



IRAN TASK FORCE

BY YASMIN ALEM AND BARBARA SLAVIN

Rouhani's First One Hundred Days: Cautious Domestic Reforms and Nuclear Breakthrough

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After eight turbulent years during which conservatives monopolized Iranian politics, the election of centrist cleric Hassan Rouhani on June 14, 2013, marked a new, yet in some ways familiar chapter in post-revolutionary Iranian politics. It was new in the sense that his sweeping victory demonstrated unprecedented popular desire for change and elite recognition of the need for a less confrontational foreign policy. But Rouhani's presidency is also familiar because the team he has assembled is drawn from the old guard of the Islamic Republic, which enabled the regime to survive following the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War.

The serious economic and international challenges of today have an air of *déjà vu* for many of these technocrats. The majority served under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who spearheaded the war-ravaged country's reconstruction from 1989 to 1997.¹ Many of these figures went on to work for Rafsanjani's successor, Mohammad Khatami, whose thwarted efforts to repair Iran's relations with the West while increasing personal liberties present a cautionary tale for the Rouhani administration. Most Khatami appointees were sidelined by his successor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who drew on a group of religious conservatives and military and security service veterans known as *principlists* for upholding the principles of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

¹ For a biography of President Rouhani's cabinet members and top advisers, see http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/08/130804_i51_rouhani_cabinet_ministers.shtml (in Persian).

Atlantic Council Iran Task Force

The Iran Task Force, launched in 2010 and chaired by Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat, performs a comprehensive analysis of Iran's internal political landscape, as well as its role in the region and the world, to answer the question of whether there are elements within the country and region that can build the basis for an improved relationship with the West and how these elements, if they exist, could be utilized by US policymakers.

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The United States can facilitate Rouhani's efforts by implementing the historic nuclear agreement reached on November 24. This agreement validates the new president's approach and eases the pressure of sanctions on the Iranian economy in return for stringent, verifiable curbs on Iran's nuclear program. If the agreement fails, the best opportunity for progress on everything from the nuclear issue to economic and social reforms in at least a decade may be lost.

If there is one phrase that characterizes Rouhani's worldview and style of governance, as exemplified by his first one hundred days in power, it is "anything

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but Ahmadinejad.” The new president’s softer tone and call for “constructive interaction”² with the world is in stark contrast with his firebrand predecessor’s inflammatory rhetoric. Only two months after taking office in 2005, Ahmadinejad called Israel “a tumor” that should be “wiped off the map.” The Rouhani administration, by contrast, has steered clear of referring to the Jewish state as the “Zionist regime,” the established lexicon of the Islamic Republic. Instead, Rouhani and his team have referred to the country as “Israel” or relied on context to avoid naming it at all. The government also cancelled an annual anti-Israel conference. A Twitter account run by President Rouhani’s office and the official Twitter account of Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif extended congratulatory Rosh Hashanah messages to the Jewish people.³ In the economic domain, Rouhani has restored monitoring and planning agencies dismantled by Ahmadinejad and has brought more transparency and stability to the Iranian economy. He has not followed Ahmadinejad in making frequent provincial trips, which were seen as wasteful populist gestures that did not lead to successful long-term government projects. Rouhani also established a better understanding with the parliament and avoided mass purges of personnel in government agencies.

Breakthrough on Nuclear Issue

Although the balance of power in the executive has shifted toward the center, all other nodes of power are still under principlist control. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has honored the tradition of providing the new president with his support and blessing, but he has also criticized some of Rouhani’s foreign policy ventures, particularly his initial efforts to break the taboo of direct high-level US-Iranian contact by speaking on the phone with President Barack Obama at the United Nations in September. At the same time, Khamenei has protected the Rouhani team against hardline criticism and called for “heroic flexibility”⁴ in renewed nuclear negotiations with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council

and Germany (P5+1). Khamenei was quick to praise the historic agreement reached in Geneva November 24⁵ and the Iranian media has portrayed the deal as an affirmation of Iran’s nuclear rights. Under the first six-month phase of the accord, Iran will continue low-level enrichment of uranium but cannot increase its stockpile. Iran pledged to stop enriching uranium to 20 percent U-235—close to weapons grade— and to blend down and oxidize the approximately 200 kilograms of 20 percent uranium it has amassed over the past two years. Iran will also freeze most work at a heavy water reactor called Arak that if completed, could yield plutonium, another potential bomb fuel. It will also provide the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) with unprecedented daily access to enrichment plants at Natanz and Fordow. In return, the Iranians will receive about \$7 billion in sanctions relief, largely on their own oil earnings which have been frozen abroad. Iran will be able to continue to export oil at current reduced levels to Asian clients, resume trade in petrochemicals, automobiles, and precious metals, and gain improved access to imported food and medicine. The United States, European Union, and UN Security Council also pledge not to pass new nuclear-related sanctions against Iran over the next six months. During this time, Iran, and the P5+1 are to negotiate a comprehensive agreement that will verifiably cap the Iranian nuclear program, permit low-level uranium enrichment under stringent curbs, and remove all nuclear-related sanctions. Rouhani’s first one hundred days augur a presidency that is more inclusive, pragmatic, and cautious than that of his predecessors. But Rouhani’s fate ultimately hinges on his ability to salvage Iran’s economy, which depends on surmounting domestic and international obstacles to implementing the Geneva agreement and concluding a comprehensive accord that peacefully resolves the nuclear crisis. If these efforts succeed, Rouhani could become the most successful president in the history of the Islamic Republic.

Rouhani’s First Acts

Rouhani’s first test was assembling a cabinet. He presented a well-balanced list of nominees to the Iranian parliament on the day of his inauguration. Excluding extremists from both principlist and reformist camps, the president clearly demonstrated his desire to move beyond the divisive politics that

2 Hassan Rouhani, “Why Iran Seeks Constructive Engagement,” *Washington Post*, September 19, 2013, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-09-19/opinions/42214900_1_violence-world-leaders-hassan-rouhani.

3 Barack Ravid, “Are Rohani’s Rosh Hashanah Blessings a Diplomatic Signal?” *Diplomania* (blog), *Haaretz*, September 7, 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/diplomania/premium-1.545503>; “Iran Foreign Minister Zarif Tweets Happy Jewish New Year,” *BBC*, September 6, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23990717>.

4 Reza HaghighatNejad, “What Does Khamenei Mean by ‘Heroic Flexibility?’” *IranWire*, September 18, 2013, <http://iranwire.com/en/projects/2687>.

5 “The Supreme Leader’s Response to the President’s Letter About the Nuclear Talks,” <http://www.leader.ir/langs/fa/index.php?p=contentShow&id=11312> (in Persian).

paralyzed his predecessors. Having served twenty years in the parliament and over twenty-three years in Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), including sixteen as its head, Rouhani understands the importance of negotiating and building alliances with a wide array of factions and institutions. Thus, he offered concessions to the conservative ruling establishment with his choices for ministers of interior, culture, defense, and justice.⁶ But he made no compromises on key appointments in two areas high on his political agenda: the economy and foreign policy. He nominated Zarif, a US-educated diplomat, to serve as his foreign minister and chief nuclear negotiator. And despite fierce opposition from principlists, Rouhani selected Bijan Zanganeh, a veteran of three governments prior to Ahmadinejad, to serve as minister of oil. What distinguishes Rouhani's new cabinet from its predecessor is that it represents forces from across the political spectrum and relies on results-oriented technocrats rather than ideology-driven politicians. Zarif, for example, succeeded in cultivating a wide swath of US legislators, think tankers, and journalists while stationed in New York as Iran's UN ambassador from 2002 until 2007. Zanganeh is credited with attracting significant foreign investment for Iran's petroleum sector following the Iran-Iraq war.

Rouhani's cordial relationship with the parliament has not provided him with *carte blanche*, however. In the first round of confirmation hearings, the parliament rejected three of the president's eighteen proposed ministers. In the second round, it approved two of three nominees. In the third round, his pick for the ministry of youth affairs was once again rejected. Only a few days short of Rouhani's government reaching its one-hundredth day mark, the Iranian parliament finally approved Rouhani's fourth candidate for the empty post. This was a reminder that Rouhani's election has done little to change the fractious nature of Iranian politics.

6 Rouhani's choice for the ministry of interior, Rahmani Fazil, is a close ally of Ali Larijani, the speaker of parliament. Ali Jannati, minister of culture, is the son of the Guardian Council's hardline secretary, Ayatollah Jannati. Though the younger Jannati's views are closer to those of former president Rafsanjani, the selection appeased conservatives who vehemently opposed reformist personalities heading the ministry. Hossein Dehghan, minister of defense, is a former commander of the Revolutionary Guards. Mahmoud Alavi Tabar, the minister of intelligence, is a former member of the Assembly of Experts. He has close ties to conservative groups aligned with the former commander of the Revolutionary Guards Mohsen Rezaei.

In his second major institutional shake up, Rouhani transferred responsibility for Iran's nuclear negotiations from the SNSC to the Foreign Ministry.⁷ In a recent memoir, the new president described the SNSC as useful for consensus building, but too cumbersome for sensitive multilateral negotiations. He noted that during past negotiations "due to domestic pressures and pessimistic views on foreign relations, the nuclear team had to coordinate every single step with senior officials."⁸ The shift provides the administration with increased control over the diplomatic process. But it also makes the administration more vulnerable to criticism because the process no longer has the Supreme Leader's explicit imprimatur on tactical moves as it had when the secretary of the SNSC was Iran's chief nuclear negotiator. What's more, the new structure gives parliament oversight over the diplomatic process, which could create new obstacles for the government.⁹ Despite the associated risks, the new decision-making structure has provided Rouhani with greater agility to conduct diplomacy by entrusting career diplomats in the Foreign Ministry with the task of carrying out negotiations while distancing the day-to-day process from actors who view the nuclear issue purely through a security prism.¹⁰

The Economy

During the presidential campaign, Rouhani promised to implement a series of measures in his first one hundred days to address the immediate economic concerns of the population. Following his inauguration, he outlined his top economic priorities: improving the living standards of Iranians, increasing

7 From 2003 to 2013, the secretary of SNSC also served as Iran's lead nuclear negotiator.

8 Rouhani, Hassan, *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy* (Tehran: Center for Strategic Research, 2011), p. 342.

9 For instance, ahead of the October 15-16 negotiations between Iran and members of the P5+1, a senior lawmaker, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, warned that "As long as unfair and irrational US policies continue, Majles [parliament] will not authorize the acceptance of the Additional Protocol because lawmakers are highly sensitive about safeguarding national interests." See "Majlis Not to Accept Additional Protocol," IRIB World Service, October 1, 2013, <http://english.irib.ir/news/iran-a-iaea/item/118100-majlis-not-to-accept-additional-protocol>.

10 In the run up to the June presidential election, Mohammad Hossein Adeli, a former member of Iran's nuclear negotiating team, described one of the fundamental challenges for the incoming administration as "returning diplomatic decision-making to the Foreign Ministry." He criticized the fact that Iran's foreign policy decisions were managed by security-military groups and not the diplomatic corps.

their purchasing power, and reducing inflation.¹¹ But reversing the devastating impact of eight years of increasingly draconian sanctions and economic mismanagement is no easy feat. Ahmadinejad left the country's economy in ruins, with a 42 percent inflation rate, a negative economic growth rate, double-digit unemployment, millions of dollars of government debt to private contractors, municipalities, and the industrial sector, and a private sector in shambles.

