

Aligning with Rouhani Is Not the Answer

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Articles & Testimony

Given the uncertainties surrounding the Iranian regime's internal struggle, Washington should not pin its hopes on President Rouhani's camp, whose regional strategy appears to converge with that of the hardliners.

The Iranian nuclear negotiations have proven divisive enough within the United States and among the United States and its allies. But the bigger story is the wedge they have exposed between factions in Iran.

The administration of U.S. President Barack Obama and some of its partners in the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) see Iranian President Hassan Rouhani as a critical partner, one with the potential to deliver a long-sought nuclear compromise and a broader rapprochement with the West. Skeptics in the United States and abroad, on the other hand, see Rouhani as little more than an Iranian hard-liner pretending to play nice.

Both views, however, miss the larger drama. There is indeed a fundamental divide within the Iranian regime -- with Rouhani leading one side -- but it has less to do with Iran's nuclear program or regional strategy than with the more basic question of how best to preserve the regime itself.

A CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY

Thanks to the Arab uprisings and the thaw in U.S.-Iranian relations, the West has largely forgotten about Iran's "Green Revolution" of June 2009, during which over 100,000 protesters flooded the streets of Tehran to protest what they saw as the fraudulent reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. But the revolution has not been forgotten in Iran itself. Indeed, the leaders of the Green Movement, Mir Hussein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi, remain in confinement, and hard-liners to this day warn of these so-called secessionists who must be barred from power.

The events of June 2009 represented a crisis of legitimacy for the Iranian regime. The uprising and its aftermath exposed the widening gulf between Iran's progress and the progress of other developing countries, between the

regime's actions and its stated principles, and, most important, between the aspirations of Iranians in 2009 and the aspirations of Iranians in 1979, whose revolution established an anti-Western authoritarian theocracy under the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

The crisis also sharpened a rift among Iranian elites over how best to ensure the regime's survival. One camp, dominated by hard-liners and led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei -- despite his efforts to appear above the factional fray -- wants Iran to return to the values of the 1979 revolution. The other camp, led by Rouhani and former Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, favors an economic, diplomatic, and social opening to the West -- although unaccompanied by political reform -- a la China in the 1970s.

In the years following the suppression of the Green Movement, the pragmatists of the second camp found themselves increasingly aligned with the reformists in their calls for change. Regime leaders watched this coalescing alliance with alarm; after all, such coalitions had played key roles in all three Iranian revolutions of the twentieth century.

To defuse the threat, the regime's leaders allowed the presidency to pass from Ahmadinejad, a hard-liner, to Rouhani, a pragmatist. Although the Iranian public evidently preferred Rouhani to the other candidates, his election was also, in part, an effort by the regime to satiate the public's desire for change while co-opting the second camp, forcing its leaders to attempt to solve the very problems they had decried.

A WIDENING RIFT

Rouhani's election, however, did not patch the rift between the two factions. On economic issues, both Rouhani and the hard-liners have stressed the need for an "economy of resistance," whereby the country reduces its dependence on oil to circumvent international sanctions over its nuclear program. But they differ over how such a policy should work. Rouhani has called for domestic economic reforms and the expansion of economic ties overseas; the hard-liners have urged a return to the autarkic ideals of the revolution. Nevertheless, Rouhani has enjoyed some success on the economic front, mainly through smaller adjustments to fiscal and monetary policy rather than through large-scale reforms. Although he has even secured some support from the country's supreme leader for these efforts, his approach hinges on a loosening of international sanctions that will require a nuclear accord that Khamenei may balk at signing. In the social sphere, Rouhani's campaign pledges to loosen restrictions on Iranian civil liberties have proven even less successful, having fallen prey to hard-line opposition.

The two camps have also clashed over Iran's foreign policy, with the nuclear negotiations serving as the dispute's focal point. Although Khamenei has voiced support for Iranian negotiators, he has at the same time severely restricted their room to bargain. And hard-liners continue to oppose the talks outright. In part, they resent that the negotiations require concessions to the United States, as anti-Americanism remains one of the regime's central ideological pillars. In addition, many fear that a nuclear agreement will empower their pragmatic rivals and open the door to a broader rapprochement with the West -- and thus to the expansion of foreign influence inside Iran.

Rouhani, in response, has argued that foreign policy should be crafted on the basis of strategic interests, rather than on principles and ideals. He has defended bilateral engagement with Washington as no different from that with any other P5+1 state.

Despite their disputes over the negotiations and their implications, however, there is little evidence that the two camps actually diverge on the value of the nuclear program or the security strategy of which it is part. Rouhani has not only downplayed his nuclear concessions but also boasted of his expansion of the nuclear program during the presidential administration of Mohammad Khatami. On Iranian regional policies, the two camps also appear to converge.

WASHINGTON, BE WARY

Viewing this internal struggle from afar, American policymakers might be tempted to align themselves with Rouhani and conceive of the nuclear negotiations not as pitting Iran against the international community but as pitting Western and Iranian negotiators against "hard-liners" on both sides. But Washington should be wary of pinning its hopes on Rouhani's camp, much less on influencing the regime's internal struggle.

It is impossible to know whether a nuclear agreement will empower Rouhani and his allies or prove the end of their usefulness for the regime; although Khamenei has lent qualified support to the country's nuclear negotiators, he appears far less enthusiastic about Rouhani's broader agenda. Rouhani's authority is limited not only by his ability to deliver on his campaign pledges but also by the considerable sway of hard-liners, especially over Iran's regional policies and internal security.

Further, even if Rouhani's stock does rise in the wake of an agreement, it is far from clear that this would benefit the United States. Rouhani's supporters remain committed to the survival of Iran's regime, as well as to a security strategy in the Middle East that is at odds with U.S. interests. Indeed, following a nuclear deal, Washington and its allies may find themselves facing an Iran that is enriched, empowered, and no less committed to regional hegemony.

In light of this, American policymakers should not offer additional concessions on the theory that a nuclear deal will yield ancillary security benefits. Indeed, if the United States and its allies wish to obtain not just a lasting nuclear accord but also a broader shift in Iranian strategic thinking, they will have to persuade the whole regime -- not just one faction of it -- that the status quo is unsustainable. This will require persuading Iranian leaders that failing to reach an agreement is a price too high to pay.

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director of The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the [Foreign Affairs website \(http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142814/michael-singh/a-deal-with-the-devil\)](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142814/michael-singh/a-deal-with-the-devil). ❖

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