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IRAN AFTER THE ELECTIONS: TIME FOR RE-ENGAGEMENT

FRANCESCO BASTAGLI

After saying for months that all Iranian presidential hopefuls were the same, foreign observers are falling over themselves in fine-tuning the special features of the successful candidate, Hassan Rohani. Indeed, Rohani's profile confirms that Iran's politics are more complex and nuanced than is normally depicted in Western media. Iran's new president can be safely labelled as a moderate conservative; but what does this mean, and how to deal with the new government in Tehran?

Well rooted in the Iranian establishment, Rohani managed through a skilful campaign to capture the longing for change that is widespread in Iranian society. His constituency is diverse. Important support came from Iran's frustrated middle-class, the bedrock of the protest that followed the 2009 presidential elections. But he is also the expression of influential religious circles and is a close ally of the powerful Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the pragmatist supreme of Iranian politics. Therefore, in his stated desire for a less dogmatic approach to domestic and foreign policy, Rohani is not alone. Yet, if one looks at his trajectory, Rohani appears as a man for all seasons; it's difficult to fathom which one of his different political personas will prevail once the easy rhetoric of reconcili-

ation will have to be turned into hard choices. This may very well depend on the behaviour of those powers that are sitting opposite Iran at the negotiating table.

Before rushing to articulate their expectations from the new government, the US and its allies should consider a negotiating approach that would make it easier to demonstrate Rohani's commitment to a rapprochement with the West. To that end, they must pay greater attention to Iran's legitimate concerns. Three of them will be prominent in Rohani's mind. First, he must avoid early concessions on the nuclear issue without adequate reciprocity. Otherwise, Rohani would be accused by hard-liners of caving in to the West and positions may freeze again. Second, there is the overarching preoccupation with the deteriorating Iranian economy, by far the top concern of the Iranian electorate. As the sanctions imposed on Iran because of its nuclear programme have a major negative impact on the economy, this is a key tessera of the mosaic. Thirdly, it's imperative to guarantee national security and to protect strategic Iranian and Shia interests in the volatile greater Middle East.

To bring all these strands together, a multi-layered approach is necessary. First, the current negotiations over the Iran programme should aim with renewed vigour

Francesco Bastagli, has been United Nations Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Iran



towards an agreement on a minimum set of steps sufficient to defuse the sense of imminent danger. Viable options were recently put forward by competent sources including former IAEA and weapons inspector chief Hans Blix and Seyed Mousavian, a former Iranian negotiator now a visiting fellow at Princeton. An easing of sanctions or even their temporary suspension would provide a powerful lubricant. Progress in this focussed effort will gain time and credibility for tackling the long-term nuclear challenge, and implicitly Iran's foreign policy choices, within a broader context.

Iran's nuclear programme and the controversy surrounding it are symptoms of a problem that affects most countries in the Middle East: national and regional insecurity. Assuming that the programme is intended to acquire nuclear weapon capability, its purpose wouldn't be to "bomb Tel Aviv" (some of the Iranian leaders' rhetoric may be disturbing, but they are no fools); rather, it's to provide Tehran with a powerful military deterrent. Often depicted as a potential aggressor, Iran feels isolated and sees itself under recurrent external threat. The hard facts of past and recent history vindicate this perspective. Rohani cited as one of his greatest achievements the security pact established between Iran and Saudi Arabia while he was an official in reformist president Khatami's government. And in his first public pronouncement, the newly elected president said that the priority of his foreign policy would be to have excellent relations with all neighbouring countries. Helping Iran in this direction will provide a much more favourable environment for the nuclear negotiations. How to achieve this goal?

Rohani's government should no longer be demonized and excluded from international initiatives to address the turmoil in its neighbourhood, from Afghanistan to Iraq, from Syria to Lebanon. A carefully managed but sincere effort towards engagement at this level is long overdue. It would give recognition to Iran as an important regional player, which it is, and strengthen Rohani's hand internally. At the same time, engagement would force Tehran towards greater transparency and accountability over its role and intentions. It would also allow the Iranians to contribute to the definition of an urgently needed regional security understanding where their concerns could be taken into account as appropriate.

It's only within this wider regional context that Iran may secure those political and security returns that warrant compromise, while laying at rest any remaining international concerns over the nuclear programme and beyond. Today it's difficult to imagine Iran and some of its regional antagonists sitting at the same table. But world powers, and the United States in particular, have the experience and influence necessary to open up channels of communication. Besides, the effort wouldn't require any compromise on the deep ideological and political differences among Middle Eastern countries. They would just engage among equals in the pursuit of their sole but paramount common interest: regional security through a mutual commitment to non-interference and respect for each other's sovereignty. The changing of the guard in Tehran may provide an opportunity in this direction that should not to be missed.