One of Rouhani's first economic initiatives was to amend the Ahmadinejad-bequeathed budget, which Rouhani's team deemed unrealistic. The government announced that nearly one third of the revenue anticipated by Ahmadinejad in the 2013-2014 budget could not be realized. Rouhani then, moved to restore the planning organization that Ahmadinejad had scrapped in the early years of his presidency and approved a twenty-five-point plan to jumpstart the country's economic recovery. The plan included removing unnecessary hurdles in customs, facilitating access to lines of credit for traders, stabilizing the currency, and supporting the private sector.

Rouhani opted to deal with the increased presence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the country's economy, a legacy of Ahmadinejad's administration, in a nuanced manner. Mindful of the risks of antagonizing the powerful leadership of this elite force, Rouhani invited the Guards to have control over three or four large national projects, instead of competing with the private sector across all areas of the economy. In this endeavor, Rouhani seems to have the blessing of Khamenei, who told a group of IRGC commanders in September that the IRGC should focus on guarding the revolution and not stretch itself "across to all spheres including scientific, intellectual, cultural and economic spheres."¹²

Though the new administration has managed to increase Iran's short-term oil exports by 20 percent,¹³ Rouhani's most important challenge remains increasing government revenues. Given Iran's diminished petroleum exports and the inaccessibility of much

of its oil revenue due to sanctions, the government is facing major obstacles to sustaining the subsidy reform program that Ahmadinejad launched in 2009. Rouhani's economic team has repeatedly warned that the program is in deep deficit and that there is not enough revenue to make cash handouts to all of the seventy-five million people previously deemed entitled to them. To this end, the government proposed and received parliament's approval to stop paying roughly twenty million people, nearly 30 percent of recipients. Such bold actions might be necessary, but they risk exacerbating discontent among large swaths of the population.

Although the competence of the new economic team and higher hopes for a peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis have brought a degree of stability to the Iranian economy, sanctions relief will be key to preventing a major economic crisis. The government will seek to capitalize on the Geneva accords to lure back major international oil companies and has offered more lucrative contracts in part to persuade powerful multinational oil giants to lobby Western governments to ease sanctions.

Mixed Record on Human Rights

Rouhani pledged greater respect for human rights and social freedoms during his campaign and expectations were high in the aftermath of his inauguration. However, the president's performance so far has been a mixed bag. The new government has eased pressure on the press, lifted restrictions on the coverage of previously banned topics such as the future of US-Iran relations, and withdrawn fifty government motions filed against Iranian journalists and media outlets by the Ahmadinejad government.¹⁴ But there have also been setbacks. For instance, the reformist newspaper Bahar was banned in October 2013 and its editor subsequently arrested¹⁵ for publishing an article that questioned the authority of Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the first Shiite Imam, as a political as opposed to a religious leader, a topic considered sacrilegious by a regime whose supreme authority is a Shiite cleric.

Other promises have remained just that. During the campaign, Rouhani pledged to draft a "citizens' rights

11 "The Rouhani Administration's Guiding Principles," Iranian Students' News Agency, August 5, 2013, <http://bit.ly/18WY7vQ> (in Persian).

12 Koroush Avaei, "Will Iran's Revolutionary Guard Reduce Economic Role," *Al-Monitor*, September 19, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/rouhani-asks-revolutionary-guard-scale-back.html>.

13 "Rouhani's Latest Success: Iran's Oil Exports Increase by 20 Percent in the Last Month," *Khabar Online*, October 12, 2013, <http://khabaronline.ir/detail/317173/Economy/energy> (in Persian).

14 "Rouhani Fulfills First Campaign Promise to the Media: Cancellation of Complaints," *Mehr News*, October 8, 2013, <http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/2151564> (in Persian).

