

February 10 2015 | Last updated 2 minutes ago

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Matrix of US-Iran nuclear negotiations

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If Tehran and Washington manage to resolve the issue, a disastrous war can be averted and the door will be opened for cooperation in fighting terrorism

By Seyed Hossein Mousavian | Special to Gulf News
Published: 20:41 January 30, 2015

GULF NEWS



Image Credit: AP

FILE - In this Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2010 file photo, a worker rides a bike in front of the reactor building of the Bushehr nuclear power plant, just outside the southern city of

Bushehr, Iran. While much is known about Iran's nuclear activities from U.N. inspection visits, significant questions remain uncertain, fueling fears of worst-case scenarios and calls for new Mideast military action. (AP Photo/Mehr News Agency, Majid Asgaripour, File)

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and US Secretary of State John Kerry took a walk together in full view of the world's media during the latest round of nuclear negotiations in Geneva. Such an act by two foreign ministers who are actively confronting some of the world's most challenging issues may be considered normal and even reassuring by most politicians, as it shows the determination of two long-standing adversaries to solve outstanding crises. But this has not been the case for Iran and the US.

Mohammad Reza Naqdi, commander of Iran's Basij paramilitary force, deemed the walk as an "intolerable mistake" and likened it to "trampling on the blood of the martyrs". Moreover, interim Tehran Friday prayer leader Ayatollah Kazem Seddiqi called on the Iranian nuclear negotiators to be mindful of the West's animosity against Iran and Islam. "Walking with Kerry was not supposed to be a part of the state's diplomacy," proclaimed Seddiqi. Javad Karimi Ghodosi, a member of the parliament explained the aim of the walk as being "to instil in the public that the era in which the Iranian nation can on the basis of its own closed door foreign policy pursue diplomatic relations in the world has passed". He confirmed his faction is preparing a motion in parliament for the intensive questioning of the foreign minister over the walk. Last but not least, another cleric and member of Iran's Resistance Front stated: "If the authorities show frailty in carrying out their duties, they will definitely be kicked out of Iran ... the nation has already deported a president and executed a foreign

minister.”

Despite these criticisms, Rouhani administration spokesperson Mohammad Bagher Nobakht remained composed. “They resort to these tactics because negotiations are proceeding well and with determination,” he said.

Meanwhile, as domestic opponents of the nuclear talks in Tehran have focused their criticisms on the “strolling” issue, opponents of the on-going negotiations in Washington have dedicated themselves to the issue of “increasing sanctions” on Iran. Arguably the most important foreign policy component of President Barack Obama’s State of the Union address was his vow to veto any legislation passed by Congress that would impose new economic sanctions on Tehran. House Speaker John Boehner immediately reacted in a way that was telling, by announcing he had invited Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address both chambers of the Republican-led Congress. The White House followed by calling Boehner’s invitation a “breach of protocol” and announced that President Obama would not be meeting with the Israeli prime minister.

While some in Tehran still believe these events are merely part of a “good cop, bad cop” strategy of the United States, the reality is that the American-Israeli relationship has never been in such a disjointed state. As one seasoned American foreign policy expert told me: “The relationship between Obama and Netanyahu has reached a level of loathing. The relationship between the United States and its Arab allies has also become tense and marked by distrust because of the diplomatic process between Iran and the United States

and the possibility of peacefully resolving this crisis. They just want sanctions and war.”

Iran has always protested Washington's attachment to Israel. Now we are presented with a president of the US who intends to peacefully resolve the Iranian nuclear dispute in defiance of the desires of an Israeli prime minister, and in the face of immense pressure from a seemingly Netanyahu-aligned wing of the US Congress and the combined efforts of the Israeli, Arab and Iranian opposition lobbies. Similarly, the Iranian President is facing unprecedented domestic pressure due to his direct negotiations with the US and the friendly relations between his foreign minister and Kerry.

These circumstances are indicative of the US-Iran relationship having entered its most sensitive stage since the 1979 revolution. The potential exists for the current trend of Iran-US engagement to expand beyond the nuclear issue. If Iran and the United States manage to peacefully resolve the nuclear issue, a disastrous war would be averted and the door would be opened for cooperation in fighting against terrorism (Daesh or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and Al Qaida). This would in turn facilitate broader regional dialogue to help manage crises in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, ultimately paving the way for normalisation of diplomatic relations between Iran and the US. Such an achievement would be a historical victory for Obama and Rouhani, as well as the P5+1 (US, Britain, France, Russia, China + Germany) and the international community as a whole.

However, it is apparent that Obama and Rouhani are taking increasingly larger risks in attempting to reach this goal. In Iran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has maintained his strong support for the

Iranian negotiating team, and has said in the recent past that no one should weaken them, insult them, or accuse them of succumbing or capitulating. As long as the Supreme Leader's support remains, Rouhani will be able to deliver. However, the question remains on the American side, will Obama be able to resist the pressures he is facing to reaching a diplomatic compromise with Iran?

Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian is a research scholar at Princeton University and a former spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiators. His nuclear book, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir*, was published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His latest book, "Iran and the United States: An Insider's view on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace" was released in May 2014.