



**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER  
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**



**Bar-Ilan**  
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# **Iran's President Rouhani: Part of the Problem, Not Part of the Solution**

Udi Evental



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 152

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# Iran's President Rouhani: Part of the Problem, Not Part of the Solution

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	5
Prospects for Positive Change in Iran .....	7
Rouhani Is No Gorbachev .....	9
Shielding the IRGC and Its Quds Force .....	10
Facilitating Iran's Transformation Into a Nuclear Threshold State .....	12
Rouhani, The United States, and Israel .....	14
Conclusion .....	15
Notes .....	17

# **Iran's President Rouhani: Part of the Problem, Not Part of the Solution**

*Udi Evental*

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The controversy surrounding the US withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) epitomizes the ongoing debate between two contending approaches on the best way to bring about a positive change in Tehran's Islamist regime and its policies.

Many, including in Israel, identify the (supposedly) moderate President Hassan Rouhani as the best hope for such a change, warning that the collapse of the nuclear agreement and the reintroduction of international sanctions will play into the hands of the hardliners and weaken Rouhani and the "reformist camp" more generally.

While intriguing, such views are not only unfounded but detrimental to the efforts to pressure Iran to end its domestic repression and external aggression.

For one thing, it is international sanctions, not friendly persuasion, that brought Tehran to the negotiating table in the first place. For another, as shown by the popular protests across Iran since early 2018, sustained economic pressure does not weaken the internal Iranian demand for change but rather reinforces it.

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Udi Evental is a colonel in the Israel Defense Forces who will soon be retiring after long years of military service.

While Rouhani's rhetoric may well sound more moderate than that of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, his political record, ideological worldview, and actual conduct over the past decades clearly show him to be cut from the same cloth: an unreconstructed revolutionary Islamist. As such, he constitutes a major barrier to real change in both Iran's domestic situation and its hegemonic foreign policy ambitions.

Worse: due to his seemingly moderate image, Rouhani has succeeded in alleviating international pressure on Tehran at a time when its aggressive activities throughout the region – from terrorism to subversion to military intervention in neighboring states – have only accelerated during his tenure as president.

# **Iran's President Rouhani: Part of the Problem, Not Part of the Solution**

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## **PROSPECTS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE IN IRAN**

The Trump administration's withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) has generated a schism between Washington and the European signatories to the agreement, which rushed to reassure Tehran that the forthcoming US sanctions would not affect its economic relations with Europe or the continued export of Iranian oil to the Continent.<sup>1</sup>

On the immediate level, this response represents the fundamental transatlantic differences over the JCPOA, with France, Germany, and Britain viewing the agreement as the best means to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions and Washington considering it a stepping-stone to Tehran's nuclearization and regional hegemony. Moreover, Europe views US secondary sanctions as a dictate aimed at forcing it to abide by Washington's policy vis-à-vis Iran.

On the deeper level, however, the JCPOA controversy represents an ongoing debate between two contending approaches regarding the prospects for positive change in Iran and the ways and means for its inducement.

According to the thesis advanced by the European signatories to the JCPOA, which is widely shared by Western academics, journalists, and decision makers, "the JCPOA may be a nonproliferation agreement, but it is intrinsically linked to the internal struggle between two competing visions for Iran."<sup>2</sup> Hence, its collapse and the restoration of international sanctions are bound to have a devastating impact on the moderate camp,



led by President Rouhani, which is fighting its conservative rivals to increase political freedoms within Iran, curb Tehran's aggressive regional policies, and rebuild its relations with the West.

Much has been said about the deepening tensions between Rouhani and the conservative ayatollahs and generals in Tehran around the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the Iranian economy, as well as its undermining of government authority and subversive activities throughout the Middle East. Some observers have even described Rouhani's alleged confrontation with the IRGC, especially with its elite Quds Force and influential commander Qassem Suleimani, as "unprecedented."<sup>3</sup>

This confrontation, especially against the backdrop of the protests that have spread across Iran since early 2018, reinforced the widespread perception of Rouhani as a person with whom the West can find common ground, and who can be persuaded to curb Tehran's hegemonic ambitions in return for a generous economic package that will improve Iran's socioeconomic wellbeing.

But are these great expectations either justified or realistic? Is Rouhani's worldview fundamentally different from that of his extremist and dogmatic fellow ayatollahs, including Supreme Leader Khamenei? Does he consider himself the leader of a liberal camp seeking enhanced freedoms and democratization? Do his differences with the IRGC reflect a fundamental disagreement over long-term strategic goals? If so, does Rouhani have sufficient power to rein in this formidable force? Above all, will Rouhani be willing to discard Tehran's prolonged striving after nuclear weapons, or at the very least its attainment of nuclear-threshold-state status?

While the answer to all these questions is negative, Rouhani has nevertheless been highly successful at reducing international pressure on Tehran at a time when its domestic repression and external aggression have drastically intensified. In this respect, Rouhani is more of a problem than a solution to the perennial Iranian danger.

## ROUHANI IS NO GORBACHEV

The widespread expectation that Rouhani would steer Iran away from its forty-year-long Islamist legacy towards domestic and foreign moderation, whether in his present capacity as president or in any future role he may play (perhaps even as Supreme Leader after Khamenei's death), makes the fundamental error of misconstruing pragmatism for moderation.

Rouhani may indeed be the quintessential pragmatist, but he is no moderate. As Stephen Ditto, who explored Rouhani's political thought and conduct convincingly shows, Rouhani is an integral part of the Islamist regime and its ideological, political, and strategic worldview.<sup>4</sup> He played a significant role in the revolutionary struggle led by Ayatollah Khomeini in the years preceding the 1978-79 revolution and toiled tirelessly to cultivate the personality cult around Khomeini, being apparently the first to define him as Imam (at a 1977 sermon during a memorial for his son).<sup>5</sup>

Like his "moderate" predecessor, President Muhammad Khatami, Rouhani has never questioned the foundational principles on which the Islamic Republic is predicated. He is fully committed to Khomeini's vision of the "rule of the jurispudent" (*wilayat al-faqih*) and has often defended it, including through censorship of the media whenever needed (e.g., closing newspapers, banning satellite dishes, etc.).<sup>6</sup>

In 2008, Rouhani claimed that "in a Muslim society, the 'Islamic system' is more important than anything else, and its preservation is a religious duty." Rouhani reiterated this message during the recent protests in Iran, declaring, "we will not trade away our Islamic system."<sup>7</sup> By way of fulfilling this duty, he has taken a pragmatic/instrumental approach to all aspects of state-running. In his view, economic development, international relations, and social and political reforms are not ends in and of themselves but rather useful tools to strengthen the standing and legitimacy of the Islamist regime, especially vis-à-vis its sworn enemies at home and abroad: first and foremost the United States and Israel.<sup>8</sup>

When confronted in 2018 with tens of thousands of protesters across Iran chanting anti-regime slogans, including "Death to Khamenei (but also to Rouhani)", the president acted the same way he behaved on similar previous occasions (such as the 1999 and summer 2009 protests): he

defended the regime and its legitimacy while paying lip service to the people's right to criticize.<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, not only does Rouhani not portend the end of the rule of the ayatollahs, or even a change in their extremist policies, but he serves as a "shock absorber" for the regime, using his "moderate" reputation to buffer it from domestic and external challenges. As Ray Takyeh perceptively quipped, "Iran's president isn't a reformer. He's an enabler."<sup>10</sup>

## **SHIELDING THE IRGC AND ITS QUDS FORCE**

It is true that Rouhani, who has his own agenda and order of priorities, prefers the use of "soft power" and diplomatic tools over the IRGC's crude methods of subversion and terrorism. But these are differences of form, not substance. At issue are the most suitable means for the promotion of the regime's goals and the best manner and timing of their use, not the goals themselves. As far as these are concerned, there is no difference between Rouhani and the IRGC.

