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Behraves, Maysam

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00



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## Why the Iran Nuke Talks Might Fail

International and domestic politics make it increasingly likely that the Iran-P5+1 negotiations will fail.

**By Maysam Behraves**

October 28, 2014

Ongoing negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (Britain, France, China, Russia, U.S. and Germany) to reach a final settlement on Tehran's nuclear program are taking place against a totally different background from last year when they reached a historic interim agreement. A year ago, Russia had not yet annexed Crimea, setting off the greatest East-West showdown since the end of the Cold War, nor had the Islamic State (IS) developed into a security threat of regional proportions after seizing vast swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria. The signatories of the Geneva Accord sounded so optimistic about the accessibility of an ultimate deal that no more than a six-month period was thought to be needed to resolve the remaining differences and end the protracted nuclear controversy once and for all.

But cracks in the diplomatic effort soon took center stage. Shortly after the extension of negotiations for another six months in June 2014, a large-scale conflict broke out between Israel and Hamas, laying waste to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's months-long use of shuttle diplomacy to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The conflict prompted Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei to **call** for the arming of the West Bank in the same vein as the Gaza Strip. The Leader's physical **health** has also become a major question mark with significant **implications** for the future of the Islamic Republic, while factional tensions are intensifying day by day. Today, Iran's motivation for appeasing the world powers seems to have waned. If the West does not show adequate flexibility, Tehran will likely refuse to make the big compromises necessary to reach a deal. In sum, both internal and external factors may cause the nuclear talks to fail.

On the geopolitical scene, Russia's growing distance from the West and deepening alignment with China has largely convinced the more hardline elements in Tehran that the anti-imperialistic bloc they have long hoped for is finally taking shape. This faction argues that the Islamic Republic does not have to stomach any unpalatable demands from the U.S.-led alliance over Tehran's foreign policy conduct in general and nuclear venture in particular. In other words, the Ukraine crisis and the ensuing confrontation between Moscow and Washington have shifted the balance of power in Iran's favor, to use "realist" terminology. Notably, in September of this year, Russia **signaled** an unprecedented **willingness** to facilitate full Iranian membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russia has just assumed the rotating presidency of the multinational group, which is widely seen as an Asian counterweight to NATO. The two sides have also been working on an "**oil-for-goods deal**" in defiance of Western sanctions imposed on Tehran over its nuclear program and on Russia over the Ukraine crisis.

It was against this backdrop that Khamenei publicly **dismissed** in mid-September the U.S. offer to cooperate with Iran in the fight against IS. In his words, "I opposed [the U.S. request] and told them we will not cooperate with the Americans on this issue because their intent and hands are not clean." He continued, "Now they are falsely claiming that 'we will not let Iran be part of the [anti-ISIL] coalition,' while Iran had voiced its opposition to being a party to that coalition from the very beginning." More than anything, these remarks demonstrated Khamenei's anger over the exclusion of Iran as well as a deep-seated suspicion that the campaign is ultimately aimed at removing Bashar al-Assad from power in Syria. These suspicions all can affect Iran's nuclear calculus in ways that are detrimental to the prospects of a deal.

Among the internal factors impacting the nuclear talks, the Islamic Republic faces a host of stiff challenges, including an enervating factional fight between the moderate government of President Rouhani and the powerful conservatives that hold sway in both the parliament and the judiciary. Most remarkably, a number of influential "principlist" politicians and former officials held a conference called "**We're Worried**" in May to show their all-out opposition to the nuclear deal, which they likened to the ceasefire resolution "**imposed**" on the former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini at the end of Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Such a compromise, the argument goes, should not be allowed to be forced on the Leader again.

The high profile **impeachment** of Rouhani's Science Minister Reza Faraji-Dana in August, achieved with the Supreme Leader's tacit endorsement, was another move primarily intended as a grim reminder to the moderate government that the real decision-making authority rests outside the presidential office. Transgression of the established political bounds will not be tolerated. "The issue of the **sedition** [mass protests after the 2009 presidential elections] and seditionists [Green Movement leaders] is a crucial one and one of the red lines that the ministers ... should adhere to," Khamenei admonished the government during a speech to members of the cabinet shortly afterward. Notably, the nuclear dossier, as the principal foreign policy concern of the Rouhani government, falls within the same critical category.

Geopolitical flux in the region combined with internal uncertainties surrounding Khamenei's health have come to influence Iran's nuclear calculus in ways that make

further compromises implausible. Due to the stringent opposition of powerful hardliners on both sides to a compromise-based final nuclear deal (not to mention the influence of spoilers including Israel and Saudi Arabia) selling the collapse of negotiations at home in the name of “resistance” or “resolve” is easier for both Tehran and Washington. As Tehran’s perceptions are shifting, it will not accept a deal at a high price. Unlike Rouhani, who is a rational moderate, Khamenei’s decisions are as much driven by feelings of indignation and grievance, as well as a historically rooted sense of injustice, as by cost-benefit calculations.

Guaranteeing the Islamic Republic’s entrenched revolutionary path at this stage looks a safer bet to the Supreme Leader than a nuclear deal that may roll back the fruits of a costly decades long resistance and leave his legacy exposed to a highly uncertain future. In his view, even after a deal the U.S. would not be satisfied and would try to look for another set of reasons to maintain its pressure on the Islamic Republic.

As Trita Parsi **has aptly argued**, the Iranian leadership “can afford to say no to a nuclear deal” in order to leave a credible legacy behind and save the political face of the system. Under these circumstances, and despite Rouhani’s assurances that a deal is “certain,” Iran and the West may still fall short of a nuclear breakthrough absent a firm determination for serious political sacrifices.

***Maysam Behravesht** is a PhD Candidate in Political Science at Lund University, Sweden, the Senior Editor for Media Reviews of the journal *Asian Politics & Policy* (Wiley), and the Editorial Assistant of the journal *Cooperation and Conflict* (Sage).*