

No New Dawn Likely in US-Iran Relations

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, SEP 28 2013

Iran has a new president, Hassan Rouhani. He speaks eloquently about wanting a rapprochement with the West and of a desire to refrain from developing a nuclear weapons programme. The Obama administration has responded by opening the first serious high level diplomatic engagement with Iran since 1979. The two leaders have even spoken by phone. But, the odds are that this is a waste of time despite Rouhani's insistence that the environment for negotiations is 'quite different' from that of the past.

Any official representative of the Iranian regime cannot be trusted. The regime has frequently used brinkmanship tactics over the nuclear issue for its own benefit. This takes the familiar form of Iran coming to the table when it feels the squeeze of negative attention and/or sanctions. After a period of 'diplomacy' Iran then retreats from the talks and goes back to the business of being a pariah state. Meanwhile, an unbroken pursuit of attaining mastery over the nuclear cycle goes on. The goal always has been for Iran to have a nuclear option due to its precarious regional situation in which it is under threat from all directions, including internal. This pattern has repeated itself so often in the last decade that there is no reason to believe Rouhani this time.

If anything, the logic driving Iran's quest for a nuclear deterrent is more stark than ever in the face of the most serious threats of military intervention yet from Israel and a dying domestic economy. At the same time, heavy and draconian sanctions placed on Iran over recent years are biting hard on the Iranian people and the regime. There are two routes out of that quagmire. Dropping the entire nuclear programme, or actually completing a working Iranian deterrent. Both developments would change Iran's fortunes, and can be summarised in two scenarios as follows.

Firstly: Iran experts know that an Iranian president holds little real power. The Supreme Leader, Ali Khomeini, who really calls the shots in Iran, has changed his mind on Iran's stance vis-à-vis the West and has marshalled Rouhani to communicate intentions for a new dawn for Iran and its place in the international community. Thereby giving the Iranian people a taste of real change in Iran, and admitting defeat to western sanctions. This scenario is too good to be true at this stage, and even if it were a genuine occurrence, few would believe it. For those reasons, a climate of deep suspicion would eventually poison diplomatic progress.

Secondly: The Supreme Leader has capitalised on the election of a more 'Western-friendly' President (albeit a regime approved candidate and insider) to take the heat off Iran. Whilst, in the background the same old policies are pursued as the powerless president and his ministers talk overseas and make grand statements of change. This is most certainly the reality, and reflects Iran's behaviour to date. After all, the bargaining position of Rouhani has been to insist that Iran maintains independent nuclear facilities, with a vague promise of being open to IAEA inspections. This is no different to the positions Iran took in prior negotiations. It does not defuse the intense tensions within Israel, nor defuse suspicions that Iran has built hidden nuclear weapons research facilities. No amount of words, or actions, from the new Iranian president will convince the Israelis that Iran is no longer an existential threat to their national security. And the biggest security problem Iran has is with Israel, not the US.

The Obama administration is aware of these factors, and is at the table hoping that Iran has been squeezed so hard by sanctions that it has become desperate for an end to its misery. The allure of being able to proclaim that 'sanctions worked' is too great for Obama to pass up. For Iran, satiating the US is a way to pressure the Israelis to hold fire while they (presumably) continue to complete their own nuclear deterrent.

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Despite the displays of public optimism, it is likely that neither side expects much in the way of tangible results. Iran can never be seen to bow to US pressure. To do so would be a death blow to the spirit of the revolution. It would be the beginning of the end for the regime, politically, in Iran. And, the US has proven steadfast in pursuing a policy that forbids Iran to have the capability to build a bomb. There has been no indication of any material softening of that policy. Hence, the inevitable outcome will likely be a brief *détente*, followed by the resumption of the zero-sum game that has come to characterise the nuclear stand-off for the last decade.

The bottom line is this. The reason Iran is in the situation it is in (ever worsening sanctions, insecurity, and isolation) is because of the nature of the regime and the regime's policies. It is a miracle that it survived over the last five years considering the swell of popular uprisings in the region, and anti-regime momentum inside Iran. Iran is a nation under siege by design. That is exactly what the Islamic Republic of Iran's founding father wanted. By declaring that the West was evil and Iran was (essentially) an opposing force, Ruhollah Khomeini fated the Iranian people to a life in the shadows.

The only way Iran can come out of that shadow is to change its political system. And, that must be done by the Iranians themselves. Not by Israeli bombs or a Western regime change effort. As long as the regime exists, the Iranian people will suffer one way or another. No change in presidency, or change in rhetoric will change the reality underneath. It will be impossible for real change to occur in Iran, on any substantive subject, as long as the stale apparatus that grabbed power soaked in blood in 1979 remains in place. Even if change is promised, the Islamic Republic of Iran is not a trustworthy actor (and never has been), and cannot be taken at its word, not now, not ever.

When a representative of the people of Iran – not the clerical dictatorship – speaks to the world about wanting meaningful change it will be worth listening to. Until then, with regret, it is likely that Hassan Rouhani is either a wolf in sheep's clothing or a dupe.

About the author:

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