Khamenei remains solely in charge of the decision-making on nuclear policy.

Iranian state media has been an interesting barometer of the regime's intentions in the talks. In April, the media provided wide coverage of the opening round of diplomacy between Iran and the world's six major powers in Istanbul. But it has not praised or publicized what happened at the Baghdad meeting in May to the same extent. And the state media has also not shown much enthusiasm about the Moscow meeting scheduled for mid-June.

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