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The Rouhani Presidency: A kinder, gentler Islamic Republic?

The presidency of Hassan Rouhani has been greeted with assertions ranging from cautious optimism to euphoric anticipations of an unfolding rapprochement. President Rouhani has been at times described as a reformer, a pragmatist and by his critics as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing.” Although it is often suggested that President Rouhani is under significant pressure from hardline elements at home, the Islamic Republic appears to have established a consensus on its core security concerns. That consensus may prove fragile, and subject to internal censure, but the notion that Rouhani is under political stress is overstated.

Despite its soften rhetoric, we can count on the new Iranian regime to continue asserting its nuclear “rights” and press its advantages in a contested Middle East. The Islamic Republic will remain an important backer of the Assad Dynasty, a benefactor of Hezbollah and a supporter of Palestinian rejectionist groups. It will persist with its repressive tactics and deny its populace their fundamental human rights. It is also a government that will seek a negotiated settlement on the nuclear issue and will strive to test the limits of the great powers’ prohibitions.

Who is Hassan Rouhani?

Hassan Rouhani is a long-time regime insider with a deep commitment to the Islamic Republic and its nuclear aspirations. Unlike many of the Iran’s previous leaders, it is possible to develop an understanding of Rouhani’s thinking through his own published books, most notably his account of his time as Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator.

Historians often suggest that Iran’s clerical regime resurrected the Shah’s atomic infrastructure after Iraq invaded the country in 1980. In this telling, deterrence and self-reliance are at the core of Iranian nuclear calculus. But Rouhani says the revolutionaries’ attraction to nuclear science actually began when they were still lingering in exile. In 1979, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his disciples appeared certain to assume power, an Iranian scientific delegation journeyed to Paris and implored the aging mullah to scrap the nuclear program, which was

exorbitant and inefficient. The cagy Khomeini ignored such pleas. A year before Saddam Hussein's armies attacked Iran, Khomeini had decided to preserve his nuclear inheritance.

During the initial decade of the Islamic Republic, the regime's preoccupation with consolidating power and prosecuting its war with Iraq eclipsed other priorities. Still, Rouhani describes a determined effort to secure nuclear technologies from abroad and complete the fuel cycle—an essential precursor to development of nuclear arms. Those efforts were redoubled during Ali Akbar Rafsanjani's presidency in the early 1990s and were sustained by the reformist president Muhammad Khatami. Indeed, Rouhani is at pains to disentangle nuclear policy from Iran's contentious politics, insisting that all governments share credit for the program's progress.

Rouhani spent much of his tenure negotiating with the European powers—Britain, France and Germany—over what kind of nuclear program Iran was allowed to have. The signature event of his time as a negotiator was his country's voluntary suspension of its program in 2004. Those were heady days in the Middle East, with America's shock-and-awe campaign in Iraq intimidating other recalcitrant regimes, such as Iran, into accommodation. "No one thought that Saddam's regime would fall in three weeks," Rouhani recalls. "The military leadership had anticipated that Saddam would not fall easily and that America would have to fight the Iraqi army for at least six months to a year before reaching Saddam's palace." Yet, the proximity of American guns behooved the theocracy to act with caution.

Whatever political backing Rouhani has among Iran's reformers, he is not one of them; political freedom has rarely been a priority for him. During the late 1990s, when Khatami and his allies were seeking to expand individual rights and strengthen Iran's anemic civil society, Rouhani was indifferent to their efforts. Still, unlike his militant predecessor, he belongs to the more tempered wing of the theocracy that sees the nuclear debate in a larger context of Iran's international relations. In the recent presidential race, Rouhani stressed the importance of the economy—in particular Iran's declining standard of living.

Rouhani's case is not without its contradictions. He insists that Iran can expand its nuclear program while reclaiming its commercial contracts, even though today Iran stands in violation of numerous U.N. Security Council resolutions and cannot reenter the global economy until it meets U.N. demands. Tone and style matter, but what awaits President Rouhani is the hard trade-off of dispensing with critical aspects of the program in exchange for relief from sanctions. It needs to be stressed that the United States is entering these negotiations with important advantages. Iran's economy is railing and its population is disaffected. This is a time for Washington to negotiate a maximalist deal and not settled for Iranian half-measures and half-steps.

