

The Barriers to Iranian-American Rapprochement: Inside Iran and the US

PART I

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Relations between Iran and the United States appear to be thawing. Within the Iranian political establishment, President Hassan Rouhani and his cabinet were endorsed as negotiators and individuals with a history of negotiating with the Americans on behalf of Tehran. Rouhani himself had negotiated a secret arms deal with the Reagan Administration during the Iran-Iraq War whereas Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif has had many meetings with US officials, hosting people like Joseph Biden in his US residence, when he was the Iranian ambassador to the United Nations in New York City...

Publicly dealing with Washington is no longer a taboo for Iranian officials anymore. An interim nuclear deal was agreed upon in the Swiss city of Geneva between the Iranian government and Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United States (the «Permanent/P 5+1» or «EU3+3») on November 24, 2013. The agreement was put into implementation on January 20, 2014. The resumption of direct flights between Iran and the US and the establishment of a joint chamber of commerce between the US and Iran have also been reportedly discussed by Secretary of State John Kerry and Zarif at the bilateral level. The Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Jarida* has even suspiciously reported on December 2, 2013 that President Barack Obama wants to visit Iran in 2014.

There are those that oppose a negotiated outcome between Tehran and Washington for various reasons. The fact that Tehran and Washington have been foils for one another for more than three decades puts psychological impediments into place. Inside both countries there are also internal divisions about the negotiations and internationally there are fears of a rapprochement by those that want to protect their interests by insuring hostilities are maintained. It will take almost another year before a proper appraisal can be made.

Domestic Differences in Iran

There are still divisions remaining in Iran from the period of presidential election protests that erupted in 2009, which have been dubbed the «Green Wave». Mohammed Khatami, Iran's former so-called reformist president, was not even allowed to go to South Africa representing Iran at the late Nelson Mandela's funeral due to a travel ban placed on him by Iranian authorities. While there are political divisions inside Tehran, there is also a political consensus among the Iranian political establishment about ending the US-led economic sanctions targeting the country's economy.

Many members of the current government are not newcomers either and in effect represent a political continuance. Members of the current government are actually veteran officials

that have either served in the last administration or in prior governments or state positions and institutions as officials. Additionally, the Iranian technocrats involved in the nuclear negotiations, including Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi the chief negotiator, are all career civil servants that have been members of the last administration. In summary, it is due to an Iranian consensus that emerged before Hassan Rouhani's election that the groundwork for the interim nuclear agreement in November 2013 was established through silent negotiations during the end of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's term.

Despite the existence of common agreements amongst the political cliques in Tehran, there are those within the political establishment that are ultimately opposed to Rouhani either due to personal, political, or ideological differences. Moreover, while Rouhani was generally praised for breaking the ice with the US and Western European governments while in New York City, tensions began to surface in Tehran. Albeit the majority of the Iranian population welcomed President Rouhani's diplomatic actions, when Rouhani returned to Tehran the hardliners had organized a small protest against him that involved the throwing of eggs at his motorcade in a gesture of disapproval for his conversation with Barack Obama.

Though the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp would commend President Rouhani, Major-General Jafari would assert that the telephone conversation that Rouhani had with his American counterpart was unnecessary and that it should not have occurred until the US government demonstrated it was taking concrete steps to end its hostilities with Tehran. In other words, what the commander of the Revolutionary Guards was saying is that the US government should have not been given any diplomatic rewards in the field of public relations without Washington demonstrating that it was serious about doing business with Tehran.

Among the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and the political hardliners there are fears that the nuclear deal will lead to an even broader deal and a normalization of relations with the United States that could potentially open up the door for alterations in the political structure of Iran and give the undesirables among the so-called «reformists» an upper hand. Others fear that the role of the Guards Corp could be marginalized. While outsiders may be astonished at the Revolutionary Guard Corp's level of activity in political affairs, which some would term as outright interference in civilian affairs, it has to be taken into account that the Guard Corp is the branch of the Iranian military that, like it or not, holds a special mandate and place in the post-1979 polity of Iran as the protector of the Iranian Revolution. This mandate goes beyond the mission of just protecting Iran. The Guards are designed to protect the political system.

Other criticisms against Rouhani are aimed at the continuation of neoliberal economics that his administration represents. Although neoliberal capitalism and finance is incompatible with Islam, the neoliberal privatization of national infrastructure, emphasis on foreign investment, erosion of the public sector, curbing of social welfare programs, and cuts to state subsidies are economic policies that are widely supported across the Iranian political establishment by reformist and conservatives alike. A high priority has been set on injecting foreign investment into the Iranian economy and while Iranian elites talk about an alternative indigenous model to the so-called West, they are moving towards a total replication of it in economic terms. Even Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government, which initially tried to redistribute wealth in Iranian society, embraced the neoliberal paradigm by the time his second term started.

