Commentary Shmuel Bar & Alex Grinberg

Rohani recycled

Iran’s new president has been greeted with optimism in the West, but his more muted tone may be no more than an attempt to buy time as the centrifuges continue to spin

THE MID-JUNE election of Hassan Fereydoun Rohani as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran was not anticipated, but was not the surprise of the media proclaimed.

Compared with the totally unexpected election in May 1997 of Mohammad Khatami, who ran against the Supreme Leader’s favorite, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, or compared with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s victory in 2005, Rohani was one of eight candidates, whom the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei vetted after weeding out all candidates who were identified with the reformists.

Thus, Khamenei was confident that whoever was elected – including Rohani – would not attempt to challenge his policies or to project the president as the primary decision-maker, as Ahmadinejad did.

Rohani is not a newcomer to Iranian politics. Nor is he a committed reformist who will challenge the system that brought him to power. He is aware that his victory was not overwhelming; he received 51 percent of the eligible votes, while the other seven candidates split the conservative vote. His election was ultimately enabled by the mass turnout of young and reformist voters during the last days of the campaign, reversing the previous tendency to boycott the elections.

Rohani will take office in August, after Ahmadinejad formally cedes power. Until then he has to form a new cabinet and negotiate the limits of his authority – not only with the leader but also with other centers of power such as the Majles (the parliament) and the Revolutionary Guard. It is highly unlikely that he will receive authority that his predecessors lacked. This will be particularly true in relation to the key areas of conflict between Iran and the West – Syria, Iraq, support of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the nuclear file.

All of these were – and will remain – in the realm of the decisions taken by the Supreme Leader and implemented by the Revolutionary Guard. On the other hand, there is no doubt that he will attempt to lower the tensions with the West. He sees no benefit in antagonizing the West with Holocaust denial or mystical pretensions. From this point of view, Rohani will be seen in the West as someone it “can do business with.”

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The key to Rohani’s success in the eyes of his constituents will be the improvement of the economy. Since his election, he has issued a number of statements indicating that he intends to revive the nuclear negotiations with the West aimed at easing sanctions or getting them lifted altogether. He promised “more transparency” without elaborating what that would mean in practice or what concessions Iran might be ready to make. These opaque statements have already been rewarded by declarations on the American side that the US is willing to re-engage with the new administration in Teheran.

The optimism in the West has been bolstered by a narrative Rohani himself helped to spread that during his tenure as chief nuclear negotiator, Iran suspended uranium enrichment and that he proposed an Iranian initiative to suspend the nuclear program, which the Bush administration rejected. In fact, Iran only began to enrich uranium on an R&D scale in April 2006, after Rohani was replaced and achieved full industrial production in February 2007. Clearly, enrichment could not have been suspended before it began.

Furthermore, Rohani’s stint as chief negotiator does not augur well for reaching enduring agreements. During his term, Iran conducted intensive negotiations with the EU3, (France, Germany and the UK), culminating in the Brussels agreement of February 2004, which the Iranians promptly cancelled. The main achievement of the November 2004 Paris agreement which replaced it was an Iranian undertaking not to launch the newly completed Esfahan Uranium Conversion Facility to produce uranium hexafluoride (UF6). Six weeks later, the Iranians blithely started operating the facility and producing UF6. Furthermore, Rohani negotiated with the EU3 parameters allowing Iran to retain 20-centrifuge R&D cascades only. But the Iranians went on to install full 164-centrifuge production scale cascades nevertheless.

Some lessons on Rohani’s strategy towards the negotiations may be deduced from his book, “National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy,” published in 2011. There he reveals how Iran used the negotiations to stymie putative Western sanctions while
moving ahead with its nuclear program. Indeed, he criticized the Ahmadinejad administration’s belligerent attitude towards the West, complaining that “the US has been trying to drag Iran to the Security Council for decades and Ahmadinejad accomplished this within months...” It stands to reason that, as President, Rohani will attempt to implement a similarly devious strategy.

NEEDLESS TO say, Iranian foreign policy, including the nuclear issue, is defined exclusively by the Supreme Leader Khamenei. Rohani will not be able to diverge from those lines. Therefore, it is safe to assume that his new more muted tone will be little more than a cover for Iran’s buying time while the centrifuges continue to spin. The responses in Western capitals to Rohani’s election seem to indicate that the West – and the United States in particular – is willing to attempt a “reset” of the relations with Iran on the basis of generous Western concessions in return for a suspension – and not a rollback – of the nuclear program. Under the circumstances, Iran may acquiesce to a temporary suspension, much as it did during the period when Rohani led the negotiations.

Moreover, the very fact that negotiations will be taking place will put the military option in abeyance. This will certainly be true as far as the Americans are concerned. And Israel will also probably be pressured not to take or even threaten to take action in order not to sabotage the negotiations. But this restraint will come at a price. Removing the military option from the table will reduce any incentive on the part of the Iranians to continue to suspend their nuclear activities.

At the same time, the nuclear negotiations will not take place in a vacuum. The Iranian intervention in Syria may become the key issue in the dialogue between Iran and the West. This could have varied, even contradictory, effects. Escalation in tensions between Iran and the West over Syria may slow down or even stop the process of negotiations on the nuclear file. That would leave Iran still suffering from sanctions, but free of the need to take big strategic decisions, or even tactical decisions over temporary suspension of enrichment activity or further installation of centrifuges.

On the other hand, there may well be calls for a “grand bargain” in which Iran suspends certain aspects of the nuclear program in return for a putative settlement in Syria. Then again, an outbreak of hostilities between Israel and the Assad regime in Syria, say following Israeli attacks on sophisticated arms or chemical weapons being shipped to Hezbollah, could reshuffle the deck and result in massive attacks on the Israeli populace by Iranian proxies, which, in turn, could introduce a new factor into the nuclear equation, adding to the feasibility of the military option.

The argument that there is still time for diplomacy is based on two dubious assumptions: that Iran has not yet decided to make nuclear weapons, which has no basis save the absence of information; and that if Iran decides on a nuclear breakout, Western intelligence agencies will pick it up and provide timely warning. It is on this flimsy basis that Israel is being advised to desist from precipitous action, which could prove counterproductive.

The argument will be reinforced once the West decides to give Rohani a chance. As for Israel – Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has already expressed his skepticism regarding the claim the West will know about Iranian plans to break out in advance. The Israeli assumption is – and should be – that breakout might not be detected by Western intelligence (as North Korea’s breakout was not detected in advance), or that it might be discovered after it is too late for a military strike.

The point at which a military strike remains feasible is different for Israel than for the US. For Israel it may be measured in months, and for the US in a year or more. Furthermore, as negotiations proceed, the gap between Israel and the US is likely to grow. American proposals for lifting sanctions in return for the suspension of enrichment activity without the removal of the medium (20 percent) enriched uranium will be unacceptable in Israel precisely because that would not allow sufficient early warning if Iran violates the agreement and moves to breakout.

The government of Israel will have to make a strategic – perhaps historic – decision: whether to retain Israel’s traditional position on its unfettered right to self-defense or – on a one-time ad hoc sui generis basis – cede the exercise of that right to a trusted powerful ally.

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