



READING ROUHANI

**The Promise
and Peril of Iran's
New President**



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Cover photo: Supporters of moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani celebrate his presidential victory on a Tehran pedestrian bridge, June 15, 2013. (REUTERS/Fars News/Sina Shiri)

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Introduction

IN SUMMER 2013—after eight years of a worsening economy, growing international isolation, and an increasingly restrictive social atmosphere—the Iranian people signaled their rejection of the status quo with the election of Hassan Rouhani and his platform of “Prudence and Hope” (*tadbir va omid*). Throughout the monthlong presidential campaign, Rouhani proclaimed himself a consensus builder who could bring a semblance of normalcy to the country: stabilize the economy, reinvigorate a flagging foreign policy, curb the securitization of society, and foster unity through a shared sense of national identity and religious values. Once in office, he has pledged a number of reforms, such as the creation of a “citizen charter of rights” to strengthen civil liberties, including those of ethnic and religious minorities, and a Ministry of Women’s Affairs to bring full gender equality to education and the workplace.¹

However, beyond his promises on the campaign trail, questions remain, not only as to Rouhani’s personal history, beliefs and worldview, and rationales for seeking to engage the West but also regarding the reach of a presidential office that occupies a “second-tier” position below that of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

All the same, Rouhani is far from an unknown figure: in addition to his most well-known role as the Iranian government’s lead nuclear negotiator from 2003 to 2005, he served for sixteen years as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC)—the country’s highest national security body—and from 1992 to 2013, he was president of the Expediency Council’s research arm, the Center for Strategic Research (CSR). Throughout the 1980s and 90s Rouhani also served in a variety of government posts, including a twenty-year tenure as a parliamentarian. As early as 1993, he was described as “one of the most influential men in Tehran’s political hierarchy.”²

Given this background, Rouhani’s views on a variety of critical political, social, and historical issues are a matter of public record. In addition to countless interviews, speeches, and news stories—some produced as early as

1979—Rouhani, over the past fifteen years, has authored ten books and more than forty academic articles, amounting to more than seven thousand pages of Persian-language material. From personal memoirs of his adolescence and role in the Islamic Revolution, and of his experience as a nuclear negotiator, to works on economics, sociology, and Shia Islamic history, Rouhani's writings offer crucial insight into not only his deepest held values and beliefs but also his conflicts and his evolution as a statesman and a regime insider.

And from this body of literature, a nuanced picture of Rouhani emerges: that of a revolutionary ideologue turned politician and academic, deeply concerned with how to reconcile his identity as a Muslim and a representative of a theocracy with the challenges of economic development, modernity, and globalization—processes more often than not accompanied by civil liberties, individualism, and secularization. It is the negotiation of this tenuous balance—along with the maintenance of the independence, strength, and values of the Iranian “system”—that defines Rouhani's personal life, has informed his political development, and remains in contention today as he seeks to engage the world community.

Whatever inner struggles Rouhani may have, he prioritizes, above all, the maintenance of Iran's religious system. “In an Islamic society, the ‘Islamic System’ is more important than anything else, and the preservation of the System is a religious obligation,” he stated in 2008.³ Although widely perceived as a “reformist,” Rouhani envisages economic development, international engagement, and domestic reforms not as ends in themselves but rather as measures that can reinforce, and confer legitimacy upon, the system, both in the eyes of the Iranian people and internationally. In 1995, he declared:

If Iran is transformed into a modern, developed country, it will become a model country for all Muslims and a slap in the face for all the mistaken views held about Islam by a bunch of biased individuals throughout history.⁴

Likewise, in a 2003 academic article, Rouhani linked “politics, culture, and economics” as key elements in the “preservation and development of the System”—which he deemed the “fundamental principle” in Iran's U.S. relations:

The fundamental principle in Iran's relations with America—our entire focus—is national strength. Strength in politics, culture, economics, and defense (especially in the field of advanced technology) is the basis for the preservation and overall development of the System, and will force the enemy to surrender.⁵

As recently as 2012, Rouhani urged a “cultural revolution” in Iran and connected reformist ideals such as “meritocracy” and “national unity” to opposi-

tion against “America and Israel,” exhorting Iranians to “join hands under the leadership of the System”:

People! We are the ones who raised the banner against “the Arrogance”—against America and Israel.... But in recent years we have witnessed a fundamental blow to our morals, cohesion and national unity, and meritocracy....

We need a moral revolution (*inqilab-e akhlaqi*). We need a cultural revolution (*inqilab-e farhangi*). Morality should be the country’s governing social and political virtue. The philosophy of the mission of the Prophet of Islam, and the Islamic Revolution, should be our morality. Faith, belief, *jihad*, and sacrifice—besides bringing happiness in the next life—will bring victory in this one.... If we all join hands under the leadership of the System, we will be able to win again.⁶

Given such expressions, and their role in Rouhani’s rhetoric and worldview, a survey of the literature reveals areas of concern:

- **INTERNATIONAL LAW** Over the past thirty years, Rouhani has expressed support for the 1979 U.S. embassy takeover; Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s 1989 fatwa against Salman Rushdie; and extrajudicial, transnational violence—declaring in 1987 that Iranian forces have the capacity to “destroy American economic interests around the world.”
- **CIVIL LIBERTIES** Contrary to his rhetoric on the 2013 campaign trail, Rouhani’s military and intelligence background has implicated him in the suppression of Iranian civil liberties. In the 1990s, as secretary of the SNSC, Rouhani directed the quelling of peaceful protests, the closure of newspapers, and bans on satellite dishes and open media.
- **AMERICA AND ISRAEL** Following the September 11 attacks, Rouhani blamed the “wrongs and mistakes of American policies” and claimed that flight 93, which crashed in Pennsylvania, had been “shot down by the U.S. Air Force.” Concurrently, he explicitly endorsed suicide bombings against Israeli civilians, and later termed the 2006 “Thirty-three-Day War” between Hezbollah and Israel the “beginning of the next Muslim conquests, and subsequent failures of America and Israel.”
- **WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION** In the mid-1980s, as a military commander and nascent diplomat, Rouhani implicitly endorsed the development and use of chemical weapons, a claim he has denied in recent years. He has likewise praised the role of nuclear technology in “ending World War II” and predicted that “double standards” in the West’s treatment of

Israel will prompt an “arms race,” making “nonproliferation in the Middle East complex and difficult in the future.” Moreover, a founding member of Rouhani’s own political party, and a close intellectual and religious mentor, endorsed the theological permissibility of nuclear weapons.

This “promise and peril” that Rouhani embodies will be further explored through a chronological analysis of his life as a revolutionary and statesman. While rhetoric and reality can often be at odds, an accurate portrait of a President Rouhani—gleaned from his writings, speeches, and interviews—can help fill crucial gaps, not only enlightening the global public about an important figure on the world stage but also aiding Western policymakers as they negotiate the cautious road ahead and assess prospects for engagement with Iran.

CHAPTER 2 covers Rouhani’s life up to the Islamic Revolution, including the role of education and travel in his youth; his first acquaintance with Imam Khomeini and activities in the “Islamic Movement”; and travel to Europe in the lead-up to 1979.

CHAPTER 3 looks at Rouhani’s role as an ideological advisor to the armed forces; his first diplomatic forays; and rhetoric and successes as a military commander in the 1980s.

CHAPTER 4 examines Rouhani’s tenure as secretary of the SNSC in the 1990s and early 2000s, and (his often undiplomatic) handling of real world political issues, including relations with Europe; protests and press freedoms; and attitude toward the United States and Israel.

CHAPTER 5 provides a brief overview of Rouhani’s tenure as Iran’s lead nuclear negotiator, from 2003 to 2005, and its connection to his presidential mandate in 2013. However, most of the analysis focuses on Rouhani’s past statements concerning nuclear weapons and nonproliferation.

CHAPTER 6 details Rouhani’s twenty-year presidency of CSR, including his posture toward intellectual debate within the center, and provides a survey of his academic scholarship, especially on culture and national identity.

CHAPTER 7 analyzes Rouhani’s oft-repeated campaign pledge to “save the economy, revive morality, and interact with the world.” This includes his belief in a “development-oriented foreign policy,” complex rationales for engaging the world community, and statements on the possibilities and limits of negotiations with the United States.

Notes

1. For Rouhani's most comprehensive campaign statement on the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, see "The Rights of Ethnic Groups, Religions, and Islamic Sects" (Persian), June 3, 2013, http://www.rouhani.ir/event.php?event_id=63. For a compilation of Rouhani's 2013 campaign statements on women's rights, see "The Promises of Hassan Rouhani on Women" (Persian), Tabnak News, June 19, 2013, <http://washin.st/16Ze3pr>.
2. "Predicts 'War' among Palestinians," Vienna, Oesterreich Eins Radio Network, September 24, 1993, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS-WEU-93-184).
3. "The Rich 'Hosseini' Culture Has Many Lessons and Exemplars for Us" (Persian), Center for Strategic Research, January 20, 2008, <http://www.csr.ir/Center.aspx?lng=fa&subid=-1&cntid=992>.
4. "Rowhani Speech on Role of 'Culture of Ashura,'" Tehran, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, First Program Network, May 31, 1995, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS-NES-95-107).
5. Hassan Rouhani, "Khvudmadari-e Siyasatmadaran-e Amrika va Shivahha-ye Hifazat az Manafi Milli Ma" (The Self-Centeredness of American Politicians, and Methods of Protecting Our National Interests), *Rahbord*, no. 30 (December 2003): p. 37, <http://www.csr.ir/center.aspx?lng=en&abtId=04&&semid=279>.
6. "Fear the Day That Some Might Ruthlessly Attack Figures Loyal to the Revolution, the System, and the Imam / Dr. Hassan Rouhani's Speech in Commemoration of the Martyrdom of the 7th of Tir." (Persian), Center for Strategic Research, July 18, 2012, <http://www.csr.ir/Center.aspx?lng=fa&subid=-1&cntid=2546>.

The Road to Revolution

1960–1979

IN 1960, IRAN was a nation of contrasts.

On the one hand, it was enjoying an unprecedented level of political and economic support from the United States. President Harry Truman's Four Point Program had been rapidly modernizing Iranian industries for ten years; the 1955 Baghdad Pact and creation of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) had made the shah a stalwart anticommunist ally; an increase in oil revenues and private foreign investment saw a steadily climbing annual GDP and newly created urban class; and Peace Corps volunteers would soon be on their way to establish libraries and English-language schools.

But Iran was still a direly underdeveloped country. Provincial universities had only been established eleven years before, and the national literacy rate hovered at slightly less than 30 percent, women constituting a small minority. And only 20 percent of students enrolled in primary education would make the critical transition to secondary school.¹ Moreover, according to United Nations estimates, more than 25 percent of children would not live to see their fifth birthday. Infant and childhood mortality rates in Iran were on par with those in Laos and Burundi, and statistically higher than the average for what the UN termed the “least developed countries.”²

Within five years, an increasingly wealthy and clannish Pahlavi family, along with a new, modern urban elite, would contrast sharply with Iran's rural, traditional majority. At the same time, discontent with the shah's political allegiances and domestic policies would lead to the emergence of a grassroots “Islamic Movement,” poised to correct what its adherents perceived as the social, political, and religious wrongs of the time.

Such dynamics were also present in Sorkheh, a village—at the time—of three thousand people in Iran's northern Semnan province, a little more than a hundred miles east of Tehran. It is here that in 1960 Hassan Fereydon—the first of several children in his family to survive infancy—would finish primary school at the age of twelve, enroll in a religious seminary, and join a nascent

movement of discontent headed by a religious scholar named Ruhollah Khomeini. He would soon become an outspoken advocate for the fledgling Islamic Movement and travel across Iran giving speeches in defense of its ideals. At the age of sixteen, on his first excursion to a small town in western Iran, Fereydun was detained by the shah's secret police, and for safety he would come to adopt the nom de guerre "Rouhani" (lit. "cleric" in Persian). It was under the identity of "Hassan Rouhani" and intermittently "Hassan Fereydun Rouhani" that he would reenroll to complete high school and eventually university; travel to Europe to help bring publicity to Khomeini's cause; and play a key role in cementing the creation of an Islamic Republic in Iran after 1979.

However, it was not an unpredictable path. The elder Fereydun, Assadollah, had settled in Sorkheh as a farmer and carpenter after serving in Tehran during World War II. He would soon thereafter associate himself with a "respectable, religious" family—more than one member of which was a religious cleric—and marry a teenage bride from this family, who would give birth to two children before Hassan's arrival. Although his official documents state that he was born November 12, 1948 (21 Aban 1327)—corresponding to the tenth of Muharram in the Islamic calendar, or the holy day of Ashura and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala—Rouhani clarifies in his memoirs that he was actually born December 30, 1948 (9 Dey 1327), and that his birth certificate had been filed early. "Maybe I wanted to go to school earlier," he muses.³

Although born into relative poverty, Rouhani's life, like Iran at the time, was one of contrasts, and his childhood was not devoid of literacy, intellectual pursuit, and travel. He recounted:

If the morning light was good, especially in the autumn, a carpet would be laid out in the courtyard, and I would recite the Quran, *Mafatih al-Jinan* [Keys of Heaven; a book of popular supplications], and remembrances of God (*dhikr*).⁴

Religious books were not the only available literature. Hajj Assadollah, as his father would become known—having been one of the first in Sorkheh to make the pilgrimage to Mecca—was also interested in herbal medicine, and on the family bookshelf he kept a book written by a Tehran medical resident. Given Iran's low literacy rate and state of development at the time, the ability to read, much less possess, a book of this type in a rural village would have likely been exceptional. Rouhani would claim that although his father was orphaned at a young age, his grandfather—Sheikh Zein-ol-Abideen—had been a religious scholar (*alim*), cleric (*rouhani*), and lecturer (*ahl-e bayan*) who had run the equivalent of an elementary school (*maktab-e khanah*). In line with this priority

given to education, Assadollah would continually bring five-year-old Hassan to school, hoping he could be enrolled, but time and again he would be rebuffed by the principal, insisting that he had to wait one more year.

Nor was Rouhani's early life devoid of travel and exposure to the outside world. When his father returned from Mecca, he brought the young Hassan not religious items but rather a toy airplane. "It was the first time I had seen something like it," Rouhani recounts. "It was very beautiful and appealing."⁵ As an adolescent, Hassan would visit Tehran, where he marveled at its modern development. Also, certainly a luxury at the time, at around age ten he took two months off from school to travel by train with his extended family to Iraq. Stopping in Basra, they continued on to visit the Shia holy sites in Najaf, Karbala, Samarra, and Baghdad, where he recalls exploring the crypts of the shrines and venturing to the top of the ancient Mosque of al-Mutawakkil.

The Fereydun home also welcomed outside visitors. Owing to his father's status as one of the only village members to have made the Hajj pilgrimage, and the religious status of his mother's family, Hassan was exposed to clerical life early on, and fondly recalls visits from the "representative" of Ayatollah Hossein Boroujerdi, the most revered Twelver Shia scholar of the time. Such representatives of grand ayatollahs were given the authority to distribute *khums* money, an obligatory 20 percent charity of one's annual net income, which Boroujerdi's representative ostensibly spent on helping the poorer residents of Sorkheh—and distributing herbal medicines to those in need. "The clergy are the spokesmen for the honor, dignity, and fundamental rights of the people—those who call for reform, and the improvement of livelihoods," Rouhani has stated, no doubt informed by these early experiences.⁶

The Fereydun family—which would expand after the birth of Hassan with two more sons and three daughters—typically needed its eldest son's labor. During the summers, Hassan would help his father with farming and carpentry to cover the costs of his education. "Those days were a little tough for me, but I soon realized how enjoyable it is to stand on your feet," he recounted during the 2013 presidential campaign.⁷ One of Rouhani's brothers, Hossein Fereydun—a former governor (*farmanidar*) of Nishapur and Karaj, an ambassador for eight years to Malaysia, and a onetime Iranian representative to the United Nations—was at his side during the campaign as a strategist and media liaison, and will likely be a close presidential advisor.⁸

The forces Rouhani therefore attributes to his identity formation include a combination of religious and secular education; experience interacting with the broader world; hard work; and a brand of religion reflected in the memories

of his grandfather, and early childhood visitors, that would instill a desire to be of religious service to others, through action over scholarship.

With his father's permission, after "graduation" from primary school, Hassan would travel to the provincial capital of Semnan, roughly ten miles away, and enroll in one of Boroujerdi's religious seminaries. Given his success, he would be recommended the next year to travel on to Qom, the epicenter of scholarship in the Shia world. Of this transition and these new surroundings, Rouhani would recount:

I was thirteen when I came to Qom, physically weak and thin, and of medium height....

There was no heating system in the school, and no student could afford a furnace or stove.... During the summer, there was no device for cooling, and no student had the means to buy a fan. All students coped with the heat through hand fans. Winter was very hard.... To prepare for the morning prayer, I needed a device—like a "sugar cuber" [hatchet]—to break the ice of the courtyard pond, and make ablutions....

