

*Viewpoints*  
*No. 49*

# Can the Iran Nuclear Issue be Resolved?

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Following the interim P5+1 deal with Iran, the world has never been this close to resolving the Iranian nuclear issue. There is no doubt that a de-escalation in Western relations with Tehran will help usher in a more cooperative and less threatening Iran whose domestic political dynamics would positively influence the region as a whole.

*January 2014*

*Middle East Program*



Recently, an Austrian diplomat who spent years studying the political culture of Islamic countries shared an important realization with me. She described a nuanced difference between the Middle East and the American political culture and explained that the Middle Eastern approach to politics and diplomacy had to do with “horsemanship” (incidentally the origin of the Arabic word “siasat,” which means politics). She said, “Horsemanship in the Middle East is about patience and perseverance. And what do the Americans do? They insist on breaking the horse!”

The above analogy best describes the situation with Iran’s nuclear impasse. For the past decade, Western governments under Washington’s leadership have tried to “break Iran” through sanctions and pressure – a futile exercise that has backfired in the face of its initiators.

In fact, President Barack Obama confirmed the challenge of dealing with Iran in an interview at the Brookings Saban Center on December 7, 2013: “The idea that Iran, given everything that we know about their history, would just continue to get more and more nervous about more sanctions and military threats and ultimately just say, ‘We give in,’ I think does not reflect an honest understanding of the Iranian people and the Iranian regime.”

It seems that the “honest understanding” of the Iranian regime helped Washington and its partners in the so-called P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) to achieve an “interim deal,” which was signed in Geneva on November 24, 2013. The interim nuclear deal has provided the platform for further negotiations in the next six months with the objective to find a negotiated settlement to the nuclear standoff with Iran. Undoubtedly, the change of government in Iran and the emergence of President Hassan Rouhani have helped consolidate a more de-escalatory approach to nuclear negotiations. Iran and the P5+1 agree that a final deal is possible; however, sustained and creative diplomacy will be needed to achieve the final agreement in the next 6 to 12 months.

The biggest mistake on this path would be continuing to put pressure on Tehran based on the misplaced analysis that sanctions compelled Tehran to come to the negotiating table. What changed in Iran was the political composition of the executive branch as a consequence of presidential elections. The same faction that is in power today offered to resolve the nuclear standoff between 2003 and 2005, before losing power to the more hardline faction in 2005. Western observers and stakeholders have witnessed the movements of the political pendulum in Iran since the beginning of the nuclear standoff in 2003. From 2003 to 2005, President Mohammad Khatami and his team including Hassan Rouhani (then secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and nuclear negotiator), Javad Zarif (then UN Ambassador), and Ali Shamkhani (then minister of defense) produced the best possible deal to resolve the nuclear issue, but were rebuffed by Washington.

In fact, Secretary of State John Kerry explained the failure of the past approach at the end of the Geneva negotiations on November 24, 2013: “In 2003, when the Iranians made an offer to the former Administration with respect to their nuclear program, there were 164 centrifuges. That

offer was not taken. Subsequently, sanctions came in, and today there are 19,000 centrifuges and growing.”

The dismissal of the Iranian proposals in 2004 and 2005 was followed by the pendulum movement toward the hardline factions as a consequence of the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. The escalatory policies by both sides from 2005 to 2013 only led to a vicious cycle of deeper antagonism and distrust. This vicious cycle was broken by the 2013 Iranian elections and the willingness of the Obama administration to engage the new Iranian government in a new and more respectful manner. Incidentally, President Rouhani clearly stated in his inauguration speech in August 2013 that “interaction with Iran can only be based on respect and not on sanctions.”

Today, the two sides are engaged in a constructive process of diplomacy, which represents the best opportunity to resolve the nuclear issue and pave the way for a new relationship between Western governments and the Islamic Republic of Iran. That is not a foregone conclusion yet, and confidence-building measures will be required from both sides.

In order to take advantage of the new political realities in Iran, the West needs to seize the moment and engage Iran beyond the nuclear issue. In a new report, "[Extending Hands and Unclenching Fists](#)" – which relies on in-depth interviews with senior Iranian political officials, intellectuals, and members of the business community – my co-authors<sup>1</sup> and I show that the West can increase the chances of success in the nuclear deal by collaborating with Iran on scientific projects that carry no proliferation risk. Scientific exchanges would be central to a process of confidence building in which the West would argue that it is not opposed to Iran's technological progress.

The central notion of the new foreign policy narrative in Iran is a win-win approach, i.e. the notion that Iran's national security goals require peace and accommodation with regional powers – and by extension, the West. To that end, they see Western countries including Washington as potential partners in helping Iran achieve its declared goals – not just in nuclear technology, but also in other technological, regional, and security issues.

However, we should not have the illusion that President Rouhani's election and the interim nuclear deal have cemented an unshakable Iranian outlook. On the contrary, the narrative of the country's hardliners remains firm and has only temporarily been sidelined: the hardline narrative continues to view the West as a brutal, immoral entity out to "get" Iran, deprive it of scientific and technological advances, and keep it dependent on foreign powers.<sup>2</sup> They use the Western policies of the past decade including assassinations of scientists, blanket sanctions, and other forms of pressure as the evidence for their argument.

Any move (such as new sanctions and pressure) that would confirm that narrative will only endorse that hardline view and push back the more moderate win-win approach of the new

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<sup>1</sup> Reza Marashi and Trita Parsi of the National Iranian American Council ([www.niacouncil.org](http://www.niacouncil.org))

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the hardline narrative, please look at David Ignatius' interview with Hossein Shariatmadari at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/david-ignatius-irans-hard-liners-resist-nuclear-deal/2013/12/17/b7927d04-6742-11e3-8b5b-a77187b716a3\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/david-ignatius-irans-hard-liners-resist-nuclear-deal/2013/12/17/b7927d04-6742-11e3-8b5b-a77187b716a3_story.html)

government. The main risk is that Western governments, especially Washington, would unintentionally push the Iranian pendulum in the wrong direction and yet again miss an opportunity for de-escalation and resolution of the nuclear and other issues.

The interim deal with Iran and the reported progress made in the technical negotiations to implement the deal present a unique opportunity to test win-win proposals and strengthen the positive-sum narrative of the Iranian moderates – not just at the negotiating table, but also through concrete actions that can facilitate a new, cooperative relationship with Iran and its people, void of the painful baggage of the past.

Those who continue to distrust Tehran should always remember the alternative, which was tested between 2005 and 2013. The last thing the world needs at this juncture is another spiral of escalatory policies between Iran and the West that would further exacerbate the situation in an already vulnerable region. The world has never been this close to resolving the Iranian nuclear issue, and there is no doubt that a de-escalation in Western relations with Tehran will help usher in a more cooperative and less threatening Iran whose domestic political dynamics would positively influence the region as a whole.



*The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.*

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Designed by Kendra Heideman

Middle East Program  
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars