

Change with Rouhani? Mousavian Speaks with IPS

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The Jun. 14 election of Hassan Rouhani, nicknamed the “diplomatic sheik” during his service as Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator from 2003-2005, to Iran’s presidency was met with hopeful celebrations within the country. But reactions from key world leaders have been much cooler.

While a Jul. 13 Wall Street Journal [report](#) claimed that the Obama administration would seek direct talks with its long-time adversary, it remains to be seen how far the United States will go to bring about a mutually acceptable agreement and whether or not Iran would accept it.

Israel’s prime minister, who has been warning that Iran is getting dangerously close to building a nuclear bomb for [more than two decades](#), wants the United States to increase pressure on Iran while ramping up the military threat.

“What is important is to convey to them, especially after the election, that that policy will not change. And that it’ll it be backed up by increasingly forceful sanctions and military action,” Netanyahu said Sunday on CBS’s “Face the Nation”.

But Washington has reportedly already [assured](#) the Netanyahu government that it will not decrease pressure on Iran following Rouhani’s win.

“We have told the Israelis we intend to judge the Iranians according to their actions and not according to their words,” an American official told the Israeli daily, Haaretz, on Jul. 14.

According to Ambassador [Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#), a former spokesperson for Iran’s nuclear negotiators and who worked closely with Mr. Rouhani, absent substantial modifications in Washington’s negotiating posture, little will change on the Iranian side.

IPS spoke with Mousavian, currently a research scholar at Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, about prospects for change in the Iranian nuclear issue.

Q: Your [article](#) for the Cairo Review, which was written more than a month before Mr. Rouhani’s election, has generated a lot of discussion over the suggestion that one of Iran’s options is withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Is Iran seriously considering this?

A: As I reiterated in the article published by the Cairo Review, the first and most favorable option for Iran is to continue seeking a peaceful resolution to the standoff. I explained the five major demands the P5+1 [U.S., Britain, France, China, and Russia plus Germany] made in recent nuclear talks to prevent Iran’s breakout capability and to ensure a maximum level of transparency. Iran, in return, had two major demands: lifting sanctions and recognizing Iran’s rights under the NPT. I have also proposed that the world powers and Iran place their demands within a package, to be implemented in a step-by-step manner with proportionate reciprocation.

Withdrawing from the NPT has never been Iran’s intention. The US and Israel have initiated “all options on the table”, leaving open the possibility of a military attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. This policy goes against the UN charter, the NPT, and non-proliferation, where nuclear-armed states — the U.S. and Israel — are threatening to

attack Iran, a non-nuclear weapon state. Therefore, as long as the U.S. policy of “all options on the table” remains valid, Iran as a sovereign state is forced to also have “all options on the table”.

Q: *The Obama administration claims that Iran has not responded formally to the confidence-building offer made in Almaty, Kazakhstan in February. In your opinion, why haven't they, and do you expect a formal reply after Mr. Rouhani's inauguration?*

A: The P5+1 proposal in Almaty sought maximum demands and provided the minimum in return. Rouhani's administration would be ready for a fair and balanced deal, comprising all the major demands of both parties based on the NPT, placed within a package and implemented in a step-by-step plan with proportionate reciprocation.

Q: *Is recognizing Iran's right to enrich uranium a precondition to a negotiated solution?*

A: It would be part of the package deal explained above.

Q: *There are forces in Congress that would like to implement more sanctions on Iran before Mr. Rouhani is inaugurated. What effect can this have on prospects for the negotiations?*

A: Iran would never take calls for direct talks and engagement serious as long as the U.S. continues its sanction and pressure policy. If Washington is genuinely seeking rapprochement, it needs to demonstrate that through an act of goodwill instead of through increased hostilities and animosity. Iranians place importance in U.S. actions, not just words.

Q: *What's the balance of forces as you see them in Iran with respect to those who want to take a hardline on the nuclear issue and those who are in favor of a greater flexibility, and what is the effect of sanctions on this internal debate?*

A: There are two schools of thought in Iran with respect to the nuclear approach, but there is no dispute on Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology, which includes enrichment. The P5+1 and Western approach toward Iran's nuclear dossier does however play an important role in the balance of these two schools of thought.

