



TEHRAN CALLING

Understanding a New Iranian Leadership

Cornelius Adebahr



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About the Author

Cornelius Adebahr is an associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, DC. His research focuses on European foreign policy in a broad sense, from integrating the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic structures to the European Union's role in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program to the impact of the economic crisis on Europe's global role.

Since 2000, Adebahr has been the owner of a political consultancy in Berlin. His clients include major private foundations as well as academic institutions and nonprofit associations. In addition, he is an associate fellow at the Research Institute of the German Council on Foreign Relations, where he consults on a project supporting think tanks in the Western Balkans that is funded by the German Foreign Office.

He is a frequent commentator for major international print, radio, and television media outlets, including the *New York Times*, Reuters, and the BBC. He has also testified before the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament and provided written evidence to the UK House of Lords.

Summary

After years of tension, sanctions, and deadlocked negotiations, Hassan Rouhani, Iran's relatively moderate new president, has provided an opening for improved relations between the Islamic Republic and the West. While Rouhani has not ushered in a new Iran, Tehran has adopted a more conciliatory tone on its nuclear program since he took office. This shift is more than just talk, but the West will have to carefully calibrate its response to determine whether Rouhani's changed rhetoric signals the beginning of a new direction for Iran.

Key Themes

- Tehran's pursuit of a nuclear program can only be understood by looking at all four dimensions of Iranian politics—power, ideology, norms, and communication.
- Iran's power dynamics and ideology are fueled by a fundamental antagonism with the West, making compromise in these areas unlikely.
- Iran does not accept all the norms governing today's international system, but it claims to advance the aims of global nonproliferation.
- Rouhani has adopted a new approach to communication, indicating that Iran is willing to increase its nuclear transparency, exploring new channels of communication with the West, and showing signs of wanting to open Iran up to the world.
- Iran has concluded an interim nuclear agreement with several global powers, which is a positive step toward resolving the nuclear dispute and perhaps toward improving relations more broadly.

Implications for Western Policymakers

Take Rouhani's words seriously, but judge him by his deeds. Rouhani's rhetoric suggests an opening for more productive nuclear negotiations. Iran must follow these words with verifiable, tangible nuclear concessions.

Broaden the scope of negotiations with Iran. Faithfully implementing the interim nuclear agreement will build trust between Tehran and the West and

make it possible to expand discussions with the aim of finding common ground on other shared norms that can help improve relations.

Promote norms that Iran values and that advance nonproliferation aims.

Reinvigorating attempts to establish a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East and advance global nonproliferation will give Iran face-saving ways to frame concessions it must make as part of its stated commitments.

Delay attempts at U.S.-Iranian rapprochement. There is not enough bilateral trust for such a bold step, especially among hardliners in both countries.

Improve communication strategies. The West's attempts to convince the world—and especially the Middle East—that its approach to the Iranian nuclear issue is reasonable have fallen short. It will need to articulate this position more persuasively to maintain international support for Western objectives in Iran.

Introduction

It is clear what the international community wants from Iran: no nuclear bomb. Yet even after a decade of on-and-off negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, of threats and counterthreats, few people can claim to know what Iran—or, more specifically, its leadership—wants.

Many decisionmakers on both sides of the Atlantic readily content themselves with believing that Iran wants the bomb. Although this assumption has not yet been confirmed, its omnipresence overshadows the many other potential motivations that could be driving Iran to pursue a scientific and technological nuclear program that meets such extraordinary international pressure. The election of Hassan Rouhani as the country's new president has not shed more light on these drivers.

What has changed since Rouhani took office in August 2013 is the tone of the conversation. Contrary to what Iran's critics argue, this means more than “just talk.” There are four dimensions of the Islamic Republic's approach to international politics—power, ideology, norms, and communication. The fourth, communication, has been extremely important for Iran. A detailed analysis of Rouhani's first one hundred days in office through this four-dimensional lens reveals that he has changed how Iran communicates, which may be a way to promote further changes in the country's norm dimension—that is, it may provide an opening to finding an agreement on Iran's nuclear program.

Given that opposition to the West in general and to the United States in particular is built into Iran's power structure and ideology, the West should see any compromise between the international community and Tehran on Iran's nuclear program as a major policy success. An interim deal in which Iran agreed to temporarily suspend its nuclear program should therefore be seen as an important—even historic—first step.

The continuing negotiations on Iran's nuclear program will only produce a lasting agreement if both sides understand the other's needs and motivations. Reaching this sort of understanding will require Western policymakers to untangle the politics of Iran, a deeply enigmatic country. Assessing how much has really changed with the passing of the baton from former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Rouhani is a first step toward gaining the level of insight necessary to enrich the transatlantic debate on how to solve this primary-order international conflict.

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Understanding Iran

The Iranian economy is in shambles. With inflation running wild, the country's oil exports—its main source of revenue—have fallen by half over the past two years, and international financial transactions have been cut off entirely. Amid all this and near-complete isolation by the West, how can the Iranian regime survive one more day?

The regime's collapse may be just around the corner, in the same way that it was hard to predict when the Soviet Union would implode—or when the Arab Spring would erupt, for that matter. For now, however, all signs point toward an even tighter grip on power by the ruling Islamist elite. And the election of a “moderate,” as many consider Rouhani, may well reinforce this trend.

The Iranian presidential election that took place in June 2013 can be read in (at least) two ways. On the one hand, it showed that the Iranian population cares a great deal about the state of the country, including its international standing. Iranians called for limited change by voting against hardline candidates such as the former nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, whose main campaign promise was “more resistance,” and handing a first-round victory to the only moderate candidate, Rouhani. On the other hand, far from providing a platform for restaging the protests that followed the disputed 2009 presidential election—which evolved into the opposition Green Movement that demanded Ahmadinejad's removal—the peaceful 2013 vote demonstrated Iranians' willingness to stay within the boundaries set by the regime.

Rouhani may have been elected by the people, yet it was the establishment that first selected him via the Guardian Council, an influential legislative-judicial body constitutionally charged with vetting all presidential candidates and supervising elections as well as approving all of parliament's legislation. This council also accepted his first-round victory. It remains unclear whether Rouhani's success was a mistake because the elite initially believed he was harmless or part of a strategy because the establishment thought his moderate approach might help Iran overcome its current difficulties without fundamentally transforming the state.

It also remains to be seen whether Rouhani can deliver on his election promise to further political and social liberties, such as relaxing the Islamic dress code and freeing political prisoners. His other campaign promise, to seek better relations with the world in order to reduce external economic pressure and sanctions, rests mainly on Iran's approach to the nuclear negotiations.

Tehran's Nuclear Interests

In nuclear negotiations, it is obvious what the international community wants but far less clear what Iran's stakes actually are. Numerous resolutions of both the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the United Nations (UN) Security Council underscore that “the world”

wants Iran to refrain from any nonpeaceful nuclear activity. The six powers mandated by the UN to lead the talks—the five permanent Security Council members, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, plus Germany (the P5+1)—are not the only states with an interest in preventing Iran from seeking a nuclear weapon. Israel first and foremost but also neighboring Arab countries and Turkey all want Iran's nuclear program to be nonmilitary lest a regional nuclear arms race begin.

The “no bomb” bottom line is therefore the lowest common denominator for the international community, not only for policymakers but also for the wider public.¹ Granted, individual countries may have additional domestic, geostrategic, or other interests at stake in the Iran nuclear dispute. But if Tehran were to address the world's shared concern by being totally transparent about its nuclear intentions, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for any individual country to claim international legitimacy for policies advancing its specific interests in achieving regional dominance or promoting regime change in Tehran.

Given this common goal, how is it possible that neither offers nor threats have been able to persuade Iran to renounce its nuclear program? It would be easy to assume that the long-standing deadlock is a result of directly opposing interests, that is, that the Iranian leadership actually aims to pursue nonpeaceful nuclear activities. After all, the country's clandestine nuclear activities were uncovered a little more than a decade ago.² However, while publicized intelligence points to a military dimension until 2003, the same cannot be said of more recent years.³ If only for analytical purposes, it could be beneficial to explore what other interests Iran might have in pursuing a confrontational course on the nuclear issue.

