

---

## Middle East Research and Information Project

---

### "Iran Will Require Assurances"

#### An Interview with Hossein Mousavian

by Asli Bâli ([/author/asli%20B1-b%20C3%A2li](#)) | published May 16, 2012

*Hossein Mousavian has served as visiting research scholar at Princeton University's Program on Science and Global Security from 2009 to the present. Prior to this position, he held numerous positions in the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including director-general of its West Europe department and ambassador to Germany from 1990 to 1997. Ambassador Mousavian was also head of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran during both terms of Mohammad Khatami's presidency (1997-2005). In this capacity, he served as spokesman of the Iranian nuclear negotiations team from 2003 to 2005. When that team was replaced following the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Mousavian served for two years (2005-2007) as foreign policy adviser to Ali Larijani, who was secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and the chief nuclear negotiator in the Ahmadinejad administration. The ambassador was arrested in 2007 for allegedly passing confidential information to the British Embassy and others, but was eventually cleared of the charges. As part of those proceedings, he was suspended from serving in diplomatic posts for five years, due to his criticism of the nuclear negotiating strategy adopted by the Ahmadinejad administration. He left Iran in 2009 and his work at Princeton has included the preparation of the forthcoming book Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir, to be published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in June. Asli Bâli interviewed Ambassador Mousavian at his office in Princeton, New Jersey on April 26.*

#### What is your assessment of the April 13-14 negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) in Istanbul?

The meeting in Istanbul marked five clear changes in the framework for negotiations as compared to previous rounds. First, the P5+1 appear to have agreed to negotiate within the framework of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), whereas in previous rounds they had made demands that clearly exceeded Iran's treaty obligations, such as total cessation of enrichment, indefinite suspension of the civilian nuclear program, unlimited access for International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and so on. Such demands were not voiced at the Istanbul meeting, enabling the negotiating teams to move to substantive discussions, in contrast to previous rounds during which they were unable to get beyond disagreements over the terms of reference.

The second important change is that the P5+1 have agreed to a model of negotiations and compromise on the basis of reciprocity, where previously they had required unilateral concessions from Iran as a starting point for discussions. For instance, even during the most productive period of negotiations between the EU-3 (Britain, France and Germany) and Iran, from 2003 to 2005, the confidence-building gestures were mainly on the Iranian side -- in the form of voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol to the NPT and suspension of enrichment -- with no reciprocal concession from the Europeans.

The third significant change at the Istanbul meeting, in my view, was recognition on the part of the P5+1 that mistrust between the parties is mutual. Previously, the claim had been simply that the West mistrusts Iran's intentions and commitments without any acknowledgment of the legitimate grounds for Iran's own mistrust of the West.

The fourth positive development in Istanbul was a commitment to negotiate a step-by-step plan with a clear endpoint. In previous rounds of negotiations, the emphasis was always on the immediate step to be taken with no clear sense of what would come thereafter. So, for instance, there was an attempt in 2009 to negotiate a swap deal (in which Iran would expatriate a portion of its enriched uranium stockpile in exchange for the equivalent amount of proliferation-proof fuel rods) with no sense of what the next step(s) would be. From the outset, in 2003, the Iranians have emphasized the need to agree on the endgame -- that is, the whole package of issues subject to negotiation and the anticipated outcome for each side should compromise be reached -- and to identify clearly the starting point and the finish line. The framework for negotiations agreed upon in Istanbul appears to require that the substantive talks will focus on identifying each step in the step-by-step process toward an acceptable compromise.

Finally, the fifth positive change in Istanbul is the fact that the P5+1 appear to have dropped their erstwhile precondition for negotiations. Based on what we know from open-source reporting on the talks, there does not seem to be a requirement any longer that Iran suspend its enrichment program prior to the initiation of talks. This is very promising, since it suggests that a serious stumbling block to previous efforts to reengage the diplomatic process has now been removed. To the extent that the P5+1 are serious about these five changes, there is reason for optimism that the upcoming round of talks in Baghdad beginning on May 23 will be productive. If, on the other hand, the apparent ramping-up of diplomacy is merely intended to buy time for sanctions to take effect, while forestalling a military option in favor of economic coercion, then the chances for a breakthrough in Baghdad will be significantly diminished.

#### What would constitute meaningful confidence-building measures that both sides might identify as a first step in the step-by-step process?

The first logical step on the Iranian side, in my view, would be intensified cooperation with the IAEA, to address all remaining ambiguities with respect to Iranian nuclear activities to date, including on the subject of the "possible military dimensions" that have been identified as a source of concern. I believe this would be a significant measure to address the mistrust on the side of the West. It would show that Iran is ready, in principle, to allow the IAEA to conduct comprehensive inspections.

Iran does not have a real issue with transparency because Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, has committed to full transparency with the IAEA since 2003. The difficulty has not been with transparency, but rather with suspicions concerning the role of the IAEA. These suspicions are based on a perceived pattern in which increased cooperation with the IAEA and increased inspections have been correlated with increased sabotage of the nuclear program, increased assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists and revelations by the IAEA about Iran's military capabilities (including location of facilities) that are unrelated to the nuclear program. In other words, Iran believes that under the umbrella of IAEA inspections Western intelligence services are sending in agents to conduct espionage. Iran believes that revelations concerning the location of military sites have already occurred under the aegis of the IAEA, resulting in targeted sabotage activities. These concerns were already troubling to the country when Mohamed ElBaradei served as the director-general of the IAEA.

Following the end of ElBaradei's third term, the appointment of Yukiya Amano as IAEA chief dealt a severe blow to relations between the agency and the Iranian government. Indeed, a cable from the US embassy in Vienna back to State Department headquarters in

Washington, revealed as a result of the WikiLeaks disclosures, vividly substantiated Iranian concerns. The cable states explicitly that Amano is "fully in our [the US] court for all strategic issues including the handling of the Iranian nuclear file." On the basis of his activities since assuming the post of director-general, Iran had already concluded that Amano was following Washington's mandates rather than those assigned to him by the IAEA. The leaked cable only reinforced this impression.

More generally, Iran has come to believe that the West is using the nuclear issue as an instrument for other strategic goals unrelated to proliferation, such as regime change, and that this is the true purpose of the multilateral and unilateral sanctions imposed on Iran. This perception leads Iranians to conclude that the West is not sincere in its negotiating posture, since its interests lie in prolonging the nuclear crisis, which offers an additional (pretextual) instrument of leverage against Iran. Not surprisingly, then, I think that the initial confidence-building measure adopted by Iran should be met by a parallel measure on the side of the P5+1 related to sanctions. In particular, suspending implementation of the EU embargo on Iranian oil exports set to go into effect in July would be an important first step on the side of the Western powers and an expression of good will in advance of the Baghdad talks.

#### **What are the necessary elements of a viable step-by-step process, in your view?**

Attaining a constructive outcome from Baghdad requires that the step-by-step process define the endgame for negotiations in a way that takes the red lines or major demands of each of the parties into account. For Iran, there are three major demands that must be met in the course of these negotiations. The first is recognition of Iran's rights under the NPT, including the right to a civilian enrichment program. The second is the lifting of sanctions. And the third is the normalization of Iran's nuclear file, including the transfer of the issue out of the UN Security Council and back to the IAEA. The three major issues for the P5+1, in turn, appear to be the following: first, Iranian cooperation with the IAEA to address all remaining ambiguities concerning past activities, including outstanding technical questions on the possible military dimensions of the program; second, that Iran implement the Additional Protocol and attendant Subsidiary Arrangements; and finally, that Iran not obtain a nuclear weapon with an irrevocable commitment that it will remain a non-nuclear weapons state. I believe, based on the public record, that these three elements are the principal demands of the P5+1, if they are serious about coming to a negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis. Once the major requirements of both sides have been identified, they should be included in the endgame of the step-by-step process and each step should have some relationship to meeting these conditions. Beyond these basic parameters, the details concerning specific steps are up to the negotiators to determine.

#### **Do the endgame and all of the specific steps have to be defined in Baghdad for the talks to be deemed successful? Would it be fatal to the viability of the process if the final steps were left undefined?**

The Iranian side is most concerned about whether the key partner in the P5+1 -- namely, the United States -- will be able at this time to commit to negotiating in earnest. In other words, the question is whether in an election year the Obama administration is able to enter into substantive commitments to produce a real deal with Iran. Any realistic deal on the Iranian nuclear file would have to include the recognition of Iran's enrichment rights under the NPT and the lifting of sanctions. It seems doubtful that the president is capable of taking such steps even if it meant that a final resolution of the Iranian nuclear file were attainable. In light of anticipated opposition to such terms from Congress and various lobby groups, including AIPAC, if the Obama administration cannot commit to an endgame that includes recognition and the lifting of sanctions, I doubt whether the remaining members of the P5+1 will be able to deliver anything serious in Baghdad. On the one hand, the principles agreed upon in Istanbul are a source of optimism. On the other hand, the fact that 2012 is an American presidential election year and 2013 is an Iranian presidential election year, and the failure to capitalize on earlier opportunities (from 2009 through 2011) that did not coincide with such ancillary constraints, have been very costly to the potential for a near-term comprehensive agreement.

Having said that, even if Obama cannot deliver on American commitments before the November election, the two sides can still agree on the timeframe for two or three rounds of negotiation intended to specify the steps and finalize the package while committing to a de-escalation of international tensions over the Iranian nuclear program in the interim. The Obama administration clearly does not wish to go to war with Iran in an election year and neither does Iran have any interest in pursuing a confrontation with the United States or Israel. Refraining from provocative actions or statements over the months until November and moving discussions forward on the process and timeline may be attainable goals. Implementation of any agreement would have to be postponed until after the American election, but that need not become an insuperable obstacle to progress in the talks.

