

Ambassador Mousavian interview with Le Monde 01/17/2012

The Iranian diplomat Seyed Hossein Mousavian, 54, was the spokesperson of the Iranian negotiating team on nuclear issues from 2003 to 2005, when Mohammad Khatami led Iran. During which Iran accepted a temporary suspension of uranium enrichment and allowed inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to Iranian nuclear sites. Mousavian led the External Relations Committee of the Supreme Council of National Security of Iran under Khatami's two terms (August 1997-August 2005).

Considered very close to the alliance between Ahmadinejad's opponents Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani(moderate) and Mohammad Khatami(reformist) and Ali Akbar Nateghnouri(conservative), he was charged under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in April 2007 of spying for the European powers and imprisoned before been cleared a year later by the Iranian judiciary. The third judge, however, sentenced him to two years of suspended jail and five years ban on diplomatic post for having publicly expressed his opposition to Ahmadinejad's foreign and nuclear policy. The Iranian Ministry of Intelligence repeated the charge in 2010. He was Foreign Policy Advisor of Ali Larijani when arrested.

Mousavian is currently Research Scholar Associate Professor at Princeton University.

What is your view of Barack Obama's diplomacy after three years?

When he came into power, the Iranians have had great hopes. He introduced the policy of engagement with Iran, seemed so different from Bush and his "axis of evil" doctrine. While the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, had some reservations, nevertheless he decided to wait and not to have prejudgment. Obama began by promising to negotiate without preconditions to end 30 years of mutual hostility, but the conclusion of his policies is that he has established a coordinated system of international toughest sanctions ever imposed on Iran since revolution 1979.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Ali Khamenei bear no responsibility in this process?

You believe in the West that all problems started with Ahmadinejad. This is completely false. Ahmadinejad represents a significant domestic political change and his radical rhetoric has had considerably negative impact on Iran's foreign relations, but the ultimate decision maker is the Leader. Under Mohammad Khatami [the previous "reformist"] we proposed the temporary suspension of uranium enrichment. Ayatollah Khamenei's directive was clear: offer full transparency with the condition that the "3" [British, Germans and French, with whom Tehran discussed] do not require indefinite suspension of enrichment. We believe the progress in negotiation did not succeed because the Americans were not on board. When the Europeans told us after two years that what is required from Iran is an "indefinite suspension" of enrichment, it was exactly what the Supreme Leader feared from the beginning. It has reinforced his pessimism. A similar phenomenon happened with Obama.

All our stakeholders know exactly what we want from day one. In March 2005, I participated in the delegation that came to meet the head of states of France and Germany. We told them explicitly, "our right to enrich uranium will remain our red line. Define transparency measure ensuring objective guarantees you require, we will respect it. Dr. Rohani told Chirac that Iran is ready to leave to the IAEA to define transparency measures on non diversion. Later I told my EU3 interlocutors that regardless who is elected as president, Iran would not continue suspension. I offered them to restart the UCF and enrichment plants in Isfahan and Natanz at a pilot level, to export every milligram of production and to negotiate for another year to reach agreement on transparency measures. "This offer had the approval of the Supreme Leader. I told my colleagues, "If you refuse, Iran would commence enrichment. "I thought Berlin and Paris were convinced, but London believed I am bluffing. Washington did everything to ensure the negotiations fail because its position was based on "no one centrifuge in Iran". Ahmadinejad, Rafsanjani or a reformist in the Presidency, would not have difference on legitimate rights of Iran on enrichment but their negotiation strategy would differ.

Do you think Obama is now pushing the "regime change" in Iran?

He has never uttered the words, but what we have practically seen from the United States indicates that this is the ultimate ambition. In a recent speech, Thomas Donilon [the national security adviser U.S.] said almost explicitly,

using the words "pressure on the Iranian nation." I think Obama really had the ambition to end 30 years of hostilities. However he eventually agreed to continue the U.S. policy of the past 30 years.