The problem is that there are a number of voices emanating from the regime, each giving its own view on important foreign policy issues. These voices include the supreme leader, the president, the parliament with its powerful speaker, the regular armed forces, and the paramilitary Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Any attempt to decipher the country's broader intentions therefore must take into account various internal actors.

Assuming that Iran's motivations for pursuing its controversial nuclear program go beyond the basic premise that “it's all about the bomb” raises a number of questions. First, what are the motivational factors that determine Iran's actions on the nuclear file? Second, what strategic calculations does the regime make in order to justify its persistence in the face of international pressure? Third, is compromise an option for the regime, including its newly elected president and, crucially, the supreme leader? And finally, where do other actors stand?

Various authors have already analyzed those motivations, such as the country's security concerns, that derive from the trauma of the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980 as much as from the current presence of U.S. troops in virtually all of Iran's neighbors, combined with previous American efforts at regime change.

Other studies have concentrated on Iran's regional and global ambitions, for example its dominance of the Persian Gulf and its vast resources, its influence in the Middle East, and its desire to be recognized as a world power.⁴ However, these factors cannot fully explain the intransigence with which Iran continues to defy international calls to come clean about its nuclear program.

Answering that question requires a broader and more systematic approach, combining firsthand insights from Iran with a well-developed methodology of political analysis. To this end, Iran's stance can be better understood through the lens of its power, ideology, norms, and communication—the basic characteristics of political reality.

According to a classical definition by German philosopher Max Weber, power is the ability to realize one's will toward others even against their opposition.⁵ Ideology can best be described as a certain worldview (or *weltanschauung*) that influences a decisionmaker's perception by acting as an "ideological filter." Norms are the rules—such as laws, customs, and taboos—that govern social and political reality and provide a framework for what is commonly binding. They are the result of political processes. Finally, communication is the exchange of information and meanings. With regard to politics, communication processes are at the core of constructing political reality.

This analytical schema should help comb through the multitude of impressions and assumptions that an attentive observer would have of Iran.

The objective of such a broad analysis is to contribute to reasonable and fact-based policymaking toward Iran, especially on the part of the transatlantic partners. Western policymakers should engage in a debate on what they could offer Iran in a comprehensive sense beyond outlining

what Iran should do to earn the West's trust. While the immediate aim is to get Iran to adopt a policy of full nuclear transparency with effective international safeguards, the ultimate goal would be to reach an agreement that both sides perceive as beneficial to their interests.

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The World According to Tehran

Power

There are three types of power—implementation, veto, and communicative—by which Iran's influence can be measured. First, Tehran's implementation power, or its ability to execute policies that advance its national interests, is considerably hampered by sanctions. However, the country still enjoys the freedom to pursue a number of its policies. It has continued and improved uranium enrichment despite international countermeasures; it is the most important

supporter of Hezbollah and a strategic ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; and it has been crucial in shaping the post-American order in Iraq.

Second, Iran's global veto power would be small if it were not for two permanent members of the UN Security Council that have often advanced Iranian objectives through their own veto powers. Russian and Chinese support has allowed the Iranian regime to so far fend off global attempts to implement a stricter sanctions regime. The measures that really bite were passed by the European Union (EU) and the United States, not the UN. Russia and China are gambling, of course, because they do not want to see a nuclear-armed Iran either. But for them, the Iran nuclear issue is an opportunity to uphold their own priorities as much as to annoy the United States and its allies for as long as possible.⁶

Finally, the Islamic Republic's communicative power is fairly high. Iran has displayed a nuanced appreciation of the "propaganda war" accompanying the nuclear dispute by strategically communicating elements of its state ideology that many countries find sympathetic or even compatible with their own ideas. These include Tehran's constant claims to abide by the rules of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and its accusations of being treated unjustly by the world's big "bullying" powers.

All three types of power factor into the dynamics of Iranian politics at the domestic, global, and regional levels. The question of who wields power in the domestic Iranian political system was answered elaborately and authoritatively by Wilfried Buchta's book from 2000, aptly titled *Who Rules Iran?* Written shortly after reformist president Mohammad Khatami assumed office and started his ultimately unsuccessful struggle with the clerical regime for more liberties, Buchta's description of Iran as a "hybrid system" combining republican, theocratic, and authoritarian elements is still valid today.⁷

Based on the state doctrine of "guardianship of the jurist," or *velayat-e faqih*, under which Islam gives an Islamic jurist custodianship over the people, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is the center of power in Iran. When combined with the central principle of expediency (*maslahat*), meaning the superiority of state interests, this doctrine gives Khamenei near-absolute political power. It is his task to discern the supreme interest of the system (with the support of the Expediency Council, a body created to resolve potential deadlocks between the parliament and the Guardian Council), even if it goes against religious or constitutional norms and duties.⁸ This emphasis on expediency makes it clear that the ultimate norms of the Islamic Republic do not derive from religion per se but from the necessities of the regime's interests as interpreted by the supreme leader.

However, the supreme leader is no longer the "omnipotent overseer of Iran's political scene" that he was half a decade ago,⁹ as the last two presidential elections have shown. In 2009, Green Movement protests continued even after Khamenei

denounced them as illegal, and in 2013 the presidential candidates close to the supreme leader were defeated. Still, he has the final say on all things nuclear.¹⁰

Khamenei controls many parts of the three political branches of the political system as well as large swathes of society. Through his widely dispersed—both vertically and horizontally—network of emissaries and representatives, he can influence policymaking and politics at every level: from the Guardian Council to the various ministries to the judiciary; from the Revolutionary Guards and the armed forces to the state broadcasting corporation and powerful charitable foundations; and from the provincial governors to the nationwide Friday prayer leaders.

However, consecutive presidents—from the pragmatic Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to the reformist Khatami to the populist Ahmadinejad—have carved out their share of power in a contest with the supreme leader. That has been possible especially thanks to their authority over domestic and economic policies.¹¹ Yet the president competes not only with Khamenei but also with various political factions, including the military complex around the Revolutionary Guards, which functions like a state within a state.

Domestic power struggles are exacerbated by difficulties stemming from Tehran's position in the international system, where Iran's standing as a member of the UN is marred by the fact that it is the subject of several UN Security Council resolutions. While UN membership gives Iran formal equality with all other nations, this is mostly an ideological distinction with little relevance to real-world power relations. In fact, Iran appears to have few friends in the world—judging, for example, by the fact that it has held a nonpermanent seat on the Security Council only once, in 1955–1956. Other regional (and rival) countries like Egypt, Syria, and Turkey have held seats more frequently (Egypt and Turkey have each held seats on four different occasions, and Syria has had a seat three times) and also more recently.

The ultimate expression of power at the level of international politics would be obtaining the nuclear bomb that Iran denies it is seeking. A nuclear weapon would not only act as a guarantee against forcible regime change by providing domestic stability to the extent that the government in Tehran is threatened from outside. It would also give Iran the confidence to counter any Western influence in the Middle East.

Still, the nuclear conflict alone has brought Iran considerable status gains at the global level, which have afforded the country at least symbolic power by improving its perceived place in international relations. No other individual country in the world has regular meetings with the five permanent UN Security Council members (plus Germany). Iran thus sees itself as the virtual leader of the “rest.” As it happens, Tehran currently holds the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement, a group of states that are not formally aligned with or against any major power bloc. Having taken the helm from Egypt in September 2012, Iran will chair the group for the next three years.

Tehran's difficulties on the international stage have historically been balanced by its fairly influential position in the Middle East. Iran enjoys obvious sway over Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, but it also has long-standing enmity with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries and an ambivalent relationship with a fragile Egypt. The first decade of this century generally saw an increase of Iran's regional power, although the disputed 2009 presidential election undermined Tehran's authority to some degree.¹² Stripped of two enemies in neighboring countries—the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's Baath regime in Iraq—courtesy of two U.S. military interventions and enriched by skyrocketing oil prices, Iran could largely offset the punitive measures that the international community started to impose with the first UN Security Council resolution in 2006.¹³

However, regional countertrends have emerged, especially from the Gulf states—often led by Saudi Arabia—that have grouped together politically, financially, and in terms of civilian-nuclear cooperation to balance a rising Iran.¹⁴ In addition, despite all of the regime's rhetoric about its Islamic credentials, Iran remains “strategically lonely” as it finds itself squeezed between different geographical regions without really belonging to any of them.¹⁵

Ideology

In Iranian politics, ideology has less to do with Islam than with mundane political concepts colored with revolutionary rhetoric and conviction. Since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic has followed three different, albeit interrelated, ideologies: a vibrant anti-Westernism; a considerable nod to Third Worldism; and a sort of pan-Islamism. Iranian nationalism has recently emerged as a fourth strand.

Iran as a revolutionary state needs an “enemy” because the distinction between friend and foe is the essence of the regime's political existence. For the clerics in Tehran and the holy city of Qom, the United States embodies this enemy thanks to its current policies in and toward Iran and the region as well as its way of life, which they consider un-Islamic.¹⁶ Given that Iran's Islamic ideology regards Israel as a Middle Eastern “cancer” whose only patron is the United States, Tehran ends up with two main enemies: one smaller and closer to home, the other bigger and farther away. (To this duo one can add the United Kingdom, more for its history as a former occupier of Iran than for its special relationship with the United States, although Iranians seem to have realized that, in the twenty-first century, London is much less influential than it used to be.) That is why both anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism, sometimes extended to a broad anti-Westernism, have been hallmarks of the Islamic Republic since its foundation.¹⁷

Iran's anti-Americanism builds mostly on the country's historical experience throughout the twentieth century, more often than not lumping together the

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United Kingdom and the United States to form what it calls “global arrogance.” Iranian anti-Americanism also has an elaborate theoretical underpinning, with one Iranian author advocating unspecified “regional orders” in opposition to a “hegemonic core.”¹⁸ Such resistance often comes with an explicit anti-imperialist tone and always claims to take the side of the oppressed.¹⁹

Iranian resistance appears in two specific forms: a resistance economy, or attempts to circumvent sanctions through mechanisms such as smuggling and black-market trade, and nuclear resistance.²⁰ Nuclear resistance includes Iran’s willingness to share its nuclear technology with like-minded countries, as allowed under the NPT, in order to counter the arrogant powers’ monopoly on this knowledge and achieve “nuclear justice”—or, in the words of former foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki, “nuclear energy for everyone and nuclear weapons for no one.”²¹ Iran’s anti-Western ideology thus benefits from the nuclear dispute as long as Tehran can deplore the “hypocrisy” of the arrogant powers vis-à-vis the nuclear haves and have-nots.

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This aspect highlights another strand in Iran’s approach to the world: its Third World ideology. Building broadly on the nonaligned rhetoric of the 1970s and 1980s, Iran’s leadership accuses the United States—and, by extension, the West—of trying to dominate the rest of the world. That alleged domination takes several forms: political, through perceived U.S. control of the UN system, especially the “anachronistic” composition of the Security Council; economic and cultural, through America’s promotion of its “neo-imperialist” agenda throughout the developing world; and military, through unilateral interventions regardless of their international legitimacy.

Iran sees itself as a leader of those countries that have been victimized by the Western-dominated world order. And Washington’s habit of painting the threat that the Iranian regime poses to the world in colorful images, including through references to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, only emboldens Tehran to think it is a real power leading the anti-Western movement.

But while Iran does currently lead the Non-Aligned Movement, the country is just as happy to disassociate itself from fellow members, at least those that are true Third World nations, by claiming its superiority. “Iran is not a developing country” is an oft-heard (and true) statement made by Iranians. Mastering the nuclear cycle would be proof of Iran’s status as a developed and influential state.

Tehran also portrays itself as a champion of Muslim nations—but only those that share its anti-Western ideals. Iranian officials shame those Muslim countries that side with the United States. Targeting mainly Arab states on the other side of the Persian Gulf, Iran expresses its deep disgust of fellow Muslims who align themselves with “the enemy” and elevates the Iranian resistance to a defense of “true Islam”—a sort of selective pan-Islamism. Iran sees Alawite-ruled Syria as its only reliable Arab ally, with which it shares both an enmity toward Israel and

a feeling of being threatened by the United States.²² Tehran's anti-Western rhetoric is therefore relevant both for domestic discourse because it unites Iranians against a shared enemy and for regional acceptance because it provides credentials for Iran's Shia regime in its mostly Sunni-dominated neighborhood.

Of course, Iran's ideology includes religious elements far beyond its worldly ideas about opposing dominant powers—if only because a number of people in the highest echelons of power in the Islamic Republic see the world through Islam. The supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is certainly a religious and political hardliner, but he is much less of an apocalyptic thinker than other Iranian leaders.²³ Former president Ahmadinejad, for example, follows a strand of Islam that believes it is possible to hasten the return of the hidden Twelfth Imam, or Mahdi—believed to be the ultimate savior of humankind—by fostering an environment of chaos.²⁴ Khamenei has proven more pragmatic, putting the interests of the revolutionary state (and its cronies) before those of Islam.

However, despite the regime's proclaimed Islamic credentials, neighboring Muslim countries do not perceive Iran as an example to follow. On the contrary, a recent opinion poll in 20 countries revealed a “growing antipathy” toward Iran across Arab countries as well as among Iran's non-Arab neighbors. As regional views of Iran were largely favorable in 2006, this antipathy is not based on a Shia-Sunni divide. Instead, the poll attributed the shift to Iran's “policies in Iraq, Syria, the Arab Gulf region, in general, and . . . [to] its nuclear program.”²⁵ To that list of grievances one could add Iran's own domestic policies, especially its repression of the Green Movement.

Sunni Arabs, in particular, respond in kind to Iran's perceived creed of “nation before *ummah*,” or the international community of Muslims, by claiming their Arab culture to be superior to Iran's. The poll found that “most Arab Muslims, of all sects, . . . see themselves as more generous and knowledgeable, less violent, and as having made a more significant contribution to Islamic civilization.”²⁶ Moreover, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which only hardened after the buffer of Iraq was taken out of the equation, is seen not as a Shia-Sunni competition but as a contest for political power in the region²⁷—at least on the Iranian side.

These regional tensions are exacerbated by a steadily rising tide of Iranian nationalism. Tehran's pragmatic approach to regime preservation has kept religion in check since the Islamic Republic's beginnings, and nationalism has increasingly replaced Islam as a dominant ideology. While nationalism has been powerful throughout Iran's modern history, the people's apparent distancing from the Islamic revolution has led even high-ranking politicians to put more and more emphasis on Iran as a great nation in the world.²⁸ They see greatness in the Iranian people and its history rather than in the current regime. In that context, the slogans of anti-Westernism, resistance, and independence fit with Iran's national sentiment of being treated unjustly by the West, especially given the country's ancient civilization.²⁹

Therefore, at a basic level, Iran simply demands respect in accordance with the principle of the international system that all states are equal. On a more sophisticated level, however, Iran aims for recognition of its three thousand years of history and of its contributions to global civilization. And the regime prides itself on its endurance in the face of war, repeated natural catastrophes, and now heavy international sanctions.³⁰ This is the point at which ideology connects directly with the norms that Iran promotes globally.

Norms

After thirty-four years of the Islamic Republic, Iran's position on the fundamental norms that make up today's international system is still unclear. Whether Tehran has accepted these norms and is trying to improve its position within this system or whether it still genuinely opposes the norms of contemporary international relations remains an open question.

As a revolutionary state based on divine authority, Iran for a long time openly rejected the international order. One remainder of this revolutionary fervor is the country's alleged sponsoring of terrorism, from selective assassinations and bombings in Berlin and Buenos Aires in the early 1990s to attacks in Bulgaria, Georgia, and India as late as in 2012 to its broad support for Hamas and Hezbollah, for which the indiscriminate killing of civilians remains a legitimate means of resistance. Moreover, Iran's continuous denial of Israel's right to exist—let alone its refusal to recognize this fellow UN member as a state—raises a number of questions about Iran's acceptance of the norms governing the international system. And it makes the question of whether the regime pursues weapons of mass destruction all the more critical.

Yet there are also elements that point toward Iran's acceptance of the current world order. One such piece of evidence is the government's reference, throughout the nuclear dispute, to the equality of all states in general and to Iran's rights under the NPT in particular. Iran continues to claim that it is playing by the rules—unlike other countries, it is quick to add, given that India, Israel, and Pakistan acquired their nuclear weapons outside the NPT. It regularly points to the thousands of hours of IAEA inspections it has put up with as evidence of its compliance with the treaty.

Iran has repeatedly articulated this position in the nuclear negotiations, contending that it ought to be allowed to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, as is any other country. However, abiding by the NPT alone is not a guarantee that a country will not build the capacity to produce nuclear weapons quickly if and when the leadership so decides because the technologies for the peaceful use of nuclear energy, whose “proliferation” is encouraged by NPT rules, are essentially the same as those needed to build a nuclear weapon.

A potentially promising point in the discussion about nuclear norms is a ruling, or fatwa, purportedly issued by Iran's supreme leader declaring nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction to be unlawful, or *haram*,

according to Islamic standards. This norm easily falls in line with the country's NPT requirements. As a news agency reported in 2005, Khamenei declared "that the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons are forbidden under Islam and that the Islamic Republic of Iran shall never acquire these weapons."³¹ On various occasions, Khamenei has reiterated this view, and scores of officials—from Ahmadinejad, the former foreign minister, and the then top nuclear negotiator down to diplomats in all countries—have referred to this ban.³²

But there has been a lot of debate about the fatwa's validity.³³ For one thing, it has so far not been made public, even on Khamenei's own website, and authors who reference it make different assumptions about when it was actually issued. For another, the IAEA has a record of Khamenei during his time as president praising the 1984 decision of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, then the country's supreme leader and the father of the revolution, to reactivate Iran's nuclear program. Khamenei called the nuclear program "the only way to secure the very essence of the Islamic Revolution" and declared that "a nuclear arsenal would serve Iran as a deterrent in the hands of God's soldiers."³⁴ In addition, the supreme leader is not the highest religious authority even in Shia Islam, and other verdicts from his peers support the use of weapons of mass destruction if these are found to be in Islam's or Iran's interest.³⁵

Finally, it is hard to take the supreme leader's statement at face value. By its very nature, any fatwa is mutable and can change with the circumstances. This was most visibly evidenced by the discussion around the "death sentence" against British Indian writer Salman Rushdie. The late Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa in 1989 labeling Rushdie's recently published book heretical and calling for his death, which sparked a major diplomatic crisis with the West. Iranian officials later downplayed the fatwa and made a commitment not to pursue Rushdie's assassination to reduce diplomatic tensions. In addition, Iran admitted to acquiring a chemical weapons capability to serve as a deterrent during the final stages of the Iran-Iraq War.³⁶ This was an apparent reversal of Khomeini's previous interpretation that such weapons were un-Islamic,³⁷ but there is no evidence that Iran had actually produced such weapons.

However, despite all the justified cautions, Khamenei's fatwa offers an opening for finding a diplomatic agreement that could combine the international community's demands for legal assurances with Iran's declared religious principles. Of course, Iran may have carefully calibrated its talk about the fatwa from the beginning to forbid only the actual possession of nuclear weapons while allowing for the development of the capacity to produce them. That would give Tehran the ability to wield a serious threat without breaching the limits of the NPT.³⁸ Still, it would be possible for a robust monitoring and inspection regime, coupled with a yet-to-be-developed regional security system, to keep Iran below the threshold of actually building a bomb.

In a wider context, Iran promotes general norms of nonproliferation. When it comes to chemical (or biological) weapons, the regime is unequivocal: scarred by the experience of being “one of the few victims of deadly non-conventional weapons attacks since the First World War,”³⁹ Iran has vocally supported the elimination of such weapons since the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988. The country signed and ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention, which prohibits the production, stockpiling, and use of chemical weapons, in 1993 and 1997 respectively, although there have long been allegations that Tehran maintained a chemical weapons capacity.⁴⁰ Also, and especially in response to accusations that it is pursuing a military nuclear program, Iran is quick to denounce Israel as the only nuclear-weapon state in the Middle East, a fact Tehran regards as a source of constant conflict.

Iran is by no means alone in wanting to bring Israel into the nonproliferation equation. In a December 2012 vote in the UN General Assembly, 174 nations, including all EU countries, voted in favor of asking Israel to adhere to the NPT.⁴¹ While this resolution was not in favor of Iran per se, it did fall on fertile ground in Tehran given Iran’s eagerness to push for a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East, a proposal first made by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, then the country’s shah, or ruler, in 1974 in order to prevent a regional nuclear arms race.⁴²

The broader, and bleak, nonproliferation picture plays into Iran’s hands too. Nuclear-weapon states have made no meaningful efforts toward full nuclear disarmament—barring the “Global Zero” initiative, a campaign by 300 world leaders dedicated to eliminating nuclear weapons. Although emboldened by U.S. President Barack Obama’s 2009 commitment in Prague to “a world without nuclear weapons,” the initiative has so far lacked official government support from the relevant nuclear powers.⁴³

Iran can therefore point to double standards. While claiming to abide by the rules of the NPT, the regime argues that the five nuclear-weapon states recognized by the treaty (which happen to be the permanent members of the UN Security Council) are violating a formal and specific obligation to disarm themselves of nuclear weapons stemming from Article VI of the NPT. In this, Iran has most nonaligned countries on its side, in particular outspoken critics, such as India, of what is perceived as an NPT-sanctioned “nuclear apartheid.”⁴⁴ While this argument has been long debated, it points to a broader, more inclusive solution to the Iranian question—that is, not only focusing on Iran but also taking the wider regional or even global nonproliferation context into account.

This emphasis on nonproliferation also factors into Tehran’s discussions of its global intentions—and especially its nuclear intentions. In this, Iran uses norms as tools of communication. Ever since 2005, reference to the fatwa has been a constant feature of Iran’s arguments in favor of its nuclear program, as has criticism of Israel’s unconfirmed nuclear weapons and of the P5’s refusal to

disarm. Tehran attempts to use such arguments to convince a largely skeptical world public that it is not pursuing weapons of mass destruction.

Communication

Analyzing Iran's stance on the nuclear issue by sketching how Iran frames its foreign and, in particular, nuclear policies in its communications with the world is no easy task.⁴⁵ It is complicated by the fact that the Iranian political system not only is a hybrid with theocratic, authoritarian, and democratic elements but also has some pluralistic traits. This means that a cacophony of voices emerges on any given policy issue, providing for a relatively open process of deliberation before a decision is made.⁴⁶

For any eventual decision to hold on an important issue, it needs the backing of the supreme leader, even if he personally is not involved in the decision-making process. In such cases, his close aides serve as his mouthpieces, such as Ali Akbar Velayati, a former foreign minister and Khamenei's long-standing foreign policy adviser (who was defeated as a candidate in the June presidential election). Khamenei's two representatives on the Supreme National Security Council—Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani and Saeed Jalili—also speak for the supreme leader.

Given the nature of the regime's discussions, which are often long and feature a variety of viewpoints, and the lack of reliable information about the inner workings of the system, many observers engage in something akin to the art of "Kremlinology" used in regard to the similarly opaque Soviet Union.⁴⁷ During the Cold War, analysts tried to read between the lines of the deliberations of a whole institution, the Kremlin, with various rival factions and fiefdoms, not all of which were loyal to the secretary general of the Soviet Communist Party. In Iran, the exercise of deciphering tiny tidbits from ceremonial events, such as who gets to stand where in the lineup, from unofficial remarks of people in power circles, or from commentaries in quasi-official newspapers mostly revolves around one person only: the supreme leader.

Western countries seeking to understand the Iranian regime must rely on this sort of analysis in part because many normal lines of communication between Iran and the West are closed. The United States has not had an embassy in Tehran since 1979, nor has Israel. The United Kingdom closed its embassy in Tehran in 2011 after an Iranian mob stormed the premises, and Canada severed diplomatic ties with Iran in 2012. Europe has kept its lines of communication with Iran open, although exchanges have been difficult and mostly sterile.⁴⁸ But the EU, despite being a key actor in the nuclear negotiations, lacks any kind of representation in Tehran.⁴⁹

Especially for U.S.-Iranian relations, this noncommunication has created a "poisoned atmosphere" in which formal diplomatic contacts are no longer viewed as a basic and essential channel of communication.⁵⁰ Instead, they are seen as a potential first concession granted to the other side. Moreover, the

absence of such basic communication channels has led to a number of missed opportunities when one side was willing to make an offer that the other could not (or would not) understand.⁵¹

If viewed in a different way, establishing diplomatic relations could be the beginning of improved communication and not the reward granted once a permanent accord on the nuclear file is achieved. Given the centripetal forces of the Iranian system toward the supreme leader, direct communication would have to include Khamenei personally and not just diplomats from the foreign ministry or politicians such as the president or his ministers.⁵² In a similar vein, it is important to also talk to the Revolutionary Guards, who run the country's nuclear program.⁵³

The deficiencies of established diplomatic ties aside, some communication does of course take place between Iran and the West in the framework of the nuclear negotiations. These started with talks between Iran and France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in 2003, which were joined by the remaining three permanent UN Security Council members three years later. Europeans had made previous efforts at engaging Iran in fruitful communication, most notably the "critical dialogue" of the 1990s, an EU attempt to normalize relations with Tehran that ended in 1997 without having made any real progress.⁵⁴

While both Iran and the West have thus far mostly failed to communicate well with each other, they are nonetheless talking to a world audience that each side is trying to win for its cause. Here it seems that Iran is playing its hand fairly well. Among audiences critical of American leadership, Tehran benefits from being regarded as an underdog rather than an outlaw, even though eight years of shrill rhetoric from Ahmadinejad did put off audiences that were in principle sympathetic to Iran. In addition, with regard to neighboring countries like Afghanistan, Bahrain, and Iraq, the regime follows a determined approach—using technical equipment to broadcast Iranian radio and television channels—to make sure its voice is heard beyond its borders.⁵⁵

Iran draws upon various elements of its power, ideological, and normative structures to defend itself in the nuclear debate. It points to the democratic elements within its hybrid political system. It emphasizes the purportedly peaceful nature of the Iranian regime, which claims never to have attacked another country and complains of being surrounded by American troops in neighboring states. It also touts its stance at the side of the "oppressed," most recently buttressed by its presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement. In addition, it decries the "nuclear hypocrisy" of the world powers and repeats the fatwa prohibiting Iranians from acquiring the bomb on religious grounds.

To support their counterargument that Iran is indeed seeking nuclear weapons, Western countries in particular point to the resolutions of the UN Security Council as well as to IAEA reports indicating that Iran is violating its international agreements with regard to its nuclear program—which are, of

course, strong arguments for those who believe in international law. Yet they can easily be presented as one-sided by those who contend, as Iran does, that these global institutions are run by the world's dominating powers and are therefore biased in the West's favor.⁵⁶

Iran has also proven adept at communicating the humanitarian consequences of international attempts to punish Tehran for violating these agreements. A case in point is the debate that peaked in late 2012 over drug shortages in Iran as a result of the unilateral American and European sanctions. Every major Western newspaper ran stories on how cancer patients, hemophiliacs, or those needing kidney dialysis were suffering under the increased embargo.⁵⁷ Official responses from Washington, Brussels, and other European capitals referred to waivers granted in each sanctions round to certain medical products while pointing to Iranian mismanagement and outright profiteering as the main reasons for the shortages. But these words of justification were not enough to truly counter international opinion at seeing the damage done by sanctions—and especially the damage done to the very vulnerable parts of the civilian population, contrary to claims of the sanctions being “smart” and aimed at only the political elite.

There is undoubtedly a public relations war to be won in the nuclear conflict, both in Iran and globally. Tehran seems to have understood this better than many Western governments and is catering its communications to the nonaligned publics as much as to critical audiences in Western societies.

Rouhani's First One Hundred Days in Office

There is perhaps no one more aware of the importance of Iran's communications than the country's new president. Rouhani's election was greeted with cautious optimism in most quarters (Israel and Saudi Arabia excepted), for at least in his campaign and by virtue of his time as nuclear negotiator for former president Khatami he promised a more conciliatory tone. The question now is whether he can deliver on those expectations. To do so, he will have to meet without reserve the concerns of Iran's international interlocutors about the nuclear program and at the same time improve the lot of his own people through economic betterment and more social freedoms.

In electing Rouhani, Iranians chose the one candidate who promised some, albeit limited, change. But while people did indeed vote for Rouhani in great numbers, they did so with very few illusions. He was simply the least radical of the six candidates who were left on the ballot.

And Rouhani's victory would not have been possible without some degree of acquiescence by the regime. Faced with growing frustration, even among conservative elites, with the country's foreign policy in general and the nuclear

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issue in particular, Iran's leaders must have seen that the status quo simply could not continue.⁵⁸ Acutely aware that Iranians would not follow them on the path to more privations and that a repeat of the 2009 election rigging could prove disastrous (and may have been outright impossible given Rouhani's apparent lead in the polls), the country's leaders accepted Rouhani's victory.

Indeed, they may have even facilitated it—only the regime knows whether Rouhani really won the 51.4 percent of votes with which he was officially declared the winner on the day after the first ballot. But no one around Khamenei would have wanted a runoff in which the establishment could only lose. A second round would likely have galvanized the population, handing Rouhani maybe an 80 or 90 percent win. Such a truly popular mandate would have greatly complicated the power dynamic between the supreme leader and the president.

To many, Rouhani appeared to be the perfect solution: a reliable cleric and a revolutionary of the first order, what one expert called “a quintessential creation of Iran's post-revolutionary order,”⁵⁹ he is also amenable to the outside world and charming to his own people. While he proposes a new, pragmatic approach, it is one meant to preserve rather than transform the Islamic Republic. And in many ways he fits into Iran's basic political position, agreeing with the regime's ideas on power, ideology, and norms. In other ways, however—and especially when it comes to communication—Rouhani differs from Tehran's official line and has already introduced some substantial changes.

The President's Limited Powers

At the domestic level, Rouhani quickly felt the limits to the powers his new office would wield, especially given his dependence on the supreme leader. While his mandate may be strong, Khamenei's institutional grip on the presidency is stronger. This became clear with Rouhani's selection of his ministerial cabinet, for which he accommodated the supreme leader's express wish request that he withdraw the nomination of three individuals who had served as ministers under former president Khatami.⁶⁰ Once sworn in as president, even his Khamenei-sanctioned list of ministers proved problematic for the conservative-dominated parliament, which approved of only fifteen out of eighteen candidates. Parliament accused the three it did not confirm of being too close to the “sedition” of the Green Movement.⁶¹

But Rouhani did successfully exercise his power on one critical issue—changing the composition of the nuclear negotiation team and shifting the responsibility for nuclear talks from the Supreme National Security Council to the Foreign Ministry. Now Mohammad Javad Zarif, former Iranian ambassador to the UN and Rouhani's foreign minister, leads the negotiations. He stresses that there has been a shift in Iran's approach by promoting “engagement” with other countries, first and foremost the international negotiation

partners. At the same time, Zarif cautions that this reconsideration of Iran's methods for enacting foreign policy "doesn't mean a change in principles."⁶²

As Rouhani faces power struggles with the supreme leader, parliament, and the Revolutionary Guards, his position as a long-standing regime insider commanding influential networks will work to his advantage. He has held powerful positions in nearly all branches of government throughout his career, including as a high-ranking commander during the Iran-Iraq War, a longtime secretary of Iran's national security council, and the country's first chief nuclear negotiator. In addition, he has long been a member of both the Assembly of Experts—which elects the supreme leader for life and, theoretically, supervises his conduct in office—and the powerful Expediency Council.

Rouhani also has at least conditional backing from the supreme leader to conclude the nuclear negotiations with a view to a deal that would give Iran some economic breathing room. Prior to Rouhani's trip to speak at the September 2013 UN General Assembly in New York, Khamenei announced that he was "not opposed to correct diplomacy" and that he believed in "heroic flexibility," a statement many interpreted to mean that he would be amenable to a negotiated compromise.⁶³ This interpretation is consistent with the mixed reaction the president received upon his return from New York, with Khamenei explicitly expressing his support for Rouhani's diplomatic efforts while cautioning that some of what occurred on the New York trip was "not appropriate"—widely understood as a reference to a phone conversation between Rouhani and Obama.⁶⁴

A Familiar Ideological Approach

Since internal power relations are unlikely to change, the question of whether the seemingly "moderate" Rouhani stands for ideological change becomes pertinent. There is significant debate on this point, with some referring to his campaign promises of a government of "prudence and hope," focused on economic revival and engagement with the world, and others pointing to the unwavering assertiveness of Khamenei's regime.

With Rouhani's election, a trained Shia cleric rather than a populist politician again holds the presidency. This means that his religious credentials align with those of the existing regime and that he adheres to the principles guiding the inner circles of the regime. Along these lines, a recent study portrays Rouhani as an "ideologue and defender of the Islamic Revolution" and an "abrasive intellectual."⁶⁵

So far, Rouhani's rhetoric seems to indicate that he is embracing the regime's ideological tenets and downplaying the more reformist promises from his campaign. Upon the confirmation of his presidency by the supreme leader, one day prior to his official inauguration by the parliament, Rouhani pledged to "take fundamental steps in elevating Iran's position based on national interest and lifting of the oppressive sanctions."⁶⁶ In a speech following his public

inauguration, he combined two themes from his campaign into a very general and ideology-free promise, saying that “moderation and tolerance . . . is the shared aspiration of all” and pledging to “safeguard the great achievements of the Islamic revolution . . . [and] address the concerns of the country and the shortcomings and the limited opportunities the people are suffering in the current situation.”⁶⁷

Rouhani’s speech during the UN General Assembly touched upon many of the ideological strands in Iranian politics. Catering to the nationalists, he first praised “the great people of Iran” for their rationality and moderation in electing him and in realizing a “democracy consistent with religion” that he said would make Iran “the anchor of stability in an otherwise ocean of regional instabilities.” He then declared “the age of zero-sum games” over, indirectly criticizing the United States and expressing anti-Western sentiment by denouncing those actors that continue to use “archaic and deeply ineffective ways and means to preserve their old superiority and domination.” He spoke of “a civilized center surrounded by un-civilized peripheries,” a concept that exemplifies the Third World ideology inherent in Iran’s foreign policy, then became more concrete by deploring “propagandistic and unfounded faith-phobic, Islamo-phobic, Shia-phobic, and Iran-phobic discourses . . . [as] threats against world peace and human security.”⁶⁸

World attention naturally jumped to his remarks on Iran’s nuclear program. Rouhani reiterated the familiar Iranian line that “nuclear weapon[s] and other weapons of mass destruction have no place in Iran’s security and defense doctrine and contradict our fundamental religious and ethical convictions.” He did not specifically reference the nuclear fatwa, though, instead claiming that the “acceptance of and respect for the implementation of the right to enrichment inside Iran . . . provides the only path towards achieving” an international agreement.⁶⁹

Rouhani’s presidency has also seen evidence of the regime’s principled pragmatism and its focus on expediency. One example is the supreme leader’s credo of heroic flexibility, which was understood—in Iran as much as in the West—as an attempt by Khamenei to prepare the Iranian public for a compromise and signal to the international community that Rouhani should negotiate a settlement with his blessing.⁷⁰ The supreme leader introduced this phrase, which before long was widely disseminated, during an address to a meeting of Revolutionary Guards commanders—that is, to the core of those hardliners that would have to be convinced of the virtues of an international understanding that would put at least some restrictions on the Iranian nuclear program and could signal the beginning of some kind of rapprochement with the United States.

In introducing the concept of heroic flexibility, Khamenei used a metaphor of a wrestler who shows flexibility but does not forget who his opponent is. In doing so, he made it clear that this shift in policy was tactical in nature—the

strategies may change, but the end goal would remain the same. As a senior adviser to Rouhani elaborated, heroic flexibility “does not mean retreating against the enemy but rather achieving the system’s interest by relying on principles and values.”⁷¹ This assessment echoes that of a hardline member of parliament who appears on the EU’s sanctions list: “Heroic flexibility,” Mohammad Saleh Jokar argued, “will never lead to surrender and compromise. Heroic flexibility means insisting upon principles and resistance in the path of defending the given rights of the Iranian nation.”⁷²

Nor did the new, more flexible approach to diplomacy signal a substantial shift in the regime’s ideology, as was evident when the regime celebrated the anniversary of the November 4, 1979, seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran. After Rouhani’s trip to New York, a domestic discussion had begun about the appropriateness of demonstrators shouting slogans such as “death to America” (*marg bar amrika*, also more mildly translated to “down with the United States”) in the midst of a potential thaw in U.S.-Iranian relations. Partly in response to the phone call between Rouhani and Obama, an article in the Iranian newspaper *Asre Iran* proposed replacing this chant with a more general call for “death to arrogance.”⁷³ On the same day, former president Rafsanjani made a similar demand, invoking an argument allegedly made by Khomeini that public “death to” chants should be eliminated.⁷⁴

The proposition to drop the familiar chant immediately met vigorous opposition from the security establishment around the Revolutionary Guards, but it has since received some careful support from people close to the supreme leader. After initially dismissing the idea, Khamenei’s representative in the Revolutionary Guards, Hojatoleslam Ali Saeedi, conceded that eliminating the “death to America” chant exemplifies the changing rather than fixed tactics the Islamic Republic uses to achieve its goals. He was quick to add, however, that “the change of tactics and methods can only take shape at the hands of the Supreme Leader of the time.”⁷⁵ And even then, it would not mean an end to the anti-American sentiment that is so engrained in the Islamic Republic.

As it happened, the demonstrations celebrating the anniversary of the storming of the U.S. embassy turned out to be no less determined than in previous years, if only for hardliners to make a point that they have no desire to improve U.S.-Iranian relations. Indeed, even some government officials were present at the rallies. But most people’s attention was focused on one of Rouhani’s former competitors for the presidency, Saeed Jalili, now also a member of the Expediency Council. Giving a speech at the central ceremony close to the former U.S. embassy in Tehran, in official jargon referred to as the “den of espionage,” he explained the value of the slogan in reference to no less than Khomeini, elaborating that to Khomeini the slogan meant “death to the grandiosity and humiliation of nations . . . [and] death to the violence that gives permission to occupy countries.” To his credit, Jalili also emphasized that “death to America” was not directed against the American people as a whole

but against the “1 percent” of wealthy and powerful Americans who oppress not only people around the world but also the other 99 percent of Americans.⁷⁶

Accepting Established Norms

On norms, Rouhani is very much in line with the general stance of the country toward international law—that is, he adopts a position of ambivalence. Nothing in his remarks or actions during his first one hundred days in office suggests that he would work against established international norms.

However, several of his previous statements point to a manifest uneasiness with, if not outright disregard for, the rules of the world. Immediately after the overthrow of the shah, Rouhani called for an export of the Islamic Revolution even if this were to violate international law, saying it was “not important how the Westernized people judge” Iranians.⁷⁷

In the early 1990s, at the height of the controversy around Khomeini’s fatwa against Salman Rushdie, Rouhani made a dual argument about the edict calling for Rushdie’s death. He ascribed it merely to Khomeini in his capacity as a religious authority and not as the supreme leader and head of state. In this understanding, Iran was abiding by its obligations as a state according to international law because no government leader was calling for Rushdie’s execution, but Khomeini could still encourage individual actors to carry out the death sentence because he was speaking about a religious, not political, obligation. This display of “tacit external adherence, but internal opposition, to international law characterizes the Islamic Republic and Rouhani’s true commitment to its principles,” according to one expert.⁷⁸

When Rouhani became Iran’s top nuclear negotiator in 2003, many in the West—and especially in Europe—were hopeful that a preliminary deal could be concluded. This optimism proved well-founded, at least in the short term. With the Tehran Declaration of October 2003 and the Paris Agreement of November 2004, Iran opened its nuclear facilities to the IAEA and committed to voluntarily implement the provisions of an Additional Protocol to its IAEA Safeguards Agreement that would grant IAEA inspectors greater access to nuclear sites and require the state to issue a broader declaration of its nuclear activities.

Rouhani also agreed to a voluntary suspension of Iran’s nuclear activities, for which he received international praise but was castigated at home. To build his defense—which he used extensively during his presidential campaign—in 2011 Rouhani published his memoirs as the head of the negotiation team, *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy*.⁷⁹ In an early sign of heroic flexibility, he claims he and his team tried to protect “the secrets of the country, and the honor and authority of the System . . . while at the same time building trust with the IAEA and various nations of the world”⁸⁰—that is, giving away as little as possible while trying to make good on the country’s international obligations. Iran’s concessions of the time were thus acceptable to Rouhani only to the extent that they allowed the country to continue its nuclear program—for

example, by completing installation work on the nuclear research facility in Isfahan or producing yellowcake uranium, a material used for weapons-grade enrichment—with much less international pressure.

Rouhani was thus apparently in favor of furthering Iran's nuclear program, a stance that raises the question of how he views the nuclear fatwa. There are very few instances in which he is on record speaking about this document. One is in an interview with the Tehran Bureau of PBS *Frontline* in which he recalls presenting the newly issued fatwa to the foreign ministers of France, Germany, and the UK in December 2004 in Tehran: "I told the three European ministers that they should know about two explicit guarantees from our side, one of which is the fatwa of the . . . [supreme leader]. He issued the fatwa and declared the production of nuclear weapons *haram* [forbidden]. This fatwa is more important to us than the NPT and its Additional Protocol, more important than any other law."⁸¹ In the interview, Rouhani claims it was his own idea to bring up this issue during their conversation.

Rouhani also appears to agree with the regime's position on international norms regarding recognizing Israel, about which he has no inclination to mince his words. In an interview in 2001, he criticized the September 11, 2001, attacks as terrorist acts while claiming that anything Palestinians did against Israelis would be an act of self-defense: "Undoubtedly, if a country is invaded by an occupying force, and is fighting for the freedom of a land and country, then it is considered legitimate defense, even if it includes explosions, assassinations, and suicide operations."⁸²

Indeed, his remarks at the Iranian-government sponsored al-Quds (Jerusalem) Day celebrations just before assuming the presidency highlight his understanding of Israel's existence. Speaking to the masses marching to show their solidarity with the Palestinian people, he called Israel a "wound . . . on the body of the Muslim world."⁸³ Iranian media distorted those remarks to imply that he called for the removal of this wound,⁸⁴ sparking a major controversy. But even if the new president's rhetoric on Israel is more polite than that of his predecessor—who used to express his disdain for what he called the "black and dirty microbe named the Zionist regime"⁸⁵—Rouhani sees Israel as an illegitimate regime and an enemy of Iran. There is no way to tell whether he adopts this position because it is the Islamic Republic's official policy line from which he dare not deviate or because he fundamentally believes it is so.

Shifts in Communication

On one point, Rouhani has diverged significantly from the regime's entrenched practices: there have been striking changes under the new president in Iran's communication. For some, this is "only talk," first and foremost for those who agree with the Israeli prime minister's assessment of Rouhani as a "wolf in sheep's clothing."⁸⁶ But communication is a political category of great importance. Talk without action still has significance simply because it matters how

politicians talk to each other. Especially in this initial phase of new communication between Iran and the West, words can bear a symbolism that has political effect. Of course, if talk remains without actual backing for some time, it becomes empty.

Rouhani's UN speech testified to the power words can have. Speaking a week before Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Iranian president flatly refuted any notion of an "Iranian threat." Instead, he declared that Iran "has been a harbinger of just peace and comprehensive security."⁸⁷ There was no Israeli official present at the speech to hear this, but there were plenty of journalists to report it.⁸⁸ Western media jumped on the part of the speech in which Rouhani promised that Iran was "prepared to engage immediately in time-bound and result-oriented talks to build mutual confidence and removal of mutual uncertainties with full transparency."⁸⁹

While there were some new and hopeful words in this address, its tenor was a well-known one, steeped in praise for Iran and criticism of America. That said, there was also a follow-up in the form of a constructive first-ever P5+1 meeting with Iran at the level of foreign ministers—and hence the encounter between foreign ministers John Kerry of the United States and Mohammad Javad Zarif of Iran, the highest level of bilateral contact between the two countries since the first year of the Islamic Revolution.⁹⁰ In that sense, the speech can be seen as laying the groundwork for the meetings between the P5+1 and Iran that led to an interim agreement in late November 2013, less than two weeks after Rouhani formally concluded his first one hundred days in office.

This new level of communication was facilitated by the fact that Rouhani has kept up lines of contact he established with his Western counterparts during his leadership of the Center for Strategic Research in Tehran, a think tank that conducts research for the Expediency Council on political and economic affairs. Through the center, Rouhani had access to both Iran's intellectual elites and their international counterparts.⁹¹ So when EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton or European Parliament President Martin Schulz wrote letters to Rouhani to congratulate him on his inauguration,⁹² they were not addressing an unknown.

It also helped that both Rouhani and Zarif, in addition to other members of Rouhani's government, heavily engaged in the use of Twitter and Facebook even before assuming their offices. The simple fact that both politicians have accounts with these U.S.-based social media outlets and actively use them is meaningful. After only three months in office, the foreign minister had more than 550,000 likes on Facebook while the president's English-language Twitter account had more than 120,000 followers.⁹³ With countless tweets and retweets during his visit to New York, it is undeniable that Rouhani's team knows about the power of social media.⁹⁴

But in a country where access to international information and news on the Internet is tightly controlled and social media sites have been generally blocked

since they played a major role in organizing the 2009 revolt, Rouhani's use of Twitter and Zarif's activity on Facebook also send a mixed message. Here, too, it will be deeds that count—that is, the extent to which the Rouhani government lives up to its campaign promises to provide the citizens with free access to information. Hopes sparked briefly in mid-September when, in the week before the UN General Assembly, the banned social media sites were available throughout Iran—but only for a day, after which they were again blocked. Rather than a newfound freedom, this appears to have been a technical glitch or even a testing of the waters by elements within the establishment.⁹⁵

Rouhani had a Twitter exchange on this particular matter with Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey, who asked the Iranian president in a tweet whether citizens of Iran were actually able to read Rouhani's tweets. The president replied, "As I told @camanpour, my efforts geared 2 ensure my ppl'll comfortably b able 2 access all info globally as is their #right,"⁹⁶ referring to an interview with Christiane Amanpour, anchor of the American cable network CNN.

This interview with Amanpour, which was part of the Iranian president's UN tour in September, stirred up considerable controversy with regard to Rouhani's views of Israel. Initially, Western media reports detailing the interview remarked on the supposedly new tone Rouhani struck with regard to the Holocaust, hailing the very mention of this word—according to CNN's simultaneous interpretation of the president's words—as a big leap forward. The headline for an article about the interview on CNN's website read, "Iran's new president: Yes, the Holocaust happened."⁹⁷ Then the Iranian media outlet Fars, traditionally close to the Revolutionary Guards, turned the story by accusing CNN of "fabricating" the president's remarks about the Holocaust,⁹⁸ pointing to inaccuracies in the official translation. The *Wall Street Journal* jumped on this reading, giving their journalistic colleagues in Tehran "points for honesty" on their editorial pages.⁹⁹

As it turned out, the president did not use the word "Holocaust." What he said could be interpreted as an acknowledgment of the crimes Nazis committed against Jews and others, although he was coy about the "dimensions" of it, leaving it to historians to judge.¹⁰⁰ But Fars was wrong in its accusations against CNN because the error was made by an interpreter provided by the Iranian government.¹⁰¹

Although Rouhani did go to some lengths to appear to recognize the existence of the Holocaust—albeit not by name—he then immediately described the plight of the Palestinians today as equally despicable, which weakened his admission. What is more, he has previously declared that Israel's "brutal repression" is "unprecedented in the history of mankind."¹⁰²

On the international stage, Rouhani has made significant strides in improving Iran's channels of communication. The United Kingdom and Iran have

It is undeniable that Rouhani's team knows about the power of social media. But in a country where access to international information and news on the Internet is tightly controlled and social media sites have been generally blocked, Rouhani's use of Twitter and Zarif's activity on Facebook also send a mixed message.

started talks about reopening their respective diplomatic missions, something that was outright unthinkable in the aftermath of the storming of the British embassy in Tehran two years ago.¹⁰³ And Rouhani's government has attempted to improve its international image by luring tourists to the country, proposing to abolish visa requirements for most foreign visitors.¹⁰⁴ The number of tourists visiting the country has already increased over the first months of Rouhani's presidency, with agencies making additional bookings for the travel season next spring.¹⁰⁵

Such efforts on the diplomatic and touristic fronts signal the new government's broad-based desire to open up Iran to the world (again). Yet at some point, for the international community as much as for the Iranian domestic audience, words and small steps will no longer be enough.

Forging a New Relationship With Iran

The changes Rouhani has wrought during his short time in office mean that there is room for Tehran to maneuver toward a more conciliatory stance in its dealings with the international community. However, time is not in abundance: hardliners skeptical of any compromise with the West are waiting for Rouhani and Zarif to fail—and if this team of “moderates,” as many in Iran view them, cannot succeed, a long time will surely pass before any new Iranian overtures occur.

In terms of both power and ideology, antagonism with the United States in particular and the West more generally is a central tenet of Iranian politics, making fundamental compromises difficult. When it comes to norms, however, there are avenues for agreement. On the nuclear issue, it appears that international rules can coexist with Iran's professed religious standards. While debate about the nuclear fatwa remains, it could—if only implicitly and for domestic Iranian consumption—serve as a frame of reference for a binding agreement based on international law.

Iran's communication, in turn, is marked by contradiction to the extent that the system's inherent pluralism is masked by the opaqueness surrounding the supreme leader and his personal intentions. In addition, there is general and mutual mistrust that keeps Iran and the international community from understanding each other. Just as Tehran must trust that Washington no longer pursues a policy of regime change, the United States must have faith in Iranian assurances that “this time is different” and that the regime is indeed willing to restrict its nuclear operations.

Communication is also the dimension in which the analysis of the new president's first one hundred days in office reveals significant differences from the regime's established practices. To be sure, Rouhani is a regime insider and trained cleric with an ambiguous stance on international law, which makes him fit nicely into the broader picture of Iran's positions on power, ideology,

and norms. The arrival of the new president thus does not signal the arrival of a new Iran. Yet if one understands communication as an integral part of politics and not “just talk,” then these changes merit an appropriate response to test the new government’s intentions. The tricky question is to what extent Rouhani’s changed rhetoric signals the beginning of a new direction for the Islamic Republic.

As a first step to a lasting rapprochement, Rouhani and the international community should establish a new basis for communication, which appears to have taken place. They could then work on creating shared norms, which is what the continuing negotiations are about. For this to succeed, the regime’s ideology and power disposition, the first two dimensions of Iranian politics and the areas in which the Islamic Republic is least flexible, would have to be left unquestioned, distasteful as this may be to the Western world.

With regard to the United States, it has often been said that for Iran to seriously negotiate over its nuclear program, an understanding with its primary enemy would also have to be on the table. But this should not be overstated. True, it may be possible to overcome the mutual impasse given the U.S. and Iranian presidents’ presentations at the UN General Assembly plus their ensuing phone call. However, the prompt reactions from hardliners in both countries have shown that there is still a long way to go before there could be any sort of reconciliation.

The biggest stumbling blocks are in the field of power relations, where the United States and Iran are direct competitors in the Middle East, and ideology, where Iran opposes the “global arrogance” that it associates with America. It will be very hard to find an agreement on these two dimensions. Moreover, the Iranian side appears to distinguish between the nuclear negotiations, which Tehran wants to see concluded sooner rather than later, and an overall accord with the United States, which the supreme leader does not—yet—seem to have endorsed.

Given that communication is an essential part of politics, it should also be seen as an important element to the confrontation over Iran’s nuclear program. Yet it often appears to be undervalued in Western countries, particularly in the United States, as if the conflict could somehow be handled on the basis of “pure facts” and not in relation to how these facts are presented. Even after a decade of public and confidential discussions and negotiations, neither the United States nor the EU seems to have a communication strategy on this critical international conflict.¹⁰⁶

The international community must adopt new postures with regard to Rouhani’s government and rethink its approaches to negotiating on and communicating about the Iranian nuclear issue.

In order to lay the foundation for a new relationship with Iran, the international community in general, and Western partners in particular, must adopt new postures with regard to Rouhani’s government and rethink its approaches to negotiating on and communicating about the Iranian nuclear issue.

Approaching the New Government's Overtures

The signals emanating from Iran have indeed changed in recent months, and Western policymakers must be willing to accept that the presidential election in Iran has produced a new situation. If they continue with business as usual, they will miss an opportunity to solve the decades-long dispute over Iran's nuclear program.

At the same time, the West must judge Rouhani by his deeds, not just his words. The new president has made promising overtures in his speeches, but Western leaders should welcome him cautiously until they have seen proof that actions will follow these words. While being forthright in their own offers, policymakers need to assure verifiable and tangible concessions from Iran with regard to its nuclear program.

To help convince Tehran that it is negotiating in good faith, the West should continue to put off new sanctions unless Iran fails to deliver on its promises. Unilateral American and European sanctions have helped get Iran to engage in serious discussions about its nuclear program, but now that the regime is at the negotiating table, extending these sanctions would signal a dishonest approach. The West should resort to new sanctions only if Tehran does not adhere to its obligations under the interim agreement.¹⁰⁷

A Revised Negotiation Strategy

The interim accord marked the first real success after nearly a decade of negotiations, and there is a window of six to twelve months in which to conclude a permanent deal. If the interim agreement helps develop sufficient trust between the parties, the P5+1 should be ready to broaden the scope of talks and include other issues in the negotiations as long as they support discussions on the main nuclear track.

The negotiation process should build upon those Iranian norms that fall in line with the country's requirements under the NPT. If Iran asks for consideration of Khamenei's nuclear fatwa, Western policymakers should work on a legally binding document that accepts the validity of the supreme leader's respective statements while at the same time providing for monitoring and verification arrangements that would turn it into a real confidence-building measure.

They should also leverage Iran's oft-repeated commitments to nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament. Renewing efforts to establish a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East, distant as this end goal may be, will help Iran come clean on its own record while at the same time meeting a concern that the country shares with a number of other UN members. And intensifying the drive for universal acceptance of the Additional Protocol will allow Iran to frame its potential adherence to this agreement as part of a wider effort to strengthen the nonproliferation regime instead of as a concession to the West.

For the time being, the focus should be on using this revised negotiation strategy to reach a comprehensive nuclear agreement, not on enacting a broader U.S.-Iranian rapprochement. The initial reactions of hardliners in both camps to the recent warming of relations have shown that there is simply not enough trust yet between the two countries for such a bold step.

A New Approach to Communication

It is not enough for Western countries to believe that they are following a legitimate and reasonable approach toward Iran—they must also convince the world that this is the case. Otherwise, international support for the broad-based sanctions regime will quickly erode. For this reason, the West will need to invest much more into its communication strategy.

This new communication strategy must go beyond citing IAEA reports and UN resolutions. Instead, Western policymakers should communicate their position on the nuclear issue to the Iranian public and to their partners in the region and globally as much as to their own—sometimes critical—domestic audiences.

The next six to twelve months will be crucial not only in terms of the nuclear negotiations but also with respect to the broader effects a viable long-term deal could have. In an optimistic scenario, such an agreement would shape both the regional environment and the prospects for nuclear nonproliferation by allowing Iran to shed its pariah status and regain regional weight and by showing the world that a negotiated solution is possible. Such a compromise would offer a third way between the path of India and Pakistan, which global powers allowed to develop nuclear weapons outside the NPT, and the fate of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which endured Western-backed regime change by military means because of its alleged weapons program.

By capitalizing on the changes Iran's new president has wrought—and by respecting those areas in which compromise is unlikely—Western policymakers may be able to find potential areas of agreement. Accepting that improvements in Tehran's communication on the nuclear issue are not “just talk” but a serious beginning on the way to compromise is key.

The P5+1 should now focus on finding a common understanding in the norms dimension, with agreement on Iran's nuclear program being only the first step. Even if Iran's power rivalries are here to stay and Westerners have little chance of changing the Islamic Republic's ideology, reaching a lasting agreement on the rules of the international game would be a major success.

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