After prayer, the sound of the Quran and supplications from the chambers were loud. All seminary students in the morning would read the Quran, and then would be called for breakfast, have a brief discussion, and lessons were prepared.⁹

It was in Qom that Rouhani's transition would occur from religious pupil to revolutionary. Upon Boroujerdi's death in 1961, a crisis emerged as to the identity of the "most learned" (*aalam*) cleric who could take his place at the helm of the Shia world. Rumors soon emerged of a "Haji Agha Ruhollah" (i.e., Khomeini) who had been a "very popular" student of Boroujerdi, though "I had not heard his name before," Rouhani would recall.¹⁰

Concurrent with Boroujerdi's passing, a political as well as a religious vacuum opened up in the country. Throughout the fall of 1962, Khomeini made his political debut by voicing fierce opposition to the shah's "Provincial and District Councils Bill" (*anjumana-ye eyalati-e va velayati*), which would have eliminated Muslim religious affiliation as a prerequisite for public office and introduced suffrage for women. "We are still hopeful that the administration realizes its mistake and accepts our demand, and fails to assume that the religion is susceptible now that the late Ayatollah Boroujerdi is not among us," Khomeini would declare publicly in November 1962. "Those hearing my words, go and report this point to the government."¹¹ Khomeini would then publicly state that the Iranian government was a "bunch of Jews disguised as Bahais."¹² Yielding to popular expressions of discontent, by December the

government had shelved the bill, and Khomeini declared that its public opposition was an “overwhelming religious uprising” that had “taught the foreigners a lesson.”¹³ He likewise declared that the Iranian government had openly violated the precepts of the Quran and that “the clergy are the backbone of the country.”¹⁴ Soon clerical opinion coalesced around Khomeini as a religious and political authority, and the Islamic Movement (*nahzat-e Islami*) had begun.

Reflecting on this time, Rouhani would argue that the Islamic Revolution was the culmination of “three stages”: the defeat of the Provincial and District Councils Bill; Khomeini’s antigovernment speech on the fifteenth of Khoradad (June 5, 1963), after which he was arrested and the shah’s security forces descended upon Qom; and the 1963 attempted “secret passage” of a bill in parliament that would have granted legal immunity to American military advisors.¹⁵ It was in these crucial two years, between Khomeini’s public campaigns against the shah and his exile to Turkey in 1964, that Rouhani himself first met Khomeini. “I was so happy because I had waited more than one year to meet him. The Imam was very appealing and impressive, but very taciturn,” Rouhani recalled.¹⁶ He would later say:

The Imam was an exceptional person. He deeply moved everybody by his inspirational and sincere manner of speaking and his holy character. Everyone would feel completely changed after meeting him. We were transformed every time we sat at his feet and listened to his words.¹⁷

Following Khomeini’s exile to Turkey, Rouhani—then sixteen years old—would become a spokesman for the thriving movement. He would become interested in preserving recordings of Khomeini’s lectures, and he also distributed leaflets back in his hometown of Sorkheh. The young Hassan would become an outspoken ideologue and travel across Iran performing *tablighat*, or “outreach,” for those who had not heard Khomeini’s message. These early attempts were not always without incident. During his first visit to the western town of Tuyserkan, in Hamadan province, he was detained by the Organization for Intelligence and National Security (SAVAK) for allegedly insulting the shah during his speech, a charge he would deny, likely under religious dissimulation (*taqiyya*). Elaborating on this “tactic,” Rouhani writes in a 2012 book:

Taqiyya is the shield of the believer...it is moving and fighting behind a protective mask, and means minimizing your loss, and imposing the highest cost on the enemy.¹⁸

The authorities were not Rouhani’s only worry. On another trip, Rouhani would have an altercation at the home of a generous host, claiming he was

“forced to leave” after his host’s wife refused to cover her hair and stop playing music. “Such were the hardships and problems faced on missionary journeys,” he would write.¹⁹

Yet safety was a real concern, and—although he had been speaking under an alias—after his brief detention Hassan decided to change his name permanently. Since his arrival in Qom, he had been teased about the prospect of being called “Ayatollah Fereyduh.” “Fereyduh is an old Persian name from the *Shahnameh* [Book of Kings; an epic poem],” Rouhani would recount. “But I don’t know how this name was chosen by our ancestors.”²⁰ With little sentimental attachment involved, three alternative names were proposed: Islami, Imami, and Tashayoei—all indicating an affiliation with Islam, and more specifically Twelver Shiism. But Rouhani had been used up to that point, and his friends convinced him it was already well known, so he stuck with it. “Gradually,” he recalls, “my family name was forgotten, and people would only know me as Hassan Rouhani.”²¹

However, this change was largely symbolic, and Rouhani only had the chance to use the new name for enrollment at his seminary in Qom. During his 1980 bid for election to the Majlis (parliament) from Semnan, he would campaign as Hassan Fereyduh Rouhani, and after the election he officially changed his birth certificate to Hassan Rouhani. The danger of the shah and SAVAK had now passed—but Rouhani insisted that his new identity, forged during the Islamic Revolution, be preserved.

By 1966, Rouhani sought to play a more integral role in the events that were unfolding and enrolled in high school courses. The impetus for this move occurred when Rouhani engaged in a conversation with a group of peers but could not understand some of the “philosophical and theological” concepts discussed. “To promote Islamic culture, familiarity with the new is a necessity,” Rouhani would conclude.²² Although he had skipped secondary school, tutoring for high school admissions, followed by classes, would take only three years to complete, mostly during summers. A healthy appetite for “the new” thus caught on. Subsequently, in 1969, Rouhani was accepted to the Tehran University Faculty of Law, where after three years he earned a degree in criminal justice.

However, Rouhani still punctuated his formal study with revolutionary activities. The day after passing his high school exams, he awoke crying after dreaming of Karbala. “I was going to see Imam Khomeini,” he declared.²³ But if Rouhani’s dream was divinely inspired, his means of getting to Iraq was decidedly less holy. He and a companion paid three hundred *tomans* each to a

“smuggler,” a sum well over a month’s income for an average worker, much less a religious cleric who lived off handouts. But the two were successful and eventually spent Ashura in the company of Khomeini, who had relocated to Najaf after his brief stay in Turkey in 1965. Returning to Iran several months later to start law school, Rouhani would marry at age twenty and also begin a limited form of military service, which would last until 1974. His voluntary enlistment as a student, he elaborates, guaranteed only six months of total training, mostly during summers. By comparison, had he enlisted after graduation—or been compelled into service following an arrest associated with revolutionary activities, an outcome Rouhani saw as likely—the commitment would have been close to two years, likely leaving little time for revolutionary commitments.²⁴

Rouhani’s time at the University of Tehran, from his own accounts, was largely lived through the lens of ideology. Debates with students and professors on topics of theology, contemporary politics, and pop-religious issues such as women’s rights in Islam seem to have predominated. Overall, the atmosphere of the university by that time was decidedly political, as Rouhani recalls protests and strikes hitting the campus. But, he would recount, when faced with a cleric at Iran’s oldest and most prestigious university who continued to wear religious garb, “There were people who tried to create artificial conflict.”²⁵ At other times, Rouhani seems to have been the one to instigate conflict, as one account of a confrontation with a professor demonstrates:

One day, one of our professors held a discussion on the topic of family law in Islam, and pointed out criticism concerning Islamic law and women’s rights. At that time, I stood up and spoke, explaining the justice of Islamic laws and rejecting his criticism. The students cheered my words and applauded. But the professor became angry and said to me, “Why are you disturbing the class!?” In response, I said, “If you want a calm classroom, teach your own subject, and do not talk about those that are not your specialty!”²⁶

It was at this time that Rouhani would begin to focus on activism over religious study. Rather than commute between Qom and Tehran, he took up permanent residence in the capital. “Seminary education was one of the most joyous times of my life,” he would recall. “In the seminary, you have books of jurisprudence and philosophy, but now was the time for political and social issues.”²⁷ Rouhani would recount during the 2013 campaign that his legal studies had taught him “how to defend the rights and interests of the people.”²⁸

Given the clearly ideological nature of his university experience, it might not be a surprise that Rouhani never seems to have practiced law. From 1974 to 1977, Rouhani claims he simply attended “lectures” and meetings of the

newly formed Militant Clergy Association, where he associated himself with Ali Khomeini, whom he had first met during a visit to Mashhad in 1968.²⁹ Rouhani would later admit that a “lull” in the Islamic Movement had led to his relative inactivity during these years. But this lull would come to an end in October 1977, with the death of Khomeini’s eldest son, Mostafa, in a car crash in Iraq—an event portrayed in Iran as a martyr’s death at the hands of SAVAK. Rouhani recounts:

The martyrdom of Hajj Agha Mostafa gave new life to the Islamic Revolution. Lethargy had arisen in the people from 1350 to 1356 (1971 to 1977), and the Islamic Movement came out and took on new “blood vessels” during this event. A wave of speeches gave the Revolution new movement.³⁰

Rouhani was among the speech makers during this resurgence. In a November eulogy at a Tehran mosque, Rouhani, who was almost thirty years old, would compare Khomeini’s trials and travails to those of the Prophet Abraham. Like Abraham, Rouhani would claim in his speech, Khomeini was looked to as a guide by his people; was charged with eradicating “iconoclasm” in his community; and had experienced familial hardship during his religious quest. In the Quran, this unwavering dedication to God earned Abraham the title of Imam—a “leader of the people.” And it was this “divine” title that Rouhani chose to bestow upon Khomeini in his speech. “The mosque was shaken,” Rouhani claimed. “And from that point forward, people accepted the proposal to call him ‘The Imam.’”³¹

Allegedly under increased government surveillance, and facing the prospect of a lengthy prison sentence if detained for his revolutionary activities, Rouhani would soon depart for the United Kingdom under the guise of seeking English-language education and medical treatment. Although he was detained upon arrival, the next day, speaking through a translator, he would successfully pass through customs. However—as he had done since he was a teenager—Rouhani would soon use the houses of supporters around the country to rally people to Khomeini’s cause. And consorting with these fringe elements would eventually land him in jail for a second time, though he would be released without charges. In only one year in Britain, Rouhani had spent more time in a jail cell than he had in the previous twenty years as a nascent revolutionary in Iran. Moreover, like the financial sacrifice he had made to travel to Iraq, this period abroad was complicated by his need to support a wife and three children back in Iran, and Rouhani was forced to abandon the endeavor temporarily. But he would return to the UK and, using it as his base throughout 1978 and 1979, would visit Khomeini—who had been expelled from Iraq to the Paris suburb of Neauphle-le-Château—on ten separate occasions.

In December 1978, three months before Khomeini's return to Iran, Rouhani would take part in a 2,500-person-strong protest in front of the Iranian embassy in London on the day of Ashura, concurrent with a demonstration by an estimated 2 million protestors in Tehran the same day. He would recount:

The Ashura protests were organized very well. More than half were Iranians, and the rest were Arabs, Pakistanis, and a few English. The Quran was recited, and many demonstrators were carrying pictures of the Imam. Black flags with the slogans "Ya Hussein" and "Every Day Is Ashura, Every Land Is Karbala" were displayed. Police attended the march along the route, and there was chanting outside the Iranian embassy on Kensington Street...the English media was also very good.³²

By February 1979, the shah had fled the country, and Khomeini landed at Mehrabad Airport in Tehran. "Tears of joy were flowing from everyone's eyes," Rouhani would recall. "It was a history-making moment for Iran and the Islamic world."³³ He would return to Iran shortly thereafter.

But less than a year and a half after he departed the streets of Kensington, the new image of Rouhani would emerge, one that did not seem to acknowledge his good fortune, or humble roots of education, service to others, and quest for social justice. In a July 1980 speech broadcast over the radio, the newly elected parliamentarian and ideological advisor to the armed forces would urge that the Islamic Revolution be "exported" through armed struggle. Rouhani would subsequently denounce international law; claim that "jihad recognizes no boundaries...in the same way that Satan and Satanic people recognize no boundaries"; and exhort the Iranian people—who were involved in no war at the time—to "go to the battlefield." In some of his most vitriolic language on record, Rouhani stated:

The principle on which I end my talk is the question of exporting the Revolution beyond our borders. If the Revolution remains within the country it will be destroyed.... We must export our revolution to Iraq, to Kuwait, to Afghanistan and to all Muslim countries and to all the oppressed countries. We must export the Revolution.

Therefore, if we can we should export the Revolution by publications, by newspapers. If necessary we should do so by means of arms. What is wrong if we give weapons to our dear brothers fighting in Iraq? It is our religious duty to assist them. Why shouldn't we support them? When domestic conspiracies come to an end, we should even go together in groups to neighboring countries. We should go to the battlefields.

It is possible that a number of Westernized people may get very upset. They may say it violates international laws, it violates Carterism. Those

tiny groups, thanks be to God, are gradually being isolated. It is not important how the Westernized people judge us.

What is wrong if we go to our brothers in Iraq, if we go side by side with our brothers in Saudi Arabia, in Afghanistan?... Why shouldn't we go to our Palestinian brothers? Who can stop us? What will happen if, for instance, we go and attack Israel from Lebanon? Would it not be the case that we will be the cause of pride for history and for Islam?

Jihad recognizes no boundaries...in the same way that Satan and Satanical people recognize no boundaries.... We must export the Revolution. We must not hoard it inside Iran. Hoarding is ugly, hoarding is evil. The hoarding of the Revolution is the greatest crime and greatest sin.³⁴

But perhaps this new Rouhani was the one who had existed all along. Who Rouhani was during these years might never be fully known. In a 2004 interview, in an attempt to rewrite the past, he claimed to have never spoken about “exporting the revolution”: “There was never talk of exporting the revolution. The only issue on the table was in terms of culture, and not beyond that.”³⁵

There are demonstrable examples of Rouhani doing the same with his educational background, nuclear tenure, and stances on protests, press freedoms, social tolerance, and government criticism. In one example, a March 9, 1980 (19 Esfand 1358), parliamentary profile in the highly regarded Iranian newspaper *Jumhuri-ye Islami* stated that Rouhani obtained a 1979 doctorate in “legal sociology” (*jamah shinasi-e huquq*) from the University of London—an impossibility given his brief time in the country.³⁶ Rouhani would additionally claim in his 2009 memoir that during his two-year stay in England he applied and was accepted to Harvard—but was forced to decline the offer due to lack of funds.³⁷ All the same, throughout the 1980s—whether in parliamentary profiles or press clippings—“Dr.” would almost always accompany his name. The law faculty at the University of Tehran inaugurated a doctoral program in 1955—one of the first of its kind in Iran—ensuring that Rouhani’s bachelor’s degree (*lisans*) could never confer such a title.³⁸

However, one thing is clear: the Islamic Revolution had begun, Hassan Rouhani was a part of it, and throughout its convoluted history he has never deviated from defending its ideals.

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The Iran-Iraq War

1980–1988

COMPARED TO HIS early life, Rouhani’s role following the Islamic Revolution is less clear. A second volume of personal memoirs was set to be published in May 2013 but has yet to hit the shelves of Iranian bookstores. However, soon after 1979 Rouhani’s name would continually emerge in press reports, and, unlike his self-authored memoirs, these can perhaps paint a more realistic picture of his activities.

Immediately after his return to Iran, Rouhani slipped back into a familiar role: that of engaging in missionary trips, or “outreach” (*tablighat*), around the country. This time, however, he would not be calling people to the revolution but rather seeking to “consolidate” it. Rouhani traveled to villages that were sympathetic to other ideological groups, such as the communist Tudeh Party, and even held a theological debate with the leadership of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization. “The real threat is the Tudeh Party,” he stated in 1980. “I promise you that the Tudeh Party will pose no threat to us today...but they pose the greatest threat to us in 4 years’ time, 5 years’ time, or 10 years’ time if we do not work wisely, if we do not expose them, if we do not try hard.”¹

This ideological role within the nascent Islamic Republic also extended to the military. In March 1979—a month after the Islamic Revolution and Rouhani’s return from London—he was tasked by Ali Khamenei with organizing the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (*kumitah dar sitad-e mushtarak*). He would recount:

My main activities were organizing grassroots Islamic associations, strengthening the leadership, order and discipline in the barracks, and settling disputes and breaking up strikes in the military.... The army was headless, and organizing it was messy. All of our efforts aimed to boost military discipline. One of our tasks was the creation of Islamic associations in different military organizations, and ultimately political-ideological organizations. Magazine publishing was also a part of this.²

Independent news reports from the time confirm this role. A 1979 report references Rouhani as an “envoy of Imam Khomeini” and details his resolving

a dispute between differing factions in the air force, which had resulted in a strike.³ A 1980 report portrays Rouhani as directing a “purge” of the armed forces—and, more broadly, of all “state institutions and companies”—to rid them of shah and SAVAK loyalists.⁴ Another report from the same year refers to Rouhani as a “supervisor of the political and ideological department of the army and air force.”⁵ And a fourth report, from March 1980, cites Rouhani—with no official state title—giving a speech outside the U.S. embassy in support of the hostage takers inside, but with no text included.⁶

Rouhani would soon gain formal credentials. In the same month, March 1980, he would be elected to the Majlis from his hometown of Semnan, with approximately 19,000 of an overall 30,000 votes—a commanding proportion that would steadily decline over his five terms in parliament, until he eventually lost his seat in the reformist-dominated elections of 2000, at which point he assumed an elected spot in the Assembly of Experts.⁷ It is in his capacity as a lawmaker from Semnan that Rouhani would call for the “export” of the revolution in summer 1980 and deliver a commentary about the U.S. embassy takeover in February 1981, a month after the hostages were freed. Rouhani would use possessive pronouns in referring to the hostage takers. “We...took the hostages,” he declared, contrasting his role and outlook to those of other (ostensibly state-affiliated) individuals who opposed this course of action:

A momentous event took place and the U.S. idol was smashed. A number of people opposed this and another lot said: The hostages should be set free without any question. I must say that we did not take the hostages in order to obtain money, but rather to neutralize the U.S. plot. They wished to hatch plots abroad in favor of the Shah, but we neutralized that. We resisted so much through the hostage-taking issue that the United States finally bowed before us.⁸

Rouhani’s commentary on exporting the revolution, and his remarks on opposition groups—though not his speeches about the embassy takeover—would be cited in a 1981 report to the U.S. Congress about the hostage crisis.⁹ Rouhani would continue to make speeches on the public anniversaries of the embassy takeover and Operation Eagle Claw (the failed 1980 hostage rescue attempt) as late as 1997.¹⁰ And in 2009 he termed the hostage crisis a “second Islamic revolution”:

After capturing the “spy nest,” the Americans repeatedly threatened that the hostages should be released immediately.... The resistance and perseverance of the nation against the threats of America was a second revolution.¹¹

One of the more intriguing findings from this early period is Rouhani's membership from 1980 to 1983 on the supervisory council of the Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic, better known as Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), the Iranian state media conglomerate. Known as National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) prior to 1979, IRIB's role is enshrined by Article 175 of the Iranian constitution, which tasks it with choosing the media that fits "the Islamic criteria and the best interests of the country."¹² Rouhani himself sought to help identify what this "correct" media would constitute, stating in a 1982 interview that foreign films were becoming "useless":

The task of the Voice and Vision in obtaining films becomes more difficult with time and this is due to the growth of the cultural and religious revolution of the people and the fact that foreign films are becoming useless.¹³

Moreover, after a 1981 meeting with Khomeini about the direction of IRIB, Rouhani elaborated that choosing this content was a "heavy burden":

The first point the Imam stressed was that radio and television should serve Islam and the Islamic Revolution. And so the radio and television programs should be Islamic and serve the Islamic nation.... We all hope to be able to implement the Imam's guidelines and act in accordance with them. God willing, the council will be able to bear the heavy burden of responsibility on its shoulders in the end.¹⁴

Rouhani's evolution as a statesman during this period is unclear. From 1979 to 1981, multiple press reports reference a "Hassan Rouhani" as Iran's ambassador to Syria,¹⁵ although no further details are immediately available and Rouhani's official biography makes no mention of this position. However, during his tenure at IRIB, he did gain foreign travel experience as an emissary of the Islamic Republic. In November 1981, press reports indicate Rouhani headed an IRIB delegation to North Korea that met with Kim Il-Sung and counterparts from the DPRK Radio and Television Broadcasting Committee.¹⁶ Rouhani would later recount that by 1980 he had been tasked with making weapons purchases for the nascent war effort against Iraq, including "RPG-7s and light weapons" from North Korea, Syria, and Bulgaria—a subject that no doubt would have been discussed in Pyongyang.¹⁷

Moreover, in 1985 Rouhani traveled to Paris to negotiate an alleged "\$1 billion" of French "debts" to Iran, stemming from a 1975 "loan" the shah had made to France's Atomic Energy Commission, and discuss a normalization of Iran-France relations. Beyond financial discussions, Rouhani urged the French to cease military aid to Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and also "end the

activities of Iranian terrorists who have found refuge in France”—the first indication of discontent with “revolutionary groups abroad,” which would likely be taken up later by Rouhani in the 1990s, as secretary of the SNSC.¹⁸ And, although details are scarce, at this same time Rouhani has been mentioned as a key interlocutor in the Iran-Contra affair.¹⁹

The War Front

The 1980s were also dedicated to Iran’s war effort against Iraq. News reports detailing Rouhani’s involvement in the early part of the war are sparse. However, as head of the Majlis Defense Committee, starting in 1982—ostensibly his earliest official post in the war effort—Rouhani participated in planning retaliatory strikes on civilian areas. In response to Iraqi attacks against Iranian cities, Rouhani agreed to a “tit for tat” tactic and claimed that Iraqi cities would be subject to the “fire of Islamic combatants,” as a news report from 1984 makes clear:

Hassan Rouhani, head of the *Majles* Defense Commission, said the moment for determining the outcome of the war is now. He proposed that in reprisal of Iraqi attacks upon these three cities [Andimeshk, Masjed Soleyman, and Behbahan], as well as Gilan-e Gharb, the Islamic Republic, after issuing evacuation warnings, should attack four more Iraqi cities. The cities would, at any given moment, be subject to the fire of Islamic combatants.²⁰

Rouhani would later detail that there were “religious” concerns with the use of indiscriminate weaponry against Iraqi cities but that, after consultation with Khomeini, the decision was made to announce these bombardments on the radio a day in advance in Arabic and mention the specific city for which the attack would be in retribution.²¹

However, these operations did not dissuade Rouhani regarding the war effort. In February 1986, as head of Iran’s National Air Defense Command (*farmandih-e padafand-e havayi*), a post he would hold from 1985 to 1991, Rouhani referred to the war possibly lasting an additional twenty or thirty years:

Together with the Supreme Defense Council, we are getting ready for a war which would last 20 or 30 years. In parliament, the planning and budgetary committees are taking the necessary steps to face a long war, without our needing the help of foreign countries. We are getting ready for a long war because we know that Iraq could not sustain it, while Iran is a big country with a much larger population, and an unshakable faith.²²

It was in this capacity that Rouhani accomplished what he considers the crowning achievement of his war service: Operation Val Fajr 8. From February

to March 1986, Iranian air defense forces shot down seventy-six Iraqi aircraft and another eighty during the Karbala-4 and 5 operations that summer.²³

Rouhani would later state during the 2013 campaign that his experiences during Val Fajr 8 had “taught him a lesson”—that it was “important to guard the skies of Iran.” He elaborates:

It is important to guard the skies of Iran, not only in their geographic space, but also in their cultural, economic, and social spaces. Iran has always been in need of protection. That is, to be watchful and have the tools of expertise needed, so the enemy can be crushed, and the nation can live in freedom, prosperity, and security.²⁴

Aside from his personal triumphs, troublesome rhetoric also emerged from Rouhani during the war. During his earlier-mentioned September 1985 trip to France, a news report quoted Rouhani criticizing international ambivalence concerning Iraqi chemical weapons use and expressing “deep concern that Iran would be forced one day to retaliate in this respect”:

Commenting on the issue of the Iraqi-imposed war, Hoj. [Hojjat-ol-Islam] Ruhani said that Iranian combatants have liberated about 800 sq. km. of land, killed thousands of Iraqi troops and captured over 500 of them in a series of offensives launched since March this year....

Referring to minor casualties Islamic combatants suffered in these offensives, Hoj. Ruhani said that Iran was considering new war tactics. He said that after tolerating Iraqi attacks on residential quarters for a long time, Iran was forced to embark on retaliatory measures. He criticized [the] indifferent attitude taken by international bodies towards Iraqi deployment of chemical weapons and expressed deep concern that Iran would be forced one day to retaliate in this respect.²⁵

Given the context and wording, this statement likely foreshadows an Iranian desire to achieve chemical weapons parity with Iraq—a claim denied in recent years by senior Iranian officials, Rouhani included.

Likewise, in a June 1987 interview with an Iranian news outlet, Rouhani claimed that, if the United States ever attacked, Iran had the capacity to “destroy” America’s “economic interests around the world” and that “such operations are not difficult for us.” This would be the first of several statements from Rouhani that explicitly sanction transnational, extrajudicial violence:

We would like to give our Moslem brothers the good news that if we are exposed to an attack, we will repay it two times over and will rub America’s nose in the sea, on top of destroying its economic interests all over the world. To carry out such operations is not difficult for us.²⁶

Despite his 1986 mention of a twenty-to-thirty-year war, the Iranian public had become increasingly eager to see its end. In the same interview, Rouhani was pointedly asked if “one could call the current year the year of conclusion of the war.” Rather than repeat enthusiasm for a potential decades-long conflict, Rouhani offered a more nuanced assessment: “Optimism over a specific date for this matter is difficult from a military standpoint, especially since that is tied to a number of political, social, and international matters.”²⁷ Rouhani would later describe the war’s wind-down and eventual end:

In the years before the resolution to end the war—from 1365 to 1366 (1986 to 1987)—we won decisive victories at al-Faw, Karbala-5, and Halabja. At that time, soldiers and commanders believed that we had yet to achieve the desired objective, and could reach a better position if we tried a little harder, and this was conveyed to Imam Khomeini. And the government and parliament had the same view. Naturally, the Imam, considering the views of these officials, could not say to stop the war, because everyone would say that we had been in reach of a big achievement, and that the Imam had prevented it. Some would have even argued it was possible to liberate the Iraqi nation.

But in 1367 (1988), when the Imam saw the military commanders and political officials, they wrote letters stating that we do not have the budget, especially considering Iraq’s resources and use of chemical weapons, to continue the war, and that our casualties will increase [if we continue]. So, the resolution was adopted by the Imam.

Anyhow, it would have been time consuming to acquire resources. We would have had to stop the war to pay for tanks and planes...and train soldiers, which would have taken one to two years. In those conditions, the Imam felt that the atmosphere was not suitable for continuing the war.²⁸

With the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 598, the multifarious defense councils would be consolidated by Article 176 of the Iranian constitution into the Supreme National Security Council (*shura-ye ali-ye amniyat-e milli*). In November 1989, citing Rouhani’s “long experience and valuable knowledge of the country’s defense issues,” newly minted Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed him to the SNSC as his personal representative, along with Khomeini’s son Ahmad.²⁹ At the council’s inception, Rouhani would also serve as its secretary, a position he would hold until the end of his tenure as nuclear negotiator in 2005.

And, although the war had ended, Rouhani would be forced well into the 1990s to confront its fallout, including negotiations to free remaining Iranian prisoners of war, an official position of neutrality during the 1991 Gulf War, and efforts at the United Nations to secure Iraqi reparations.

Notes

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The “Undiplomatic Sheikh”

1990–2005

ALTHOUGH POPULARLY known throughout the 2013 campaign as the “Diplomat Sheikh”—a title bestowed on him by the Iranian media during his 2003–2005 nuclear tenure—Rouhani’s diplomatic finesse was tested throughout the 1990s and early 2000s as head of the Supreme National Security Council and vice speaker of the fourth and fifth Majlis. However, on a number of critical issues, Rouhani’s actions during this period failed to live up to the title he would come to assume.

This chapter will address (1) Rouhani’s relations with Europe; (2) his handling of student protests and press freedoms; and (3) his attitude toward the September 11 attacks, the subsequent American invasion of Afghanistan, and Israel. From this treatment, a working portrait of Rouhani and his interactions regarding real world political issues can emerge.

Relations with Europe

Some of the Islamic Republic’s most sensitive moments vis-à-vis the West have arisen from issues involving human rights and international law. The Salman Rushdie affair in 1989, extrajudicial killings of Iranian dissidents in Europe, and chronic concerns related to Iran’s military ambitions have contributed to a significant erosion of trust with the international community and corresponding massive diplomatic and economic fallout. In the 1990s, all these issues would come to converge on Rouhani.

In April 1993, Rouhani headed a parliamentary delegation for a five-day visit to the former West German capital of Bonn, where he would meet with Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel. Framed in the Iranian press as a visit to boost economic ties—Germany was Iran’s largest trading partner in Europe at the time—it was prompted by far different concerns.

In actuality, the Iranian delegation was invited at the behest of the German government in response to a court verdict from late 1992 sentencing German engineer Helmut Szimkus to death on charges of espionage. But the Iranians

were the ultimate arbiters for setting the date: the first week in May 1993, the United States, Germany, and seven other nations were set to convene to discuss sanctions on Iranian imports.¹ Legitimate economic overtones played a part here. In 1992, Iranian exports to Germany had shrunk by 24 percent, while imports had increased by 18 percent, resulting in a significant trade deficit.² And the Iranians were on the verge of asking European governments to “silently reschedule” their debts, stemming from decreased oil revenues.³

However, due to the timing and context of the Iranian visit, economic matters soon gave way to larger concerns. As part of these “economic discussions,” Rouhani’s team inquired into restarting construction and exports for Iran’s Bushehr nuclear power plant, halted in 1979 by the German firm Siemens, and also completing a facility for producing agricultural pesticides by a Frankfurt-based company. German officials would later state that the Iranian perception that these facilities were even on the table for discussion was an illusion and “out of the question,” noting that both Bushehr and the pesticide plant had clear dual-use purposes.⁴ But for the first time on record, Rouhani pledged that he wanted a Middle East “free of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons” and also communicated a willingness to accept “unreserved foreign control” over any nascent nuclear activities, if the Germans gave the go-ahead to resume construction.⁵

This transition from economic to human rights issues led to the second topic of discussion during the April 1993 visit: the Salman Rushdie affair. As a representative of Europe and Western ideals, Germany had become increasingly concerned over the human rights ramifications of Khomeini’s 1989 fatwa, to the point that assurances were sought from Rouhani that Iran would not “send commandos” after Rushdie.

In meetings with German officials, Rouhani offered a nuanced explanation of Iran’s position: Khomeini’s fatwa was unchangeable; Iran deplored Rushdie’s offense to Muslim feelings and the West’s inability to understand the pain it had caused; but Khomeini’s sentence against Rushdie was articulated in his capacity as a religious jurist, not as a state actor. Khomeini had the “freedom” to give the verdict, but it was directed at individual Muslims to fulfill as a religious duty. News reports from 1995 indicate that Rouhani traveled to London to discuss the Rushdie incident, no doubt using a version of this argument to help reestablish diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom.⁶ However, Rouhani, clearly angered by the issue, would state at the end of the Germany trip: “The West should tolerate the edict [*fatwa*] as an act of freedom of expression, just as it shelters Rushdie for the sake of the so-called freedom of expression.”⁷

The year before, Rouhani would dismiss Western conceptions of human rights by saying, “They misuse this sacred issue in order to attain their sinister goals in the countries whose ideologies contradict that of the West.”⁸ And as late as 2009, Rouhani would continue to endorse the dichotomy he had applied to the Rushdie affair—affirming Iran’s obligation as a state to abide by international law, while at the same time sanctioning that *individual actors* are free to carry out Khomeini’s verdict. This tacit external adherence, but internal opposition, to international law characterizes the Islamic Republic and Rouhani’s true commitment to its principles:

About Salman Rushdie, it’s not a matter of the civil rights of a Western citizen...it’s not even about a single individual...it is a cultural war. They say: “The culture of democracy and freedom should be propagated and enforced according to our interpretation and concepts, and since your religious culture restricts freedom and puts democracy in a specific frame, it’s not compatible with our ideas, therefore we are in confrontation with Islam.” Even if Salman Rushdie is killed, the fight won’t be over, but will only start from a different point. So it’s not about whether we have freedom of political parties or women’s rights as they define it. The war is a war of two cultures....

According to their point of view, the problem is that a sentence has been issued for an individual who is a citizen of another country. They believe this sentence is unacceptable. Our response is that the fatwa is a religious decree and does not pertain specifically to Imam Khomeini. All Islamic experts, clerics, and scholars, both Shia and Sunni, are of the same opinion concerning an apostate who insults the Prophet.

We as a government have not issued an order to assassinate this person, so it cannot be said that we have broken international laws, but we say this is the duty of Muslims. And this duty is determined by God, and this is not only Iran’s view but all Muslim scholars have also asserted this fatwa.... Its overseers are all Muslims, whose duty it is to carry out the order if it is within their power. We as the government of Iran have not sent troops to invade a city, or arrest or assassinate a person.⁹

Nevertheless, Rouhani’s attempt to communicate an Islamic consensus regarding the Rushdie fatwa is inaccurate: only Twelver Shia Islamic law accedes to the *extrajudicial* killing of blasphemers.¹⁰

The third and final issue on the agenda of the April 1993 meeting, alongside economics and human rights, was ostensibly German prisoners in Iran. And although the evidence is not definitive, it appears that Rouhani played a role in helping engineer a prisoner swap involving Szymkus and Abbas Ali Hamadi, a dual Lebanese-German national imprisoned in Germany.

Hamadi's brother, Muhammad Ali Hamadi, had been charged in a German court with the 1987 hijacking of TWA flight 847 from Rome to Athens, where Navy diver Robert D. Stethem was killed and thirty-nine Americans were held hostage for sixteen days. During the trial, Abbas Ali coordinated the kidnapping of two German nationals in Lebanon, and in 1989 he was arrested while in possession of explosives. Szimkus would later recall that in prison he was specifically told that he would be swapped for Hamadi, a claim supported by testimony from Iran's ambassador to Germany at the time.¹¹ Although he likely never met Hamadi, during his April 1993 visit Rouhani would express concerns over “human rights in Germany, and prisons in Europe” and request to meet inmates at a German jail.¹²

By July, Hamadi had been released and returned to Lebanon. And by summer 1994, four German nationals in Iran, including Szimkus, had been pardoned and returned to Germany.¹³ Szimkus later recalled that he had observed torture and rape in Evin Prison, and called for the Iranians to be tried at The Hague over its conditions—helping put Rouhani's “concerns over human rights” in context.