Who is in charge?

Although much of the focus since the Iranian presidential election has been on Rouhani and his thoughtful and urbane Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif, the critical decisions will be made in the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). The composition of that body and its newly installed leadership tells us more about the direction that Iran is going to take than Rouhani and Zarif's speeches, press briefings and tweets.

The SNSC is increasingly being populated by a cohort of conservatives who spent much of their careers in the security services and the military. The head of the SNSC today is Ali Shamkhani, a founding member of the Revolutionary Guards and an official long involved in Iran's nuclear

procurement efforts. Shamkhani has chosen as his deputy a shadowy Revolutionary Guard officer, Ali Hussein-Tash, who has long been involved in Iran's nuclear deliberations. The essence of these new leaders worldview is that since September 2001, Iran has a unique opportunity to emerge as the preeminent state of the region. However, over the past eight years, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's unwise provocations and his unnecessarily hostile rhetoric has paradoxically thwarted those ambitions. They argue that the only way for the Islamic Republic to reach its desired status is to present itself as a more reasonable actor while increasing its power. Such an Iran would have to impose some limits on the expressions of its influence, accede to certain global norms, and be prepared to negotiate mutually acceptable compacts with its adversaries.

It is important to stress that despite their interest in diplomacy and embrace of a more tempered language, the new cast of characters in charge of the SNSC perceive that Iran must claim its hegemonic role. Given the displacement of Iran's historic enemies in Afghanistan and Iraq, they sense that it is a propitious time for the Islamic Republic to claim the mantle of regional leadership. Iran has finally been offered a rare historical opportunity to emerge as the predominant power of the Persian Gulf region and a pivotal state in the Middle East. Whether they are correct in their assessments of regional trends, the salient point is that such perceptions condition their approach to international politics.

The newly empowered conservatives at the helm also believe that to enhance its influence Iran needs a nuclear capability. As the newly-appointed deputy head of the SNSC, Hussein-Tash once noted, "The nuclear program is an opportunity for us to make endeavors to acquire a strategic position and consolidate our national identity." But they also believe in a measure of restraint. As Iran plots its nuclear strategy, they recognize the importance of offering confidence-building measures to a skeptical international community. All this is not to suggest that Iran is inclined to suspend the program or relinquish its critical components, but they are more open to dialogue. Moreover, they stress that a reasonable Iran can assuage U.S. concerns about its nuclear development without having to abandon the program.

At the core, all disarmament agreements call upon a state to forgo a certain degree of sovereignty in exchange for enhanced security. Once a state renounces its weapons of mass destruction program it can be assured of support from the international community should it be threatened by another state possessing such arms. This implied trade-off has no value for Iran's rulers. The prolonged war with Iraq conditions their worldview and behavior. Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iran has reinforced Iran's suspicions of the international community. For many of the Islamic Republic's leaders, the only way to safeguard Iran's interests is to develop an independent nuclear deterrent.

Hovering over all this is Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The Supreme Leader's instincts would be to support the reactionary elements in their call for defiance and pursuit of the bomb. But in his role as the guardian of state, he must consider the nuclear program in the context of Iran's larger concerns. In the recent months, he has opted for an approach that takes into account his competing mandates. On the one hand, he has pressed for acceleration of Iran's program and construction of an advanced nuclear infrastructure. Yet, he has also conceded the need for negotiations and pressed the state toward a degree of restraint. Khamenei hopes that his new president can somehow square the many circles that confront him, and somehow make the Iranian nuclear program more acceptable to the international community. He will be cautiously

assessing Rouhani's diplomacy, ready to impose the necessary restraints should the new team be prone to compromise Iran's core concerns.

In assessing a state's nuclear path, it is important to note that its motivations cannot be exclusively examined within the context of its national interests and security considerations. Whatever strategic benefits such weapons offer a state, they are certainly a source of national prestige and parochial benefits to various bureaucracies and politicians. As such constituencies emerge, a state can cross the nuclear threshold even if the initial strategic factors that provoked the program are no longer salient. The emergence of bureaucracies can generate its own proliferation momentum, empowering those seeking a nuclear breakout. As time passes, the pragmatic voices calling for hedging are likely to be marginalized and lose their influence within the regime.