



ARTICLE

West Minus US: Hashemi Rafsanjani's foreign policy in an interview with Hossein Mousavian

Iranian Diplomacy- When Seyyed Hossein Mousavian was appointed as Iran's ambassador to Bonn, then capital of Germany, the European power became the gateway for relations between Iran and the West, minus the United States of course. However, efforts were made through this gateway to find a way for détente with the US. That proved futile in spite of Mousavian's efforts and follow-ups by then-president Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Five years ago, Mousavian told a conference in Florida that the best chance for rapprochement between Iran and the US emerged during Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency. Everyone was stunned.

Later, when he published his book, *Iran and the United States: the Failed Past and the Road to Peace*, it turned out that in 1993, Rafsanjani had even sent his brother, Mohammad Hashemi, to Germany with a letter written to inform Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Iran's readiness to put an end to two decades of hostility with the US. The US president Bill Clinton did not want that and it never happened. In an interview with Sergei Barseghian, the former ambassador and nuclear negotiator tells us about the pursuit of the 'West minus US' strategy alongside efforts to reduce animosity with the United States, under the Hashemi Rafsanjani administration.

In your book, *Iran and the United States ...*, you refer to the period when Ayatollah Khamenei became Iran's Supreme Leader and Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani became the country's president as the 'beginning of a new era'. The two Ayatollahs had different viewpoints regarding the US. How was Iran's foreign policy shaped? Was the 'West minus US' doctrine being pursued in parallel with efforts to reduce hostility with the US?

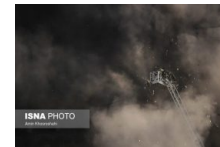
In 1990, when I was about to leave Iran for the mission to Germany, Ayatollah Hashemi told me that the Supreme Leader's policy, hence our benchmark policy, was 'West minus US'. Utmost efforts had to be taken to improve ties with Europe. In the meantime, if an opportunity came up for détente with the US, it had to be seized. At the time, all European countries involved in talks with Iran stated that the two issues of the US and Israel would have significant impact on ties between Europe and Iran. Thus, the main topics in European talks with Iran revolved around the peace process, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and human rights. These talks were often in line with Washington and Tel Aviv, blocking any improvement in ties between Iran and Europe.

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During my mission in Germany, Chancellor Helmut Kohl had been convinced about maximal expansion of ties with Iran and he was absolutely ready for it. He expressed interest to mediate in order to resolve hostilities between Iran and the US. Ayatollah Hashemi welcomed the proposition but the US President Bill Clinton turned it down. At the time, we told Kohl that Iran was ready to join a workgroup for negotiation over all the four disputed areas and cooperation on the fight against terrorism, WMD, and improved human rights. We were also to prove, in the workgroup, that Iran would never sabotage the peace process and Israel itself was the side to blame. It was a very intelligent initiative because Kohl was the most powerful European leader who was playing a pivotal role in improving the ties between Iran and Europe.

We had already managed to accelerate expansion of ties with Germany. We had lifted the credit restrictions of the German Euler Hermes insurance. Other European insurance firms had immediately followed suit. It had opened the gate for European credit to be invested in Iran's post-war reconstruction projects. In two years, 1990 to 1992, Hermes provided covers for Iran worth approximately DM14b. Kohl and Hashemi had begun regular telephone conversations. It was the first direct and regular conversation between a European leader and Iran's president. I tried to elicit the German side's evaluation after each conversation. I daresay, no exaggeration intended, that Mr. Kohl was drawn to Hashemi after the first conversation and enthusiastically pursued the continuation of the talks. Tehran welcomed Kohl's proposition for conflict resolution between Iran and the US, giving him a constructive offer. When the US rejected the initiative, it became clear that US did want hostility with Iran and it was not the other way around. Iran's goodwill and the test of mediation led German officials to show more resistance against pressures from the US.

From Hashemi Rafsanjani's point of view, Germany was the springboard for establishing ties with Europe. Even Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher had told you that Hashemi Rafsanjani was one of the most intelligent and competent leaders he had worked with, during his sixteen-year term. What happened that Germany became the beginning of the end to ties between Iran and the West at the end of Hashemi's presidential term, following the Mykonos incident?

