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GLOBAL CENTRE STAGE

Split Wide Open

By Dr Emmanuel Navon

A country that could enrich uranium to about 3.5% will also have the capability to enrich it to about 90%. Having fuel cycle capability virtually means that a country that possesses this capability is able to produce nuclear weapons Hassan Rouhani, Iranian President

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, like his predecessors, is not the ultimate decision-maker of a democracy. He is the second-in-command of a theocracy ruled by Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei. Rouhani headed Iran's Supreme National Security Council from 1989 to 2003, and, as such, was involved in Iran's terrorist activities during that time, which included the killing of Iranian opposition leaders in a Berlin restaurant; the murder of 85 people at the Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires; and the blowing up the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia (which killed 19 US soldiers). Hassan Rouhani was also Iran's chief nuclear negotiator between 2003 and 2005. He is the one who conceived and implemented the strategy that enabled Iran to develop its nuclear weapons programme while negotiating with the West.

At his UN General Assembly speech in October 2013, Rouhani made statements that were an insult to his audience's intelligence. He lamented the "human tragedy in Syria," while the Iranian government actively participates in Assad's murder and massacre of tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children in Syria, including with chemical weapons. Rouhani condemned the "violent scourge of terrorism," while Iran has ordered, planned or perpetrated terrorist attacks in 25 cities in five continents in the last three years. Rouhani denounced "attempts to change the regional balance through proxies," while Iran is actively destabilising Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain and many other Middle Eastern countries. Rouhani promised "constructive engagement with other countries," while two years ago, Iranian agents tried to assassinate Saudi Arabia's ambassador in Washington and while an Iranian agent was recently arrested trying to collect information for possible attacks against the American embassy in Israel.

True Designs Revealed

Rouhani has also declared that Iran has never chosen deceit and secrecy with its nuclear programme. Facts point to the very opposite. In 2002, it was revealed that Iran had secretly built an underground centrifuge facility in Natanz, and in 2009, it was revealed that Iran had built a huge underground nuclear facility for uranium enrichment in a mountain near Qom.

Iran has vast natural energy reserves, so why would it invest billions of dollars in developing nuclear energy? Moreover, a country only interested in peaceful nuclear energy does not need to build hidden underground enrichment facilities, as Iran does. If Iran was only developing a civilian nuclear programme, it would not continue to ignore and defy Security Council resolutions and economic sanctions that paralyse the Iranian economy and cause great suffering to the Iranian people. If Iran was only developing a civilian nuclear programme, it would not develop, as it does, intercontinental ballistic missiles whose sole purpose is to deliver nuclear warheads.

In 2012, Iran enriched three tons of uranium to 3.5 percent, it doubled its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium, and it added thousands of new centrifuges. Meanwhile, Iran is building a heavy water reactor in Araq. None of this has stopped since Rouhani's election. Uranium enrichment continues because Iran wants to be in a position to rush forward to build nuclear bombs before the international community can detect and prevent it.

If Iran has been able to develop its military nuclear programme so far, why is it suddenly willing to negotiate the very pursuit of this programme with the West? Is it because the economic sanctions imposed by the West have become unbearable, and Iran is desperate to have them lifted? On the other hand, Iran does not want to give up on its military nuclear programme. And this is why Rouhani was elected in the first place: he has impeccable credentials in successfully deceiving the West and prides himself at doing so in the past. In his 2011 book about his time as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Rouhani wrote the following: "While we were talking to the Europeans in Tehran, we were installing equipment in Isfahan ...By creating a calm environment; we were able to complete the work in Isfahan."

Rouhani has good reason to believe that if he was able to fool the West once, he surely can fool them again. Moreover, if this strategy has worked in the case of North Korea, why wouldn't it work for Iran? North Korea also claimed that its nuclear programme was civilian and peaceful. In 2005, North Korea agreed to a deal with the West, which was celebrated by many as a successful dismantling of its nuclear programme. And yet, one year after this deal and the supposed success of diplomacy, North Korea exploded its first nuclear bomb.

Some in the international community are willing to leave Iran with a residual capability to enrich uranium. But such leniency ignores what Rouhani himself declared at Iran's Supreme Cultural Revolutionary Council in 2005. This is what Rouhani said: "A country that could enrich uranium to about 3.5 percent will also have the capability to enrich it to about 90 percent. Having fuel cycle capability virtually means that a country that possesses this capability is able to produce nuclear weapons." Rouhani, of course, is correct, and this is why Iran's nuclear weapons programme must be fully and verifiably dismantled. This will not happen without crippling economic sanctions and a credible military threat.