During the nuclear talks from 2003 to 2005 with the three European powers [UK, France and Germany], when I was a member of the negotiating team, Iran demonstrated far-reaching overtures to resolve the nuclear dispute. Iran implemented the maximum level of transparency a member-state of the NPT can commit to by accepting the Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Arrangement. We also demonstrated Iran's readiness to commit to all confidence building measures, assuring the peaceful nature of the nuclear program—forever. Regrettably, Iran and its European counterparts failed to reach a final agreement because the US continued to deny the legitimate rights of Iran under the NPT. The US inflexibility and position altered the balance of forces in Iran toward those in favor of radicalism. Therefore, if the West seeks cooperation and flexibility from Iran, it has to respond proportionally and appropriately.

The sanctions policy is only good for a lose-lose game. The Iranian nation has suffered from the sanctions, while the West has suffered from the dramatic increase of Iran's enrichment-capacity and level. Once sanctions were implemented, Iran increased the number of centrifuges from 3,000 to 12,000, the level of enrichment from 3.5% to 20%, the stockpile of enriched uranium increased approximately 800% and so on.

Q: *Mr. Rouhani referred to Israel as Israel rather than by any other name in his first press conference as president-elect. In your opinion, do you think this portends a new approach by Mr. Rouhani? What could it look like?*

A: Dr. Rouhani is not a man of radical rhetoric. He is courteous and logical and respects international norms and regulations. The key to resolving the dispute with Iran depends on whether the traditional Western policies of pressure, sanctions, threats and humiliating Iran will change to those based on respect, mutual interests and cooperation with Rouhani's administration.

Q: *In your view, what caused the Iranian government to reject the TRR fuel swap proposal in 2009 and subsequently accept it when Turkey and Brazil came forward as intermediaries in 2010?*

A: Iran never rejected the TRR fuel swap proposal of October 2009. Iran was asking for the simultaneous exchange of fuel for enriched uranium. The West was instead demanding the immediate delivery of Iranian enriched uranium with the fuel only provided to Iran after 2 years. However, in December 2009, through Mohammad ElBaradei, Iran offered a direct deal between Tehran and Washington, where Iran would deliver the enriched stockpile immediately and receive the fuel rods after two years. This concession from Iran was to open a door for direct talks and make a deal with the U.S. The U.S declined the offer. After that Iran signed the deal with Turkey and Brazil because the U.S. president encouraged the Turkish Prime Minister and Brazilian president to reach an agreement. Yet again, the U.S. declined to support the deal and instead pressed ahead with sanctions on Iran.

Q: *Why should the world have confidence in Iran now when it is believed that for many years Iran pursued “a policy of concealment” as Mr. ElBaradei once put it?*

A: In 1975, Germany signed a contract to build a nuclear power plant in Bushehr, Iran, and was paid approximately 7.8 billion DM. The project was 90% completed at the time of the 1979 Revolution. Soon after the revolution, the West's policy toward Iran was aimed at denying Iran's right to a civilian nuclear power plant — a clear violation of NPT.

In 1976, France signed a contract with Iran worth \$1.2 billion to produce the fuel for the Bushehr nuclear power plant on French soil. Once again, following the revolution, the West transgressed Iran's right to access the international fuel market, in clear violation of the NPT. Such Western policies pushed Iran toward self-sufficiency. Moreover, during Iraq's invasion of Iran (1980-88), the US and European powers provided the materials and technology for Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons against Iran, killing and injuring about 100,000 Iranians. With such a history, can Iran have confidence in the West?

Tags: [Almaty](#), [Cairo Review](#), [Congress](#), [Face the Nation](#), [IAEA](#), [Iran diplomacy](#), [iran nuclear program](#), [Iran nuclear talks](#), [Iran presidential election 2013](#), [Netanyahu](#), [NPT](#), [P5+1](#), [Rouhani](#), [Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#), [TRR Fuel Swap Proposal](#)

About the Author

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