Is Tehran's serious about its threat to close the Strait of Hormuz, if there is an oil embargo on its export oil?

The defense and Foreign ministers, Ahmad Vahidi and Ali Akbar Salehi, just declared that Iran has never announced such an intention. I believe the only time it could happen would be if the country was under military attack. Because since the Iran-Iraq war [1980-1988], the Iranians feel that an assault would be endangering their lives. An armed confrontation would be a global catastrophe, especially for all those involved.

In a recent interview in the bulletin of the American Atomic Scientist, you mention the "sense of loneliness" that grips Iran. Is this feeling shared by all the tendencies of its political class?

Yes. The dominant idea in Iran is that the West, the US and some regional Arab countries are after disintegration of Iran and to destroy the system. The main reason behind such impression is mainly because the West, the East and regional Arabs supported Iraq's invasion of Iran (1980-8) and Iran has been faced with separatism activities in provinces like Kurdistan and Sistan Baluhestan after revolution 1979. It is also a fact that some regional Arab countries perceive Iran as too powerful as a regional player. In Iran we feel that we deserve a rightful place, potential and status as a regional power. This explains the feeling of loneliness that so many Iranians share, when we are denied our rightful place.

Do you think the current tension is more dangerous than before?

The situation has not been so frightening since the Iran-Iraq war, when the United States, the Soviet Union and Europe all supported Saddam Hussein. During President Rafsanjani and Khatami tenure Europe was a counterweight to the United States ambitions of overthrowing the Iranian system. Today, Europeans, led by Nicolas Sarkozy, are more hawkish than the Obama administration. This change is essential. Sarkozy is the key figure in the recent developments. The Paris-London position now matches Tel Aviv position and has become more extreme than that of Washington.

Again, does Iran have any liability in these developments?

I have always been a political opponent of Ahmadinejad. Him and his supporters have accused me of the worst. But, we must admit that on the nuclear issue, Ahmadinejad in 2011 passed the position of Khatami in 2003-4! Ahmadinejad welcome the Russian Step-by Step Plan which includes all major requirements of the UNSC and IAEA resolutions and even beyond. The Russian proposal includes: Iran would not add new centrifuges,

- a) Limit enrichment to existing site at Natanz ,
- b) Stop production of new generation of centrifuges,
- c) Allow IAEA surveillance of centrifuges,
- d) Implement subsidiary arrangement code 3.1,
- e) Limit production of enriched uranium to a maximum of 5%,
- f) Implement additional protocols and
- g) suspension for a short period

Iran also released the American hikers.

But the west responded with mounting hostilities. The West rejects Ahmadinejad's offers , increased unilateral sanctions, passed resolutions on terrorism and human rights against Iran at UN and sanctioned the Central Bank and now moving toward sanctioning the oil. The west approach only leads to escalation of hostilities in relations and pushes toward confrontation.

Are the assassinations of Iranian scientists effective in terms of deterrence? How might Iran respond?

These murders have the effect of accelerating Iran's nuclear work. They are completely counterproductive ... unless your aim precisely is to raise the tensions. For the people in the streets of Iran, these scientists are national assets and a matter of great pride. The result is a general sympathy for the victims. Now they are convinced that the killings are the result of an alliance of the U.S., British, and Israeli intelligence services. I note that for the first time, Hillary Clinton has publicly condemned these acts. Was this a way of saying "this time we had nothing to do with it"? Nevertheless she condemned as an act of violence not an act of terror.

Recently, the CIA claimed that the Israeli services had fraudulently used uniforms to enlist American "terrorists" to act on Iran. Did she mention that she is distancing herself from Israel? The Iranians will not let these acts go unpunished, they will act, I believe. Tehran believes the US is responsible. I am also convinced that the Israelis want confrontation between Iran and the US. Iran's retaliation against US can lead to military confrontation.

How does Tehran analyze the American-Israeli relationship?