Yes. It was in October 1990 when I visited Mr. Hashemi before my departure for Germany. He said Germany is the gateway of establishing ties with Europe for us and our ties with Europe would be the major part of relations with the West. From then on to September 1993 when the Mykonos crisis took place, mutual relations between Iran and Germany expanded miraculously fast. In about two years, joint economic and cultural committees were revived, a large number of ministers made visits, and economic ties reached an unprecedented DM10 billion record, and so on. The assassination of Shapour Bakhtiar in Paris and Kurdish leaders in the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin were bombs placed under the foundation of modern Iran-Germany and Iran-Europe relations.

However, not only did we prevent the collapse of relations, we also expanded the ties in spite of Mykonos trials. Ayatollah Hashemi practically played a key role in the process of crisis management and continued expansion of ties. Iran's Intelligence Minister [Ali Fallahian] visited Germany after the Mykonos assassinations- first visit ever made by an Iranian Intelligence Minister to Europe and a NATO state. German ambassadors in Washington, London, and Tel Aviv were summoned in protest. The initiative was an important beginning that led to a significant shift in security ties between Iran and Europe/NATO.

However, our problems were not limited to Mykonos assassinations. Events like the assassination of Farrokhzad, the discovery of a missile cargo destined to Munich, the Faraj Sarkohi episode, and constant arrests of German nationals in Iran, were grenades that shook the foundations of a new chapter in relations between Iran and Germany, and Europe. Foreign Minister Mr. Velayati, deputy minister Mr. Vaezi, and all ambassadors of Iran in Europe made fruitful efforts to realize our diplomatic strategy. Nonetheless, the concomitance of these bitter events not only injured 'soldiers of the diplomatic front' that worked for improvement of ties with Europe, but also crippled the establishment's strategy of 'West minus US'.

In 2011, you told a conference in Florida that the best chance for rapprochement between Iran and the US emerged during Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency. Given Hashemi Rafsanjani's power and influence inside Iran, could one conclude that the American side failed to seize the opportunity?

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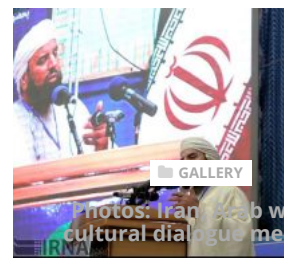
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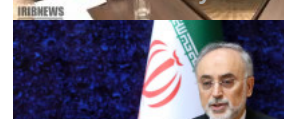
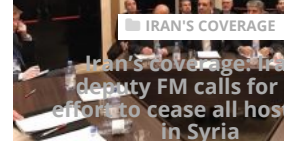
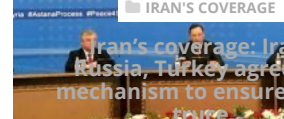


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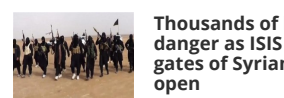
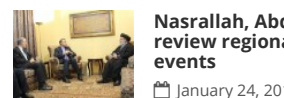
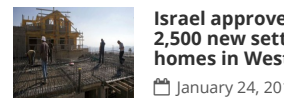
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Yes, because the post-war era had begun. The era coincided with the leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei and presidency of Mr. Hashemi. These two figures were the main bulwarks of the Revolution after the death of Imam Khomeini. The [new] Supreme Leader had no trust in the US and deemed every effort futile. Ayatollah Hashemi took some big steps to expand ties with Russia, China, and India. At the same time, the 'West minus US' strategy was being pursued in full force. Meanwhile, Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani was always looking for ways to reduce US hostility against Iran.

US' call on Iran to help release Western and American hostages [in Lebanon] was the first chance to test the chances and Ayatollah Hashemi did not turn it down. With the Supreme Leader's green light, Iran used its utmost capacity and released the hostages. Mr. Vaezi and I were in charge. The commander of IRGC Quds Force and the Intelligence Ministry also collaborated in full capacity. After the hostages were released, European countries expressed gratitude and responded with goodwill in expanding ties with Iran. However, the US did not show reciprocal goodwill and increased its hostility instead. If the Americans demonstrated goodwill at the time, a domino effect would launch and the situation would change.

How do you evaluate Hashemi Rafsanjani's role in the synthesis of the Islamic Republic's diplomacy? How did his realism and pragmatism shape Iran's post-war diplomacy?

During the war with Iraq, almost all Eastern and Western powers sided with the aggressor [i.e. Iraq] and against Iran, the victim of the invasion. Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani took control of the country's executive affairs after the war and revolutionized [our] relations with the Muslim World, Russia, India, China, Europe, and other countries (excluding the US and Israel). These landmark achievements were not possible without support from the Supreme Leader.

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran-US relations, Seyed Hossein Mousavian January 19, 2017 no comments

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