

Nuclear Breakthrough Unlikely Under Rouhani

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Brief Analysis

Rouhani may soften the veneer and rhetoric of Tehran's nuclear policy, but there is little reason to expect a change in the regime's objectives.

Contrary to the popular belief that Iranian leaders have long been united on the nuclear program, the issue has in fact been the subject of several vigorous (albeit discreet) debates. After Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became president in 2005, Iranian conservatives argued that nuclear negotiations were tantamount to betrayal of the revolutionary values that lay at the core of the Islamic Republic. Yet pragmatists and reformists cautioned that if Western governments referred Iran's nuclear case to the UN Security Council, it would lead to further confrontation that could prove detrimental to the regime's survival.

To consolidate the conservative base, Ahmadinejad turned the nuclear issue into a lightning rod for factional feuding and -- with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's support -- systematically marginalized his political opponents. His targets included former presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Muhammad Khatami, both key allies of new president-elect Hassan Rouhani, who headed Iran's nuclear negotiating team for years prior to Ahmadinejad's victory.

An interesting twist occurred in 2009, however: Ahmadinejad supported a proposal to send Iran's 20 percent enriched uranium abroad so that it could be fabricated into fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor, a modest confidence-building measure that Khamenei ultimately rejected. After that deal fell apart, Saeed Jalili, the chief nuclear negotiator under Ahmadinejad, shifted his stance to become a partisan of the "resistance" narrative favored by the Supreme Leader. Yet when Jalili ran as a conservative candidate in this year's presidential race, other candidates sharply criticized his resistance approach, with Rouhani offering the clearest alternative: a path of "moderation and justice, not extremism." His surprise victory suggests that Ahmadinejad's once-sidelined predecessors are back at the top of Iran's constellation of power.

IRAN'S "DIPLOMATIC SHEIKH"

Rouhani is a veteran politician and regime insider who, while loyal to the Supreme Leader, keeps close company with Khamenei's main political rival, Rafsanjani. For example, he has served for twenty-two years on the

Expediency Council, an advisory body long chaired by Rafsanjani. And prior to the election, he headed the Center for Strategic Research, a Tehran-based foreign policy think tank that has been formally annexed by the Expediency Council and is well known for its affiliation with Rafsanjani. This is not to say that Rouhani is hostile toward the Supreme Leader: for years, he has been a member of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), where he serves as Khamenei's personally appointed representative. He is also a member of the Assembly of Experts, the body charged with electing and removing the Supreme Leader.

Rouhani is perhaps best known for his role as chief nuclear negotiator during Khatami's presidency, earning the moniker "diplomatic sheikh" for deftly handling the issue during drawn-out negotiations with the E-3 (France, Germany, and Britain) from 2003 to 2005. According to Rouhani's 2011 Persian-language memoir *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy*, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) was responsible for technical oversight and implementation of nuclear facilities prior to 2003 -- that is, the regime had no need to place an official in charge of the nuclear issue until after its undeclared nuclear activities were publicly revealed in 2002. Rouhani explains:

"At the beginning of international tensions and pressure, Iran faced severe internal challenges about what steps to take regarding the negative political crisis surrounding the nuclear issue. In August 2002, the Mujahedin-e Khalq [an Iranian opposition group] held a press conference stating that Iran had secret nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak and was using them to produce an atomic bomb...Faced with this political pressure and propaganda, the Supreme National Security Council had different opinions on how to deal with the issue than the AEOI and the Foreign Ministry. The AEOI believed the issue was not important and would not have serious repercussions for Iran. The Foreign Ministry believed the situation would have severe consequences."

By summer 2003, Iran decided that increased public scrutiny of its nuclear activities required active intervention by the SNSC, then headed by Rouhani. The council was tasked with leading regular interagency meetings and dealing with the politics surrounding the nuclear issue. Meanwhile, Khamenei insisted that Rouhani assume the newly created post of chief nuclear negotiator, where he was entrusted with devising a new framework for nuclear diplomacy, among other duties.

Under Rouhani's stewardship, the SNSC established a pyramidal structure for nuclear decisionmaking, with committees at the director, deputy, and ministerial levels. The council's strategy was simple: to exploit gaps between the United States and Europe, prevent them from referring Iran's nuclear case to the UN Security Council, and simultaneously advance the regime's nuclear fuel cycle capabilities. As Rouhani asserted in a speech to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council in 2004, "While we were talking with the Europeans in Tehran, we were installing equipment in parts of the [uranium conversion] facility at Isfahan, but we still had a long way to go to complete the project. In fact, by creating a calm environment, we were able to complete the work in Isfahan."

LIMITED ABILITY TO SHAPE NUCLEAR STRATEGY

Despite being one of Khamenei's most trusted nuclear advisors, Rouhani has often proven unable to change the Supreme Leader's firm mindset on the issue. According to Rouhani's memoir, "One of the biggest problems in [Iran] is that sometimes the domestic political environment constrains us from taking necessary actions on important international and national issues." In other words, the nuclear decisionmaking process is ineffectual if constrained by the regime's complicated domestic politics and bureaucratic passivity.

These constraints include sharp limitations on the executive branch -- a predicament made clear by Rouhani's account of his attempts to mend Iran's rocky relationship with the United States while rescuing nuclear negotiations from the pressures of domestic "political infighting, propaganda, and the lack of working relationships among Iranian officials." In discussing Iran's voluntary suspension of enrichment activities during the E-3 negotiations in 2003-2005, Rouhani claimed that the regime's lack of diplomatic relations with Washington was a "fundamental

problem" that prevented resolution of the nuclear issue. The Supreme Leader forbade direct negotiations with the United States at the time, and Rouhani had no choice but to obey.

Then, in April 2005 -- four months before Ahmadinejad took office -- Khamenei issued instructions to resume uranium conversion activities at Isfahan, effectively nullifying the suspension Rouhani had negotiated with the E-3 under the November 2004 Paris Agreement. Rouhani tried to convince the Supreme Leader that the consequences of breaking suspension would be too great, but Khamenei dismissed his warning. "The Supreme Leader decided to launch the facility because it was not clear who the next president would be," Rouhani wrote, "and perhaps because it would be difficult during the next administration to break the suspension."

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM IRAN'S NUCLEAR POLICY UNDER ROUHANI

The new president-elect's background on the issue suggests two major themes for Iran's nuclear policy going forward. First, reducing current economic sanctions and preventing new ones will be a central tenet of the Rouhani administration. To achieve that goal, Tehran will seek to create a semblance of "openness" and "greater transparency." At his first press conference as president-elect, Rouhani claimed that "the era of [enrichment] suspension is gone," but his writings also contend that Iran's best option is to pursue confidence-building measures and reassure the international community that the nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes and should be removed from the UN Security Council's agenda.

Second, Rouhani will abandon Ahmadinejad's "look to the East" approach to nuclear diplomacy, focusing instead on increasing interaction with the United States, E-3, and others. He might also seek a detente with Saudi Arabia in order to thaw Iran's relations with neighboring Persian Gulf states. Although this may prove difficult given Iran's role in the Syrian crisis, Rouhani's keenness to build constructive ties and curtail regional opposition to Iran will make the Gulf states a key priority of his foreign policy.

Whether Rouhani can maneuver through Iran's domestic political minefield to achieve his campaign promises is an open question. Yet barring a change in Khamenei's nuclear mindset, it is unlikely that Rouhani -- "diplomatic sheikh" or not -- will be able to deliver a deal that ends the ongoing nuclear drama.

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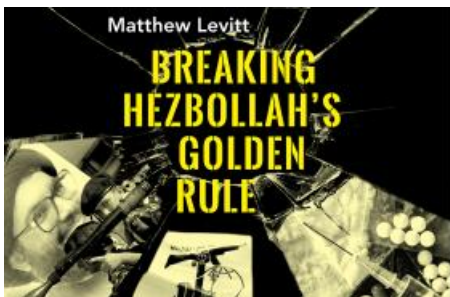
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