

EXPERT VIEW

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Rowhani's Election and Implications for Israel

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KEY POINTS

- Hassan Rowhani was the most critical of the remaining candidates towards Iran's recent nuclear policy, and advocated a less confrontational stance towards the West, which would allow Iran's economic situation to improve.
- The fact that the Supreme Leader allowed Rowhani's victory to stand may reflect the extent of the economic pressure created due to sanctions, and an acceptance in the regime of the need to address internal concerns and reduce tensions with the West, with a less confrontational nuclear policy.
- The extremist rhetoric of Ahmadinejad contributed to the isolation of Iran which Israel sought over its nuclear programme, and his replacement with a more diplomatic leader has removed a liability for Iran's international relations. At the same time, the support received by Rowhani could be seen as positive for Israel, indicating that the Iranian people want a different approach.
- The measure of whether Iran is ready to change its policies will ultimately be judged according to its actions, and the international diplomatic pressure is unlikely to let up without clear changes of behaviour in its nuclear programme.

WHO IS HASSAN ROWHANI?

The election of Hassan Rowhani marks a new chapter in Iran's post revolution history. The 64 year old cleric was the most moderate among the six remaining candidates in the Iranian presidential elections. Of all those left in the running, his narrative was the most challenging to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, especially regarding the nuclear program.

In this area, the candidate who seemed to have the closest view to Khamenei was his chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili. While he promoted

"resistance"¹ against pressure and advocated standing up to the world powers, Rowhani provided the alternative view. He advocated pragmatism and close cooperation with the international community. The example he gave to justify this was his own negotiations with the E3 powers (UK, France and Germany) in 2003. According to Rowhani, his cooperation with the E3 was so close that they promised to veto any UN resolutions at the Security Council. Such close cooperation, also allowed Iran to make advances in the nuclear fuel cycle while ensuring that Iran's file was not referred to the UN Security Council, preventing international sanctions being imposed on Iran.²

This is in direct contrast to Iran's current uncompromising policies, which have meant tough sanctions and unprecedented isolation, and which have turned Iran's nuclear programme into a serious liability, both diplomatically and economically. "We don't like that because of Natanz (one of Iran's main enrichment centres) there are 100 factories which are no longer working," was an example of a sound bite he used to drive this point home. "It's nice that while centrifuges are working, the country is also working" was another of his favourite lines to push back against the "resistance" narrative of Jalili, which advocated continuation of the status quo.³

WHAT EXPLAINS ROWHANI'S VICTORY?

Criticising Jalili's nuclear policies is akin to criticising the Supreme Leader's nuclear policies, albeit indirectly. Jalili does not set Iran's nuclear policies, he just carries out the orders of the Supreme Leader. So the question is: why would the Supreme Leader allow someone who criticised his approach publicly, even if indirectly, to become president? Why not falsify the results, as in 2009, and appoint a 'yes man' like Jalili or a close associate such as Tehran Mayor Qalibaf? Why go through all the expected infighting between Rowhani, who is backed by leading pragmatist Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and reformist Mohammad Khatami, both

¹ Bozorgmehr, Najmeh; Iran's election frontrunner berated on nuclear policy in debate; *Financial Times*; 07/06/2013.

² The first election documentary of Hassan Rowhani; www.youtube.com; June 2013 [in Persian].

³ Ibid.

of whom have a bad relationship with Khamenei's biggest ally, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC)?

There are several possible explanations. One of them is that the regime lost much legitimacy and support among the masses after the uprisings of 2009. By allowing Rowhani to win, Ayatollah Khamenei is trying to repair that damage. The recent uprisings in the Arab world, especially Syria, are bound to have made regime officials worried. But another explanation worthy of particular attention relates to a statement made by Iran's popular and influential former president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. After his disqualification from the elections, he stated that Iran needs a president who can manage the economy, given that Iran currently owes its banks and contractors the equivalent of \$200 billion dollars.⁴

To put this into context, the estimated total damage to Iran's economy of eight years of fighting in the Iran-Iraq War was \$300-500 billion. The situation is set to get worse, with the continuation of existing sanctions and the possible imposition of new ones. Ayatollah Khamenei's current nuclear policies are pushing Iran's economy to its very limits, meaning something must be done, and sooner rather than later.

Khamenei has not turned into a democrat. He is still the same person who oversaw the killings after the 2009 election, the imprisoning and torturing of protesters, and the house arrest of reformist candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi which continues to this day. He is still an unelected official who has the final word over Iran's the nuclear programme, domestic political reform and foreign policy. Furthermore, he also personally questioned the authenticity of the Holocaust's gas chambers three years before Ahmadinejad entered office⁵ in addition to stating publicly that the Iranian regime is not just against the Israeli government, but also against its people.⁶

⁴ Hashemi Rafsanjani; They don't understand what they are doing; *Saham News*; 22/05/2013 (in Persian).

⁵ Khamenei, Ali; Statements in meeting with participants in the international congress of international press in support of the Palestinian Intifada; <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/>; 31/01/2002 (in Persian).

⁶ Reaction of Ayatollah Khamenei to Jalili's controversial statements; *BBC Persian*; 19/09/2008.

It is difficult, therefore, to believe that he ultimately allowed Rowhani to become president for any other reason than to get Iran out of its current economic mess, which is getting worst by the day. Rowhani will be expected to do that by managing the economy domestically in a more structured and responsible manner, ending Ahmadinejad's populist fiscal policies. He is also likely to bring a cadre of professional technocrats with him, probably some of the best the Iranian government has seen for the last eight years. At least as important, it is possible that Rowhani will be given a mandate to improve relations with the West by working more closely with the IAEA.

WHAT DOES THE RESULT MEAN FOR ISRAEL?

For Israel, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad could be considered, ironically, a diplomatic asset. Former Mossad chief Shabtai Shavit described Ahmadinejad as being better than any agent which Mossad could create in order to isolate Iran and to wreak domestic havoc within the regime.⁷ With his belligerent rhetoric, which included public calls for Israel's elimination as well as denial of the Holocaust, Ahmadinejad did more to isolate Iran than Israel ever could.

When it comes to diplomacy and Iran's image abroad, Rowhani is almost everything that Ahmadinejad was not. He is known as a capable diplomat. Former British foreign secretary Jack Straw remembers him especially for his pragmatism as well as being "naturally courteous, respectful, and engaged".⁸ Rowhani believes in reconciliation with the West instead of isolation and has declared himself an "ardent enemy of extremism." This indicates he will shift away from Ahmadinejad's reprehensible holocaust denial and confrontational attitude towards the West, which is likely to make him more palatable to EU and other Western leaders.

But whilst the potential for the new president to improve Iran's relations with the West may be a source of concern to Israel, the election of Rowhani could also be the harbinger of good news. By voting

⁷ Quoted in Melman, Yossi and Javedanfar, Meir; *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran* (Basic Books, 2008).

⁸ Straw, Jack; *Iran's new leader offers hope for the region*; *Daily Telegraph*; 16/06/2013.

for Rowhani the people of Iran sent a clear message to the Supreme Leader that they have had enough of Khamenei-backed nuclear policies. They want to have a nuclear program but also a functioning economy. This means a less confrontational nuclear policy and real diplomacy with the West, instead of Jalili's monologues.

But what is the standard by which to judge whether this is really a new chapter in Iran's history? It would mean instead of stonewalling, we would now see Iran start answering important questions about its previous nuclear activities, in particular its research on weaponisation. After years of evasion, real concrete action in terms of Iran's cooperation with the IAEA, and not just conciliatory words, will be required to remove suspicion and restore transparency. It would also mean a more conciliatory approach in the talks with the P5+1, aimed at addressing Iran's growing enrichment capacity and its stockpile of enriched uranium, which is approaching the red line defined by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

HOW WILL THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY REACT?

Until such time as Iran changes its current nuclear strategy, especially its dealings with the IAEA, it is unlikely that sanctions will be lifted. Today, it is not just Israel which does not want the regime to have nuclear weapons. Eight years of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president have helped create a strong Western consensus which has translated into EU oil sanctions. Meanwhile Iran's relations with the Persian Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, have worsened considerably. This is due to various reasons, not least the UN tribunal which accused Iran's ally Hezbollah of being behind the assassination of Rafiq Hariri.

The most sensitive issue between Iran and the Sunni states today is Syria. The region's Sunni countries, including Turkey, see the Iranian regime as the co-sponsor of one of the biggest massacres of their kin in recent history. With casualties in Syria nearing 100,000, tensions between Iran and Sunni countries in the region, especially Saudi Arabia and Turkey, are increasing, and are unlikely to subside any time soon.

Behind the scenes in Brussels and Washington, Saudi Arabia is likely to call for maintaining the pressure, and will continue to help out by using the sale of its own oil as replacement for that of Iran.

Meanwhile Russia and China are unlikely to turn against sanctions until Iran's differences with the IAEA have been resolved, as it could lead to further political confrontations not only with the US and EU, but with Arab states in the Gulf. Both Russia and China currently have bigger problems to deal with and are likely to try and avoid such headaches.

CONCLUSION

The election of Rowhani can be interpreted in several ways. First and foremost it is a sign that the people of Iran want more moderation in government policies, at home and abroad. By allowing Rowhani to be elected instead of disqualifying him like Rafsanjani, or falsifying votes against him as was the case with Mousavi in 2009, Ayatollah Khamenei has also shown that with Iran under considerable economic pressure, he wants to try a number of changes. These include reducing gaps within the regime, restoring legitimacy with the people of Iran and gradual improvement in relations with the West. The election of Rowhani may therefore offer the promise of a welcome change, though Israeli policy makers, like those in the US and European capitals, will wait to judge the new Iranian government upon its actions.

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