In terms of specifying the endgame, Iran will require assurances that a deal that ensures that Iran will not acquire a nuclear weapon will be sufficient to satisfy Israeli demands, in addition to those of the P5+1. That is to say, if Iran is prepared to cooperate in terms of transparency in its civilian nuclear program and commit to verifiable non-diversion of nuclear material to military applications, this is the most that can be required of them to satisfy Israeli as well as other regional and international security anxieties concerning Iranian nuclear energy production. On the Iranian side, making such a commitment would be possible, as there is already a consensus that Iran does not need a nuclear weapon and that pursuit or possession of a nuclear weapon will compromise rather than strengthen Iranian national security. This consensus is firmly grounded in numerous fatwas issued by the most senior religious authorities in the country, by the ongoing commitment to the NPT framework and numerous other strategic considerations. For the Iranians, so long as the country's right under the NPT to pursue a civilian uranium enrichment program is recognized, sanctions are lifted and the Iranian nuclear file is normalized, conditions related to inspections and remaining a non-nuclear weapons state present no difficulties.

#### **Why is recognition of Iran's rights under the NPT so central to Iranian red lines and what would such recognition entail?**

While I was the spokesman for the nuclear negotiating team of the Khatami administration, from 2003 to 2005, the American position was that Iran must accept a deal that would allow for no civilian enrichment program (the so-called "zero enrichment" posture). The US position on zero enrichment ultimately produced a deadlock that undid all of the groundwork laid over the course of two years of negotiations with the EU-3. At the time, Iran was prepared to start with an extremely minimal program that would involve restarting the Isfahan uranium conversion facility -- with a commitment to swap everything produced by that plant for an equivalent amount of yellowcake -- and retaining one pilot-size enrichment facility at Natanz, with a commitment to export all of the enriched uranium produced by the pilot facility. In other words, Iran's rights under the NPT would be respected but for all intents and purposes Iran would not retain control over its indigenous uranium products. In parallel, Iran would be committed to negotiate with the EU "objective guarantees" on the non-diversion of nuclear materials to allay international concerns about possible future military applications of Iranian nuclear activities. In exchange for these Iranian commitments, the EU would normalize the Iranian nuclear file at the IAEA and broaden political, economic and security cooperation with Iran. The basic principles that constituted the negotiating framework from 2003 to 2005 would have produced a viable diplomatic solution to the crisis, but they were ultimately abrogated as a result of the unwillingness of the US to accept the framework. Without the US on board, security cooperation with Europe would not be sufficient (or sufficiently reliable in light of NATO commitments) to allay Iranian security concerns and the Europeans could not guarantee normalization of the nuclear file at the IAEA. Once it became clear that the Americans would not compromise -- even after Iran committed to scale back its program radically to a zero stockpile, implement the Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Arrangements and cooperate with the IAEA on

transparency measures -- the approach of Iranian nuclear diplomacy changed.

Now, years later, the parameters of negotiation from the 2003-2005 period are no longer the appropriate frame of reference. Following years of crippling sanctions, Iran has paid a huge price for insisting on its rights under the NPT and the progress in the Iranian nuclear energy program as a result is not subject to reversal. Today, the principles underlying the negotiating framework have to be based first and foremost on non-discrimination. Iran's rights under the NPT to develop civilian nuclear technologies should be recognized symmetrically with the rights of all other non-nuclear weapons state members of the NPT. To the extent that Iran is prepared to engage in maximum transparency and cooperation with the IAEA and the program can be declared to have no military applications, that is, to be peaceful, there is no basis to insist on limits on Iran's civilian enrichment program.

At this juncture, the parties need to focus on identifying a sustainable long-term solution rather than interim agreements based on temporary suspension of the program and so on. The Iranian uranium enrichment program now runs over 10,000 centrifuges, is capable of enriching uranium to 20 percent and has mastered the technology to produce fuel rods indigenously. In light of the advanced phase of development in the Iranian program, it is not tenable to speak of ceilings and caps to limit Iran's capacities. This is not to say that the Iranian negotiating team cannot show flexibility. For instance, the team might show flexibility by slowing down the enrichment program for a period as a good faith gesture during negotiations. Such a slowdown, however, should not create an expectation that Iran is prepared to agree to a permanent cap on any aspect of its nuclear program that is permissible under the NPT. In other words, Iran cannot and will not be the only non-nuclear weapons state member of the NPT to forgo the right to produce 20 percent enriched uranium.