15 "Iran Arrests Head of Reformist Daily," *Agence France-Presse*, November 2, 2013, <http://news.yahoo.com/iran-arrests-head-reformist-daily-wife-163737276.html>.

charter” and submit it to parliament for approval.¹⁶ For an administration that has been exceptionally open and candid about its programs, no news has emerged about the content of this charter. There has been little or no progress on Internet censorship, an issue that Rouhani discussed at length before and after his election victory.¹⁷ Despite asserting that the “Iranian people must have access to all information worldwide,”¹⁸ the only progress has been breaking the taboo of using social networks by top officials. Since taking office, both Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif have used Facebook and Twitter for public diplomacy purposes. However, ordinary Iranians still have trouble accessing these sites and heavy censorship of the Internet continues. Other areas in which Rouhani’s reformist rhetoric has not been backed by action include changes to the segregation of the sexes and strict enforcement of the hijab code.

The latest report by Ahmed Shaheed, the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, concludes that the situation “continues to warrant serious concern, with no sign of improvement in the areas previously raised by the General Assembly or the various human rights monitoring mechanisms.”¹⁹ Iran continues to execute more prisoners per capita than any country. And although the Rouhani government has freed forty-two political prisoners, including Iran’s most prominent human rights activist Nasrin Sotoudeh, they represent a small fraction of the country’s prisoners of conscience. According to Shaheed’s report, at least forty journalists and twenty-nine bloggers and online activists are still in jail along with at least five hundred other human rights defenders. Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, presidential candidates in 2009, remain under house arrest and in deteriorating health despite Rouhani’s pledge to address their situation. At the same time, more

than two hundred people including Kurdish political prisoners, members of the Baluch ethnic minority and drug traffickers have been executed since Rouhani took office. It is, however, important to remember that the fate of political prisoners and the implementation of capital punishment remain under the purview of Iran’s judiciary, whose chief is appointed by the Supreme Leader. Although several government officials have expressed disappointment over the new wave of repression,²⁰ the administration appears loath to engage in a power struggle with hardline factions amidst the nuclear negotiations.

The Rouhani administration has also acted with restraint in response to a bill passed in parliament that would allow a stepfather to marry his stepdaughter or adopted daughter. This legislation caused uproar among women’s rights advocates inside and outside Iran as well as the wider human rights community who see the legislation as legalizing child abuse and statutory rape.²¹ After enlisting the support of several clerical sources of emulation and female lawmakers, Iran’s vice president for women’s and family affairs announced that the government has set up a working group to draft a bill seeking to amend the controversial clause in the law.²²

Rouhani has taken concrete measures to deliver on one of his key promises: desecuritizing universities. At the start of the academic year, the Ministry of Research, Science, and Technology (MSRT) announced that it would no longer target and expel students because of their political and personal beliefs. At the same time, it encouraged those banned from pursuing higher studies in 2010, 2011, and 2012 to reenroll without having to take the nationwide entrance exam. So far, four hundred students have been permitted to reenroll.²³ The MSRT also set up an internal committee to review cases of university faculty dismissed or forced into

16 This, however, will not be the first time an Iranian president attempts to detail and codify the specific right of Iranian citizens. Former President Khatami tried and failed to pass a “Citizens’ Rights Bill” in 2002, after the Guardian Council rejected his government’s draft legislation.

17 In his first interview as president with *Chelcheragh*, a reformist aligned Iranian weekly magazine, Rouhani said, “In the age of digital revolution, one cannot live or govern in a quarantine.”

18 F. Brinley Bruton, “Iran President Blames Israel for ‘Instability,’ Calls for Peace,” NBC News, September 19, 2013, http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/09/19/20573897-exclusive-iran-president-blames-israel-for-instability-calls-for-peace?lite.

19 Ahmed Shaheed, UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, October 4, 2013, <http://shaheedoniran.org/english/dr-shaheeds-work/latest-reports/october-2013-report-of-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-2/>.

20 “Iranian Government Official Dismayed at Rise in Executions,” International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, November 6, 2013, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/11/executions-kurdistan/>.