On the contrary: Rouhani has always eloquently and publicly supported the long-term goals of the Islamic Republic: regional expansion and hegemony, attainment of nuclear capabilities, and the export of the Islamic revolution. In fact, Rouhani has been at the forefront of the regime's efforts to advance these objectives. As secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, he was deeply involved in promoting terrorist activities throughout the region. As head of Iran's nuclear negotiating team, he played a key role in duping the international community.<sup>11</sup>

It has been argued that Rouhani's economic priorities make him more susceptible to international pressure and sanctions than his hard-line rivals. This may or may not be the case, but the incontrovertible fact is that Rouhani's moderate image has reduced the international, especially European, appetite to impose international sanctions on Iran in the first place.

But even if Rouhani were fully committed to moderating the Islamist regime (as some of his European champions wrongly believe), his ability to enforce that agenda on the IRGC, which has massive non-government economic resources and which controls, by CIA estimates, about 20% of the Iranian economy,<sup>12</sup> is virtually nil.

But the story doesn't end there. Not only does Rouhani lack the leverage and political power to restrain the IRGC, but on his watch, governmental support for the organization has substantially increased (defense expenditures grew by 18%),<sup>13</sup> with the president heaping public praise on the IRGC and defending its aggressive activities throughout the Middle East. As he put it in an October 2017 cabinet meeting and Iranian TV interview:

The IRGC is not only a military unit; the IRGC is in the people's heart, and in dangerous days, it will protect our national interests. Not only is the IRGC beloved by the Iranian people, it is also beloved by the Iraqi people, because it saved Baghdad and Erbil. It is also beloved by the people in Damascus and Syria, because it saved Damascus. And it is also beloved in Lebanon, because it supported its honor and its independence. The IRGC has always aided the oppressed and opposed the terrorists... There is no disagreement among our parties with respect to fighting the plots of the enemy. We are all united and stand at the same front. The IRGC, the Iranian people, the people in Iraq, the people in Syria, the people in Yemen, and the people in the region fight and stand firm against the terrorist groups created by America – as admitted by Trump himself – and will not rest until they destroy them.<sup>14</sup>

When the IRGC came under international pressure, it was Rouhani who led efforts to prevent its designation as a terrorist organization so as to protect it from international sanctions, *inter alia* by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which fights money laundering and terror financing.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, far from representing an alternative to the regime's hardline outlook and practice, most starkly epitomized by the IRGC and its activities, Rouhani provides cover for the organization, allowing it to sustain its violent and subversive activities throughout the region without incurring the requisite international retribution. Within this framework, during Rouhani's presidential tenure, the IRGC/QF has:

- Persistently upgraded Hezbollah's threat to Israel, improving the organization's technological capabilities (e.g., the accuracy of its missiles capable of striking targets throughout most of Israel) and providing technological knowhow and capabilities, including for the construction of weapons production factories in Lebanon.<sup>16</sup>

- Helped save Bashar Assad's brutal regime and consolidated Iran's military presence in Syria through the establishment of bases, the deployment of Shiite militias and their arming and training, and efforts to establish a land corridor from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea. This was done with a view to creating, among other things, additional terror and missile fronts against Israel.
- Dramatically expanded Iran's Yemen intervention along the lines of the "Lebanese model" by supplying its Houthi proxies and building their armed forces with an emphasis on surface-to-surface missiles, thus creating a strategic threat to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and freedom of navigation in the Bab al-Mandab Strait at the southern tip of the Red Sea.
- Supported and trained Shiite militias in Iraq that fought ISIS (but also killed scores of innocent Sunnis) and which later became a legitimate part of the Iraqi security forces, thus increasing Tehran's influence in Iraq and its penetration of the country, including the economic sphere.
- Was deeply involved in the Iraqi government's operations in Kurdistan following the September 2017 referendum that decided on the independence of the Kurdish region, including the use of force to drive the Kurds from areas they had occupied during their war against ISIS.<sup>17</sup>
- Continued its subversive activities in remote arenas including Morocco, which severed diplomatic relations with Tehran and accused it of supporting the irredentist Polisario Front via Hezbollah, among other factors.

Against this backdrop, hopes for a major change in Iran's regional policies under Rouhani's stewardship could not be more removed from reality.

## **FACILITATING IRAN'S TRANSFORMATION INTO A NUCLEAR THRESHOLD STATE**

While Rouhani has reiterated the claim (allegedly enunciated in a special fatwa by the Supreme Leader)<sup>18</sup> that Islam prohibits the development of nuclear weapons, he has steadily supported, on both religious and strategic grounds, the provision of Iran with nuclear capabilities so as to strengthen the regime and secure its ability to attain its hegemonic and strategic goals.

Rouhani was deeply influenced by Ayatollah Motahhari, his spiritual mentor and a spirited champion of Iran's right to obtain nuclear weapons, which he justified on Qur'anic grounds as well as for strategic reasons.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, a number of Rouhani's early statements indicate clear support for the nuclear option. In the early 1980s, for example, he praised the role of nuclear power in ending World War II, and in 2005 he declared that Iran subscribed to the NPT not because of an ideological commitment but as a result of political pressure.<sup>20</sup>

True to this outlook, Rouhani has defended throughout his career Iran's right to a nuclear program, including control of the nuclear fuel cycle and an advanced technological infrastructure. At the same time, his approach has been overtly pragmatic. In contrast to the brutally candid approach of his predecessor, President Ahmadinejad, Rouhani has striven to make Iran a nuclear threshold state gradually so as to avoid the economic and political costs of such a move.

In this respect, there is a direct link between the October 2003 agreement, negotiated by Rouhani with the EU3 (Britain, France, and Germany), on the suspension of enrichment-related activities and the JCPOA that gives Tehran a clear nuclear horizon at which it will be able to advance its nuclear project unhindered and with international legitimacy, effectively making it a nuclear threshold state.

Thus, for example, Rouhani presented the EU3 agreement to the Iranian leadership as a temporary concession in the face of international pressure in areas where Iran had already achieved the necessary technological knowhow, while in areas where progress was still needed, such as the production and assembly of spare parts for centrifuges, there was no suspension of activities.<sup>21</sup> A decade later, Rouhani compared the signing of the JCPOA to Khomeini's agreement to end the Iran-Iraq war, viewed by the Iranian political echelon as a necessary but temporary concession.<sup>22</sup>

This combination of fundamental support for nuclear capabilities and political pragmatism, in tandem with the international linkage of his supposed moderation with the need to salvage the JCPOA, makes Rouhani the foremost, perhaps only, Iranian leader at the present time capable of making Iran a nuclear threshold state without incurring the requisite international sanctions.

## ROUHANI, THE UNITED STATES, AND ISRAEL

As a quintessential Khomeini disciple, Rouhani has been a staunch detractor of US influence and involvement in the Middle East with few qualms about blaming it for having brought the 9/11 attacks upon itself.<sup>23</sup>

Nor was Rouhani deterred from voicing the basest conspiracy theories about “Zionist” culpability for those attacks, arguing in a major speech that “in Europe some analysts wrote that this event may have been perpetrated by the Zionists, but this issue was not allowed to be raised.”<sup>24</sup>

Given this mindset, it is hardly surprising that Rouhani has referred to Israel as a “cancer” (a pejorative coined by Khomeini); lauded Hezbollah’s alleged military exploits during the 2006 Lebanon War as “a glorious victory for the Islamic *umma*” that heralded “the beginning of the next Muslim conquests (*aghazi*) and the subsequent failures of America and Israel”; and offered unqualified support for Palestinian terrorism, including suicide bombings.<sup>25</sup> On August 1, 2013, two days before beginning his presidency, Rouhani told a mass rally on Iran's al-Quds Day that “the Zionist regime has been a wound on the body of the Islamic world for years and the wound should be removed.”<sup>26</sup>