Based on this analysis, the only viable agreement between Iran and the P5+1 at this stage will have to be grounded in an acknowledgment of the full spectrum of Iran's rights under the NPT coupled with political, security and economic cooperation. On the Iranian side, there will have to be an acceptance of maximum transparency and confidence-building measures to establish definitively the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program and to substantiate Iran's continuing commitment not to pursue military applications of its nuclear program. And, of course, there are a number of measures that might allay Western fears without requiring Iran to compromise on its rights. For instance, one confidence-building measure might be pursuing an agreement on the maximum stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium that Iran would need for domestic consumption. The remainder might be converted to fuel rods or exported. Such an agreement would ensure that Iran would never maintain a sufficient stockpile to divert 20 percent enriched uranium to military uses but would not impose a cap on enrichment activities. By ensuring that all of the 20 percent uranium was consumed domestically (through proliferation-resistant fuel rod conversion) or exported, the West would be assured that Iran was not developing a stockpile, while Iran would be able to maintain its rights to enrich. Creative solutions such as moving the emphasis from enrichment to the question of a stockpile is one way forward that would satisfy the principal red lines on both sides.

#### **What do you expect between now and the Baghdad meeting?**

To be honest, I am skeptical that the P5+1 will be able to maintain their commitment to the five positive changes that I believe emerged out of Istanbul. This is because America is in a presidential election year and the Obama administration faces significant pressure within and outside of the US to maintain a confrontational posture toward Iran. If the Obama administration cannot deliver on the Istanbul commitments, then the P5+1 cannot, either. For instance, recently there has been some focus on the underground enrichment facility in Fordow, outside of Qom. This emphasis is mistaken because it reverts to the pre-Istanbul approach of seeking short-term measures and ones that compromise Iran's rights under the NPT. Demands that the Fordow facility be disassembled show bad faith on the side of the P5+1, both in failing to respect Iran's rights as agreed in Istanbul and in detracting from durable solutions by insisting on piecemeal measures. Despite my skepticism, however, I do think there is a possibility of some progress in talks between the two sides this month.

At the Istanbul meeting it was agreed that there would be frequent meetings of deputy-level representatives of the P5+1 and Iran between mid-April and the Baghdad meeting in late May. In particular, it was expected that the deputy of Saeed Jalili, the chief Iranian nuclear negotiator, and the deputy of Catherine Ashton, the EU's foreign policy chief, would meet to work out the substantive provisions of the step-by-step plan. In Istanbul the core principles were agreed upon, but the sequence of steps and the total package were left to be determined. It is essential that the relevant preparatory work on the part of deputies be completed before the principals meet again in Baghdad. Beyond Ashton's deputy, I hope that experts from each country will also participate in discussions before Baghdad.

Unfortunately, it is not helpful that Jalili's team rejected a meeting with Wendy Sherman, the US deputy, to discuss bilateral issues between the US and Iran. That decision may reflect the view on the Iranian side that as a result of the electoral season in the US, the Americans are not in a position to discuss a grand bargain over the two countries' common interests and bilateral disputes. Perhaps, for this reason, they thought there was nothing productive to be gained at the meeting. But, in the long run, it is clear that Iran and the US do have common interests: on Afghanistan, on narcotics trafficking and organized crime in the region, on the safe passage of energy supplies, and on the ongoing confrontation with al-Qaeda and other extremist groups. Of course, there are also disputes about the labeling of Hamas and Hizballah as terrorists and other matters. These issues would best be addressed by identifying a package deal that would address bilateral concerns and facilitate cooperation on common issues. But until the Iranians are certain that the US is prepared to discuss such a package, it would seem that Jalili does not want to face domestic criticism for a meeting that produces no serious outcome. Indeed, when the Iranians did sit down bilaterally with US representatives at the beginning of the Obama administration, the talks eventually foundered and the meeting with [State Department official] Bill Burns was followed by increased sanctions and pressure. As a result, the Iranian perception may be that the US asks for such meetings largely to buy time and develop new instruments to ratchet up pressure on the Iranian government. Unfortunately, such mistrust undermines the conditions for progress in the P5+1 talks on the nuclear file as well as postponing any possibility of a bilateral grand bargain between the US and Iran.

#### **You have argued that the Obama administration has done more to undermine Iran over the past three years than any US presidency in the 33 years since the Iranian revolution. Is the Obama administration perceived in Iran as having escalated tensions between the two countries?**

It is not only my view that Obama has been more confrontational with Iran than any previous American president. Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, has also taken this view. The reason is that Ayatollah Khamenei concentrates on actions rather than words. While it is true that the arrival of the Obama administration signaled a rhetorical change in the American approach to Iran, in terms of actions the Obama administration has been even more hostile toward Iran than the US under George W. Bush. Indeed, Obama administration officials also brag about their accomplishments in terms of application of pressure against Iran and isolation of Iran. While the Obama administration claimed to be seeking conciliation in 2009, they were advising allies that their outreach was designed to demonstrate that engagement with Iran would fail. Since then, both Thomas Donilon, the national security adviser, and President Obama himself have repeatedly stated publicly that they view it as an important accomplishment that the administration was able to unite the international community against Iran. They also repeatedly refer to the fact that the Obama administration has been instrumental in putting in place comprehensive sanctions against Iran, both unilateral and multilateral, that go farther than any previous effort to exert pressure on

Tehran. In other words, their promise of engagement has yielded nothing but the trumpeting of greater coercion. It is in this sense that Obama's engagement policy has actually been the instrument through which the United States has adopted the harshest and most coercive measures against Iran and rallied the international community around a strategy of isolating Iran. Taking this into account, the Obama administration is viewed by the Iranian government as having escalated the bilateral crisis between the two countries.

There were, however, moments when Tehran was willing to engage with the Obama administration, particularly in its first year. For instance, the October 2009 Geneva talks were a moment in which Iran came to the table prepared for meaningful bilateral negotiations. Unfortunately, this proved to be a key missed opportunity that set the two countries on a course of confrontation instead of conciliation. The mistake in the fall of 2009 was on the part of the US.

At Geneva, Iran agreed in principle to a deal involving a fuel swap that would have allayed Western concerns that it was developing a stockpile of low-enriched uranium for use in producing highly enriched uranium down the line. Shortly after the meeting, the Iranian side agreed to a simultaneous exchange of its stockpile (1,200 kg) of enriched uranium for the equivalent amount of fuel rods. The reason for the insistence on a simultaneous swap was Iranian mistrust of the P5+1 powers stemming from earlier failures on the part of countries like France to honor agreements involving nuclear fuel supply. The simultaneous element of this first iteration of the deal was rejected by the P5+1. In response, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran at that time, Ali Akbar Salehi, approached the then-director general of the IAEA, Mohamed ElBaradei, to serve as an intermediary in conveying to the Obama administration an Iranian offer to conduct the exchange as agreed in Geneva bilaterally with the Americans (i.e., without simultaneity but also without French participation). Despite the fact that this represented a return to the terms set in Geneva (with the US substituted for France as the source of the fuel rods in the exchange), the Obama administration turned that proposal down as well. A third attempt was made to resuscitate the Geneva principles in January 2010 when an Iranian official offered simply to go forward with the deal as originally agreed. The American counterpart told the Iranian side that they would now require Iran to suspend further enrichment before they could implement the deal, a requirement that was never part of the discussions in Geneva.

A similar pattern recurred in late spring 2010 when Turkey and Brazil sought to negotiate a swap agreement with Iran. The Turkish and Brazilian officials were under the impression that they were serving as intermediaries to negotiate with Iran on a proposal that came from the Obama administration. Yet when those talks resulted in the Tehran Agreement in May 2010 the United States rejected the deal in favor of passing additional sanctions against Iran through the Security Council, prompting frustration on the part of the Turks and Brazilians as much as the Iranians. Their explanation for the turn of events was that Obama had assumed that the Turks and Brazilians would fail at persuading Tehran to accept the fuel swap terms and that a substantive agreement would not be concluded. When they succeeded, the administration was shocked. In the meantime, their bid for increased sanctions had made some headway in the Council so they accelerated that strategy and treated the Tehran Agreement as an Iranian ploy.

The most unfortunate part of the missed opportunity for engagement in the first 18 months of the Obama administration was the failure of Russia and China to play a balancing role. Had these powers taken a firmer position against coercive measures, it might have afforded the Obama administration an additional argument against domestic pressure groups demanding punitive sanctions rather than engagement. If the Europeans, Russians and Chinese had played a balancing role, it would have been a contribution to bolstering the American resolve to pursue an engagement policy. Instead, they went along with sanctions. In particular, their willingness to accept additional sanctions on the Security Council in June 2010 despite the potential of the Tehran Agreement was misguided. By taking such a hard line on Iran, all of these parties have jeopardized the credibility of any engagement policy -- with compulsory multilateral sanctions in place, trust has been diminished and engagement has little to offer the Iranians.

Having said all of this, I believe that at the outset President Obama had good intentions concerning engagement and was personally serious about changing the course of three decades of hostility between the two countries. Unfortunately, he was not able to deliver on his intentions, an ongoing problem that is a result of domestic pressure in the form of opposition from Congress, Republican presidential candidates and the pro-Israel lobby, on one side, and direct pressure from Israel and other outside powers, on the other. The result of this pressure has been that Obama has moved to the extreme opposite of engagement. He now proclaims proudly that his presidency has ushered in the toughest sanctions ever enacted against Iran and he openly takes credit for leaving the Iranian economy in shambles.