The Hamadi incident, though, was not the last in which Rouhani expressed tacit support for foreign-national mercenaries. Throughout 1993 and 1994, the Iranians intensified a military campaign against Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), resulting in airstrikes against Iraqi bases.¹⁴ During this time, Rouhani allegedly said—ostensibly in the context of these airstrikes—that Iran “will not hesitate to destroy the activities of counterrevolutionary groups abroad.”¹⁵ Rouhani would later cryptically state in a 2005 interview that foreign nationals who adhere to the principles of the Islamic Revolution can be used as “levers” to “confront” Iranian “enemies” abroad:

Undoubtedly, the influence of the Islamic Revolution throughout the world, those who love the revolution the world over and the people in various parts of the world who have chosen the path of genuine Islam under the influence of the revolution, could be used as levers at the disposal of the revolution's forces throughout the world. Such forces can help and assist at sensitive junctures by confronting our enemies.¹⁶

In 1997, a German court would convict Iranian intelligence minister Ali Fallahian for his role in the “Mykonos incident”—the 1992 killing of four Iranian-Kurdish dissidents at a Berlin restaurant, an issue that had also been on the agenda during Rouhani's 1993 visit to Germany. Following the recall of European diplomats from Tehran in response to the court verdict, Rouhani threatened to sever trade relations with all Western nations and announced that Iran had “no desire for useless communication with self-centered Europe.”¹⁷

By 1998, with the election of Mohammad Khatami, Rouhani would take on a new tone with a visiting delegation from Germany, which used the election of a new Iranian president to thaw relations. “The enemies of the two nations have tried to distort the bilateral ties and what we have now to do in the first place is the restoration of ties between the two countries’ peoples,” he would claim.¹⁸

Protests and Press Freedoms

On February 14, 2011, in the wake of Arab Spring protests across the Middle East, Iranians poured into the streets to peacefully protest the prevailing state of the country. Although the Iranian political establishment had been supportive of the protests in the Arab world—because it sensed a consolidation of regional Islamic identity—those at home were not judged as positively. It was also the first time since the summer 2009 elections that the Green Movement staged a coordinated, public gathering. Although his sixteen-year tenure on the SNSC had ended in 2005, Rouhani still retained his 1991 appointment to the Expediency Council, on which he headed the Political, Defense, and Security Committee. Therefore, Rouhani would find the time to comment on the protests, declaring them “seditious” and “against Islam and the Revolution”:

The movement of 25 Bahman [14 February 2011] was against Islam and the Revolution and wanted to overshadow the determined voice of Iran’s nation on 22 Bahman [11 February, anniversary of the Islamic Revolution] and become a tool to divert the public opinion of the region from the real enemies, meaning America and the Zionist regime, as well as their recent defeat. This unwise and seditious action was in the favor of [the] Arrogance and anti-Revolution.¹⁹

Although he would largely shield himself from criticism following the disputed 2009 presidential elections, Rouhani’s denunciation of the Green Movement—by terming it “seditious”—demonstrates his fealty to the regime’s official narrative of the event. However, this was not his first involvement in quelling dissent.

On May 30, 1992, riots erupted in the eastern city of Mashhad following the eviction of residents from tenements that had been “illegally” constructed but that were seemingly being demolished for a state-run development project. The event soon spiraled into popular discontent against the government, resulting in attacks on official buildings. Iranian media would later report that the protesters had “burned copies of the Quran.”²⁰ Due to this hyperbole, the exact details of the Mashhad event may never be known. Still, the SNSC—which Rouhani chaired at the time—would recall an army unit from the Afghan border to help

put down the unrest.²¹ By June 1, eighteen people were reported dead, and three hundred of the alleged two thousand protestors had been arrested.²²

Traveling to Mashhad on June 5, Rouhani would speak at a Friday prayer sermon, alleging that the protests had been directed by the United States on the “death anniversary of Imam Khomeini” in a bid to thwart a railway project between Turkmenistan and Iran and disrupt the region’s economic development. Terming the United States the “global Arrogance,” Rouhani vowed “maximum punishment” for the protestors and stated:

The Arrogance intended to make the region insecure in order to force the nations of Afghanistan and some Central Asian republics to revise their political and economic relations (with the province) and reconsider their decision to make investments in the Sarakhs-Mashhad railway project.²³

By June 10, four people were reported to have been executed, the real figure likely reaching twenty.²⁴

This was not the first time Rouhani would link a spontaneous protest to American conspiracies. In July 1999, Iran would witness its most widespread protests since the Islamic Revolution, following the closure of the reformist newspaper *Salam* over its reporting of a recently passed law on press freedoms. On the night of July 8, in response to a peaceful demonstration staged by students at Tehran University, riot police stormed a dormitory, killing a student in the process. Six days of protests followed in universities and cities across Iran, during which 300 people were injured, 6 killed, and an estimated 1,200 to 1,400 detained, some whose whereabouts were unknown.

On July 14, the day the protests ended, Rouhani addressed a “counterprotest” that had gathered at Tehran University in defense of the “Islamic system.” While holding the police liable for the original student death and vowing to investigate, Rouhani also denounced the ensuing protests as a “foreign, opportunist plot” aimed at overthrowing Iran’s ruling system:

The enemies, who await in ambush, [are] our opportunist enemies who have nothing to do with the university and have no links with our dear students.... You know that the enemy intends to create despondency and doubt among the people in order to pave the way for his own future. In pursuit of this objective, the enemy launched an onslaught on the foundation stone of the Revolution’s patriarchal structure. It broke the grace and sanctity of our Revolutionary values. It attacked the foundation of the System and particularly the most essential pillar of the Revolution, that is, the sacred sanctity of *velayat-e faqih*. The enemy wanted to pave the way for its future conspiracies.... Our people know very well and understand that the enemy is unhappy with the Islamic nature of our system.

Our internal and external enemies know that Islam was the mighty power which stood up to all their conspiracies for over 20 years.... Our people know well that *velayat-e faqih* is the symbol of our society's national unity. Offending the status of *velayat-e faqih* is tantamount to offending the entire nation, is tantamount to offending Iran, is tantamount to offending all Muslims, and is tantamount to offending all freedom-seekers whose hearts beat in support of Iran as the motherland of the Islamic world. The onslaught on our sanctities is, therefore, an intolerable matter to our people and to the supporters of our Revolution all over the world.²⁵

As it actually happened, the closure of the reformist newspaper was ordered by the SNSC. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, reformist newspapers such as *Azad*, *Sharq*, and *Yas-e No*, as well as *Salam*, were the frequent targets of SNSC gag orders. Whether anticorruption issues or negotiations with the United States, the SNSC had free reign to determine what the press could report.

One of the most well-known incidents would occur in July 2002, with an edict forbidding reporting on Ayatollah Jaleddin Taheri, who had been Isfahan's Friday prayer leader since the Islamic Revolution but in recent years had taken an increasingly critical approach toward the government. Taheri's frustrations would culminate in a resignation letter to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, in which he noted the "chaotic situation" in Iran, marked by "disappointment, unemployment, inflation, daily price rises, the gap between rich and poor, a sick economy, corrupt bureaucracy, bribery, embezzlement, growing drug use, official incompetence, and weak political structures."²⁶

On 10 p.m. of the day of Taheri's letter of resignation, the SNSC issued a directive prohibiting newspapers from printing "anything favorable or hostile" related to Taheri. However, many had already gone to press by the time, including *Azad*, where the story appeared the next day on the front page, prompting the paper's suspension.²⁷ Soon the debate became not about Taheri but about the SNSC's gag order on reporting anything about it. Following the outcry over *Azad's* closure, Taheri's letter was frequently discussed in the press, undermining the SNSC's original directive. In the wake of the incident, Iranian parliamentarians would submit resolutions for the SNSC to be investigated for its "overreach" into press and economic issues, claiming that neither had any immediate national security ramifications.²⁸

In a 2002 interview, when questioned over the spate of newspaper suspensions and closures that occurred under his watch, Rouhani would claim that there is a difference between "freedom" and "shambles" and that the press must follow the "law," a likely reference to limits on freedom of speech:

The kind of freedom you see in Iran, you cannot see it in many countries.... People are completely free to express their thoughts. Of course, there are laws and rules in every country. There is a court, and if anyone disobeys the law, then it is the law that deals with that person. What is important is that the courts act within the framework of the law. It is possible that some newspapers or magazine publishers go against the law, and it would be dealt with, but that does not mean that there is no freedom or democracy in this country. If we don't abide by the law, it would be a shambles. We have to distinguish between freedom and shambles.... Read these newspapers and see with what freedom they express their opinions. Officials are being criticized; government is being criticized....²⁹

However, Rouhani's concern with media content—a long-standing issue since his original tenure at IRIB in the early 1980s—has been manifested in his posture not only toward the press but also toward global communications as a whole. As secretary of the SNSC, Rouhani engineered the ban on satellite dishes that has angered so many Iranians. Defending this action, he stated in 1995:

In today's world, the arrogant countries employ the satellite networks as an instrument against the independent cultures of the third world nations. We are not the only ones concerned about this issue, as such a concern also exists in some Western countries.³⁰

Likewise, in 1996 Rouhani said that “receiving foreign television programs by satellite” was illegal because of the “moral danger of Western culture,” but that “checking the apartments of citizens was not part of the government's job.”³¹

Even after his tenure on the SNSC, Rouhani would continue to write about the media and its effects on social cohesion and national security. In a 2007 academic article, he would defend this authoritarian control of state media and claim that “information and news media is the intermediary between policy makers and people.” He continues:

It can mobilize people to accept new ideas and techniques. The difficult task of the media is to build political structure and stability, develop an appropriate social atmosphere, and accelerate national development. Unifying the nation and encouraging citizens to participate in national development are the two most important initiatives and tasks for the media.³²

Whether with bans on press reporting or satellite ownership, Rouhani has exhibited an extreme style of micromanagement in choosing the information to which ordinary Iranians can have access. And Rouhani clearly wielded his vast power in arbitrary ways. Moreover, whereas combating corruption and the freedom to “constructively criticize” the government formed the pil-

lars of Rouhani's 2013 campaign, it was these very practices that he silenced during his tenure at the SNSC. With his election to the presidency, Rouhani will once again oversee the activities of the SNSC and likely have the authority to influence the Iranian government's posture toward open media—and censorship.

9/11, Afghanistan, and Israel

The attacks of September 11, 2001, sent shock waves across the world. People from all walks of life came together to mourn and reflect upon the sobering reality that terrorism and extremism know no borders, and to empathize with others on the basis of a common humanity. And, even in Iran, throughout September and in early October numerous public candlelight vigils were held in memory of the victims.

As head of Iran's highest national security body, Rouhani felt obligated to respond to the tragedy as well, in his own way. In a September 12 interview, Rouhani expressed sympathy for the victims, denounced the attacks as “abominable” and “inhuman,” and further stated that “no Muslim could be glad about the occurrence of such incidents.” At the same time, he took a subtle swipe by dedicating the majority of the interview to how the world must discover the “roots” of terrorism:

Terrorism should be fought against and the roots of terrorism should be destroyed...The roots of terrorism will be destroyed when everybody thinks of peace and justice in the world.³³

And at a major Friday prayer sermon in late September—the content of which would later be published as both an academic article and a standalone publication by the Expediency Council's Center for Strategic Research—Rouhani would make the meaning of these roots clear.³⁴ “Fighting terrorism necessitates recognition of its roots and elimination of its development,” he stated, “including injustice, discrimination, poverty...unjustified interference in the affairs of other countries, dictatorship, ‘unipolarity’ in the management of world affairs, and discriminatory actions by international leaders.”³⁵ Whereas here he was implicitly faulting the United States for bringing the attacks upon itself, his language was starker in December 2001, when he claimed that instead of invading Afghanistan as a response to the 9/11 attacks, the United States should have pursued a different course of action—namely, finding out “why the people of the world hate American policies.” He continued:

Planning for how to make up for the past wrongs and mistakes of American policies could have been one response to the attacks... Unfortunately, America did not choose this option.³⁶

In essence, from the outset Rouhani rejected the outpouring of humanity and support that flowed from the world community following the attacks. However, Rouhani’s post-9/11 Friday sermon offers further revelations into both his posture toward the United States, at one of its most sensitive times, and his status as an intellectual and an accurate purveyor of national security and world events.

In his speech—which likely lasted more than two hours, given its length—Rouhani claimed that flight 93, which crashed in Pennsylvania, had been “blown up by a missile from the U.S. Air Force.” Recounting the broader events of the day, he stated:

The total timeframe of this event was about an hour and a half. At 8:25 a.m. the first plane hit one of the two towers in New York known as the World Trade Center. About 20 minutes later the second plane hit the next tower. Then, one hour later, around 10 a.m. the third plane hit the Pentagon. The fourth plane in Pennsylvania was blown to pieces by the U.S. Air Force, through means of a missile.³⁷

He would go on to state that “within one hour...7,000 people had perished,” a steep misstatement of the number of victims.³⁸ Rouhani would likewise deplore that the American media had failed to report on the possibility that “Zionists” could have been behind the attacks, arguing from this example for the Iranian government’s own authoritarian control of news media:

In the early hours after the attacks, there was talk in the American media of eight airplanes, and this news was uncensored, but soon the number of planes was reduced by half!... We saw that in this event no media outlet in the West—America or Europe—dared to publish anything outside the framework given to them. ...

In the American press we do not see anything about the fact that this event could have been carried out by domestic groups.... In Europe some analysts wrote that this event may have been perpetrated by the Zionists, but this issue was not allowed to be raised. ...

It soon became clear that the debate of press freedom and the media is no more than a slogan. ... This shows that freedom of the press, radio, and TV and the free flow of information are illusions. If national security or national interests are involved, the media will undoubtedly report what is dictated to them.³⁹

However, Rouhani's most egregious comments were yet to come. Although he had expressed tacit sympathy for innocent victims of terrorism, he would make clear that certain nationalities were exempt. While Rouhani would state that the world must "fight terrorism," he added the caveat that "the world must agree on how to define terrorism." In the process—in a speech about September 11—Rouhani would endorse suicide bombings and "assassinations" against Israeli civilians and condone the actions of Hezbollah and Hamas:

If there is going to be a global war on terrorism, we believe that the countries of the world should first agree on its principles. The first step is to define what terrorism and terrorist activities are, and what constitutes freedom movements, and self-defense. What is the difference between these two?

Undoubtedly, if a country is invaded by an occupying force, and is fighting for the freedom of a land and country, then it is considered legitimate defense, even if it includes explosions, assassinations, and suicide operations. . . .

A passenger plane hitting a building in New York, which is a terrorist act, cannot be compared to the *jihad* of the Palestinian people, and the combat of groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Islamic Jihad and Hamas, which are legitimate defense.⁴⁰

Rouhani would speak out in support of suicide bombings elsewhere as well. Just a year later, in a September 2002 interview with ABC News correspondent Chris Wallace, Rouhani would explicitly endorse suicide bombings against Israeli children, because, he reasoned, if the Palestinians go to such lengths, it must mean the oppression they are under has forced them into such a situation:

Wallace: Dr. Rohani, you said that the Palestinians can use any action to fight Israeli occupation, yes?

Rohani: We believe that the Palestinians, to regain their country and their freedom and to kick out their occupier, have the right to fight with Israel.

Wallace: Any right?

Rohani: Palestinians have to try, if it is possible, not to hurt non-combatants.

Wallace: But let me ask you directly, when someone walks into a restaurant, to a Passover Seder, and slaughters innocent families, is that a freedom fighter?

Rohani: What should they do? What is the Palestinians' alternative? The Palestinians, whose children are being killed?

Wallace: So they should kill Israeli children?

Rohani: What is their alternative? You tell me what should these people do? If these people are blowing themselves to pieces before anything else, this means there remains no alternative.⁴¹

During the 1990s, Rouhani would continually oppose any peace deal between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and meet personally with Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah. In 2012, he claimed that Iran must support the regime of Bashar al-Assad because “Syria has constantly been on the frontline of fighting Zionism and this resistance line must not be weakened.”⁴² On this support for Hezbollah, following the 2006 “Thirty-three-Day War,” Rouhani stated that it was a “glorious victory for the Islamic *umma*,” which would be “the beginning of the next Muslim conquests”:

It was a great victory of Hezbollah. It was a glorious victory of the Islamic *umma*. God willing, it is the beginning of the next Muslim conquests (*aghazi*), and the subsequent failures of America and Israel.⁴³

Additionally, on multiple occasions Rouhani has termed Israel a “cancer,” and during a 2001 state visit to Pakistan, he declared that the “brutal repression being directed toward the people of Palestine...is unprecedented in the history of mankind.”⁴⁴ While a strong statement, it is also one that lacks historical support—a common theme in Rouhani’s rhetoric on geopolitical issues:

[The] rights of Muslims in many parts of the world are a cause for concern.... Very frankly and very bluntly I should say that we should not compare any other part of the world with the issue of Palestine and what is going on there. The brutal repression [that] is being directed toward the people of Palestine right now and such kind of brutality and barbarism, I can safely say, are unprecedented in the history of mankind.⁴⁵

Notes

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The Nuclear File

2003–2005

“Diplomacy,” Hassan Rouhani writes in a 2009 book, “is the art of understanding a region...estimating its strength and position, and finding opportunities critical to exploit.”¹

Much has been written about Rouhani’s twenty-two-month tenure at the helm of the Iranian government’s nuclear negotiation team. From October 2003 to August 2005, he shuttled between Western European capitals, engaged in efforts to convince the EU-3—Britain, France, and Germany, representing the European Union—of Iran’s peaceful nuclear intentions.

