

PROSPECTS FOR IRAN'S NEW DIRECTION

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At the end of September 2014, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani made his second appearance at the United Nations General Assembly in New York. His previous visit in September 2013, had seen the first telephone conversation between a U.S. President and an Iranian leader since 1979. Despite the domestic controversy it caused in Iran, the fact that this was possible was indicative of the significant changes in Iranian foreign policy that had already taken place since Rouhani's election as Iranian president, replacing Mahmoud Ahmedinejad.

President Barack Obama noted that, "I think this new president is not going to suddenly make it easy,"¹ but the prospects for a significant easing of tensions with Iran appeared good. Since his election, the new president had sent conciliatory messages to a range of Western governments, as well as to neighboring Arab Gulf countries, and in particular seemed willing to take a different approach on nuclear negotiations to that of Ahmadinejad. Nevertheless, Obama still felt it necessary to specify that direct military action by the United States against Iran remained an option: "Iran should avoid thinking that the United States would not launch a military strike in response to Tehran's nuclear program just because it has not attacked Syria. . . . They shouldn't draw a lesson that we . . . won't strike Iran."²

One year later, Rouhani returned to New York under entirely different circumstances. The option of military strikes in response to Iran's nuclear ambitions had given way to stalemate over the extension

of a groundbreaking agreement between Iran and the West that had seemed to promise a peaceful resolution. Despite positive movement, the intervening year had clearly demonstrated the limited freedom of movement of the Iranian president in improving external relations—there was no prospect in 2014 of anything so daring as a telephone conversation with President Obama.³ A deadline for reaching further agreement on the status of Iran's nuclear program was close, and the consequences of failure to reach this agreement seemed alarming.

This monograph reviews the period since Rouhani's election in terms of these shifts in what seems possible and achievable for Iran, in order to draw conclusions about the likely future vectors for Iranian foreign policy. Although external relations regionally and internationally feature prominently on the agenda of the new Iranian leadership, they cannot be separated from Iran's domestic issues. Key junctures throughout Rouhani's first year of office emphasize that Iran is not a monolithic political body. The Iranian regime is constituted of a variety of political forces, and their influence on both nuclear negotiations and foreign policy more broadly is significant and pervasive. Any new approach adopted by an incoming Iranian President thus results from a shift in the thinking of other influential Iranian institutions, stemming from internal pressure. President Rouhani's initiatives enjoy the support of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, but this support is qualified and may have a limited duration.

ENDNOTES

1. Laura Rozen, "Obama Corresponds with Iran's Rouhani, Holds Out Hope for Nuclear Deal," *Al-Monitor*, September 15, 2013, available from backchannel.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/09/6265/obama-says-exchanged-letters-with-irans-rouhani/.

2. "Obama Says Syria Deal Could Offer Lesson for Iran Talks," *Reuters*, September 15, 2014, available from www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/15/us-syria-crisis-usaidUSBRE98D09C20130915.

3. "Rouhani: Time Not Right for Another Phone Call with Obama," *The Times of Israel*, September 27, 2014, available from www.timesofisrael.com/rouhani-time-not-right-for-another-phone-call-with-obama.

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