Obama was not the first person to seek engagement in the US-Iran dyad. Actually, Ahmadinejad initiated efforts at engagement with his first letter to President Bush, which was the first such letter any Iranian president has ever written to a US president. Next, he congratulated Obama on his election to the presidency, also a first among Iranian leaders. And thirdly he sent a letter to Obama in early 2009. With respect to each of these initiatives, the US counterparts offered no response. Somehow the American leadership never seemed to understand that these communications signaled that the Iranian government was ready to initiate a major shift in bilateral relations. Ahmadinejad would not have been permitted to engage in such communication without the approval of the Supreme Leader. One reason such a task could be entrusted to Ahmadinejad where Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Khatami had not been allowed directly to engage American presidents is that Ayatollah Khamenei trusted Ahmadinejad on foreign policy more than any of the previous administrations. Certainly, he would not permit either of the two previous presidents -- Rafsanjani and Khatami -- to engage in such gestures. Ahmadinejad was given this opportunity because of the potent combination that Ayatollah Khamenei felt he could be trusted to represent the interests of the system and because the Iranian government viewed Obama's election as an opportunity to enter into more constructive relations with the US. That the signals from Ahmadinejad were received with silence in Washington was taken as an indication that Obama's interest in engagement was not a substantive change of policy but rather a change of rhetorical strategy.

**We have focused on developments on the negotiating track running parallel with the sanctions strategy. What we have not discussed is the military option that the Israeli government insists on maintaining as part of the international strategy toward the Iranian nuclear file. How do you evaluate the prospects for an Israeli strike against Iran?**

Obviously, any such strike would be absolutely catastrophic. For that reason, I also believe it is quite unlikely. Notwithstanding such probabilistic guesstimates, however, it is worth noting that just the threat of an Israeli military strike is illegal, illegitimate and counterproductive. Iran does not have nuclear weapons, while Israel may have as many as 400. Iran is a member of the NPT and Israel is not. Iran has given more access to IAEA inspectors (in terms of man-hours of inspections) in the last decade than any other country. The level of access afforded by the Iranians to the Agency is unprecedented. By contrast, in the 40 years that Israel has had an active nuclear program it has not allowed a single inspection. Israel is in no position legally or otherwise to make threats against a member of the NPT. The very threat should be the subject of international condemnation.

Having said that, I believe the Israelis will not attack Iran because Israel is too small of a country and they know it is too risky for them to engage in that level of aggression. I believe that the statements that they have been issuing are designed to be perceived as a credible threat in order to convince the Americans and Europeans to impose further sanctions, such as unilateral sanctions on the central bank and on the oil trade with Iran. The Iranian government, too, understands that the Israelis are pursuing a tactic to gain further leverage and demand more punitive action against Iran from the international community. Of course, if the Israelis could drag the US

into a war with Iran they might do it, but the Americans are not ready for a third war in the Middle East after the setbacks they have faced in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The US knows that Iran is a very different prospect than either of those prior wars and that the consequences of an attack on Iran would be several orders of magnitude greater than the difficulties they already face in the region. In light of the reluctance on the part of the US, Israel's options are more limited. Israel cannot engage in a strike against Iran without coordinating with the US. The Israelis insist that their defense strategy is an independent matter for their own determination, but the Iranian government believes they cannot act without American support and an American green light will not be forthcoming in light of the global economic crisis, existing destabilization of the region and military costs associated with any military option against Iran.

**Another important player in events concerning the Iranian nuclear file is, of course, the IAEA. Do you think the Agency has played a constructive role in negotiations? What change (if any) resulted from the replacement of Mohamed ElBaradei by Yukiya Amano as director-general?**

The difference between ElBaradei and Amano has been huge. The Iranian government was confident that ElBaradei was trying to play a constructive role in developing a framework that would bring Iran and the P5+1, including the US, to an agreement. He knew very well that such an agreement would have to go well beyond the technical issues in dispute about past reporting concerning the Iranian nuclear program, because it was clear that the heart of the crisis was political, not technical. For instance, in an interview he stated that he relayed a message from Ahmadinejad to Obama in 2009 that Iran was prepared to enter a comprehensive agreement, including the nuclear file but also regional and international tensions between the two countries. Obama rejected that initiative. Earlier, he had worked hard to serve as an impartial mediator between the EU-3 and Iran in their negotiations from 2003 to 2005. Following the end of his term, he gave an interview in 2010 in which he states unequivocally that there is no evidence that the Iranian nuclear program is intended for military purposes or has involved military applications. This assertion was based on the intrusive and widespread inspections that the Agency conducted under his stewardship from 2002 to 2010. He was involved in every detail of the IAEA's work on the Iranian nuclear program, so there is no more knowledgeable international observer than ElBaradei concerning the dimensions of the program.

By contrast, as soon as Amano took office as director-general he began to shift the official position of the Agency, making ambiguous statements suggesting that IAEA inspectors might have detected signs of "possible military dimensions" to the Iranian nuclear program. Following such statements, when the IAEA report of November 2011 was made public it became clear that what Amano had described as "possible military dimensions" was nothing new. All the issues in the report had already been listed by ElBaradei in 2007, and Iran had responded with 170 pages of answers to specific technical questions in response to that list. Once ElBaradei received those responses, the matter was closed. The Iranian government suspects that Amano reopened these old files simply to introduce ambiguity in the IAEA's findings in order to facilitate eventual Security Council activity in the direction of further sanctions and pressure. Since Amano became director-general, the IAEA has gone from being a neutral third-party agency offering the service of resolving technical questions through inspections to being a highly politicized actor fueling the fire of confrontation and undermining cooperation.

Because the Iranians now view the IAEA and Amano as instruments of the United States -- something reinforced by comments by American officials in confidential cables that were revealed by WikiLeaks -- they no longer trust the Agency. This represents a huge setback, of course, because if the IAEA cannot be trusted under Amano there is a concern that Iran might not view transparency to the Agency as a viable confidence-building measure. To the extent that Amano gives the appearance of being a member of the US delegation to negotiations, the IAEA's ability to play a constructive role is undermined.

The only way to resolve this impasse would be within the framework of a broader agreement that would serve as a basis of confidence for Iran that the P5+1 are eager to resolve issues and therefore will green-light independent third-party inspections. In other words, the IAEA can no longer facilitate the reaching of such an agreement, but in the wake of a broader deal may still be able to serve the function of a third-party arbiter of implementation. If the P5+1 sticks to the principles agreed to in Istanbul and desists from political interference in the inspections, the IAEA would be able to resolve outstanding technical questions within 48 hours. Technical issues and the questions about possible military dimensions are easy to resolve so long as the Iranians are confident that the IAEA is authorized to conduct technical rather than political evaluations. As part of a comprehensive agreement on the resolution of the Iranian nuclear file, Iran would have no difficulty providing inspectors with full access. Even the military facility at Parchin has been visited twice by IAEA inspectors and, in the future, Iran would allow such access again under the proper circumstances. For Iran to offer full transparency, the government will require assurances as to the purpose of renewed inspections. An agreed step-by-step process that makes clear how each set of steps relate to the ultimate objective and the conditions that must be met to normalize the Iranian nuclear file would be the appropriate framework for further transparency. Absent such a package, the Iranians will remain unclear as to whether the inspections are intended to resolve the problem or simply increase pressure on the country.

**On the Iranian side, how has nuclear diplomacy changed over the last decade?**

My book is forthcoming this June. In the memoir, I describe in great detail the course that negotiations have taken from the Iranian perspective. The first round of nuclear diplomacy, which took place between Iran and the EU-3 under the Khatami administration, focused on engagement, confidence-building measures and using the nuclear issue as an entry point for resolving broader issues between Iran and the West. For instance, in the October 2003 Tehran Agreement and the November 2004 Paris Agreement, the terms of the agreements included non-nuclear issues such as counter-terrorism cooperation, other regional security issues, the elimination of WMDs in the region, energy cooperation and World Trade Organization membership. In other words, the Iranian negotiating strategy was much more comprehensive than the nuclear issue. On the nuclear question, the idea behind the strategy was that by implementing the Additional Protocol, Safeguards Agreement and additional transparency measures, Iran would establish that its nuclear program was entirely civilian and thereby quell concerns and secure the right to develop a civilian enrichment program under safeguards. In accordance with this strategy, Iran agreed on a voluntary basis to all of the transparency measures proposed by the IAEA at the highest level. The broader strategy of rapprochement between Iran and the West (as represented by the EU) was the subject of consensus among the Iranian leadership and was understood to be consistent with Iran's rights to pursue civilian nuclear energy under the NPT. Unfortunately, this first period of negotiations came to an end when it became clear in the spring of 2005 that the EU-3 was not capable of delivering on a broader deal including such elements as cooperation for the elimination of WMD in the Middle East and joint efforts at combating terrorism because they could not secure American consent to any arrangement in which Iran retained even a pilot enrichment program.

Both the micro strategy of the nuclear issue and the macro engagement strategy advocated by Khatami failed. The terms of the agreements in Tehran and Paris had been approved by the Supreme Leader, but the record of two years of suspension of the Iranian program with nothing to show in return changed the equation. It was not the election of Ahmadinejad in the summer of 2005 but rather a change of approach by Ayatollah Khamenei that shifted the course of Iranian nuclear negotiations. By the end of Khatami's term, Ayatollah Khamenei concluded that the EU-3 were not serious about resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis but were using negotiations as a means of buying time and prolonging the suspension of enrichment in Iran. He came to believe that the EU-3 were negotiating under a mandate from the US not to recognize Iranian rights under the NPT but to use the prospect of a resolution to prolong suspension of the