The Influence of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

The number of former Revolutionary Guard commanders that have become cabinet ministers has dropped under Rouhani and it is believed that there are some tensions between him and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Rouhani has also reduced the budget for the Basij, which is essentially a Revolutionary Guard reservist paramilitary force. He may be working to steadily reduce the influence of the Revolutionary Guards in Iranian politics.

During the presidency of Ahmadinejad the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's influence in Iranian politics grew, particularly after the protests that erupted about the 2009 elections when security and intelligence became a greater priority in Tehran. When the influence of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps is discussed, it should be cautioned that there are subtle and deliberately orchestrated attempts to misrepresent and grossly distort the role of the Revolutionary Guards by individuals, media outlets, think-tanks, and foundations such as the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, the American Enterprise Institute, the Brookings Institute, and the Zionist-promoting *Middle East Quarterly*. What is asserted by such groups about the Guard Corps needs to be analyzed with a grain of salt. According to these sources, there is a battle between a coalition that includes Rouhani, reformists, and the old guard of the post-1979 political establishment against the Revolutionary Guard and the nouveau riche class, which has become wealthy and well-to-do with the ascendancy of the Revolutionary Guard Corps and its former members in the political arena. These same sources claim that the arrest of the Iranian billionaire Babak Zanjani is linked to this behind the scenes battle in Tehran.

Babak Zanjani is linked to the Halkbank Scandal in Turkey and was one of the individuals asked by Ahmadinejad's government to find ways of circumventing the US and EU sanctions against Iran and given access to billions of dollars in Iranian government funds. He has been charged with embezzling two billion US dollars from the Iranian government. His arrest could actually be on the account of the fact that his associates and he were pocketing too much money for their services in circumventing the US-led economic sanctions.

Although there are legitimate grievances about the Revolutionary Guards and the ascendancy of retired Guard officers in Iranian politics, it has to be remembered that the Revolutionary Guard has been one of the main targets of the US in its efforts to crush Iranian opposition to Washington's edicts. This is why the US designated the Iranian Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organization. Moreover, the narratives drawn by those that deliberately misrepresent the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, as a means of promoting the aggressive US and Israeli policies against Iran, simplistically try to paint the entire Revolutionary Guard with one brush, as if all its past and present members share the same political views and harmoniously coordinate in the political arena. Not all the Guards, former and present, are hardliners or conservatives as has been portrayed. Some are reformists, like Education Minister Ali Asghar Fani. The support of the Guard Corp was also divided during the 2013 presidential election between different candidates and during the 2009 election and prior ones.

During Ahmadinejad's tenure the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp's economic strength was expanded with many contracts and tasks being given to the Revolutionary Guard's Khatam construction and engineering firm. These projects ranged from the construction of infrastructure and work in the petrochemicals sector to being awarded the contract to develop the natural gas field of South Pars, the largest known natural gas reserve in the world. Brigadier-General Rostam Ghasemi, the chair of the Revolutionary Guard's Khatam,

was even nominated and selected with the approval of the Iranian Parliament by Ahmadinejad to become his last petroleum minister in 2011. Ghasemi would leave his military post and become a civilian, but he would later be appointed as an adviser to Hussein Dehghan, Rouhani's defence minister.

While there is absolutely nothing wrong with critically analyzing the awarding of contracts to Khatam or any corporations tied to any military, it has to be acknowledged that military forces in the US and all over the world have been involved in major business ventures and infrastructure and development projects. The Pentagon is the largest employer in the United States. Likewise the armed forces of countries such as Canada, France, and the United Kingdom are deeply tied to big business, major employers, and important sources of research and development. Yet, the Revolutionary Guard in Iran is singled out for special consideration by the mainstream media and authors in North America and places hostile to Iran.

Political Friction in Tehran

There were stern and reserved statements released in November 2013 by commanders of the Revolutionary Guards days before an interim agreement was reached between the Iranian government and the P5+1 in Switzerland. The statements assured that Iran's ideology would not change and that Iran would not bow down to foreign powers. At the time, understanding that Ayatollah Khamenei had given Rouhani's government the green light, the hardliners stayed relatively silent in a state of self-restraint.

Two months earlier, all the political nuances inside Iran were apparent through the media circus that began in September 2013 as Rouhani's administration prepared to go to the United Nations Headquarters in New York City and to begin talks with United States to renew the nuclear negotiations. The Iranian media reported in one way or another that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had endorsed the talks that President Rouhani's administration was holding with the US government, albeit with pessimistic reservations about the credibility and trustworthiness of the US government or Washington's intention's to honour any agreements reached with Tehran.

