

Iranians Debate: What Next with the United States?

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Apr 6, 2015

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Brief Analysis

President Rouhani speaks of conciliation with the United States, but the differing bilateral descriptions of the parameters have some Iranians worried that a deal is by no means certain.

Debate is raging inside Iran about the meaning of what happened in Lausanne last week. Two of the biggest questions center on why the U.S. and Iranian narratives differ, and whether the nuclear framework presages a broader improvement in relations.

LAUSANNE AS TRANSFORMATIONAL?

In his April 4 interview with Thomas Friedman, President Obama described the nuclear parameters as creating "the opportunity for those forces within Iran that want to break out of the rigid framework that they have been in for a long time to move in a different direction." He also spoke about his hope that the framework will foster "a new era in U.S.-Iranian relations."

That language fits with how President Hassan Rouhani has been talking about the nuclear issue. For example, he described last week's framework as a "*tavafogh*." While that word can be used for "agreement" or "deal," there are other equivalents in Persian that are at least as common for a formal accord or legal agreement, such as "*movafeghat nameh*" or "*tavafogh nameh*." Yet unlike those terms, "*tavafogh*" by itself resonates in Iranians' ears as something more than a legal agreement; the word is also used to describe conciliation between two people who have been at

odds. In addition, it has the connotation of peace, as contrasted with strife. By using this word, Rouhani seems to be suggesting that more is coming -- that relations with the United States could improve. It also helps him create a dichotomy between those who advocate his nuclear policy and his critics: the former are cast as peace lovers while the latter, by implication, are warmongers.

On April 3, in his first statement after the Lausanne framework was announced, Rouhani told an Iranian television audience, "The nuclear negotiations are the first step toward constructive interaction with the world...The reason we negotiate with the world is not that we have an issue called 'nuclear' and then [after we solve it], we end our interaction with the world. This is the first step toward the goal of constructive interaction with world...We work and cooperate with all those countries that want to respect the Iranian nation and to work with the people of Iran within a framework of mutual interests...We want to improve our relations with those countries that we already have good relations with, and end the tension and animosity with those countries with which we have tensions and animosity." The last part of that passage is particularly interesting because Iranian officials have repeatedly said that only two countries are enemies of the Islamic Republic: the United States and Israel.

Rouhani's tone implies that he and other officials hope to shift Iran's foreign policy away from "steadfast resistance to global arrogance," the approach so firmly advocated by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Yet they would have to overcome considerable conservative resistance if they hope to spur any such change in course. On April 6, Ibrahim Fayadh, a well-known conservative professor at the University of Tehran, compared the deal to UN Security Council Resolution 598, which called for an end to the Iran-Iraq War without saying who was the aggressor; likewise, he argued, the nuclear parameters are "an injustice to the Iranian people" that Tehran was "forced to accept." He concluded that "America's goal is to deprive the regime of an enemy." The same day, Basij militia commander Gen. Muhammad Naghdi declared that "[The Iranian] government and nation should punch unfaithful America in the mouth...These negotiations showed -- one more time -- that Americans are liars and untrustworthy."

Meanwhile, many Iranians took to the streets of Tehran and other major cities to celebrate the framework's announcement. For many of them, a nuclear deal means not only the beginning of the end of sanctions, but also the end of animosity with United States -- a transformational development they hope could change the government's behavior at home too. Yet this jubilant, spontaneous reaction died down quickly as a war of interpretation broke out between Washington and Tehran over what exactly was agreed in Lausanne.

WAR OF INTERPRETATIONS?

During a state television interview soon after the framework's initial announcement, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif criticized state media for broadcasting misinformation about the deal and for claiming that the EU announcement was different from what he and the Foreign Ministry had said about the terms. Then, on April 6, the Majlis (parliament) asked Zarif to appear before the National Security and Foreign Affairs Committee to explain the discrepancy between the U.S. and Iranian factsheets. State media broadcast only a few seconds of the session, showing Zarif losing his temper, raising his right hand, and swearing to God, "This is an absolute lie." The Alef website, affiliated with conservative parliamentarian Ahmad Tavakkoli, later criticized the broadcast, saying that it "provides a picture of internal tension and conflict to observers, rivals, and enemies of the regime around the world and draws a very bad portrait of the regime's face on a vital issue."

This public airing of differences can only make people more skeptical about the deal's meaning for Iran and the prospects of sustaining a final agreement. It also suggests that state television and radio, which operate under Khamenei's direct supervision and are the principal source of news for the great majority of Iranians, might not be particularly helpful to Rouhani on the issue.

As for social media, the main question being asked is: whose description of the deal is correct? Some have argued

that Iran loses either way. If the U.S. factsheet is true, many worry that sanctions will not be lifted any time soon, and that significant nonnuclear sanctions will remain indefinitely. In that case, some Iranians believe that the hardliners may have been right to suspect that the negotiations were a trap to force Tehran into a bad deal. Alternatively, if the U.S. factsheet is inaccurate and what the Rouhani team says is true, then how can Iran negotiate when Washington lies about what was agreed? Put another way, if Washington is misinterpreting the deal to its advantage, how can Iran make a long-term commitment with such an unreliable party?

Meanwhile, Khamenei and the commanders of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have remained silent about the Lausanne developments. This lengthy pause suggests to many in Iran that the Supreme Leader's camp is not enthusiastic about the framework, and that they need to study it and gather information before deciding what to say. The delay can only feed concern that Khamenei will ultimately go the same way he did with the Tehran Research Reactor accord proposed in 2009: tepidly endorse the agreement in principle but then turn it down when presented with the full text.

Not surprisingly, public euphoria about the framework seems to have given way to a sense of confusion. Few Iranians may care about the details of what the nuclear program does or does not get to keep, but the issue of sanctions relief resonates deeply with them, and this is the matter on which the Obama and Rouhani descriptions differ most sharply. Having seen their hopes about sanctions dashed so often in the past, the public has much reason to worry that Tehran is once again promising more than the United States will deliver.

CONCLUSION

The usual rule of thumb is that the U.S. government can do little if anything to influence debates in Iran. Yet the nuclear deal and its implications for sanctions relief may be a modest exception. To the extent that Washington and Tehran can describe in similar language what has been agreed and what still needs to be worked out, they can help dispel Iranian public fears that major disagreements persist and that the United States remains untrustworthy. This is a necessary -- though by no means sufficient -- condition for reaching a viable final deal.

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