21 Fariba Parsa, “Women’s Rights are Linked to U.S.-Iran Negotiations,” *LobeLog*, November 2, 2013, <http://www.lobelog.com/womens-rights-are-linked-to-u-s-iran-negotiations/>.

22 Golnaz Esfandiari, “Iran Law Could Allow Adults to Marry Their Adopted Children,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 8, 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/content/iran-law-marrying-adopted-children/25162057.html>.

23 Lisa de Bode, “Iranian student-outlaws seek new life under Rouhani,” *Al Jazeera America*, November 6, 2013, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/11/6/iranian-student-outlawsseeknewlifeunderrouhani.html>.

retirement by Ahmadinejad's government.²⁴ Finally, the ministry took decisive action in dismissing several hardline heads of universities in response to student petitions and campaigns.²⁵ Yet, Rouhani's cautious approach prevented him from nominating Jaffar Tofighi, the MSRT's caretaker and the person behind these reforms, as minister. This failure casts doubt on how far the government will push the envelope in promoting academic freedom.

The Rouhani administration has demonstrated greater tolerance for civic activism than its predecessor, but has less of a *laissez-faire* approach toward civil society groups than the Khatami government (1997-2005). For example, more than a dozen grassroots campaigns focused on less politically charged issues such as the environment have been permitted to operate freely since Rouhani took office.²⁶ Tehran's House of Cinema, an independent professional association that supports about five thousand Iranian filmmakers and artists, shut down during Ahmadinejad's administration, has been reopened. The reopening was one of Rouhani's campaign pledges, and the ceremony was attended by Iran's new minister of culture.²⁷ This positive trend, however, has not extended to more politically sensitive institutions. For example, the Association of Iranian Journalists, the country's largest independent union of journalists dedicated to protecting and promoting the rights of journalists, bloggers, writers, and photographers, remains closed.

Conclusion

Rouhani's success in easing social restrictions and improving Iran's human rights situation will largely depend on his ability to negotiate with rival

conservative factions that continue to control key institutions such as the parliament, judiciary, and the military. The new president has thus been careful not to invest too much political capital in hotly-contested areas such as human rights. For now, his focus appears to be on using the momentum created by his electoral victory to end the stalemate in nuclear negotiations and revive Iran's anemic economy. A foreign policy victory could help him consolidate his power and deal with rival power centers on social issues from a position of strength.

The United States should implement the Geneva agreement and work hard to conclude a comprehensive nuclear accord with Iran, which would bolster the Rouhani government and give it the political space it needs to introduce other reforms. Failure to implement the historic framework concluded in November would undermine Rouhani and provide new ammunition to hardline elements that have largely held their fire during the past one hundred days. This would complicate Rouhani's efforts to resuscitate Iran's ailing economy and could deprive him of the Supreme Leader's essential backing. Under such circumstances, the Rouhani government would have to adopt more hardline policies to survive the remainder of its term. This is a prospect neither in the interest of the United States, Iran, or the international community.

24 Since 2009, between 50 and 150 university faculty members have been forced to retire or have been dismissed due to their personal and political opinions. See "Dismissed University Professor Awaits Response to Request for Reinstatement," International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, October 12, 2013, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/10/dismissed-reinstatement/>.

25 Among those dismissed was Sadreddin Shariati, the controversial head of Allameh Tabatabai University, the country's top humanities academic institution, who was instrumental in implementing gender segregation on campus and eliminating thirteen branches of the social sciences from the curriculum. See "Iran: Caretaker Minister Fires Controversial Head of University," Payvand, September 2, 2013, <http://www.payvand.com/news/13/sep/1005.html>.

26 "Iranian Mountain Climbers, Environment Activists Form Human Chain to Save Mountain from Mining," Payvand, September 15, 2013, <http://www.payvand.com/news/13/sep/1098.html>.

27 "House of Cinema Opens in Tehran," International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, September 12, 2013, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/09/house-of-cinema-2/>.

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