

Who Is Hassan Rouhani?

by [Steven Ditto \(/experts/steven-ditto\)](#)

Sep 24, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Steven Ditto \(/experts/steven-ditto\)](#)

Steven Ditto, a 2013 adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute, is an independent Middle East researcher who specializes in law, human rights, and education. He reads French, Arabic, and Farsi and has written extensively on topics related to Islamic law and history, religious freedom and women



Brief Analysis

President Rouhani's track record shows that he is deeply committed to preserving the regime's longstanding interests, and frequently at odds with the principles of international law.

Three months on from his June election victory, there is still a knowledge deficit surrounding Iranian president Hassan Rouhani. On the eve of his first major international trip to the UN General Assembly, this gap has led to vastly different perceptions of his intentions on key issues and his overall posture toward the West and its values. This should not be the case, however. During the past decade alone, Rouhani has authored at least ten books and forty academic articles on politically pertinent issues, totaling over 7,000 pages of open-source Farsi-language material. These writings, along with countless speeches and campaign interviews from his three-decade political career, mean that a clear picture of him is well within reach. Beyond the details of today's speech at the UN, it is crucial that policymakers understand Rouhani's background and rhetoric and how they align with his perceptions of his role as president.

FROM IDEOLOGUE TO "CRISIS MANAGER"

In December 2003, two months into his tenure as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Rouhani wrote the following in an academic article: "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." This quotation encapsulates the overwhelming impression gleaned from Rouhani's history and writings: his identity as a revolutionary ideologue and defender of the Iranian "System." It is the common thread throughout his life, the clearest manifestation of his actions in political office, and the driver of his rhetoric and motivations today.

What separates Rouhani from traditional ideologues, however -- and what fuels perceptions of him as a "reformist" -- is his belief that certain kinds of political and social reform can facilitate the defense, upkeep, and legitimization of the Iranian regime. On multiple occasions, he has tied reformist ideals such as meritocracy, national unity, and minority rights to the regime's "security" and "capability." In a 2000 interview, for example, he stated, "If the bond

between the people and the ruling establishment becomes stronger and more extensive, our capability, power, and national security will increase."

To achieve these objectives, Rouhani is convinced he needs to ease outside pressure on Iran, which means reaching a nuclear deal. In a January 2013 academic article -- his last before the presidential campaign -- he implicitly likened nuclear negotiations with the United States to the resolution that ended the Iran-Iraq War. Regime elites tend to view that 1988 resolution as a necessary but temporary compromise in Iran's revolutionary ideals -- a way of preserving the survival of the "System." As Rouhani put it, "The objectives of public policy in every country are designed so as to control crises related to specific times and transient events, and stand in relation to larger issues." In February, he likewise asserted that the next president should be a "crisis manager...who has the power to negotiate with the world."

This combination of ideological intellectualism -- which sees some reform measures as a strength, not a threat -- and the nuclear crisis has transformed Rouhani's public persona over the past few years and fueled his conciliatory rhetoric with the international community. "We should talk carefully so as not to provoke the enemy, we should not give them any excuses," he stated in 2007 -- a point he has frequently reiterated.

Yet Rouhani's primary identity is as a defender of the Islamic Revolution. In addition to "saving the economy" and "interacting with the world," one of his central campaign pledges was to "revive morality" -- a phrase he uses to connote the renewal of not only religious values, but also national unity under the guardianship of the Supreme Leader. He made this point clear at a July press conference following his election victory: "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 *velayat-e faqih* [the doctrine granting the Supreme Leader his authority]...All problems originate from this point."

NO GRAND RAPPROCHEMENT

In light of this background, there will be no moral, political, or intellectual meeting of minds between Rouhani and the West. In an unusually candid May campaign briefing with Iranian expatriates, he claimed that while he does not wish to see an "increase in tensions" with the United States, he has no desire to see a "decrease" in them either: "Today, we cannot say that we want to eliminate the tension between us and the United States...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, and secondly, its enmity would not be effective."

As this revealing admission demonstrates, Rouhani has not always followed his own advice to "talk carefully." The quote also highlights the most important takeaway from his many speeches, interviews, and writings: the utter incompatibility between his personal history and any notion of allegiance to international law and Western political or moral ideals. The following are some of the most salient examples of this incompatibility:

- Rouhani has expressed support for blatant violations of international law over the past thirty years, including the 1979 U.S. embassy takeover, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1989 fatwa against Salman Rushdie, and the general use of extrajudicial, transnational violence (e.g., in 1987, he declared that Iranian forces had the capacity to "destroy American economic interests around the world"). He has done so both at the time the violations occurred and in the years since.
- Contrary to this year's campaign rhetoric, Rouhani's military and intelligence background includes past violations against the liberties of the Iranian people. As secretary of the Supreme National Security Council in the 1990s, he directed the quelling of peaceful protests, the closure of newspapers, and bans on satellite dishes and open media.
- Following the September 11 attacks against the United States, 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." And in a September 2002 interview with ABC News, he explicitly endorsed suicide bombings against Israeli civilians, even children, saying that Palestinians had "no alternative."

- 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. In an April 2001 academic article, he likewise praised the role of nuclear technology in "ending World War II." And in a 2009 article, he predicted that because of "double standards" in the West's treatment of Israel, there will be an "arms race" that makes "nonproliferation in the Middle East complex and difficult in the future." In addition, the late Morteza Motahhari, a founding member of Rouhani's own political party and a close intellectual and religious mentor, endorsed the theological permissibility of nuclear weapons.

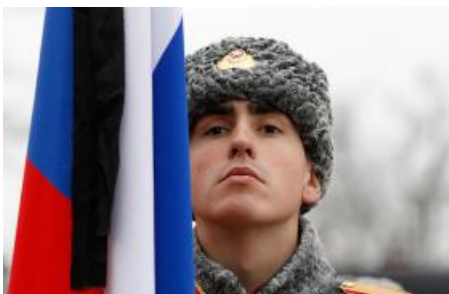
CONCLUSION

Understanding Rouhani's personal beliefs and the context of his rhetoric is more important than poring over the content of any one UN speech. The perception of positive signals in his recent rhetoric has raised the international community's expectations and given hopes for a new era in relations with Iran. Yet it is important to bear in mind his longstanding, deep commitment to the regime's objectives.

That applies to the nuclear issue as well. In a far-reaching June interview, Rouhani described concerns about Iran's nuclear aspirations as a "fabricated crisis" that is "directed by Israel," claiming that the UN Security Council had "lost its credibility." He also declared that talks with the United States must be prefaced by American promises of noninterference in Iranian affairs, recognition of Iran's "nuclear right," and avoidance of "unilateral bullying" against Iran. "If we feel there is goodwill involved," he concluded, "the grounds for talks will be ready." Clearly, this vague path forward is less than satisfying. As Washington and its international partners consider their next steps at the UN meeting and afterward, they should make sure that all nuclear negotiations are based on cold calculation of strategic interests, not positive rhetoric.

Steven Ditto is an independent Middle East analyst and author of the forthcoming Washington Institute Policy Focus Reading Rouhani: The Promise and Peril of Iran's New President. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022



Jay Solomon

[\(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)