I think between Obama and Netanyahu there are real and serious differences regarding the issue of the peace process [between Israelis and Palestinians]. Netanyahu made the Iranian issue a priority to downplay the Palestinian question. I am convinced that Netanyahu really wants military strike but Obama would like to avoid it. Tehran believes that Israel cannot act on its own initiative, without prior U.S. agreement. The Iranian government really believes that Israel is powerless without the United States. In a way, it is also supporting Israel and facilitating its ability to push Washington towards confrontation.

Iranian parliamentary elections will be held in March. Could this change the situation?

No. Everything seems under control of the Leader. Majority of moderates and reformers will stay away. I guess this may be the same with the presidential election of 2013. A new president will be elected with the backing of ayatollah Khamenei. After so many years aimed at "regime change", the West has in fact strengthening system. I believe on radicalism in Iran, the West is fully responsible: when Iran had a more moderate governments, which promoted the release of western hostages in Lebanon, signed the convention on chemical(CWC) and biological(BWC) weapons , CTBT, cooperated in the war against terrorism in Afghanistan, supported the UN resolutions on Iraq, etc ... the West responded with a tightening of sanctions and pressures.

There are voices in the United States for Obama and Khamenei to establish an "emergency communication channel" to prevent uncontrolled escalation...

There has always been direct contact between the American and Iranian governments. Installing a "hotline" between Tehran and Washington, seems like a good idea. Moreover, Turkey and Oman play an important role as intermediaries. Ankara probably passed the warning from Obama to Ayatollah Khamenei regarding Hormuz.

But this is not the point. Americans and Iranians should work on a dual track: on the nuclear issue, and other topics of common interest: Afghanistan, stability in Iraq after U.S. withdrawal, fighting against drug trafficking, etc...however there is a need for confidence building measures to be taken by both parties. Under these conditions, the two sides should negotiate on a basis where everyone accepts the "red line" of the other. For the Americans and the west, that redline is Iran not possessing a nuclear weapon. For the Iranians, they want their legitimate rights for nuclear technology to be recognized under NPT, which includes enrichment and be treated the same as other nations. If we want the next Istanbul talks to be successful, we must prevent the past approaches. The first 10 minutes will be cardinal. If the "P5 +1" says "yes to enrichment, not the bomb," Tehran will be flexible and cooperative all future requirements on transparency measures. If, after nine years of failure, Westerners say, "no enrichment", talking will be useless.

If Iran were a closed system in itself, divided, who lives in fear of destabilization inside and outside, would it not make sense to aim for the bomb to deter any attempt for an attack?

I do not think so. The Iranians are convinced that the United States is declining both in the region and internationally, and this will continue. Then, what Westerners call the "Arab Spring" is called in Iran the "Islamic awakening". Our leaders are so convinced that Islam will win and the movement will spread from Morocco to Bangladesh. They believe superior military and hegemonic powers of the United States and Israel will not be able to stop this wave and Iran does not need nuclear weapons to exert its influence in the region and beyond. They maintain sooner or later the consequences of the Arab Spring will change Israel's status in the region and the need for it to have nuclear weapons. Nevertheless who can believe that Iran would use a bomb against Israel that would kill as many Palestinians as Israelis!

If nothing changes, is armed confrontation inevitable?

It is my great fear. If Westerners do not move in right direction, it will end with a confrontation.

What the Leader , Rafsanjani, Khatami or other key politicians from all political stripes, want:

a) Guarantees that the West does not seek regime change and a relation based on mutual respect and non interference.

b) A schedule taking into account all major issues of interests of both parties, not just the nuclear issue. But the nuclear issue has now become the keystone of Iranian nationalism.

Even if the sanctions hurt the economy , it would not change the position of Iran on nuclear. It is a matter of national pride and sovereignty. If Westerners get their way, dropping the plan, they would quickly find themselves with one that will manifest exactly the same ambition.