

# Perils and Promise of U.S.-Iranian Negotiations

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Brief Analysis

**W**ith mounting international pressure to force Iran to halt its nuclear program, internal demands for Tehran to begin direct negotiations with the United States are increasing. On April 20, Hassan Rowhani, director of the Expediency Council's Center for Strategic Research and a former secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, criticized the Islamic Republic's traditional pessimism and mistrust of Western countries. He said that at strenuous times, such as the hostage crisis or the Iran-Iraq war, Iranians have been unable to use small windows of opportunity presented to them. He noted that while Iranian officials have always claimed they frown upon negotiations with the West, in reality they reluctantly negotiate in the end.

### Impact of Negotiations on Iranian Politics

From a political and sociological standpoint, having diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations with the United States is a forbidden tree for the Iranian people. Eating from the forbidden tree would lead to a fall from Eden into harsh reality. Most Iranian people will certainly support a U.S.-Iran relationship. Even many former revolutionaries, including numerous high-ranking clerics and political figures inside the government, believe that the hostage taking and occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979 was, if not a mistake, then an action that was only justifiable within the chaotic revolutionary period. They believe that this wound should not have been allowed to fester; it should have been resolved in the 1980s. While many indirect and concealed attempts by Iranian officials to seek diplomatic ways of resuming a relationship with Washington have failed, social frustration and enthusiasm in Iran for such a relationship have never slacked. Many Iranians have even exaggerate the value of such a relationship, believing that it would miraculously resolve all of Iran's political, economic, and cultural problems.

On the other hand, conspiracy is the dominant mode of political thought in Iran. Such widely circulated theories are used to explain Iran's victories and defeats since the constitutional revolution a century ago. Due to a weak of civil society and a lack of political parties, as well as a historically deep rooted autocratic political structure and a strong suspicion of the presence of foreign superpowers in the course of the modernization process in Iran, there exists a powerful illusion and severe overestimation about the extent to which foreigners had a role in shaping Iranian politics.

Negotiations between the United States and Iran under current circumstances run the risk of negatively affecting the U.S. image in Iran and hampering the democratic process there. If Washington ignores the autocratic nature of the

Iranian regime and sits at the negotiating table to discuss its concerns with Iranian officials -- the nuclear program, financial support for terrorism, and Iran's opposition to the Middle East peace process -- this would create an image of U.S. opportunism in Iran. It would portray the United States as a nation that does not truly care about democratic principles, but that caters only to its own interests. The Iranian people will wonder why, if the United States has no fundamental problem negotiating with the current regime, Washington did not do this decades ago, rather than let the Iranian people pay the hefty price of economic sanctions and political isolation. They will ask what has changed about the regime, why it is that the United States would find it favorable to negotiate with a more radical, more belligerent regime.

The vast spectrum of opposition groups inside Iran hope that they can play a positive and effective role after Ahmadinezhad's decline and the decline of ideology of the Islamic Republic, in essence a beginning of a new era in Iran. The American attempt to approach the current regime and launch negotiations with one of the "axis of evil" powers could be considered as a disruption of the Iranians path to democracy and a move to save the regime from collapse. Constructive negotiations between the Islamic Republic and the United States could be regarded as recognition of the Iranian regime after more than twenty years and a would be a great help to its survival in its current form.

It would be particularly problematic to begin negotiations with Iran in the midst of the Ahmadinezhad government's crackdown on dissent. That government has been hitting universities particularly hard . In the latest outrage, in late April the prominent Canadian-Iranian philosophy professor Ramin Jahanbegloo was arrested at the Tehran airport while trying to leave the country. Neither the Iranian media nor his immediate family were permitted to announce his capture. After the publication of this news on the BBC and Persian websites, Iranian officials confirmed that he is in the Evin prison (the notorious prison for political dissidents) and that he is accused of spying against the regime and uniting the opposition.

On the other hand, the hardliners know that crossing the red line and beginning negotiations with the United States could lead to unpredictable or unpleasant results for their government. Last March, in his speech to the members of the Assembly of Experts, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Hossein Khamenei stated that if Iran retreats from its right to have nuclear energy today, Americans will pick another issue to fight about tomorrow. Khamenei, who admitted last month that Iran is ready for negotiations with the United States, has to worry what such negotiations will do for his government's pretensions to be the leader of global Islamic anti-Americanism.

#### Circumstances of Negotiations

The use of negotiations as an effective part of diplomacy is neither good nor bad in itself; that depends on the give and take that happens as a result. If the United States decides that negotiations are worthwhile despite all the risks of a negative impact on the Iranian reform movement, there are at least several ways in which Washington could enhance the prospects for a positive outcome.

There is a risk that if the United States chooses to negotiate with Iran about the nuclear program, it could be seen as an admission that the nuclear threat is not the global threat that American officials claim, but rather just a threat to U.S. hegemony in the region. In fact, most American concerns about Iran are indeed global, and Americans would undercut their position by dealing unilaterally with Iran. With this in mind, it would seem that any negotiations should take place with the participation of other world powers, especially Russia, the European Union, and even China.

Who is chosen to be the top Iranian negotiator would be critical. This person would become a sort of icon in Iran. If a figure well known for corruption or manipulation took responsibility, the Iranian mistrust of the U.S. would only intensify. Just as candidates for ambassadorship must get the approval from the host country before they assume

their posts, Washington should insist on being consulted about who Iran selects as its negotiator.

In the case of any negotiations between the United States and Iran, the Islamic Republic would announce that the Iranian model for an anti-Western government has succeeded and forced the great power of world to recognize Islamic fundamentalism in its governmental form. Furthermore, Tehran would argue that negotiations are a sign of U.S. weakness in Iraq and persuasive evidence that Iraq war was a wrong decision. The Iranian regime would go on to blame the United States as the chief problem in the Islamic world and make it responsible for all world events, even issues of regional poverty. Washington should anticipate such Iranian propaganda and to make high-profile efforts to put out its own interpretation, emphasizing that Khamenei had to give up his longstanding opposition to negotiations with the United States because Iran was too weak to stand up to concerted international pressure.

Mehdi Khalaji is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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