program. On the basis of this view, Ayatollah Khamenei decided to change the course of nuclear diplomacy as early as January 2005. He insisted that the nuclear negotiating team make clear to the EU and the US that, whatever the outcome of the June presidential elections that year, Iran would not forgo its legitimate rights under the NPT. It was at that point, in January 2005, that Ayatollah Khamenei decided that he would not allow the suspension of enrichment activities to be prolonged after the expiration of the Paris Agreement. He gave the negotiating team time to convey this position to the Europeans to see whether there was a possibility of using the remaining suspension period to come to an agreement. In the spring of 2005, I met with the chief negotiators for each of the EU-3 and conveyed to them that Ayatollah Khamenei had taken this decision and would restart enrichment even if Rafsanjani were to win the election. As a result, I urged the EU-3 directors to sit down with our negotiating team to achieve a realistic deal before June. Unfortunately, the Europeans were not able to deliver. The Supreme Leader felt vindicated in his judgment that the two years of negotiations between 2003 and 2005 had largely been a ploy to suspend progress in Iran's civilian nuclear energy program.

Once the negotiating track with the EU-3 foundered, Ayatollah Khamenei replaced the negotiating team from a set of officials invested in a strategy of engagement to one that would adopt a more aggressive stance. The emphasis on rapprochement was dropped from the negotiating framework and diplomats were no longer the principal negotiators. Having said that, even the hardline negotiating team that came in under Ali Larijani was prepared to make a deal in the end and to be flexible in coming to terms with the West. Unfortunately, rather than working to identify a realistic deal, the West continued to increase sanctions. The result was that Larijani was replaced by an even more hardline negotiator, Saeed Jalili, who remains the chief negotiator at present. But under all three lead negotiators -- Hassan Rowhani, Ali Larijani and Jalili -- the Supreme Leader's objectives have remained the same: protecting Iran's right to pursue civilian nuclear energy under the NPT, transparency with neutral inspectors from the IAEA, assurances that Iran will not pursue the development or acquisition of a nuclear weapon, and normalization in Iran's relations with the international community. There has been no change in these principles. Rather, Ayatollah Khamenei's perception of bad faith on the part of Western negotiators has changed the negotiating approach, not the objectives.

When the negotiating stance on both sides went from engagement to confrontation, several windows of opportunity to come to an agreement were lost. As a result, once the suspension of the enrichment program ended in 2005, Iran has made significant advances in its program. Of course, the passage of Security Council resolutions and multilateral sanctions against Iran have taken a toll on the economy, which has been harmful. But at the same time, this period also witnessed tremendous advances in Iran's capabilities, beyond the point of no return in terms of limiting the domestic enrichment program.

Ayatollah Khamenei is neither pursuing a nuclear weapon nor willing to bring the country to a crisis over the specific number of centrifuges that Iran may run in its enrichment program. For Ayatollah Khamenei, this is a question of principle about the nation's entitlement to the same rights as all other NPT members. As a result, there may still be room for flexibility. For instance, in the context of a broader package that is deemed constructive and attractive, the Iranian government might not treat the level of enrichment as a deal breaker. Similarly, increasing the program until the country is running 60,000 centrifuges is not the principal objective. But compromises on these issues cannot be attained in a piecemeal approach specifically focused on reversing Iranian advances. If the EU or P5+1 approach pursues specific goals absent a broader package, the chances of a deal will diminish. The production of a small amount of enriched uranium has cost Iran tens and perhaps hundreds of billions of dollars. The sacrifices already made in defense of the nation's rights will not be bartered in a piecemeal fashion. But a broad package should be attainable, if one were able to abstract the situation from the domestic politics of the US.

Obama has been clear and wise in focusing on weaponization of the program as the American red line in negotiations. This is a constructive stance that suggests that the retention of some enrichment program on Iranian soil is not precluded. This shift from the Bush administration's red line around enrichment is very promising. On the Iranian side, whatever happens in the 2013 presidential elections, there will be no change in the underlying position. The foreign policy framework is set by Ayatollah Khamenei and there are some positive indications that he is willing to consider a broad package such as the Russian step-by-step proposal to normalize the Iranian nuclear file in exchange for full transparency, implementation of the Additional Protocol, a cap on enrichment levels and suspension of further growth in the scale of the enrichment program. The outcome of the Baghdad talks will tell us a great deal about the capacity of President Obama and Ayatollah Khamenei to come to an agreement in the near term.

**An Iranian court suspended you from service in diplomatic posts for five years in 2008. Once that ban is lifted in 2013, would you consider returning to Iran?**

My legal case ended in April 2008. I remained in Iran for one year after the final verdict in my case. There has been no objection from the government to my activities in the US since I left Iran in 2009. I retired from the Foreign Ministry at that time. Though I remain eligible for political appointments to diplomatic posts once the term of my suspension elapses, I prefer not to hold political posts any longer and would continue my academic work even if I were to return to Iran. I am not concerned about arrest should I return to Iran, but the question is how best to employ my time. I am satisfied working as a researcher at Princeton. Having said that, I would be willing to return. In my view, the main question is in what capacity am I best able to help my country.

Filed under: