



# Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

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## The Safeguard of the Iranian Regime: Nuclear Weapons Program

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The most recent round of nuclear talks between representatives from the permanent five members of the UN Security Council and Germany (known as P5+1) and from the Islamic Republic of Iran in Geneva ended on 24 November 2013. Unlike previous sessions, these talks resulted in the signing of an interim agreement, a step towards resolving the ongoing impasse over the nature and scope of Iran's nuclear program. The fundamental, if unstated, concern in the calculations of most of the Western representatives among P5+1 as well as some other involved states is the nature of the Iranian regime. For Iranian side, the crux of its nuclear gambit is the safeguarding of Islamic Republic system established in 1979. Resolving the Iranian nuclear impasse through such negotiations will have a lasting and perhaps irreversible impact on the role and politics of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in international affairs. WMD's political currency would gain more value, as one of the means to safeguarding unsavory regimes around the world which stand in opposition to accepted international norms of behavior, specifically those that try to challenge the Western norms and policies.

### Iran's "Heroic Flexibility"

The victory by Hasan Rouhani in the June presidential elections of the Islamic Republic of Iran ushered in new hope and opportunity for the United States and its European allies to try to achieve their broadly stated strategic objective of not allowing Iran to become nuclear weapons capable. While almost all analysts of Iran regard the election of Rouhani as a great surprise, few doubt the new president's credentials as perhaps one of the most longstanding and devoted sons of the Islamic Republic system. Going against the trend, I have argued that Rouhani's election was not a surprise

### MES Notes

#### "Egypt in Upheaval"

On 3 December 2013 Middle East Studies at the Marine Corps University will host Professor Nathan J. Brown, George Washington University, to discuss "Egypt in Upheaval" as part of the AY13-14 MES Lecture Series.

Further information about the MES Lecture Series is available at: <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil>, under the Middle East Studies tab or via Facebook at: [middleeaststudies.mcu](http://middleeaststudies.mcu).

POC for the lecture series is Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or [seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu](mailto:seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu).

#### MES at MCU Disclaimer

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and that the system or regime (*nizām*) of Iran calculated that the system required a total facelift both domestically and internationally in order to safeguard its existence.

Iran is experiencing dire economic conditions, brought on by a combination of the toughest, most effective, and broadly-backed international economic sanctions imposed on a country and the gross economic mismanagement by presidential policies. Furthermore, Iran's radical behavior, especially former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's bellicosity, has isolated Iran in the international arena. Iran has been left with few friends and vulnerable to the possibility of military strikes on its nuclear facilities by the United States or Israel or a combination thereof. Perhaps most damaging for Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is the impact of his hitherto unprecedented open support of Ahmadinejad before the controversial 2009 presidential elections and the regime's brutal suppression of the popular mass demonstrations following the elections. These tarnished the assumed impartiality and absolute supremacy of his office—the core of the Islamic system of Iran—bringing him to the level of *primus inter pares*. Additionally, the balance of power between the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC), formed to safeguard the regime, has been shifting in favor of the IRGC, to the point that the Supreme Leader almost appeared to be becoming dependent on it. My assertion is that Khamenei and his close associates sensed that, after eight years of Ahmadinejad's presidency, the system was in danger of being challenged from within through an economic meltdown, mass protests, and political wrangling and thus orchestrated Rouhani's election.

Rouhani's main mission, with Khamenei's full blessing and support, is safeguarding the Islamic Republic system. To that end, his government's first objective is to alleviate the stifling international sanctions to better the economic environment. In my estimation, the Iranian leadership has offered to negotiate on limiting the scope of its nuclear program in the hopes of a reversal or lessening of the sanctions. Doing so would potentially regain broader support for the system, at least internally, and also help to bring Iran back from its ostracized status with the Western world.

It must be remembered that in the mindset of Khamenei and perhaps others among the top leadership of Iran, the West's animosity towards the Islamic Republic is not due to the country's nuclear program, but rather its political regime. Their mistrust of the West stems from the conviction that the West's ultimate strategic aim, especially that of the United States, is to change the Iranian regime to a subservient and dependent client system. In this line of thinking, the United States and some of its allies would regard any change of behavior by the Islamic Republic in the nuclear field as an opportunity to defang Iran and set the stage to deal with Iran in the same manner as with Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011. Therefore, the Iranian leadership has cast its recent diplomatic initiatives surrounding its nuclear program as "heroic flexibility," invoking a truce initiated by Hasan bin Ali, Shi'a Islam's second imam, in 661 to avoid bloodshed within Muslim community. Likening his country's "flexibility" to a wrestling match, Khamenei cautioned Iran's negotiators that "a good wrestler at times shows flexibility due to technical reasons but does not forget his opponent or his main goal."

## MES Notes (cont.)

4 September 2013

Amin Tarzi presented a paper "The Persian Heritage of Afghan Historiography" to the Sixth Biennial Congress of the Association for the Study of the Persinate Societies, Sarajevo.

20 September 2013

Amin Tarzi Presented a lecture entitled "Rouhani's Iran" to Training Command, Military Academy of the Czech Republic, Vyškov.

20 September 2013

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Egyptian Military as Guardians of a Popular Revolution" to Training Command, Military Academy of the Czech Republic, Vyškov.

3 November 2013

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Iranian Grand Strategy under the Ayatollahs" to the Foreign Policy Research Institute's History Institute for Teachers held in Pittsburgh, PA.

## WMD and Regime Survival

At first glance, the interim deal can be regarded essentially as a positive step for nonproliferation of WMD. If implemented to its fullest stated spirit by the United States and other Western states, the deal will prevent Iran from becoming a state armed with nuclear weapons. On the other hand, it can be seen as a negative step in overall nonproliferation aims of the post-World War II international security system. Consider how six of the major global powers played to the tunes of the Iranian regime. Some of states backing the Geneva agreement have accused the Islamic Republic of Iran of being a top sponsor of international terrorism; a denier of the right of existence of another member state of the United Nations; an interferer in the affairs of its neighbors; and a gross violator of human rights internally. So why would the West bend so much to appease such a system of government? Of course, there are myriad of external and internal reasons for each one of the P5+1 to support such an agreement beyond ensuring that the number of states with overt or opaque nuclear weapons capability stay at the current number of nine. One is to avoid an armed conflict over Iran's nuclear program. There is also a realization in most of the capitals of the Western members of the P5+1 that sustaining the current international sanctions regime may prove problematic in light of the Iranian presidential results. There has been a shift in presidential gestures towards Israel that may weaken international resolve on maintaining such a tough sanctions regime. The image of the smiling, soft-spoken Rouhani who sends personal greetings to Jews around the world on Rosh Hashanah is in sharp contrast to that of his predecessor who was denying the existence of the State of Israel and that the Holocaust had taken place. Perhaps there is also a growing fatigue in dealing with the Middle East where politics have become more complicated and have gone beyond the control of a regime or a monarch. And of course, there are the oil and gas considerations. An Iran that relatively adheres to international norms of behavior can impact positively global hydrocarbon politics, including supply, transportation and price.

Whatever their rationale, the P5+1 eagerly met with Iran at the most senior political levels and have allowed the regime in Tehran to save face, slowly emerge from under the economic burden of sanctions, and pave the way for a possible end of its political ostracism. This has provided a much-needed six-month long lifeline to the regime, a regime that since 2009 has been feeling very uneasy about its ability to preserve its system of governance.

An argument can be made that the West came to the negotiating table with Iran due to Iran's nuclear program. Tehran tried, even if it did not have the intention to produce nuclear weapons, to show that its intentions were far beyond producing fuel for nuclear energy or to produce medical isotopes. Iranian leadership's calculation is that the United States respects a nuclear weapons potential. As such, the U.S. will deal with any state that showcases a determination to acquire such a capability and not move to destabilize states which have a nuclear weapons capability outside of the P-5, which are the only recognized nuclear weapon states under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. This calculation is based on the premise that U.S. behavior towards Pakistan and North Korea would have been different if these two states did not possess nuclear weapons. Iranian leadership is also convinced that the United States invaded Iraq in 2003 only after it was sure that there were no nuclear weapons in that country. In addition, Khamenei has been especially vocal in the case of Libya where he believes that Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi had struck a deal with Washington to give up his nuclear weapons program in exchange for an agreement with the United States to safeguard his rule and perhaps that of one of his sons as his successor.

While all of the cases discussed above have involved nuclear weapons, the latest example of WMD providing a lifeline to a besieged regime has involved chemical weapons. By using chemical weapons against civilians and opposition fighters in the Syrian civil war and then agreeing to their dismantlement under international supervision, the regime of President Bashar al-Asad has in effect bought itself precious time to regroup and try to hold on to power. Inspectors from Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) have concluded that it will take until mid-2014 at the earliest to destroy all of Syria's declared chemical weapons. While the Syrians are primarily

responsible for destroying their own stockpile of chemical weapons, there remains a need for supervision by OPCW and United Nations inspectors, requiring security and access to Syrian governmental sites. Furthermore, some weapons have to be transported out of Syria. These require a government interlocutor on the Syrian side. Ironically, by using a prohibited weapon, the regime of Bashar al-Asad has helped its legitimacy. By continuing its cooperation with OPCW while prolonging the process to destroy its chemical weapons, it may have buttressed its survival.

For countries like Iran, the key takeaway from these examples is that WMD matters and can get otherwise unsavory and dangerous regimes a seat at the table with the big powers and offer it legitimacy and survival.

The next six months will be crucial not only with regards to Iran, but also for the overall security architecture dealing with belligerent regimes with the potential of acquiring WMD programs. The Geneva interim deal is only a starting point. The P5+1 negotiators still have a daunting task of maintaining unity of purpose in limiting Iran's "right" to enrichment to no more than five percent while pressing for the curtailment of all other aspects of Iran's nuclear program such as production of heavy water and the technology and production of long-range nuclear capable delivery systems and deliverable nuclear warheads. Without the latter as part of a long term agreement, the Iranian regime would gain freedom from the economic sanctions as well as access to the restricted technologies currently prohibited due to the sanction regime. The Iranian regime would survive because of illicit nuclear activities and would preserve the knowhow of nuclear weapons production. In short, this would be a very dangerous precedent to set for the perceived or real value of WMD in global security calculations.

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