

# Rouhani's Nuclear Views: An Open Book?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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## The president-elect's recent writings provide a basis for judging how he will approach the nuclear issue.

Iranian president-elect Hassan Rouhani has written at least seven books and fifty articles. His works are not light reading -- for instance, his 2010 book *National Security and Iran's Economic System* weighs in at 860 pages, while his February article "Khomeini's Discourse Concerning National Security and Foreign Policy" is 60 pages long and uses terms not frequently heard from U.S. presidents, such as "Foucauldian Critical Dialogue Analysis." Perhaps the most important of his works, however, is the thousand-page 2011 study *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy*, a Persian-language tome that provides ample fodder for assessing his posture on Tehran's nuclear program.

## LONG EXPERIENCE WITH THE NUCLEAR FILE

Rouhani describes being actively involved on the nuclear issue for at least twenty-four years -- in other words, for most of his professional life. This is not a minor issue for him; it has been central to his career, and he has been an important figure in Iran's nuclear program for decades.

According to him, when Tehran decided to restart its nuclear power program in the mid-1980s, it was determined from the get-go to control the full fuel cycle, which would give it the capability to produce highly enriched uranium. While his 2011 book never spells out in detail why the regime wants a robust nuclear program, he repeatedly mentions nuclear technology's importance to the nation -- in other words, he does not emphasize an economic rationale.

Rouhani describes a far-reaching effort to obtain a broad range of nuclear technology from foreign sources. In 1988/89, for instance, he visited China in a vain effort to persuade Beijing to build a 300-megawatt nuclear power plant in Iran, and to build a uranium enrichment facility as part of a full nuclear fuel cycle. He also joined then-Majlis speaker Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in a June 1989 trip to Moscow to negotiate Soviet completion of the Bushehr

plant and construction of an enrichment facility. According to him, both China and the USSR told the visitors that although Iran had the right to enrich uranium, they would not sell Tehran the necessary technology. He also writes that during Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto's first term (1988-1990), Islamabad refused to provide such technology, implying that Iran asked for it.

Rouhani's account of enrichment technology is particularly interesting, in part because it does not align perfectly with what others have written. After being turned down by China, Russia, and Pakistan, he writes, Iran approached a German company to buy centrifuge equipment. The company referred them to a Swiss agent, and through the services of a "Mr. Taher" -- an apparent reference to B. S. A. Tahir, a Dubai-based member of the proliferation network of Pakistani scientist A. Q. Khan -- Iran bought some centrifuges it believed were new but which were in fact secondhand. Rouhani noted that during Rafsanjani's presidency, Iran bought "several hundred centrifuges in different parts" -- a lot more than others have described -- but lacked the technical expertise to get them to work. He adds that an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) investigation later showed these used centrifuges to be of Pakistani origin. If this account is accurate, it is interesting that Rouhani would reveal such information.

## CONSENSUS-BUILDER

**R**ouhani's 2011 book also goes into mind-numbing detail about nuclear negotiations. A constant theme is that during his tenure, Iran's position was carefully worked out through consultations with all the important power centers. His concluding remarks about the impasse that emerged after he left office in 2005 draw a clear contrast between his consensus-building approach and what followed, which he implies was slapdash and not well thought out. He also emphasizes how much effort went into identifying points of convergence between the Iranian and international positions.

This focus on consensus fits well with Rouhani's campaign rhetoric. Assuming he truly wants to construct a broad consensus on the nuclear file, he will have to address the concerns of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and key constituencies in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. If those two players are not on board, they will have many ways to sabotage any agreement Rouhani might reach. The need to secure their buy-in will certainly complicate efforts to reach an agreement acceptable to the United States, Europe, Israel, and the Gulf Arab states, though there is a (small) silver lining to this cloud: a broadly supported agreement is more likely to be durably implemented.

Yet Rouhani is not simply a passive actor waiting for consensus to emerge. For example, his book acknowledges that the November 2004 Paris Agreement -- in which Tehran pledged to temporarily suspend its uranium enrichment efforts -- crossed most of Khamenei's redlines for an unacceptable deal. Without going into details about Khamenei's objections, the book describes how the Supreme Leader was unhappy with the agreement and saw it as a mistake, but nevertheless allowed it go forward based on the endorsements Rouhani had marshaled for it. It will be very interesting to see if he can once again persuade Khamenei to proceed with a deal he dislikes.

## WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT MODEST STEPS

**R**ouhani's book trumpeted the Paris Agreement as a success for Iran on several fronts:

- Iran gained some economic benefits. After languishing for ten years, Tehran's application to join the World Trade Organization began to advance in 2005 with U.S. and European support. Rouhani also asserts that Iran was on track to reach a Trade Cooperation Agreement with the EU, which would have been a major economic coup.
- Iran did not agree to end enrichment -- in the words of the agreement, Tehran "decided, on a voluntary basis, to continue and extend its suspension." In return, Britain, France, and Germany recognized that the suspension was "a voluntary confidence-building measure and not a legal obligation."
- Iran kept the nuclear impasse off the UN Security Council's agenda despite insistent U.S. pressure, while also

making headway in resolving its problems with the IAEA. Indeed, the November 29, 2004, IAEA Board of Governors resolution, adopted soon after the Paris Agreement, noted that "good progress" had been made since October 2003. It mentioned only two "outstanding issues," namely, "the origin of the contamination [i.e., the presence of low- and high-enriched uranium particles at various locations] and the extent of Iran's centrifuge programme." The board also reiterated the need for full implementation of the Additional Protocol as pledged by Iran. At the time, Tehran seemed well on track to resolving these concerns, in part because the agency was prepared to give it a pass on many other open issues. The situation looked bleak for the United States and its allies -- they did not want to see Iran resume enrichment, but they may not have had much international support for that position if Iran had indeed been able to satisfactorily answer the IAEA's remaining questions.

- Iran was able to continue improving its nuclear facilities. Rouhani's 2011 book expanded on this theme, which he set out in a much-quoted 2004 defense of his record: "While we were talking with the Europeans in Tehran, we were installing equipment in parts of the facility in Isfahan. In fact, by creating a calm environment, we were able to complete the work in Isfahan."

In short, Rouhani presents a good case that his approach -- cooperation with the IAEA and negotiations with the three main European powers -- was the best way for Iran to continue advancing its nuclear program. Such a policy would be more difficult to implement today given the suspicions created by Iran's stonewalling and the additional information that has emerged about the regime's activities at the time. But Tehran could probably still obtain an agreement that leaves it with robust nuclear capabilities, so long as it is prepared to be more transparent and accept some modest limitations. In other words, a more accommodating Iran might reach a deal that leaves many in the United States (and more in the Gulf and Israel) very uncomfortable. The question is whether the approach that Rouhani defends vigorously in his 2011 book will be the one Iran takes going forward.

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