And, during this time Rouhani would articulate how the Iranians estimated the “strength and position” of Europe as similar to driving a Paykan:

Talks with Europe alone might not be sufficient for our purposes.... Sometimes you cannot afford to buy a Mercedes, so you buy a Paykan.... In this case, you know what to expect from a Paykan and you lower your expectations accordingly. You should not complain and moan about it too much. You shouldn’t complain about its speed, its mechanics, its petrol consumption, and the like, because you know it is a Paykan. You bought this car based on your budget in the first place. Some people might argue that without such a car, we could have walked. This is not an acceptable argument either.²

Rouhani would further state that Iran was negotiating with a “second-rate” power, while the first-rate one was “assessing and evaluating” its interests, given U.S. involvement in Iraq.

Therefore, negotiations with the EU-3 were not the “be all, end all” of engagements. Rouhani would recall that there was never a nascent military threat stemming from questions surrounding Iran’s nuclear program, but rather an “economic threat.”³ And it is through the lens of economics that Rouhani’s nuclear tenure can best be understood.

Commensurate with the economic goals of reformist president Muhammad Khatami, and his own belief in a “development-oriented foreign policy,”

Rouhani sought to lessen tensions with the international community in a bid to transition the “security atmosphere” with which Iran had come to be associated on the world stage to a “political-economic atmosphere.” In a 2006 speech, Rouhani would confirm that this had been his primary goal from the outset:

Do we want Iran to have a security atmosphere in international relations, or do we want to create a political atmosphere, and then an economic one? When the previous nuclear team was negotiating with Europe, the goal was to preserve the nuclear technology and, at the same time, reach a comprehensive economic agreement with the European Union and gradually change the security atmosphere into a political-economic atmosphere. Today, in every contract we sign with a foreign company, there is a discussion of risks. Our difficulty with foreign investment is that the world sees our country as a security risk. We have paid a very high price economically. The question is: How long does our economic sector have to pay for our political and security sectors.... Is it not time to change the atmosphere in the country and not pay such a high price for this security atmosphere?⁴

During negotiations with the EU-3, Rouhani would attempt to create this pivot and build international confidence—averting an Iranian referral to the UN Security Council—while at the same time retaining the Iranian nuclear program’s technological development. In essence, Rouhani’s mandate could be defined as seeking to convince Europe that Iran followed the rules, so that the Europeans would continue to do business with it, with the fewest possible compromises on the nuclear program. Rouhani would later describe this diplomacy as “being able to stand on one’s feet, at the lowest cost.”⁵

The signing of two key documents signaled Iranian determination to achieve these ends: the October 2003 Tehran Declaration and the November 2004 Paris Agreement. Under the terms of both, the Iranians sought to allay Western fears of nuclear weapons development by “temporarily suspending” all “enrichment related and reprocessing activities,” including the operation of gas-powered centrifuges, and plutonium separation and uranium conversion activities. Both agreements termed these Iranian concessions a “voluntary confidence-building measure.”⁶

However, due to the voluntary nature of the suspension, and central fears over enrichment activities for a nuclear weapon, scrutiny of other activities would fall by the wayside. And, in essence, the Iranians would “exploit” this “relaxed atmosphere” to finish a number of critical nuclear components. Rouhani would later boast that when the Europeans were signing the Tehran Declaration, the Iranians were completing work on a uranium enrichment facility

in Isfahan (though not performing enrichment itself, according to the terms of the agreement):

While we were talking with the Europeans in Tehran, we were installing equipment in Isfahan, and much work remained to complete the project. In fact, by creating a relaxed atmosphere we were able to complete the work in Isfahan. All praises be to God (*alhamdulillah*), today Isfahan is completed, and we can convert yellowcake into UF_4 and UF_6 [uranium hexafluoride], and this is a very important matter.⁷

In his 2011 memoir detailing his time as nuclear negotiator, Rouhani would summarize the dynamics at this juncture:

One of our most important concerns at this stage was protecting the secrets of the country, and the honor and authority of the System...while at the same time building trust with the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] and various nations of the world... Our nuclear team took these steps wisely and carefully, engaging different echelons of the IAEA and European diplomats...

To those who have questions in their minds about the reasons for accepting the temporary, voluntary suspension of some of the nuclear activities in this period...the accomplishments included the completion of the Isfahan uranium conversion facility; the assembly and construction of centrifuges; the Arak heavy-water reactor; continued activity for building a 40-megawatt reactor; the completion of the Natanz underground facility; the production of yellowcake; and the building of the P2 centrifuge.⁸

By the end of his nuclear tenure, coinciding with the inauguration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in August 2005, Rouhani had been widely hailed as the “Diplomat Sheikh.” However, in an attempt to bolster his record and accentuate the successes of the “voluntary suspension,” the original goal was forgotten. In the subsequent years, economic pressure on Iran over its nuclear aspirations would increase, and Rouhani’s goal of a “political-economic atmosphere” rather than a “security risk atmosphere” would never come to fruition. In essence, Rouhani’s mandate as president in 2013 is a repeat of his mandate as nuclear negotiator in 2003. In a 2010 academic article, Rouhani would reiterate this desire for an “atmosphere” transition, reinforcing how he views the linkages between resolving the nuclear issue and Iran’s economic health:

In terms of the general atmosphere of the country, where does room for improvement lie? No doubt, it is with the security environment (*feza-ye amniyati*)...in such an environment there is no business, or research. We can be optimistic about the future if there is a peaceful atmosphere in the country, which leads to cooperation and joint efforts, and a healthy atmo-

sphere for culture, economics, and politics—rather than a military and security environment (*feza-ye amniyati-e va nizami*). In 20 years, our dominant discourse should be “progress and development” (*pishraft va taw-siah*)—if the dominant discourse is security, then the economy, and science and technology, cannot be the first priorities.⁹

Indeed, all these dynamics are well known. Ample information exists about this stage of Western diplomatic relations with Iran, and of Rouhani’s life this period has been most extensively covered in the press and other literature. But another area could use significantly more analysis: Rouhani’s statements on nuclear weapons and nonproliferation.

History and Statements on Nuclear Weapons

“I’ve been in this business since the beginning.” This was Rouhani’s response to a rhetorical question he posed in a 2007 interview about Western demands to know the “full history” of Iran’s WMD programs.¹⁰

While the accuracy of this statement is a matter of debate—for instance, Rouhani has never been a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the military entity that oversees Iran’s weapons programs—he has been involved “since the beginning” in another way: that is, in Iran’s religious and revolutionary discourse. In terms of Iranian politicians, Rouhani is unique in that he is strongly grounded in the ideological forces that formed the Islamic Republic but he has escaped the confines of the *hawza* (seminary) to play a tangible role within the country’s political hierarchy.

Meanwhile, a survey of this prerevolutionary history reveals a disconcerting reality: first, central figures of the Islamic Revolution have stated explicit approval of nuclear weapons; second, Iranian religious discourse can often function on dual “levels” or “tracks,” whereby weapons of mass destruction are denounced in a Western context, as associated with the targeting of civilians and population centers in relation to World War II and the Cold War, but accepted for purposes of “defense” against military entities alone.

This understanding of nuclear weapons was expressed by a close Rouhani mentor, and a founding member of his political party, Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari. A religious philosopher and intellectual whose writings are considered to encompass the foundations of modern Iranian religious thought, Motahhari played a key role in Rouhani’s early life, including convincing him to return to high school and university studies. However, in a 1972 lecture (which would later be published as a book), he argued for the religious permis-

sibility of nuclear weapons use. Prefacing his remarks with a Quranic verse, Motahhari stated:

The use of force against the enemy is required as much as possible. There was a time when a few blacksmiths could build the tools needed, using the empirical knowledge of their time. But today it takes more knowledge. The knowledge to build an atomic bomb is necessary. You may say, the Prophet didn't say, "O people, go, learn about atoms!"... But we should do this, because it is in the spirit of that rule.¹¹

However, in a 1970 religious lecture, just two years earlier, Motahhari denounced the American bombing of Hiroshima and warned against the dangers of nuclear proliferation: "Every day, worse and more destructive weapons appear. It was only about 20 years ago when the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima, but look at how the destructive power of human industry has multiplied.... If there is a Third World War today, the loser will be earth and people, and the winner no one."¹²

While he was likely aware of these dynamics at the time – Rouhani has also admitted to having read the book in which Motahhari's endorsement of nuclear weapons was published, and at the same time lauded him as a "great scholar (*'aalim*) and jurist (*faqih*)" who had "broad and deep knowledge of Islamic issues."¹³

While it might not have any strategic value, this history—which includes further examples—can clearly help contextualize a key statement made by Rouhani during the 2013 campaign: that doubts over Iran's peaceful nuclear intentions "originate from Israel."¹⁴ It can also help contextualize ongoing Iranian government claims of the "immorality" or "religious impermissibility" of WMDs. Like Motahhari, Rouhani has faulted the United States for bombing Japan during World War II and highlighted America's status as the only country to have used "weapons of mass destruction against *innocent* people [emphasis added]."¹⁵ Knowledge of this dual Iranian rhetoric on nuclear weapons, which acknowledges their legitimacy against troops, bases, and strategic interests in theaters of war, opens the door to reexamining past statements of peaceful nuclear intent.

Beyond the words of his mentor, Rouhani himself has made several statements that cast doubt on his true commitment to the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons.

As detailed in his dealings with Europe in the 1990s, Rouhani has made several "early" statements regarding Iran's nuclear policy, especially the status of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). In 1994, Rouhani affirmed:

Iran does not seek nuclear and atomic weapons and has no wish to make non-peaceful use of atomic energy; for this reason, the details of the NPT are very important to us and are closely linked to our national security and our country's growth and development.¹⁶

Subsequently, in 1995 Iran would re-sign the NPT at the Review and Extension Conference at the United Nations. However, in a 2005 speech to the Majlis, Rouhani, while linking NPT membership to Iran's economic advancement, affirmed that the NPT extension was not signed out of ideological opposition to nuclear weapons but rather to reduce "political pressure" on Iran:

We have accepted the safeguards of the NPT...to reduce the political, propaganda, and other forms of pressure against us. It is for the same reason that we accepted the Chemical Convention.... Between bad and worse, we chose bad and had no other choice.¹⁷

Another incongruity concerning Rouhani's commitment to nonproliferation is his rhetoric toward Israel. On two occasions over the past decade, Rouhani has conditioned Iran's peaceful nuclear intentions on expectations from and the posture of Israel. In a 2004 interview, he stated:

If the arsenals of weapons of mass destruction possessed by Israel are not eventually destroyed, the countries of the region will be encouraged to join the arms race.¹⁸

In an August 2009 academic article, Rouhani would expand on this notion, predicting that because of "double standards" in the West's treatment of Israel, there would be an "arms race," making "arms control and nonproliferation in the Middle East complex and difficult." Although a seemingly theoretical and academic prediction, it is worrying given the link to the 2004 statement and Iran's clear status as the only country in the region with any functioning nuclear program to which threats of "noncooperative" nonproliferation apply:

In the coming years, it is possible that there will be an arms race in the broader Middle East. What will bring the region into an arms race is rooted in concerns and fears related to chronic government instability, and conflicts between states, particularly because of the West's double standards, and risks of intervention. This makes the process of arms control and nonproliferation in the Middle East complex and difficult in the future. In the issue of disarmament by the West—because of double standards, especially in relation to Israel—the region does not have much confidence. The main reason is the unevenness in expectations for disarmament in the Middle East, which is why there is a context of mistrust. This atmosphere of mistrust, and conflicts between states in the region, not only creates feelings of insecurity,

but does not contribute to the disarmament process, and increases the competition between governments in the Middle East.¹⁹

During this same period, Rouhani also stated that if Iran's nuclear facilities were to be attacked by Israel or the United States, the regime would not only physically retaliate but also "accelerate our activities to complete our [nuclear] fuel cycle."²⁰

If an Iranian nuclear program is for ostensibly peaceful purposes, this is a strange response. However, these statements contrast sharply with another Rouhani admission. In one of his only English-language articles, a 2006 piece for *Time*, Rouhani affirmed that Israel's "strategic edge" was not a "threat" to Iranian nonproliferation but rather a guarantee of it:

A nuclear-weaponized Iran destabilizes the region, prompts a regional arms race, and wastes the scarce resources in the region. And taking account of [the] U.S. nuclear arsenal and its policy of ensuring a strategic edge for Israel, an Iranian bomb will accord Iran no security dividends.²¹

In dismissing nuclear weapons in a regional context, Rouhani has also argued that Iran seeks to build bridges with neighboring countries and that their acquisition would force such states to take refuge with Western powers, galvanizing regional opposition to Iran. However, he has intimated that if "bridges of confidence" could be built with regional countries—a key promise of his 2013 campaign—*then* a nuclear weapon would become a viable option. (Although the semantics are open for debate, this testimony at least sheds light on another dynamic of Rouhani's thinking on the issue.) Rouhani elaborates:

The decision made by the Islamic Republic of Iran not to possess weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, goes back to many years and not only the near past. Therefore, even during the eight-year war Iraq imposed on us and although Iraq used chemical weapons against Iran, we did not seek the production of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. Our decision not to possess weapons of mass destruction is strategic because we believe that these weapons will not provide security for Iran. On the contrary, they will create big problems. Iran exerted huge efforts during the past few years to build bridges of confidence with the states of the region. We absolutely do not want to blow up these bridges by mobilizing our resources to produce weapons of mass destruction. We are confident that our possession of these weapons will force these countries to seek the support of big powers. Consequently, regional security will worsen. This will not serve our national security. Therefore, our efforts [are] focused and continue to focus on building bridges of confidence with the states of the region before focusing on the possession of weapons of mass destruction.²²

In this assessment, Rouhani also asserted that during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran never sought the “production of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons”—a claim that has likewise been made by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Rouhani would make a similar claim in 1995.²³ However, it is a matter of public record, stemming from disclosures of Iranian diplomats at Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) conferences, that Iran embarked upon the production of chemical weapons during the later stages of the war. While it is generally acknowledged that such weapons were never used operationally, the claim that Iran never sought to produce them is incorrect. Moreover, it contradicts Rouhani’s 1985 statement during a trip to France that Iraqi chemical weapons use would “one day force Iran to retaliate in this respect.”²⁴

Finally, in perhaps a bout of *realpolitik*, in an April 2001 academic article—far from his denunciations of Hiroshima—Rouhani praised the role of “nuclear fission” in helping to end World War II, claiming that nuclear technology had achieved what “conventional military power” and “politicians” could not, and stated that political power lies in “manufacturing technology”:

In today’s world, one of the key elements of power—whether political, economic, military, or cultural power—is the possession of technology, especially advanced technology. The thing that accelerated the end of World War II was nuclear fission—not conventional military power, and not the politicians. So, today power lies in manufacturing technology.²⁵

Likewise, Rouhani has claimed that nuclear power will “reinforce the authority of Iran’s system.”²⁶ And, interestingly, despite writing extensively on development, energy resources, and oil economics, Rouhani has never dedicated a single academic article to explaining the intended effect of peaceful nuclear power on Iran’s economy or long-term energy outlook.

Notes

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12. Morteza Motahhari, *Sayri dar Sirah-e Aimmah-e Athar* (A Glance at the Biographies of the Pure Imams), pp. 274–75, <http://islamicdoc.org/Multimedia/fbook/1319/index.htm>. Like the previous work, *A Glance at the Biographies of the Pure Imams* is a compilation of Motahhari's speeches, these between 1970 and 1975. His disapproval of the bombing of Hiroshima, and global nuclear proliferation, is from October 1970 (Mehr 1349).
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The Think-Tank Cleric

1992–2013

IN 1982, AYATOLLAH Muhammad Kazem Shariatmadari—an Iranian-Azeri religious scholar second only to Khomeini in clerical status and popular following—was publicly “defrocked” and stripped of his authority as a Shia “source of imitation” (*marja*). Put under house arrest, he would die in 1986.

Although he had supported Khomeini’s opposition to the shah, Shariatmadari would run afoul of hardliners after the Islamic Revolution. Rather than supporting the concept of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurisprudent), Shariatmadari favored a civilian government in the mold of the 1906 constitution, which established only a clerical body to provide oversight of lawmaking activities. Moreover, as an ethnic Azeri, he would maintain contacts with leftist ethnic-national political parties and express opposition to the spate of executions ordered by revolutionary committees in the wake of 1979. Given his religious status and base of regional support, Shariatmadari’s dissent to clerical rule was perceived as a threat to national unity and stability.

Following further incidents, in April 1982 the central council of the Tehran Militant Clergy Association issued a circular addressed to the “militant and honorable nation of Iran” and the “heroic compatriots of Azerbaijan.” In it, the council would bluntly announce that Shariatmadari had failed in his religious duties and was not qualified for his religious office. “Mr. Shariatmadari does not enjoy the conditions for holding the status of a source of imitation and is not eligible for the position,” it stated. At the bottom of the letter were the signatures of twelve members, including Ali Khamenei, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and, second to last, Hassan Rouhani.¹

The complex hierarchy that embodies modern clerical Shiism has little basis in classical Islamic law and is the result of a historical evolution over several centuries in the Middle Ages. The position of *marja* or ayatollah arose due to vast legal, political, and social forces. However, it has always been premised upon Islamic knowledge and learning. Those who reach its highest levels—like Shariatmadari—must spend decades demonstrating the ability to understand

and deduce the essences of Islamic law and communicate them to the masses. Therefore, there exists no mechanism to “take away” the level of religious education and erudition one has obtained.

