

The Iran Primer

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Hossein Mousavian: Iran is Ready to Negotiate--If

Interview with Seyed Hossein Mousavian

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Seyed Hossein Mousavian was foreign policy adviser to former nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani (2005-07), former spokesperson of Iran's nuclear negotiation team (2003-05), former head of the Foreign Relations Committee of the National Security Council of Iran (1997-2005), and the former ambassador to Germany (1990-97). He is currently a visiting research scholar at Princeton University. This interview was conducted after Mousavian's first public presentation since his arrest in Iran in April 2007. He spoke to an audience of 5,000 people at Chautauqua Institution.

- **What are the prospects, realistically, for progress this year in diplomatic efforts? What are the realistic options for a U.S.-Iran rapprochement?**

The supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is the ultimate decision-maker and he will be ready to negotiate once Iran is offered the right package. He does not object to transparency because he already issued a *fatwa* in 1995 against weapons of mass destruction. But he is against discrimination, suspension [of uranium enrichment], and the deprivation of Iran's rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

I do not understand the notion that the supreme leader is not willing to negotiate—considering how the issue of Iran's right to enrichment has never been approached properly. Ultimately, prospects for negotiation depend on whether the P5+1 (five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany) offers Iran an acceptable package.

Even during the 2003-2005 negotiations, Iran's confidence-building measures—including suspension of enrichment, implementation of the Additional Protocol, and inspections beyond those required by NPT—all had to be approved by the supreme leader. Otherwise, we would not have been able to implement those policies. This is the same leader.

By early 2005, the supreme leader had lost confidence in the ability of the Europeans—Iran's main negotiating interlocutors at the time—to deliver on their promises. This was before Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency.

Now, after eight years, there is still a dispute among the P5+1 members over Iran's rights. In 2005, Russia, China, Germany, and even France were prepared to recognize Iran's rights to enrichment, but the United Kingdom and the United States were not. The U.S. position at the time was that Iran could have not any centrifuges.

Since Barack Obama won the presidency, there has been a clear change. As far as I understand, the United States is prepared to recognize Iran's rights to enrichment under certain conditions—such as intrusive inspections, temporary limit on the number of centrifuges, etc.

I am surprised that the Europeans—led by France—are now resisting. Paris is pushing the United States to discuss enrichment at the end of negotiations, rather than at the beginning. So, while Washington has come to

understand that no agreement can be reached without first recognizing Iran's rights, France has a different position.

That is why the P5+1 policy towards Iran has failed and will continue to fail until there is willingness to accept Iran's rights to peaceful nuclear enrichment. The suspension era is over.

It is simply not acceptable for P5+1 countries, which control 98 percent of the world's stockpile of nuclear weapons, to deprive others from the pursuit of peaceful nuclear energy and fuel cycle.

- **What conditions need to be met for negotiations to be successful? What does Iran need to do? What does the U.S. need to do?**

The P5+1 want a step-by-step approach toward negotiations, but Iran wants to see the final result. The step-by-step approach does not work. A comprehensive package acknowledging Iran's right to enrichment should be placed on the table at the start of negotiations. In other words, both parties should see the final outcome. Otherwise, the Iranians will not enter a road where they cannot see the end.

After agreeing on a comprehensive package, the parties can then further negotiate on the implementation of the package in a phased manner, with an agreed upon timetable. Without a timetable, Tehran will again hesitate to enter an agreement given its concerns about the P5+1's intentions to play with time and prolong the negotiation process.

On the nuclear issue, the end state for the Iranians is full rights under the NPT, without discrimination over enrichment. Other countries enrich but do not face sanctions. The nuclear impasse will not be resolved as long as U.N. resolutions are enforced because they require Iran to indefinitely suspend enrichment and provide access to sites and scientists for an indefinite period. These conditions extend beyond the framework of NPT.

Parties negotiating with Iran have pushed for measures beyond the NPT and the Additional Protocol, with no definition of what those measures are and no limit on their scope. That is why I think Iran will never accept these resolutions.

- **What would convince Iran to cooperate with the world's six major powers?**

The focal point of the P5+1 negotiations should be assurances about the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program and non-diversion toward weapons program in the future. If the P5+1 is seeking the above outcomes, then talking about suspension—especially indefinite suspension—is both meaningless and useless. Suspension has nothing to do with transparency. Iran views indefinite suspension as a way for the P5+1 to buy time for a long-term ban on Iran's enrichment program and ultimately its discontinuation.

Instead, the P5+1 can ask Iran for objective guarantees. The Europeans are the ones who first introduced the term "objective guarantees" in 2003-04, during the Paris Agreement. We [the Iranian negotiating team, of which Mousavian was a part] asked them to define what they meant, including the measures they expected from Iran for full transparency. They were never able to fully define what they meant.

The P5+1 can never ask Iran to give the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access that goes beyond NPT and the Additional Protocol for an unlimited period. That is clear discrimination and the Iranian parliament would never accept it. But if the P5+1 asks for confidence-building measures beyond NPT for only a short term, then it is possible because Iran showed such gestures when Dr. Rowhani and Dr. Ali Larijani were chief

negotiators.

- **What steps could Iran take to build confidence?**

We need a fair and balance “solution package” as a face-saving exit for both parties. To meet Iran’s bottom-line requirements, the P5+1 should respect the rights of Iran under the NPT, including its right to uranium enrichment; lift the sanctions; remove Iran’s case from UN Security Council and normalize nuclear cooperation with Iran under NPT.

In response, Iran could demonstrate objective guarantees, more transparency and confidence-building measures in a number of ways :

- Commit not to enrich uranium above 5 percent during a period of confidence-building—as long as the international community sells it fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor, which uses 20 percent enriched fuel (Iran’s Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, made this offer in February 2010.)
- Adhere to all international nuclear treaties at the maximum level of transparency and cooperation as defined by the IAEA.
- Take steps toward regional and international cooperation for enrichment activities within Iran.
- Limit enrichment activities to its actual fuel needs.
- Export all enriched uranium not used for domestic fuel production and refraining from reprocessing spent fuel from research reactors for a period of confidence building.
- Resolve all IAEA’s remaining technical issues within the “Modality Agreement” or “Work Plan” signed between ElBaradei and Larijani in 2007.

I also think that a parallel, comprehensive agreement on Iran-U.S. bilateral relations is essential for achieving a realistic, face-saving solution to the nuclear issue. This package should be negotiated between Tehran and the United States directly, while Iran’s nuclear issue can be negotiated within the framework of the P5+1 talks.

- **What role does domestic politics play in Iran’s position?**

A very substantial one. The reality is that the overwhelming majority of Iranians are pro-nuclear technology.

Before 1979, full rights on the nuclear program was a red line for the shah, who demanded full rights—including reprocessing and enrichment—under the NPT. After the revolution, the Islamic Republic also eventually came to view the nuclear program as a red line. It was so under the presidencies of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Therefore, it does not matter whether moderates, reformists, or principlists are in power or whether we have a monarchical system or an Islamic Republic. The 50-year history of Iran’s nuclear program has proven that it has always been a red line, regardless of the governing system.

- **How will heightened sanctions against Iran—both economic and human rights --affect future negotiations?**

Sanctions have not, and will not, change Iran’s nuclear posture. This is just a reality that Iran’s interlocutors have

to come to terms with.

After three decades, unilateral and multilateral sanctions against Iran's nuclear program have not led to the intended results. For example, they have failed to change Iran's nuclear policy, the Iranian population still views the nuclear program as a national right. And Iran has been able to acquire long-range missile capabilities, a nuclear fuel cycle, and advanced chemical and biological technologies.

But there is also another reality that it is very difficult to reverse sanctions, particularly the unilateral ones imposed by the United States Congress. Existing U.S. legislation does not endow the president with the authority to waive or terminate sanctions in response to goodwill gestures on Iran's part.

It is the understanding of these dynamics that have made Iran more insistent on seeing the end game at the beginning of negotiations. In other words, recent sanctions have made Iran more suspicious of the United States intentions. Tehran does not see unilateral sanctions as instruments of pressure but in fact as mechanisms promoted to make a comprehensive agreement impossible and maintain the regime change scenario always on the table.

- **Russia has proposed a "step-by-step" proposal for nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1. What are the prospects, realistically, for the Russian initiative?**

The initiative is a step forward but it is not a new proposal. The Russians first presented a similar plan to the United States in October 2010. Now, after the failure of negotiations in Geneva and Istanbul, Moscow believes the proposal can be a breakthrough.

I do not know the plan's details but if it is a step-by-step one, it can only be successful if does not promote yet another round of suspension and it defines an end game entailing the following:

1. Iran's full rights to enrichment
2. Lifting of sanctions
3. Removal of Iran's nuclear file from the U.N. Security Council and the IAEA Board of Governors

Engagement is both logical and realistic. But in the absence of a negotiable framework, the two parties will not be able to compromise. If the focus is on making Iran's program transparent and assuring its peacefulness, then a framework for negotiations can be developed. But if the idea is to force Iran to do something that no other country is asked to do, then there will be no agreed upon framework for talks. Even if there are meetings, they will not go anywhere.

Tags: [Enrichment](#), [Mousavian](#), [Negotiations](#), [P5+1](#), [Sanctions](#)

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