The level of emphases placed on Ayatollah Khamenei's reservations about talks between Obama and Rouhani in the Iranian media varied based on the political orientation of these sources and which political camp in Iran they were aligned with. Overlooking or underemphasizing the fact that Khamenei publicly announced that he was generally happy with how Rouhani handled his United Nations visit and that he trusted and felt optimistic about Rouhani's administration, the media leaning towards the conservative or principalist spectrum in Iran focused more on Khamenei's pessimism and highlight his criticism that the Iranian government made some incorrect moves in New York City when dealing with the US government at the UN.

The media circuit in Iran was shadowed by partisan politics. A group of Iranian parliamentarians publicly opposed the talks and Foreign Minister Zarif made efforts to appease any concerns in the Iranian Parliament. Zarif held a closed-door meeting with several Iranian parliamentarians to brief them on the exchanges between the Iranian government and US officials in New York City. The conservative media in Iran then reported that Foreign Minister Zarif had told the group of parliamentarians that the telephone conversation between President Obama and Rouhani was inappropriate and that his own meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry was unfortunately protracted. Zarif quickly hit

back by accusing these media sources, including the conservative *Kayhan* newspaper, of falsifying his remarks. Zarif announced that he would only make public statements henceforth so that his statements would not be misrepresented any longer inside Iran.

Eventually Khamenei warned the different factions in the Iranian establishment not to interfere with President Rouhani's work. He demanded that no one make any attempts to derail the negotiations. Khamenei's office even released a black and white picture of Khamenei with Rouhani behind him from many decades earlier as a sign that Rouhani was a loyal member of the political establishment and Khamenei himself publicly stated that no one should view President Rouhani's negotiating team as compromisers. «They are our own children and children of the Revolution,» Khamenei would publicly declare on November 3, 2013.

One month later, in December, Iranian lawmakers were pushing for President Rouhani to remove Zarif from his cabinet post, because he defended the interim nuclear deal while speaking at Tehran University by saying that the US could inflict severe damage on the Iranian military «with one bomb» when he was explaining that the US was afraid of the Iranian people and not the Iranian military. The chair of the parliamentary committee in charge of foreign relations and security issues even threatened to start procedures for an impeachment of Zarif. Zarif's comments also upset the upper echelons of the Iranian military. The statements were interpreted by hardliners and the conservative factions in Tehran as being detrimental to Iranian bargaining strength in the negotiations with the US and the P5+1.

Domestic Differences in the United States

Like Iran, inside the United States there are differences in the political establishment too. These differences have been mainly between the realist and hardliner neo-conservative camps, both of which are distributed without borders across the lines of the Democratic Party and Republican Party. Hardliners and opponents of President Obama in the US Congress, especially in the ranks of the Republican Party, are hostile to a negotiated settlement with Iran. Lobbyist groups representing Israeli and other foreign interests, including Saudi interests, are also tinkering in the process. Collectively, these groups can handicap the Obama Administration's efforts or prolong negotiations with Iran. Moreover, the Obama Administration cannot remove some of the anti-Iran sanctions without the US Congress. While Obama can lift the sanctions that were put into place against Iran through US executive order by the White House, he cannot do the same thing with those that were passed by the US Congress as United States federal law.

In parallel to the nuclear negotiations in Switzerland, US House Leader Eric Cantor, an unapologetic supporter of Israel and the head of Republican Party faction in the US House of Representatives, began demanding that any final deal prevent Iran from domestically enriching uranium for its nuclear energy program. Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman, the main US negotiator dealing with Tehran over the nuclear dossier, asked that there be a pause in the drive to new sanctions and legislature against Iran half way through October 2013. John Kerry then told his Iranian counterpart in November that the White House would not be able to prevent the US Congress from passing new economic sanctions against Iran if the negotiations failed to reach an agreement in that month.

Regardless of it being a negotiating tactic or not, the Obama Administration has asked the

US Congress to put further sanctions on hold while it uses diplomacy to negotiate with the Iranians. The US House of Representatives acquiesced to Obama's request, but with heavy criticism leveled against his administration, when US House Minority Leader Steny Hoyer pushed to delay the bill from being introduced in the US House of Representatives, the lower legislative house of the US Congress, by withdrawing his support for Cantor's bill.

Possibly in a move to satisfy hardliners in the US, the US Treasury Department blacklisted additional Iranian individuals and entities on December 12, 2013. The move was presented as a «reinforcement of existing sanctions». The reaction from the Iranian side was to threaten to end negotiations, but this too was probably aimed at satisfying the hardliners on the Iranian side of the aisle and to show that Rouhani's government was not soft. An internal battle in Washington, however, appears to be underway.

Despite John Kerry's reassurances to Zarif, a bipartisan group of lawmakers from the Republican Party and Democratic Party led by Senator Menendez and Senator Kirk went forward with the push for the imposition of new sanctions legislation in the US Senate, the upper legislative house of the US Congress, instead in late-December 2013. Fifty-nine senators, with about two-thirds being Republicans and one-third being Democrats, supported the new sanctions bill targeting Iran towards the end of January 2014, by which time Obama threatened to veto the bill from passing. «If certain members of Congress want the United States to take military action [against Iran], they should be up front with the American public and say so,» US National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan even berated them. Senator Menendez and the other members of the US Congress supporting him, however, have argued that the additional sanctions legislation will put extra pressure on Iran to make diplomacy and nuclear negotiations work.

US Senate Majority Leader Harry Mason Reid, the most senior Democrat in the US Senate, has worked to keep the bill from being voted on. The response to this has been to reactivate the push from the US House of Representatives by revising Representative Cantor's dual sanctions and «final demands» bill, which essentially replaces the negotiations with ultimatums to Tehran.

When the *Huffington Post* wrote «Saboteur Sen. Launching War Push» on December 19, 2013, those forces in the US that are against negotiations with Tehran, including the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the American Jewish Committee, condemned the *Huffington Post*. The Anti-Defamation League even said the choice of a picture of Senator Menendez speaking from an AIPAC podium was anti-Semitic (more properly anti-Jewish), because it was sending a subliminal message that Israel and Jewish Americans were manipulating the US government. The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*'s Chemi Shalev responded by writing the following on December 29, 2013: «Given that all of the major Jewish groups — with the exception of J-Street — have spoken out publicly and unequivocally in support of a position that is so staunchly rejected by the [Obama] Administration, the stage is being set for a showdown [between the White House and the Israeli lobby] that more than justifies comparisons to similar face-offs in the past, including the 1981 skirmish with the Reagan Administration over the sale of early-warning AWACS aircraft to Saudi Arabia and the 1991 clash with George H. Bush over settlements and loan guarantees.»

Shalev concludes his article with a warning to Jewish American. He warns about the detrimental effects the Israeli lobby presents to US Jewry by supporting sanctions or aggressive positions against Iran in the name of Jews by writing: «Iran, it should be clear, is

no Iraq, in any way, shape or form. Whatever one's view of the Iranian talks and of the wisdom of new sanctions legislation, it would be foolhardy to ignore the precarious predicament that [American] Jews may soon find themselves in — one in which headlines alluding to warmongering senators and their Jewish supporters will be much more the rule than the exception but may also be the least of Jewish worries».

Iranian Uranium Enrichment

The enrichment of uranium for nuclear fuel or research is an inalienable and universal right of all countries guaranteed by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). There is no international law or treaty that prevents any country from enriching uranium. Any attempts to prevent Iran or any other country from enriching uranium are counter to the NPT and categorically have no international legal basis. Despite this, the US has kept on insisting for the last decade that Iran cannot enrich uranium.

In regards to the nuclear negotiations, the Obama Administration has been sending unclear messages on Iranian uranium enrichment. Washington is saying the uranium enrichment is not part of the nuclear deal, but it has also been saying that Iran could have a limited enrichment program. This is mere politicking that is probably meant to gently breakdown the psychological barrier and kneejerk opposition against Iranian nuclear enrichment that has been cultivated over the last decade inside the US.

There is an informal understanding between the different parties on the shape of the interim nuclear agreement. Key sections of the interim nuclear agreement between Tehran and the P5+1 have actually been kept secret as a means of preventing embarrassment in Tehran and Washington on the compromises that have been made. According to Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Araqchi there even exists a thirty-page informal document outlining the understanding between both sides.

Reacting to the earlier threats of the US Congress, lawmakers in the Iranian Parliament responded about one week later by drafting their own counter-legislature to obligate the Iranian government to enrich uranium at the level of 60% if old sanctions are expanded or new sanctions are imposed against Iran. What is really worth noting is that the Iranian lawmakers hinted that Iran's uranium enrichment will eventually include the fuelling of Iranian ships and submarines. To add to this, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (and Ahmadinejad's second foreign minister), Ali Akbar Salehi, has talked along the same lines. Finally, the Iranian nuclear negotiators themselves have reserved the right for Iran to continue research and development in uranium enrichment.

(to be continued)

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