But that is exactly what Khamenei, Rafsanjani, and Rouhani—then only low-level clerics, none having reached the level of *ijtihad* to become an ayatollah—sought to do. Through this event, it becomes clear that, for Rouhani, above all else—even the sanctities of religious learning—stood fealty to Khomeini and the Islamic system.

Rouhani’s allegiance to the Islamic Revolution was not a passing phase. In a 1995 speech, he would declare that Khomeini was “alive” and that Khomeini and Khamenei were the leaders of the Muslim world, “whether we say so or not”:

The leader of the Islamic movement is Islamic Iran; whether we say so or not. The Imam [Khomeini] is the Leader, whether we say so or not. The Imam’s line, path, and thought rules over the hearts of all free Muslims and movements. Not only is the Imam not dead, his life casts a more widespread light with each passing day.... Is it possible for the Imam to die? The Imam has an eternal life, and this life casts its light over a bigger area with each passing day.

The eminent leader of the Revolution, his eminence Ayatullah Khamenei, may his shadow extend, is the leader of the world of Islam today. This has nothing to do with whether we say so or not. His message, his words, his cries, his line, his path is the guiding direction for Islamic movements.²

But by 1995, Rouhani was no longer a low-level cleric and ideologue: since 1992, he had been president of the Expediency Council’s research arm, the Center for Strategic Research (CSR), created in 1989 to inform government policy through political, economic, legal, and social research. Rouhani had taken over running CSR from Muhammad Mousavi Khomeiniha, the spiritual leader of the student group that had overtaken the U.S. embassy in 1979, and who allegedly kept mementos from the embassy in his office.

Despite this hardliner image, Khomeiniha had allowed a surprising degree of intellectual autonomy at CSR, including “historical revision” of the Islamic Revolution, to help negotiate a path forward for political reform. However, when Rouhani came in, allegedly this debate stopped, and in an immediate way.

Phone Taps and Spying Janitors

According to a sensational 2008 interview with Dr. Alireza Alavi-Tabar—a leading figure within the Iranian reform movement that emerged during the

Khatami presidency and an original member of CSR—Rouhani was quick to silence intellectual dissent and quash reformist discussion within the center at the time. “The discussions of the Strategic Research Center were primarily concerned with an all-encompassing development and historical revision of the Revolution,” he would claim. “Which was later suppressed by Dr. Hassan Rouhani.”³ Alavi-Tabar further stated that when he assumed the presidency of CSR, some of its members thought they “could not work with Rouhani because of what they knew of him.”⁴

Alavi-Tabar would go on to describe Rouhani as a “military-intelligence figure” who “disagreed with our views,” and he claimed that one of Rouhani’s first decisions was to cut CSR’s ties with Iran’s university community. Subsequently, Rouhani allegedly limited discussions about “poverty and injustice” and “political development and opposition.” Alavi-Tabar quoted Rouhani as saying,

If you think we will fall for your pretty words on democracy, you are wrong. We know you are seeking to topple the regime, but we will not let you because we will not make the same mistake that the shah made.

“He was fiercely against any debate on democratic revision, opposition, and political development. To him, these were merely conspiracies,” Alavi-Tabar claimed.⁵

Rouhani did not oppose the reformists with mere words. According to Alavi-Tabar’s interview, Rouhani put the CSR reformists “under surveillance” by bugging their offices and “forcing custodians to become informants.” Rouhani would likewise use the minutes in staff meetings to “assault particular members.” Alavi-Tabar claimed that he did not quit because the reformists were waiting for Rouhani to fire them, and eventually they were “blocked entry” to the door of the CSR offices. The only way they eventually came to know of the spying was from a fax mistakenly sent to the CSR offices by an alleged henchman, rather than Rouhani’s personal office. Alavi-Tabar concluded, “I doubt it has changed much. In my view, he is more dangerous than any right-winger. At least with the ultra right you know who they are.”⁶ This assessment is consistent with another that emerged in the 2013 campaign by a former Rouhani aide, who described as follows: “When it comes to social issues, he’s very open-minded and close to Western standards. He’s less open and more conservative when it comes to political issues.”⁷

Academic Scholarship

Beyond the claims of Alavi-Tabar, Rouhani, as head of CSR, would eventually dedicate extensive time to academic scholarship and even confront sensitive

social issues like drug use and family cohesion.⁸ During his tenure, ending only with the 2013 election, Rouhani authored more than forty academic articles on topics as diverse as social and cultural capital, oil and gas, the media, U.S.-Iran relations, and theories of political legitimacy. Rouhani likewise served as editor of CSR's flagship publication, *Rahbord* (Strategy), and the English-language *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*. And, as the head of a "government think tank," Rouhani also chaired numerous conferences on policy issues, where scholars and strategists from other government bodies, and even other countries, would convene. In his articles, Rouhani shows surprising familiarity with a wide range of classical Western political and moral philosophers, U.S.-based think tanks, and American social issues.

For instance, in a rare English-language article for the *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Rouhani wrote about the rise of the Moral Majority in the 1980s and the revival of religion in American society, including the spread of New Age Buddhism in California, the "Religious Right," and "the active socio-political role of the American Jewry, with its particularly manifest activism in U.S. foreign policy." He would not forget to include Marxism in the discussion, mirroring his Persian-language articles, which tend to cite a dizzying array of social and political theorists (run-ons are included as written):

Even though it may sound Marxian, but the proposition seems to be true that every thesis creates its own antithesis. Applied to the case at hand, it means that secularism as the overarching outlook, supported by practical materialism of economism and extreme one-dimensional individualism, among others, served in their collective effect to lay the grounds for the revival of religion—religious belief/faith-based beliefs, on a global scale, including both in the advanced Western societies as well as a wide range of other societies. The recent trend during the past few decades in the United States in marked increase in church attendance and also popular attraction to Asian ancient religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, as reflected in the rapid growth in the number of Buddhist temples in the State of California, is clearly indicating of a discernible change in this regard. The emergence during the past few decades of a stronger conservative block, inclusive of the Religious Right and Evangelicals, within the framework of the mainstream Protestant church in the States, which has shown its weight in a wide range of legislation on sensitive education and health issues and also politically in the 2004 presidential elections, is reflective of the same general pattern of revival. A similar phenomenon can also be discerned with regard to the active socio-political role of the American Jewry, with its particularly manifest activism in U.S. foreign policy.⁹

As an aside, Rouhani's knowledge of Buddhism is apparently not all that deep. Although he is on record as having publicly opposed the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, one of the more interesting findings from research on Rouhani is a 1999 visit to Japan—intended to discuss Japanese help with Iranian privatization efforts—where he was invited to the Todaiji Temple by Buddhist abbot Morimoto Kosei, one of Japan's few scholars of Islam. Kosei studied at Egypt's Al-Azhar University and translated Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* into Japanese.

However, Rouhani was evidently unaware of this fact—as an article written by Kosei about the incident would reveal—and rather than engaging in dialogue, “plied” him with questions about Buddhist beliefs, including on the creation of the world and why Buddhists “worship things in physical form.” When Kosei answered and likewise inquired as to the Quran's use of metaphorical, anthropomorphic language to describe God's attributes, he recalled, “Dr. Rouhani answered with a laugh, but did not address the question. It seemed I had to content myself with his laugh.” “I'm not sure how convinced Dr. Rouhani was,” Kosei recounted. “My discussion with Dr. Rouhani actually made me feel as if I had gone back in time to the Middle Ages, when religious debate was commonplace.”¹⁰

Aside from this anecdote, a related topic to which Rouhani has contributed significant scholarly attention is “cultural engineering” (*muhandis-e farhangī*), a concept intimately linked to his desire to inculcate Iran with the “cultural and social capital” to “compete” in the battle of ideas in a globalized world.

Rouhani is an incessant critic of Islamophobia and has called for “diplomatic and political propaganda” to “enlighten public opinion in America, and the world,” through “international organizations” and “lobbying.” “It is very important that the Iranian nation's voice reach the ears of people in America,” he declared in a 2003 speech.¹¹

As part of this effort to combat the spread of false information against Islam, Rouhani envisions the strengthening of Iranian civic and cultural values, especially through the medium of formal education. He has called for a “scientific, literary, artistic, and Basij culture” that promotes an integrated understanding of Islamic and Iranian identity; outreach to other Muslim countries; Persian language and literature; sports and physical education; and increased NGO participation.¹² On the ideal Iranian identity, Rouhani writes in a 2006 academic article:

National identity is one of the most potent causes of national solidarity, unity, and cohesion. Fortunately, in this country our religious

and national identities are so intertwined that it could be said that our national identity is our religious identity. Ninety-nine percent of the Iranian population is Muslim, and love for Islam and the Prophet's Household (*ahl-e bayt*) is the most common element of our national identity. Even the Persian language and national conduct (*adab*) and customs, as well as the teachings of Islamic culture, are mixed together in a way that the masterpieces of the Persian language are largely rooted in the rich teachings of Islam. And from that stems love of the Quran and the Prophet of Islam, Ali, and his pure children, Ashura, and love of country. These are the most prominent symbols and expressions of national unity.¹³

Rouhani has likewise called Iran the “motherland” (*mihan*)—a term popularized during the rule of the shah—although he has used the modified *Mihan-e Islami* (Islamic motherland).¹⁴

To further augment his research on issues of identity, Rouhani has performed a statistical analysis of *Sahifeh-ye Nur* [Pages of Light], the vast twenty-volume collection of Khomeini's speeches and correspondence. From this, he attempted to find the most commonly used words in order to reconstruct how Khomeini—and by deduction he himself—should view religious and national identity. According to Rouhani, Khomeini most frequently used the words “Islam,” “Iran,” “nation,” “republic,” “government,” and “human.”¹⁵ Rouhani has likewise devised a chart detailing the structure of Khomeini's national security and foreign policy worldview, which includes intriguing terms such as “expediency” (*maslahat*) of “Islam” and “Iran”; “deterrence and defense”; “Muslim Islamic revival”; “the critique of modern reason”; and, a central pledge of his own 2013 campaign platform, “constructive engagement with the world.”¹⁶ Given Rouhani's fealty to Khomeini as an intellectual and political figure, and the adoption of similar rhetoric, it would be safe to assume that this treatment applies to his own worldview as well. At CSR, though, Rouhani called for Tehran to no longer remain the capital of Iran due to the threat of earthquakes—a topic Khomeini likely never broached.¹⁷

However, there is a limit to Rouhani's academic pretensions. As part of his scheme of cultural engineering to solidify Iranian identity, Rouhani has also called for a “common enemy” to foster “internal cohesion”:

If people feel that there is a power, a superpower enemy—an enemy of the homeland, and an enemy of the System and the Islamic Republic, and its national interests and security—we will be closer to unity. Undoubtedly the public perception of a common enemy leads to internal cohesion.¹⁸

And Rouhani has specified who this enemy is. On May 17, 1995 (27 Ordibehesht 1374), *Ettelaat*—Iran’s oldest newspaper—ran a large photo of Rouhani in its political section, along with an equally large headline that quoted: “The Beautiful Chant of ‘Death to America’ Is Unifying the Country.”

Notes

1. “Leaders’ Statement,” Tehran Domestic Service, April 21, 1982, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS-SAS-82-078).
2. “Rowhani Speech on Role of ‘Culture of Ashura,’” Tehran, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, First Program Network, May 31, 1995, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS-NES-95-107).
3. Ali Mirsepassi, *Democracy in Modern Iran: Islam, Culture, and Political Change* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), p. 132.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
6. *Ibid.*
7. “Former Aide Says Iranian President-Elect ‘Is Not Superman,’” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 20, 2013, <http://washin.st/17sQHNI>
8. See, for instance, Hassan Rouhani, “Dar Amadi bar Muallafahha-ye Asasi-e Muhiti-e dar Chashm Andaz-e Iran” (An Introduction to the Basics of Iran’s Outlook), *Rahbord*, no. 55 (August 2010), p. 13, <http://www.csr.ir/center.aspx?lng=en&abtid=04&&semid=166>.
9. Hassan Rouhani, “Religion and International Relations: Some General Reflections, with Particular Emphasis on the Experience of the Islamic Republic,” *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2010): p. 24.
10. Morimoto Kosei, “The Destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas and 11 September: A Historical Perspective,” *Gaiko Forum: Journal of Japanese Perspectives on Diplomacy* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2002): pp. 36–45 (in particular, p. 38).
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13. Hassan Rouhani, “Hambastagi-e Milli va Musharakat-e Umumi” (National Solidarity and Public Participation), *Rahbord*, no. 38 (January 2006): p. 26, <http://www.csr.ir/center.aspx?lng=fa&abtid=04&&semid=273>.
14. Haggay Ram, “Exporting Iran’s Islamic Revolution: Steering a Path between

- Pan-Islam and Nationalism,” in *Religious Radicalism in the Greater Middle East*, ed. Efraim Inbar and Bruce Maddy-Weitzman; citing *Ettelaat*, July 14, 1984.
15. Hassan Rouhani, “Guftiman-e Imam Khomeini Piramun-e Amniyat-e Milli va Siyasat-e Khariji” (Imam Khomeini’s Discourse on National Security and Foreign Policy), *Rahbord*, no. 65 (January 2013): pp. 28–29, <http://www.csr.ir/center.aspx?lng=en&abtid=04&&semid=375>.
 16. *Ibid.*, p 57.
 17. “Earthquake Fears May See Iran Move Its Capital,” *Edmonton Journal*, January 6, 2004, p. A4.
 18. Hassan Rouhani, “Hambastagi-e Milli va Musharakat-e Umumi” (National Solidarity and Public Participation), *Rahbord*, no. 38 (January 2006): p. 24, <http://www.csr.ir/center.aspx?lng=fa&abtid=04&&semid=273>.

The Presidency

2013–PRESENT

ON APRIL 11, 2013, Hassan Rouhani announced his candidacy for the Iranian presidency. In his initial address, he summed up his policies by telling supporters that he sought to “save the economy, revive morality, and interact with the world.” Rouhani would then end with bravado, claiming that he would be victorious come Election Day on June 14 (24 Khordad) and that from this “political epic,” the “government of prudence and hope” (*dawlat-e tadbir va omid*) would create an “economic epic”:

Long live morality! Long live integrity! Long live civil rights! Long live moderation! Long live prudence! Long live hope! Long live prudence and hope! Long live Islam! Long live Iran!

On June 14, we will create a political epic. And, with the government of “prudence and hope,” we will create an economic epic.¹

If Rouhani seemed confident, it is because he was. In an April 2013 interview with the Iranian daily *Etemad*—a week prior to his candidacy announcement—Rouhani claimed that he would only enter the race if assured victory. With rhetoric more reminiscent of an athlete than a politician, he stated: “I really like to compete with strong rivals. Strong competition makes the election livelier.... If I announce my candidacy, it is because I have confidence in winning. Otherwise, I would not run.”²

Although floated as a potential presidential candidate as early as 1994, Rouhani had always avoided formally filing for candidacy.³ Thus, his decision was deliberate; in the same interview, he would state that he had thought about a candidacy decision for a “long time” and “discussed it with others.” “This is not a personal decision,” Rouhani claimed. “It is the result of consultation with many friends, elites, and parties that are willing to support me, and insist that I run.”

If Rouhani’s testimony is accurate, one of the individuals who might have “insisted” he run would have been Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—who, similar to Rouhani, coined 2013 the “year of the political and economic epic” in his March Nowruz speech.⁴

In a February 2013 interview, Ali Asghari—a parliamentary advisor to the Center for Strategic Research, which Rouhani headed at the time—claimed that Rouhani had met with both the Supreme Leader and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to discuss his plans for candidacy. In these meetings, which also took place with other “influential individuals,” Rouhani allegedly “put forward his own views regarding foreign policy, economic problems, the political situation, and government administration.” Asghari would go on to state that Rouhani was a “fresh” candidate who would come with “new words” and an “exit from the current situation.” He characterized Rouhani as representing “independent, principled, and moderate reformists.”⁵

Prospects for Reform

On Rouhani’s agenda, one of the key items mentioned in his original campaign speech is the creation of a “citizen charter of rights” (*manshur-e huquq-e shahrvandi*), specified as one of the “first actions” he will take in office.⁶ Although details are scarce as to what this will constitute, indications suggest it will be a legal document enumerating the rights of Iranian citizens based on existing laws, some of which have been undermined due to the country’s “security atmosphere.” If it comes to fruition, the charter will likely include an affirmation of Articles 19–42 of the Iranian constitution, which guarantee a range of civil rights and liberties; add language delineating rights to assembly and freedom from arbitrary arrest; and enumerate elements that constitute a shared sense of Iranian national and religious identity and values.