Understanding Iran's 'Nuclear Ambiguity'

Yet, it seems that Western powers are willing to consider the partial lifting of sanctions and are willing to let Iran enrich uranium, as long as it doesn't actually build a bomb. There was something emblematic about the fact that the UN and Switzerland, the hosts of the talks with Iran in Geneva, decided to cover-up a famous wall carving at the Palais des Nations where the talks took place. The carving, called 'The Creation of Man', depicts a nude. The hosts believed that this landmark artistic heritage would offend Iranian delegates. If the negotiating powers (the US, Russia, China, France, the UK, and Germany) were so concerned about offending Iranian sensibilities, will they have qualms about confronting Iran on its nuclear programme?

In his speech at the UN in October, Prime Minister Netanyahu declared that "Iran wants to be in a position to rush forward to build nuclear bombs before the international community can detect it and much less prevent it" and that it wants to reach the point of "sufficient nuclear material and sufficient nuclear infrastructure to race to the bomb at a time it chooses to do so." This is why Netanyahu listed four conditions for the negotiations with Iran to succeed:

- Cessation of all uranium enrichment;
- Removal of the stockpiles of enriched uranium from Iran's territory;
- Destruction of the infrastructure for nuclear breakout capability (including the underground facility at Qom and the advanced centrifuges in Natanz); and,
- Cessation of all work at the heavy water reactor in Araq aimed at the production of plutonium.

The negotiating powers are willing to settle for less than that – indeed for much less. They seem willing to reach an agreement in which Iran will commit not to produce nuclear weapons, but will be allowed to produce a large amount of highly enriched uranium and plutonium – two ingredients that are required to build a nuclear weapon. The problem is that the development and manufacturing of nuclear weapon components is very hard to detect. So in the emerging trade-off between Iran and the negotiating powers, it will be nearly impossible to know if Iran actually has nuclear weapons. Iran would be able to keep its nuclear weapons a secret, and it could even replicate Israel's policy of 'nuclear ambiguity'.

Israel – Forced to Stand Alone?

If the US is willing to accept such an agreement, sanctions against Iran would be eased or even repealed. Iran might also demand, and likely obtain, a US commitment to prevent an Israeli attack and cessation of support to Iranian opposition groups. In such a scenario, the US would be able to claim that it prevented Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. For Iran, such a deal would provide protection from an Israeli attack, would weaken internal opposition, and would ease or even repeal economic sanctions. Meanwhile, Iran would be able to secretly produce more bomb material – disaster for Israel as it would not be able to prevent Iran's "breakout capability."

Israel has good reason to doubt the United States' ability (or willingness) to prevent Iran's "breakout capability," because no less than four countries obtained nuclear weapons under America's nose: Israel itself (in the 1960s), India (in 1974), Pakistan (in 1998), and North Korea (in 2006). The only two countries that abandoned their nuclear programmes are South Africa (in 1989) and Libya (in 2003). Western economic sanctions were critical in convincing South Africa to abandon its nuclear programme. As for Libya, the 2003 US-led military intervention in Iraq convinced Gaddafi that he was next in line and that forgoing his nuclear programme was the only way to prevent a US attack.

In other words, there is no precedent for the successful end to a nuclear programme. On the other hand, crippling economic sanctions worked in the case of South Africa, while military threat worked in the case of Libya (as well as in the case of Syria's chemical weapons). Netanyahu, therefore, is correct to argue that for the current negotiations with Iran to succeed, sanctions must be maintained and even reinforced, and the military threat must be as credible as ever.

Israel's problem is not that the West doesn't agree with Netanyahu's undisputable argument. Rather, the problem is that what is good enough for the West is not good enough for Israel. The United States and Europe are likely to let Iran enrich uranium and plutonium as long as they don't actually build a bomb. But for Israel, that would mean giving Iran the option of building a bomb when it so decides.

The naked man on the wall of the Palais des Nations in Geneva might have been covered for the duration of the talks, but the Emperor has no clothes: both Iran and the United States seem to be willing to compromise on a mutually face-saving formula. If such is the case, Israel will inevitably conclude that it stands alone.

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