

TEHRAN CALLING: UNDERSTANDING A NEW IRANIAN LEADERSHIP

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After years of tension, sanctions, and deadlocked negotiations, Hassan Rouhani, Iran's relatively moderate new president, has provided an opening for improved relations between the Islamic Republic and the West. While Rouhani has not ushered in a new Iran, Tehran has adopted a more conciliatory tone on its nuclear program since he took office. This shift is more than just talk, but the West will have to carefully calibrate its response to determine whether Rouhani's changed rhetoric signals the beginning of a new direction for Iran.

Key Themes

- Tehran's pursuit of a nuclear program can only be understood by looking at all four dimensions of Iranian politics—power, ideology, norms, and communication.
- Iran's power dynamics and ideology are fueled by a fundamental antagonism with the West, making compromise in these areas unlikely.
- Iran does not accept all the norms governing today's international system, but it claims to advance the aims of global nonproliferation.
- Rouhani has adopted a new approach to communication, indicating that Iran is willing to increase its nuclear transparency, exploring new channels of communication with the West, and showing signs of wanting to open Iran up to the world.
- Iran has concluded an interim nuclear agreement with several global powers, which is a positive step toward resolving the nuclear dispute and perhaps toward improving relations more broadly.

Implications for Western Policymakers

Take Rouhani's words seriously, but judge him by his deeds. Rouhani's rhetoric suggests an opening for more productive nuclear negotiations. Iran must follow these words with verifiable, tangible nuclear concessions.

Broaden the scope of negotiations with Iran. Faithfully implementing the interim nuclear agreement will build trust between Tehran and the West and make it possible to expand discussions with the aim of finding common ground on other shared norms that can help improve relations.

Promote norms that Iran values and that advance nonproliferation aims. Reinvigorating attempts to establish a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East and advance global nonproliferation will give Iran face-saving ways to frame concessions it must make as part of its stated commitments.

Delay attempts at U.S.-Iranian rapprochement. There is not enough bilateral trust for such a bold step, especially among hardliners in both countries.

Improve communication strategies. The West's attempts to convince the world—and especially the Middle East—that its approach to the Iranian nuclear issue is reasonable have fallen short. It will need to articulate this position more persuasively to maintain international support for Western objectives in Iran.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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