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Middle East

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What Does It Mean That Iran's President-Elect Is A Moderate?

By EDITOR

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Transcript

STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

Let's look overseas now, where the election of Iran's new president shocked many analysts - even one who used to work for him.

HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN: I was surprised. I really could not imagine Rowhani would be able to win the election in the first run(ph).

INSKEEP: Hossein Mousavian was a long-time aide of the newly-elected president, Hassan Rowhani. When Rowhani was Iran's nuclear negotiator years ago, Mousavian was his spokesman. The spokesman is now at Princeton, and we asked him if the unexpected election of a moderate - who speaks of better relations with the world - might ease the confrontation between Iran and the West.

Let me focus in on the nuclear program. Do you think that, as president, Hassan Rowhani will be in a position where he can compromise with the United States, as necessary, to reach an accommodation?

MOUSAVIAN: I believe it's partly related to Dr. Rowhani and partly to President Obama. What Dr. Rowhani should - and I believe he would - is to be ready for more transparency and more cooperation with the IAEA - the International Atomic Energy organization - to remove all technical ambiguities. Mr. Obama also should be ready, in return, to recognize a legitimate rights of Iran for peaceful nuclear technology, including enrichment, like all other member states of a Non-Proliferation Treaty - NPT.

And second, President Obama should be ready to lift the sanctions, even gradually.

INSKEEP: So the position that president-elect Rowhani laid out in his news conference this week, and what you're describing to us, is in essence, Iran intends to keep enriching uranium. Iran intends to keep doing things that may potentially worry the West - but with such openness that there can be no doubt whatsoever about the peaceful nature of the program. Is that correct?

MOUSAVIAN: Exactly. I mean the level of transparency and both peaceful nature of Iranian nuclear program, this is really what international community can expect Iran. Really, the best policy for President Obama and President Rouhani would be a very, very big deal on all weapons of mass destruction to be committed to all obligations that the programs would remain peaceful forever and would never be weaponized.

INSKEEP: I remember I was in Iran in early 2009, soon after President Obama was sworn into office in the United States. And what I heard was effectively this: sure, Obama is a new president, a fresh face, he's interesting, but he still represents the United States and therefore he can't be trusted. I mention that now, because I wonder if the same thing is being asked now in reverse in the United States. People are essentially saying, sure, Rouhani is interesting, he will speak more eloquently perhaps, but he still represents Iran. Do you think Americans can trust this new president to have the country, and especially the country's supreme leader, behind him?

MOUSAVIAN: You know, to be very fair, President Obama had engagement policy, which was really good. But what happened in practice? The worst unilateral sanctions, the worst multilateral sanctions and the most comprehensive, harsh hostilities against Iran since 1979 have been during President Obama's presidency. Therefore for Iranians, they can never trust that Washington really means it.

INSKEEP: Well, you're giving me an explanation of why Iranians might have trouble trusting the United States. Americans are asking, can we trust this interesting new figure Rouhani to actually represent the country, to represent the country's supreme leader, to represent Iran's Revolutionary Guard?

MOUSAVIAN: Yes. I would say yes, and my reason is the time vector Rouhani was responsible for nuclear issue, 2003 to 2005, he showed in practice that he really means it. I mean, Iran voluntarily accepted and implemented additional protocol ensuring the maximum level of transparency for inspections of all nuclear sites. And he even suspended enrichment activities for a period as confidence-building measures. But it was the U.S. which denied the legitimate rights of Iran on their NPT.

INSKEEP: One final thing and I'm going to let you go, Mr. Mousavian. Last Friday, I was in Tehran. I went to Friday prayers at Tehran University, an experience which I'm sure you're well familiar. Part of the ritual, almost, is to chant death to America, and yet off to the side a man introduced himself to me. He said, you know, we actually like

Americans. He went on to say he feared that there could be truly terrible relations between the two countries unless Hassan Rouhani was elected. I wonder if you believe that because of that single event, that these two countries are now on a different path that could lead to far better relations.

MOUSAVIAN: I really believe. I really believe this is the time. The U.S. has experienced three different administrations, or four. Now, there is a new era. Again, a moderate president. I hope there would be no more missed opportunities.

INSKEEP: Hossein Mousavian, thank you very much for taking the time.

MOUSAVIAN: Thank you very much.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

INSKEEP: Hossein Mousavian is a former spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiator. He's currently a visiting scholar at Princeton University. This is NPR News. Transcript provided by NPR, Copyright NPR.

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