As part and parcel of this campaign promise, on June 3—almost two weeks prior to Election Day—Rouhani released a ten-point statement entitled “Rights of Ethnic Groups, Religions, and Islamic Sects.” In it, he called for the “full implementation” of constitutional provisions guaranteeing the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, including Article 15, which safeguards the right to education in minority languages. It also called for “public participation, regardless of language and religion,” and “meritocracy in all the administrative-political levels...for all citizens.”⁷ Stemming from this outreach, Rouhani won a majority of votes in areas with ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities, including Azeri- and Kurdish-speaking provinces and the Sunni-dominated southeast province of Sistan and Baluchistan, where he secured more than 70 percent of the vote—20 percentage points higher than his 50.7 percent national average.⁸

Likewise, on the campaign trail Rouhani pledged to create a Ministry of Women’s Affairs (*Vizarat-e Umur-e Banuvan*), which would likely seek to

uphold and supplement existing constitutional guarantees for women, including equal opportunity in work and education and full access to state services such as insurance.⁹ Rouhani also pledged to ease gender segregation at universities—an unpopular measure increased during the Ahmadinejad presidency—and urged the parliament to pass a Family Protection Act. In 2011, a similar bill was presented to the Majlis, which sought to augment the financial rights of divorcees and also reform laws related to the age of maturity (*bulugh*)—the Islamic legal definition of puberty, which traditionally has specified the age of legal responsibility and criminal culpability at nine years for girls and fifteen years for boys.¹⁰ As president of CSR at the time, Rouhani firmly endorsed this reform bill, and in 2012 he authored a three-hundred-page book solely dedicated to redefining the “age of legal responsibility” in Iranian and Islamic law and finding a legal mechanism to streamline provisions related to it.¹¹ During the 2013 campaign, Rouhani would likewise urge clerics and seminary students to utilize the “principle of time and place” (*asl-e zaman va makan*) in the derivation and articulation of Islamic laws, a view he has endorsed since the 1990s.¹² “Can you say that a nine-year-old girl who commits a crime should be punished, whereas a fourteen-year-old boy should not?” Rouhani rhetorically asked the seminary students.¹³

It is promised measures like these that have fueled the popular perception of Rouhani as a reformist, both within Iran and among the international community. Adding to this appeal, during the 2013 campaign Rouhani labeled himself a consensus candidate for all Iranians, and has previously stated that choosing to vote for a candidate based on whether he is “rich” or “poor,” “religious” or “nonreligious,” or “rural” or “urban” contributes to hurting national unity.¹⁴

Morality and National Unity

Rouhani’s optimistic rhetoric, and desire for reform and consensus, is not without caveats. One of Rouhani’s central campaign pledges, to “revive morality,” connotes for him not only a revival of religious values but also of national unity under the guardianship of the Supreme Leader. Therefore, despite seeking to ensure the rights of women and minorities, Rouhani firmly envisages such reforms as taking place within Iran’s existing political framework and serving to strengthen and legitimize the system in the eyes of the Iranian people. “In an Islamic society, the ‘Islamic System’ is more important than anything else, and the preservation of the System is a religious obligation,” he stated in 2008.¹⁵

Therefore, Rouhani has specifically linked greater public participation in the political process (such as in his pledge for inclusiveness of ethnic and reli-

gious minorities) to the “capability, power, and national security” of the Iranian regime. He stated in 2000:

What is particularly important is the people’s presence in the political arena. Their participation in the political arena will increase our national security. If the bond between the people and the ruling establishment becomes stronger and more extensive...our capability, power, and national security will increase.¹⁶

Rouhani has also expressed concern that Iran’s “economic situation” can lead to moral degeneration, including higher rates of divorce, an increasing age of marriage, and lower work productivity—all of which threaten not only the religious health of society but also the legitimacy and security of the regime.¹⁷ “It is undeniable that in many cases economic issues and moral issues are intertwined, and inseparable,” he stated in a 2009 speech.¹⁸ To confront this challenge, in July 2012 Rouhani called for a “cultural and moral revolution” in Iran and exhorted the Iranian people to “join hands under the leadership of the System”:

People! We are the ones who raised the banner against “the Arrogance”—against America and Israel.... But in recent years we have witnessed a fundamental blow to our morals, cohesion and national unity, and meritocracy....

We need a moral revolution (*inqilab-e akhlaqi*). We need a cultural revolution (*inqilab-e farhangi*). Morality should be the country’s governing social and political virtue. The philosophy of the mission of the Prophet of Islam, and the Islamic Revolution, should be our morality. Faith, belief, jihad, and sacrifice—besides bringing happiness in the next life—will bring victory in this one.

And [you will obtain] another [favor] that you love—victory from Allah and an imminent conquest; and give good tidings to the believers. (Quran 61:13)

If we all join hands under the leadership of the System, we will be able to win again.¹⁹

Similarly, at a July 2013 press conference following his election victory, Rouhani denounced the dangers of “factionalism” and indicated that any opposition to Iran’s religious system would not be tolerated:

Danger is when there are gaps and disagreement among main pillars of the society. Danger is when, God forbid, there is a group that considers itself equal to Islam, a group that considers itself equal to the Revolution, a group that considers itself equal to the guardianship of the Supreme Jurisconsult [*velayat-e faqih*]; and introduces [another] group against religion, against Revolution, against the guardianship of the Supreme Jurisconsult. All problems originate from this point.²⁰

Presidential Discourse

In the wake of Rouhani's election, one of the most immediate and lingering questions remains the ultimate authority of the presidency. Despite promises of improving Iran's domestic situation, and international standing, does the president—who occupies a “second-tier” position below that of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—have the power and reach to implement such a pivot? While this question will ultimately be answered by Rouhani's actions, he has provided insight that helps better contextualize his campaign rhetoric and his likely discourse as president. In February 2009, reflecting on the upcoming summer elections, Rouhani expounded in an interview:

After the Supreme Leader, the president is the second official rank in the country. The president also appoints ministers and heads of government agencies, which makes his mandate very broad.

Presidential discourse is very influential, and crucial in determining the dominant discourse of the country. For instance, at one time the dominant discourse in Iran was “reconstruction”; at one time it was “civil society” and “political development”; and now it is “justice-seeking.”...

It is true that the general policies are decided by the Leadership; and the Majlis and the Expediency Council play an important role, however, power in Iran is quite distributed and the president plays a significant role in the executive branch....

The president's domestic, foreign, economic, and cultural policies, and the politics of technology and defense can be crucial....

It is important that whoever is elected be able to understand national and world issues, and better promote the culture, politics, economy, and security of society. What is important is the strength of the System, the welfare of the people, and the progress and development of the State.²¹

During the 2013 campaign, Rouhani very clearly defined and framed his “dominant discourse”—that is, a concept he terms “constructive and dignified engagement with the world” (*taamol-e hadafmand va ezzatmand ba jahan*).²²

For Rouhani, reconciling the Iranian government with the world community is intimately linked to Iran's economic and social health. He declared in March 2013, “Today, our foreign policy influences economic, political, and even social issues.”²³ However, for Rouhani international engagement is premised upon two conditions: (1) that it be “constructive,” in that it confers benefits upon the “system”; and (2) that it be “dignified,” in that bilateral relations must be premised upon mutual respect and noninterference in affairs.

Traditionally, these conditions have exempted the United States from full economic engagement with Iran. In 2009, Rouhani stated that Iran seeks interconnectivity with the world and that global engagement brings “honor” to the Iranian people. He also claimed, however, that “one or two countries” are exceptions to this rule, an implicit reference to Israel and the United States:

The attraction of international capital and the creation of national and international institutions reflect the ability of a government. It is true that we should be able to stand alone, and be a self-reliant nation, but we should also use broader facilities. Today is a world of communication and interaction...interaction with the world is an honor for the country...however, with one or two countries, they would be the exceptions.²⁴

The Evolution of Rouhani

This link between economic development and foreign policy is the central node by which to understand both a Rouhani presidency and, more broadly, Rouhani’s evolution as a statesman along with the innermost ideals he holds today. The struggle to define what it is to be Muslim, interact with the world, develop technologically and economically, and also maintain a personal and state identity and culture defines Rouhani as an individual and his ideal path for Iran as a nation. However, it is also necessary to understand another political ideal: a development-oriented foreign policy (*siyasat-e khariji-e tawsiah garaa*). Rouhani writes in a 2009 book:

If a country wants to develop, all principal organs of the State must be development-oriented...a development-oriented government requires a development-oriented foreign policy, along with collaboration, consensus, unification, and stability.²⁵

But Rouhani has not always held this ideal, and only by understanding his evolution on this issue can prospects for engagement with Iran today become clearer. This evolution can be divided into three periods: one of idealism, a second of pragmatism, and a third of reconciliation.

In 1986—at the height of the Iran-Iraq War—Rouhani chastised the country’s business and commercial class (*bazaari*) for their complaints that the war effort had hindered economic development, and claimed that the Iranian people “must accept economic problems” because the war was “holy.” A foreign reporter in Tehran who interviewed Rouhani at the time wrote:

Even without going to Tehran’s middle-class suburbs, the foreign visitor can hear many shopkeepers in the bazaar grumble that they are tired of a war which “swallows up the country’s oil income.”

Hassan Rouhani readily admits that the continuation of the war creates economic problems which affect the daily life of the people. “But, since the aim is holy,” he says, “the people must accept these problems.... As far as the *bazaaris* are concerned, don’t speak about these people. From the beginning, they did not participate in the war. Instead of asking these *bazaaris*, who are tired of the war, you should ask the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who have been fighting since the beginning, and who are now setting off for the front.”²⁶

However, by the end of the war and his ascent to the Supreme National Security Council under the tutelage of President Rafsanjani—ostensibly the architect of an Iran-specific development-oriented foreign policy—Rouhani’s rhetoric became decidedly less holy. In a 1991 session of the Majlis, he argued that Iran’s free trade zones, such as the Qeshm Free Zone on an island in the southern Persian Gulf, should not apply Islamic law, thereby attracting greater investment:

To install Islamic codes on Qeshm is in contradiction with reality. The more freedom we provide for investors, the more of them we can attract.²⁷

Looking back on this transition, Rouhani would claim that concerns related to foreign investment stemmed from fears of meddling. But, he explained, “With the passage of time...we came to realize our need for foreign investment and foreign experts, hence a softening of our approach.”²⁸

By the mid-1990s, Rouhani had come full circle to reconcile Rafsanjani’s pragmatic vision with the idealism that defined his early years as a statesman in the Islamic Republic: economic engagement was no longer an end in its own right, but must serve the ultimate ends of Iran’s religious system. Rouhani stands in just this position today, advocating a combination of economic development with the maintenance and legitimacy of the “system.” In a 1995 interview, Rouhani would make this link clear by claiming that if Iran becomes a “developed country,” it would be a “slap in the face for all the mistaken views held about Islam”:

[A] very important mission we have today is the development of Iran. We have to build Iran, to strengthen, modernize, and develop it.... Our objective is a modern Iran. If Iran is transformed into a modern, developed country, it will become a model country for all Muslims and a slap in the face for all the mistaken views held about Islam by a bunch of biased individuals throughout history: That Islam cannot manage society; that religious culture cannot build and develop society. The world opposes...the growth and modernization of Iran.²⁹

Rouhani's most mature articulation of this connection between economic development, global engagement, and the "authority" and legitimacy of Iran's religious system was expressed in a 2006 interview:

In today's world one cannot say that a country does not in any way need help from the outside. It is not possible to abandon interaction with the outside world and say that we would not negotiate with foreigners under any circumstances....

Being skilled is all about being able to stand on one's feet at the lowest cost.... We could easily sever relations with everyone. But that would impose very high costs on us....

We want an Iran that continues to grow and prosper; a country that is able to compete with others. If we fail to achieve growth and development as we advance then our authority will be called into question. No country achieves power and strength without growth and development.³⁰

Engagement with the United States

It is only in this light—this reconciliation between the pragmatic and the ideological, or the "balance between realism and idealism," as he has come to term it—that Rouhani can be understood today.

There is no better example to demonstrate this fact than Rouhani's rhetoric toward the United States in the spring of 2000. In March, following a landslide victory for reformists in Iran's parliamentary elections, Rouhani rebuffed unprecedented gestures by then secretary of state Madeleine Albright, including the easing of sanctions on key Iranian commodities, an offer to establish joint embassies, and a settlement of claims on \$12 billion of frozen Iranian assets. The week prior to the Iranian New Year of Nowruz, Albright would state:

Spring is the season of hope and renewal; of planting the seeds for new crops. And my hope is that in both Iran and the United States, we can plant the seeds now for a new and better relationship in years to come....

We have no illusions that the United States and Iran will be able to overcome decades of estrangement overnight. We can't build a mature relationship on carpets and grain alone. But the direction of our relations is more important than the pace.³¹

Ostensibly, an easing of sanctions should have been enthusiastically greeted by Rouhani, or any adherent of a development-oriented foreign policy. However, despite these gestures (which also included admission of U.S. government culpability in the 1953 coup that removed Prime Minister Muhammad Mosaddeq

from power), Rouhani would term Albright's offer a "piece of chocolate" and claim she had "repeated the same old belligerent policies":

On the whole, her proposal on permitting export of certain Iranian commodities, such as carpets, nuts and caviar, to America is, in my belief, an apparently positive, yet infinitesimal step. However, if we observe the contents of the speech, then, in my opinion, even that step is not at all a positive one; it is a negative step, which smacks of another act of intervention by America in the internal affairs of Iran....

In Albright's viewpoint, a development is taking place inside Iran which has pleased Mrs. Albright and, in return, she is offering a piece of chocolate; this is seen by our nation as an extremely offensive and unacceptable act.... The Americans have, under no circumstances whatsoever, the right to provide any encouragement in respect of Iran's internal affairs. It is the Iranian people who pursue whatever line they have chosen....

On the whole, she has repeated the same old belligerent policies.... In general, I do not assess this speech as positive, and deem it as yet another interference by America in the internal affairs of Iran.³²

But 2013 is not 2000. Given Iran's dire economic straits, Rouhani has seemingly reversed course. In February, two months prior to his candidacy announcement, Rouhani stated in an interview that Iran was in a "special situation economically and internationally" and urged that the next president be a "crisis manager":

The individual must have the ability to manage special situations...a crisis manager...the next president should be a strong hand and powerful manager who has the power to negotiate with the world.³³

In a January 2013 academic article—his last before the presidential campaign—Rouhani implicitly likened engagement with the United States over economic issues to the resolution that ended the Iran-Iraq War, a measure frequently termed as "hated," and a compromise in Iran's revolutionary ideals, but necessary to ensure the survival of the Islamic system:

Sometimes, specific objectives of foreign policy become the dominant discourse. These are limited to time and place.... The objectives of public policy and action in every country of the world are designed so as to control crises related to specific times, and transient events, and stand in relation to larger issues, in the interest of finding a remedy....

The "Holy Defense" of Imam Khomeini should have lasted until final victory over the Baathist Iraqi enemy, but due to the economic difficulties and discretions considering time and place, we accepted a conditional cease-fire. The goal was to ensure the survival of the Islamic Revolution, the same reason why the Hostage Crisis ended in 1360 (1981).³⁴

A Path Forward?

A Rouhani presidency presents much promise, but also much peril. As former secretary of state Madeleine Albright's speech demonstrates, the United States has shown the goodwill to engage the Iranian government in the past, at a level that is likely not present today. Yet the unprecedented conciliatory gestures at that time were never fully acknowledged by the Iranian government, Rouhani included.

However, Rouhani does not theoretically object to diplomatic engagement with the United States, though he does base engagement upon a change in "U.S. behavior"—the key element of his stipulation for "dignified engagement" in bilateral relations.

In 2004, following the Bam earthquake and subsequent U.S. aid, Rouhani stated that the United States and Iran need "bulldozers to demolish the wall that separates our two countries"—but maintained it was the prerogative of the United States to initiate this process:

The Bam tragedy will not... suffice to remove the kind of bottleneck that is obstructing the resumption of our relations. It has caused a kind of glimmer of hope to emerge. But we do not need glimmers. We need bulldozers to demolish the wall that separates our two countries. The problem is that each side is expecting the other's bulldozer to do this job!³⁵

Moreover, in a 2002 interview with ABC News, Rouhani differentiated between the American people and the American government, stating that there would be no impediment to academic, cultural, and tourist exchange:

We are interested in friendly relations between the American people and the Iranian people. We believe that America is completely aware of our country's reality. We support any kind of relations between the two nations. We support tourism between the two nations. We support scientific relations and athletic and cultural relations. We are not interested in increasing tensions between the two nations. We are not interested in threatening American interests in the region or in the world. At the same time, we will not allow America to threaten our interests in the region or in the world. Also, we will not allow America to disrespect our people's vote and wishes and interfere in our internal affairs.³⁶

However, while Rouhani stated that he does not want to see an "increase in tensions," he has indicated that he does not want to see a decrease either. In a May 2013 campaign briefing with Iranian expatriates, Rouhani termed the United States "the enemy" and made clear this "neither peace nor war" outlook:

Today, we cannot say that we want to eliminate the tension between us and the USA. Today, there is aggression and threat involved.... We could have

said that we wished to eliminate the tension between us and the USA eight years ago or talk about building trust with certain other states.... The situation is different now but we should be aware that we can have interactions even with the enemy in such a manner that the grade of its enmity would be decreased, secondly, its enmity would not be effective.³⁷

Therefore, it appears that in Rouhani's eyes the United States and Iran are not poised for a grand rapprochement—or a “turning of the page and decrease of hostilities,” as he has sometimes claimed—but for something more limited: a calculated end to the nuclear crisis.

Indeed, for perhaps the first time since the 2003 ascent of the nuclear issue to international prominence, a member of Iran's leadership is seeking something concrete from the United States. The United States, in turn, also seeks something from Iran. To this point, the Iranian government has viewed nuclear negotiations as an exercise, a necessity to appease the world community. However, the economic situation has reached a point where negotiation has become inevitable. Rouhani is seeking an end to the crippling sanctions, which he views as threatening to the legitimacy of Iran's ruling system and the economic, moral, and cultural health of the country, while the U.S. government would likely like to see considerable concessions on the Iranian nuclear program.

Yet the path forward on the nuclear issue has its contentions. Rather than having a hard vision and offer to float to the world community, Rouhani has stated that the process must start with “building a national consensus.” In a far-reaching interview during his campaign, Rouhani termed concerns over Iran's nuclear aspirations a “fabricated crisis” that is “directed by Israel” and claimed that the UN Security Council had “lost its credibility”:

The Iranian nuclear program is completely peaceful.... There is a campaign, which has political motives, aimed at deception and casting doubt on the peaceful nature of this program. This campaign is launched and directed primarily by Israel in order to divert international attention not only from its secret and dangerous nuclear program, but also from its inhumane policies and practices, which destabilize Palestine and the Middle East. It is regrettable that the UN Security Council has lost its credibility through allowing the United States to impose this non-constructive Israeli agenda.

If I am elected president, I will reverse this direction through restoring international confidence and exposing ulterior motives. Nuclear weapons have no role at all in the Iranian national security doctrine. Iran has nothing to hide. However, in order to proceed towards settling the Iranian nuclear file, we need to reach national consensus and rapprochement and understanding on the international level. This can only happen through dialogue....

The United States and its allies have to abandon deception and disinformation, the creation of new enemies, and depicting Iran and its peaceful nuclear program as a threat. Serious and balanced negotiations, which have a time-frame and which aim at resolving specific issues and concerns clearly on both sides, can play an effective role in resolving this fabricated crisis.³⁸

Rouhani has likewise declared that talks with the United States must be premised upon American promises of noninterference in Iranian affairs, a recognition of Iran's "nuclear right," and an avoidance of "unilateral bullying against Iran." "If we feel there is goodwill involved," Rouhani stated in June 2013, "the grounds [for talks] will be ready."³⁹

With the stakes at hand, and Rouhani's alleged will to reconcile Iran with the world community and ease its economic woes, this clearly ill-defined path forward on the central platform of his campaign is less than satisfying.

However, the reality is that Rouhani's rhetoric has been extremely inconsistent. Both during his campaign and over the last decade, within the course of weeks or months Rouhani can seemingly oscillate on fundamental issues. For instance, in 2006 Rouhani explicitly condemned the mindset that he himself seems to embody—a double standard by which engagement with the United States is only conducted in times of expediency, rather than as a permanent policy. In a critique of the "Iranian mindset," he stated:

We have constantly said that we should not get close to the enemy and deceitful people; we see getting close to foreigners as getting close to Satan. Of course, that is not a bad thing, but provided there is consistency, instead of our acceptance of it in phases. Today, the time has come for us to adopt more balance in our decision-making. We must now proceed with a greater degree of rationality while distancing ourselves from our emotions. At the same time we should bear in mind that today's world is different to how the world was a decade ago or during the Cold War. Today's world is a fast changing world. Therefore, we cannot use past formulas as criteria....

In today's world one cannot regard a set of principles as constant principles. And then within such a framework distance oneself from the world, and only change one's opinion whenever there is an emergency.⁴⁰

"We are at a crossroads," Rouhani would declare during the 2013 campaign. "A path of moderation, reason, and justice; or a path of radicalism, extremism, and slogans."⁴¹

Inside Rouhani exists a similar crossroads: promise and peril. The onus is on him to choose which will prevail.

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Conclusion

MORE THAN ANY previous Iranian president—and most figures on the world stage—Hassan Rouhani is an “open book.” In addition to his own writings—totaling more than seven thousand pages of largely Persian-language material—Rouhani’s political offices over the past thirty years have afforded him unfettered access to the Iranian and international press. While the ideals of rhetoric can often fall hard upon the realities of geopolitics, language is important and has played a central role in defining the tenures of past Iranian presidents. Likewise, the perception of positive rhetoric frames the world community’s expectations and hopes for a new era in relations with Iran. Therefore, an analysis of Rouhani’s writings, speeches, and interviews—as contained in this report—is important and can also clarify fundamental questions, including on his posture toward the United States and the West; view of international law and human rights; personal values, beliefs, and motivations; and intentions and likely actions as president.

While this report suffices as a primer, and covers the broadest contours of his life, political positions, and worldview, further research is needed. After his 1993 trip to Germany, and initial pledges concerning Iran’s nuclear intentions, Rouhani’s rhetoric became decidedly more calculated. However, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s—given Iran’s international isolation and the nature of media—Rouhani was largely uninhibited when it came to speaking his mind. An analysis of Iranian press reports and parliamentary transcripts, especially from the Iran-Iraq War, is likely to yield insight into Rouhani’s beliefs on issues of contemporary pertinence and highlight contradictions with the positions he publicly articulates today.

Findings and Takeaways

From the vast body of literature surveyed herein, two main findings emerge, both of which are critical for policymakers to understand as they assess the dimensions of a relationship with Iranian president Hassan Rouhani and evaluate

potential Iranian overtures to the West: (1) Rouhani's identity as an ideologue and defender of the Islamic Revolution; and (2) his complex belief in the linkages between economic development, international engagement, civic participation and domestic reform, and the legitimacy and security of the Iranian regime.

First, the overwhelming impression gleaned from Rouhani's history and writings is his identity as an ideologue. From his adolescence as a seminary student and spokesman for the Islamic Movement to his law school studies and tenure at Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, military command, and the Center for Strategic Research, defense of Iran's revolutionary Islamic system has been the common thread. He stated in 2003:

The fundamental principle in Iran's relations with America—our entire focus—is national strength. Strength in politics, culture, economics, and defense (especially in the field of advanced technology) is the basis for the preservation and overall development of the System, and will force the enemy to surrender...

The second principle is to prevent compatibility and consensus, especially with Europe, Russia, and China, over Iran.¹

While Rouhani has not deviated from the revolutionary script, he is not a typical ideologue either: he has an academic background, has written extensively on economics, and possesses a realistic vision of the problems Iran is facing. In this vein, Rouhani has been criticized by hardliners for having referred to Iran as a “developing,” or sometimes even “third world,” country—whereas many conservatives within the Iranian government perceive Iran as “developed,” but just “on our own terms.”²

From a finer perspective, Rouhani believes himself to be the consummate ideologue—someone who not only manifests his beliefs through tangible action but also possesses the most correct understanding of them. On numerous occasions in his writings, Rouhani contrasts his views as a “learned ideologue” to the lesser understandings of others. For instance, on the American subprime mortgage crisis, he stated:

Some here say, “Why should we care about the world!? What does the world have to do with us?” Some even wanted to hold national celebrations, they said the time had come for divine punishment. They said, “See what has happened to the West, and what catastrophe has befallen them! Now everyone should line up and ask us how to administer the world!” These words were uttered out of inattention to economic issues...the storm has not passed, and is gradually approaching the Middle East and our country as well.³

Correspondingly, in Iran the main criticism of Rouhani's nuclear tenure entails his "intellectual" approach in having agreed to the "voluntary suspension" of enrichment activities. Rouhani has expressed dismay at the "offensive interpretations" of those who are unable to fathom the connection between this tactic and the desire for "investment guarantees" or the need to transition Iran away from a "security environment."⁴ Similarly, in 2008 Rouhani castigated Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over his claims of personal contact with the Shia messiah, Imam al-Mahdi—an action Rouhani believes to be intellectually and theologically unsound.⁵ He has likewise urged that "combating false visions and beliefs" be an integral part of Iranian public schooling.⁶ During the 2013 campaign, Rouhani came across as an abrasive intellectual, confident in the correctness of his views, who had no qualms about raising his voice during television interviews to defend his past, or *his* vision for Iran.

Moreover, as a defender of Iran's revolutionary ideology, Rouhani only values objects and actions inasmuch as they lend support to the ends of his beliefs. For instance, during the campaign—when quizzed over his personal tastes—Rouhani stated he is not artistic but nonetheless values art for its "effective language":

As far as art is concerned, I must say that I am not artistic. I am not a musician or a poet, either, but I enjoy art and if I am given the country's executive responsibility, I will use those in the art section that are artistic; meaning that I will appoint individuals to art departments whom artists are proud of. On the whole, art is a beautiful and effective language for all and this also applies to myself.⁷

However, due to his academic background, Rouhani has reached the point of no return: he can no longer support the blind idealism of his peers, or seek recourse in Islamic law to solve Iran's problems. "We cannot make plans based on idealism and principles and ignore the realities," he stated in 2006 in the context of nuclear negotiations.⁸ Rouhani prioritizes the expediency and preservation of the Iranian regime and is willing to compromise on "formalities" such as the use of "slogans" in political discourse, which he understands can help calm the international atmosphere vis-à-vis Iran. "We should talk carefully to not provoke the enemy, we should not give them any excuses," he said in 2007.⁹ This is also why Rouhani lends support to the "principle of time and place" in the derivation of Islamic law (such as in his desire to redefine the age of legal responsibility in Iran), which he views as necessary to develop the country and prevent it from being "overtaken" by more attractive ideologies. While to the uninformed these measures might appear as the actions of a reformist or pragmatist, they actually indicate a willingness to sacrifice rela-

tively minute formalities in favor of the “higher ideals” of the system (such as its general Islamic identity, independence, and “anti-imperialist” posture) and its preservation at all costs.

But there are cracks in Rouhani’s “intellectual-ideologue” pretensions. Whether in his fumbling defense of the Salman Rushdie fatwa or commentary on the September 11 terrorist attacks—in which he claimed that flight 93 was shot down by the U.S. Air Force—Rouhani has not only played fast and loose with the facts but also demonstrated an inability to extrapolate his rhetoric into real world solutions. In one of the more incredible examples, Rouhani has called for the unification of Muslim-majority states, from which he argues that oil should be used as a “weapon” against “America and the West.” The broad geopolitical and social realities of the Middle East make this a fanciful notion:

If the Muslims are united, America has little justification for the military occupation of Muslim countries, and arms sales to them will stop. If the Muslim world is united, oil will become a powerful weapon for Islamic countries, and new relations between the Islamic world and the West can be adjusted.... This will certainly bring bargaining power in economic, political, and security issues against the West and America, which will face a strong Islamic bloc. If the Muslim world is united, surely Western supporters of Israel will inevitably put pressure on them and the Palestinians, and our bargaining power will increase dramatically against the invaders.¹⁰

Like all ideologues, Rouhani is also a theoretician, and he envisages ideal, overarching solutions to Iran’s woes. And this is the second takeaway from this body of literature: that is, Rouhani’s complex belief in the linkages between economic development, international engagement, civic participation, and the legitimacy and security of the Iranian regime. While this integrated conception is difficult enough to articulate in words, much less bring to fruition in reality, Rouhani has consistently supported such a path for Iran’s future. In his most successful attempt to cohesively tie these notions together, he stated in 2000:

What is particularly important is the people’s presence in the political arena. Their participation in the political arena will increase our national security. If the bond between the people and the ruling establishment becomes stronger and more extensive...our capability, power, and national security will increase.

I think that we should first strengthen ourselves in the security field. I am not just talking about military and defensive power. We should also increase our cultural power. We should also increase our economic power. We should also strengthen our technological capability. We should make this country more stable politically. We should increase the people’s presence in

the political arena. We should also create national unity here. By achieving these capabilities, we will be able to immunize this country against any kind of threat. Moreover, we should continue to practice *détente* as an important principle of our foreign policy and international relations.¹¹

For all this lofty rhetoric, real world solution-making often requires physical and intellectual compromise. Some of Rouhani's top priorities—including promoting rights for ethnic minorities and reform of Article 44 of the Iranian constitution, which guarantees private ownership—have been on the reformist agenda for almost two decades. A floundering president—unable to prioritize his objectives and bogged down by internal disagreements—is unlikely to bring about a grand synthesis of economics, politics, and culture.

Even with agenda items that are perhaps within reach, Rouhani has demonstrated that successes pay little dividends. Whether in his criticism during the Iran-Iraq War of the *bazaaris*, a class instrumental in building mainstream support for the Islamic Revolution; oscillations in rhetoric and negotiations in the 1990s with Germany, Iran's largest European trading partner; or insults and doublespeak with neighbors, Rouhani has shown an adeptness at "biting the hand." For instance, during the 2013 campaign Rouhani boasted of negotiating a 1998 security agreement with Saudi Arabia—with the desire to forge stronger security and economic ties with regional and Muslim-majority countries a top priority on his presidential agenda. But in 1996, Rouhani had dismissed the al-Saud family and predicted a revolution that would see its overthrow. When asked whether he viewed the situation in Saudi Arabia as similar to that of Iran under the shah, he replied:

The most natural thing would be for there to be a revolution in Saudi Arabia because, as we saw in 1979 with the patience of the Iranian people, that of the Saudi people also has its limits. It is merely evolution.¹²

In the same vein, Rouhani often viscerally criticizes the U.S. government, has sanctioned military action against American "economic interests around the world," and has explicitly approved of suicide bombings against civilians in Israel, a key American ally—but conversely believes it possible to engage the "American people." Such contrasts can even occur in the same article, speech, or interview.¹³ Overall, this demonstrates diplomatic maladroitness and an inability to understand the connections between rhetoric and political dialogue, cooperation, and guarantees. Moreover, it shows that if successes do occur, a lack of gratitude or payoff is likely to accompany them.

The final takeaway is the concept of "promise and peril"—which defines not

only Rouhani's presidential agenda but also his identity as an individual. Engagement with the international community and limited domestic reforms have the promise to benefit the Iranian people and improve their lives. The peril, however, is that Rouhani views such reforms not as an inherent good but rather as measures that, above all else, will reinforce the authority of Iran's religious system—a system that has continually failed the Iranian people since 1979.

On an individual level, there is also the promise of negotiating with a president who has broad exposure to the outside world and an academic understanding of the necessity of engagement with the West for the betterment of governments and citizens in the twenty-first century. The related peril is that Rouhani has dedicated his life to defending a religio-political system that limits freedom and personal autonomy and is psychologically, systematically, and methodologically at odds with the forces of development and innovation he so desperately wishes to inculcate in Iran.

Rouhani likely knows this as well. Finding a limited way for the promise to overcome the peril will define a successful presidency, not only for Rouhani, the Iranian people, and the international community but also in terms of objective truth—of which Rouhani believes he is the ultimate arbiter.

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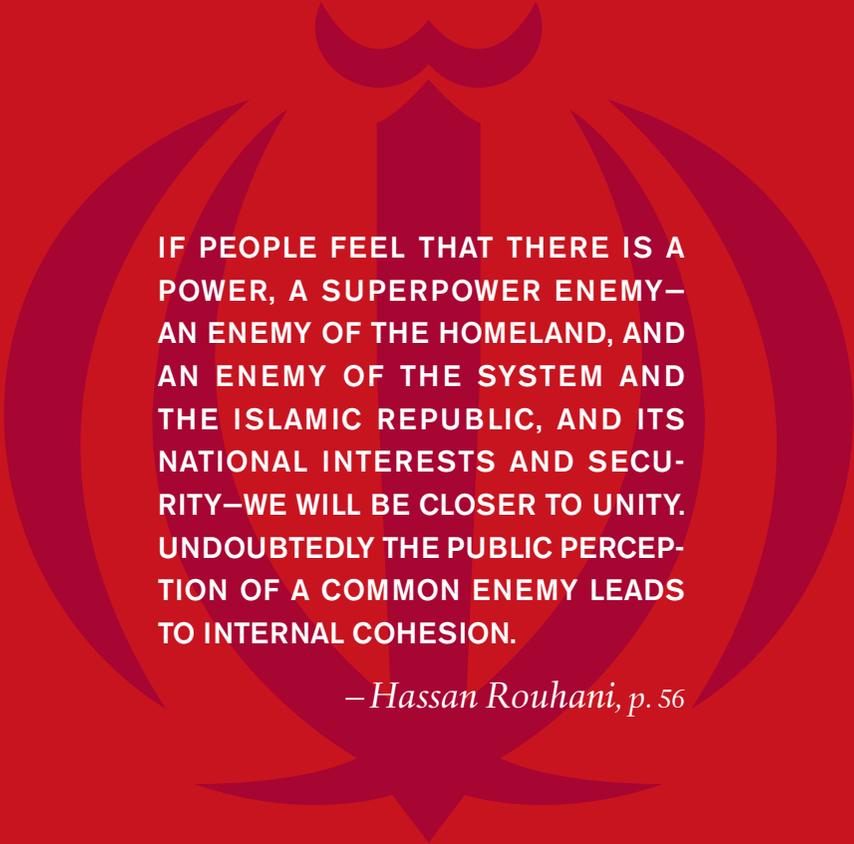
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IF PEOPLE FEEL THAT THERE IS A
POWER, A SUPERPOWER ENEMY—
AN ENEMY OF THE HOMELAND, AND
AN ENEMY OF THE SYSTEM AND
THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC, AND ITS
NATIONAL INTERESTS AND SECUR-
ITY—WE WILL BE CLOSER TO UNITY.
UNDOUBTEDLY THE PUBLIC PERCEP-
TION OF A COMMON ENEMY LEADS
TO INTERNAL COHESION.

—*Hassan Rouhani*, p. 56



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