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Report

No longer a zero-sum game between Tehran and Washington



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Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (right) and his American counterpart, Barack Obama [Al Jazeera]

Introduction

Iran's foreign policy rhetoric exemplifies the idea that international politics is no longer a zero-sum game, but a multidimensional arena in which competition and cooperation often occur simultaneously. Gone is the age of 'blood feuds' and world leaders are expected to lead in 'turning threats into opportunities', said the Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, in his recent op-ed in the Washington Post. (1) Iran is now seeking to turn the threats facing it into opportunities, and, to this end, it employs a strategy of joining competition and cooperation in the multiple arenas of conflict in which it has become a key player. For example, Iran is following in the footsteps of Russia in demonstrating power and influence in Syria, with a subtle warning to the USA not to sideline it during crisis resolution arrangements.

Iran realises that it will not be able to 'turn threats into opportunities' unless it changes its language of engagement and amends foreign policy, which is the first step towards turning a new page in its relations with the USA, the West in general, and even with Israel. Rouhani started his term by wishing Jews around the world 'Shana Tova' – Happy New Year – on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. The message was relayed via Rouhani's Twitter account, which he has used since May 2013 for his election campaign. Later, the president chose a Jewish member of the Iranian Parliament, Ciamak Moresadegh, to join him on his visit to New York. Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad

Javad Zarif, also tweeted messages indicating that his country did not deny the Jewish holocaust, and that the man who had denied the holocaust, referring to the former president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad,(2) had left office.

Is it Rouhani's decision?

One cannot help but wonder whether this change is exclusively associated with Rouhani's platform that promised major change in Iran's foreign policy, or whether Iranian officials located in various decisionmaking positions have become convinced that this change is necessary.

At first glance, the entire subject seems to revolve around a new foreign policy imposed by Rouhani and emphasised by his mentor, Hashemi Rafsanjani, who has consistently argued for direct talks with the USA. Some argue that a recent development herald a victory for Rafsanjani's policy positions, indicating that he is again involved in day-to-day politics, and is stronger than before – despite the harassment and isolation that he experienced over the past few years.

However, negotiations with the USA, which may lead to the current thirty-year impasse being replaced by a more open and relaxed relationship, needs to be accepted by more than one political trend in order to reach a general agreement, and a situation where all political forces are engaged in the discussion. Simultaneously, the pivotal role for the 'House of the Supreme Leader', Ali Khamenei, needs to be asserted. This is the common term used in Iran to refer to the political, security and military team surrounding and managed by Khamenei. This group is regarded as the most influential political decisionmaking power in Iran.

The dominant Iranian rhetoric prior to Rouhani's election regarded the USA as 'arrogant and decadent', and projected Iran as supporting the weak against the arrogant. This rhetoric has begun undergoing a process of review. There has also been, over the past two years, reinterpretation of the statements of the Islamic Republic's first leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, with claims that he did not approve of the invasion of the US embassy in Tehran by Iranian students in 1979, and that he did not entirely oppose relations with the USA. It is possible that Rouhani was deemed the ideal candidate to drive this change and to achieve its purpose.

This change is also noticeable in the rhetoric of the current Leader, Ali Khamenei, which used to dismiss US desires for negotiations as mere ruses.(3) He used to mock arguments that claimed that 'negotiations will eliminate rivalry'; in his opinion, rivalry could not be eliminated through negotiation. On more than one occasion, he explained

his reasons for refusing the offer of talks by concluding that after analysing the experiences of other countries and the advice of experts, Iran had decided that negotiating with the USA would compromise Iranian national interests. (4) He attributed this to US arrogance; 'when an arrogant [country] conducts talks with another country, it does not mean the former will accept the latter's point of view'. Furthermore, Khamenei believes that negotiating with 'a country that allocates a budget to overthrowing the ruling regime in Iran is simply foolish and treacherous.'(5)

In the past year, Khamenei has repeatedly declared that he had not explicitly denied the possibility of relations with the USA, and that he had deliberately kept the door open to allow for the possibility of such relations had they been in Iran's interests. In a speech he gave to Iran's cultural elite in Yazd City in 2007, he said, 'For the time being, relations with the US do not benefit Iran. I will be the first person to endorse such relations, the day that they are useful to the Iranian people.'(6) Prior to the recent presidential elections, extremist groups in Iran argued that the issue of USA-Iran relations can be decided only by the Supreme Leader. The implication was that a green light from Khamenei for Iran to pursue such relations would result in a change in the Iranian rhetoric towards the US. Ahmadinejad attempted to make progress on this front through unilateral decisions, without consulting the Supreme Leader.

The increased potential for the development of USA-Iran relations comes at a time when the Iranian media is speculating about an imminent announcement of direct negotiations between the two countries. Some Iranian diplomats say a good time to announce talks will be early next year. These developments follow leaked news about meetings between the parties, and rumours of a secret visit to Washington by Khamenei's advisor and former foreign minister, Ali Akbar Velayati, escorted by the head of the intelligence division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The rumours surfaced simultaneously with declarations to the western press about a wide-scale negotiation that will discuss various issues of dispute. These were put forward by the speaker of the Iranian parliament, Ali Larijani, a Khamenei ally. This series of declarations, leaks and rumours indicates that discussions about direct negotiations only recap previous negotiations conducted in European countries such as Switzerland and Germany, and which were started by Khamenei himself. The ground has been prepared, and Rouhani's task now is to seal the deal, employing his charm and flexibility in negotiation and diplomacy.

It is clear that Rouhani's decision to reconcile with the USA is not only his decision, but is based on his having received Khamenei's approval. This makes it more difficult for opponents of negotiations with the USA to attack Rouhani or place obstacles in his path.

Thus the environment on this issue is different from that which characterised the presidency of Ahmadinejad or his predecessor, Mohammad Khatami. Despite some provocative statements – such as his questioning of the holocaust – Ahmadinejad also wanted to change the nature of relations with the USA and open up channels of dialogue. And when Khatami attempted to end the standoff with the USA, he was confronted with marchers in protests carrying coffins in an attempt to condemn the notion of such dialogue.

A few days before Rouhani's Washington Post op-ed was published, and before Khamenei's statements on 'heroic flexibility' in diplomacy, Hossein Mousavian, who served on Iran's nuclear diplomacy negotiations team, and who is a close ally of Rafsanjani, disclosed that Rouhani had obtained a mandate from Khamenei to conduct direct negotiations with the USA.(7)

The revealing article

Rouhani's Washington Post op-ed, titled 'Why Iran seeks constructive engagement' (8) reveals numerous underlying causes for this change in the Iranian approach. Rouhani starts his article by asserting that his platform of 'prudence and hope' gained a broad, popular mandate in Iran, thus committing him further to his promises of change in domestic and international affairs. As such, he has prioritised economic reform, the needs of the Iranians, and Iran's international position. He believes that fulfilling these goals is jointly associated with reducing tension with the USA and the West.

Economic necessities

The Iranian economy seems to be the main driver in this new approach. For many years, Iran was preoccupied with the term 'resistance economy', which was coined by Khamenei as a response and a solution to the grave crisis in which economic sanctions had plunged the Iranian economy. He has now coined a new term, to indicate a new approach to the crisis – 'heroic flexibility' in diplomacy.(9) The resistance economy is no longer able to circumvent and bear the heavy burden of increasing levels of sanctions; Iran's economic figures indicators provide a sharp view of the critical situation confronting the country. Iran has not made much progress in its economic growth rate over the past two years, thus rendering this period economic the worst for Iran since the eight-year Iran-Iraq war which lasted from 1980 to 1988. According to the Research Center of the Majlis (Iran's parliament, also known as the Islamic Consultative Assembly), economic growth has languished at zero per cent over the past two years, seriously threatening that the country will not be able to achieve its 2025 plan which aims to develop the economy in various fields and to achieve an economic growth rate of eight per cent by 2025.(10) The low economic growth occurred despite large oil

revenues earned by Iran, totalling US \$ 720 billion over the past eight years, during Ahmadinejad's term. This exceeded the revenues earned during the rule of his three predecessors, when the total oil revenue was US \$ 432.(11)

At the same time, the inflation rate has been going up, and the Central Bank announced that inflation had reached forty-five per cent in June 2013,(12) along with a steadily weakening currency. In late 2011, the Iranian Rial lost two thirds of its value against the US dollar as a result of western sanctions targeting oil exports and the banking sector. The country was not able to receive its revenues in dollars and Iran witnessed a vigorous currency trade on the black market.

No longer a zero-sum game

Rouhani believes that 'international politics is no longer a zero-sum game but a multidimensional arena in which cooperation and competition often occur simultaneously. Gone is the age of blood feuds.' (13) Rouhani believes it is time for coexistence, and for all parties to end the 'standoff and revenge' approach and accept the Islamic Republic rather than overthrow it. (14) Rouhani discusses the many challenges facing the international community in this new era – terrorism, extremism, foreign military interference, drug trafficking, cybercrime and cultural encroachment – all within a framework that emphasises hard power and the use of brute force. (15) He also condemns US policy in this regard, mentioning 'foreign military interference' as a clear indication of Iran's concerns over the intents of the West. (16) On the one hand, it shows Rouhani's concern, and, on the other, it may be a deliberate attempt to please the more hardline element in Iran that argues that US intervention – under the pretext of 'fighting terrorism' – has exacerbated problems globally and broadened the cycle of violence. Whatever the case, fear over military intervention is the most prominent issue in relations between the two countries. Rouhani also reminds the USA that Ahmadinejad left the decisionmaking position, just as George W Bush left office, and that a new phase is expected to begin. In his Washington Post article, Rouhani further states that Iran wants the USA to recognise that the Islamic Republic is a legitimate state, and the USA should thus cease any attempts to overthrow it.

Rouhani adopts a position on Syria that is somewhat different from that of its Russian ally. Although he does not condemn Asad for the 21 August chemical weapons' attacks, he also does not blame the rebels – as Russia did. This represents a significant retreat from an all-embracing support for Asad. It does not mean, however, that Iran will radically change its policy towards Syria, even when proposing to be the mediator between the parties to the dispute.

Conclusion

At the Revolutionary Guard Corps' meeting where Khamenei addressed this issue, he did not use the term 'heroic flexibility' in diplomacy in vain. He knows full well that the IRGC is an institution that has played critical political, security and economic roles in addition to its military role, thus making it the institution most capable of defeating any attempts at reconciliation with the USA. He deliberately spoke against their interference in politics. A day earlier, Rouhani had made a similar request and similar comments. This indicates a top-level decision that can change the approach of the Revolutionary Guard Corps. At the same time, Iran's intelligence minister, Mahmoud Alavi, held intensive meetings with the most senior religious authorities in the cities of Qom and Mashhad. Although the content of the meetings was not disclosed, there are indications that he informed them of Iran's position on developments on the international scene, couched within a discussion of the interests of the Islamic Republic.(17)

Rouhani discusses a two-pronged approach of 'competition and cooperation'. Khamenei, on the other hand, does not disregard the existing conflict. While he said that Iran's foreign policy was 'just like a wrestler that, due to technical reasons, shows flexibility' he adds that Iranians 'must not forget who his opponent and enemy is'. Furthermore, he said that even if 'the diplomacy arena involved smiling, politely requesting for and conducting negotiations, it must be read within the framework of key challenges.'

The Iranian president did not mention potential concessions on the nuclear issue, but he stressed the need for dialogue 'between two parties looking for a way out, and not only two players seeking to score points against each other'. The Iranian proposal for dialogue with the USA and the West seems to include a set of themes, most prominent of which are:

- 1- The US must admit that its historical policies have failed to address conflicts in the region;
- 2- The opportunity has arisen to cooperatively approach many issues, including confronting al-Qa'ida;
- 3- Addressing major problems and injustices must be done through solutions endorsed by all parties. This possibly refers to the Palestinian issue, and indicates that Iran might accept a solution that pleases the Palestinian side;
- 4- Dialogue and the proposal of negotiated- solutions regarding Syria and Bahrain. In this regard, however, since Iran is considered a party in the conflict, it is not an unbiased mediator; and

- 5- The bottom line: that Iran seems to believe more than before in the opportunity for cooperation and dialogue with the USA, and that the time for this is ripe, both for Washington and Tehran.
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