In addition, Rouhani has often uttered statements bordering on Holocaust denial, though, as is his wont, he did so in a subtle and evasive fashion. In a September 2013 interview with NBC, for example, the newly inaugurated president evaded a clear answer as to whether he shared his immediate predecessor’s claim that the Holocaust had not occurred. That same month, while under close international scrutiny during his first presidential appearance at the General Assembly’s annual session, he condemned the Holocaust in an interview with Christiane Amanpour but declined to comment on its magnitude in a manner reminiscent of the claim by Holocaust deniers that the genocide’s proportions had been grossly inflated by the Jews for political gain.<sup>27</sup>

In short, while Rouhani’s rhetoric is subtler and less blatant than that of Ahmadinejad, and while he takes great care to avoid controversial statements that will attract international censure, his outlook regarding the US and Israel does not seem to deviate significantly from the line represented by senior Iranian officials who revere Khomeini’s teachings

and his religious and ideological enmity toward the United States and Zionism (the “great Satan” and “small Satan”, as he called them). This is readily evidenced by Rouhani’s public statements and speeches, which often echo Khomeini’s themes and ideas. Thus, for example, in his militant address to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) on May 18, 2018, the president praised Khomeini’s legacy, which “introduced mobility of the Islamic *umma* against the Zionists as the most effective way [of liberating Palestine].”<sup>28</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The high hopes pinned on President Rouhani as an agent of profound and positive change in Iran’s domestic and foreign policies, notably by toning down the regime’s Islamist hegemonism, seem to be detached from reality. Rather, close scrutiny of Rouhani’s worldview, record, actual conduct, and influence on Iran’s political system proves that the president:

- is an effective “shock absorber” who allows the Islamist regime to stifle demand for genuine political reform and consolidate its long-term grip on power without incurring international wrath;
- has successfully exploited his moderate image to weaken international pressure on Tehran, though its regional aggression has substantially increased during his tenure and though his basic worldview doesn’t differ from that of his fellow ayatollahs; and
- is playing a key role in advancing Iran towards nuclear-threshold-state status by driving a wedge between the US and the other signatories to the JCPOA, which view the preservation of the agreement as a prerequisite for Iran’s moderation and its reintroduction into the international community.

It appears that, with the notable exception of the US, most Western nations continue to predicate their policies vis-à-vis Iran on a black-and-white perception of an ongoing struggle within the Islamist regime between moderates allegedly headed by Rouhani and hardliners led by the IRGC and aligned ayatollahs.

This perception is fundamentally misconceived. For one thing, the Iranian political spectrum is far more nuanced and diverse than the



moderate-conservative dichotomy. For another, for all the diversity and tensions within the Iranian regime, its various components - including Rouhani and his government - are working towards the same strategic goals: consolidation of the Islamic Republic's domestic and international position and its ability to spread its revolutionary message.

So long as this reality is not recognized by the Western chancelleries (or by Moscow and Beijing, for that matter), it will be exceedingly difficult to muster the necessary effective international pressure to curb Tehran's aggressive policy in the region and its dangerous ambitions, especially in view of the Iranian regime's proven ability to exploit international differences to its own ends.

It was indeed the misconceived desire to consolidate the supposed Iranian moderates that limited the amount of pressure exerted on Tehran during the JCPOA negotiations and brought about the problematic agreement, which effectively paved Iran's way towards threshold-state-status in a way that eventually drove the US administration to withdraw from the agreement.

The international community must draw lessons from this mistake. Sustained economic pressure and sanctions do not weaken internal Iranian demand for change but rather reinforce it, as shown by the popular protests across Iran since early 2018. Strict international measures and unity rather than friendly persuasion were the elements that brought Tehran to the negotiating table and drove it to roll back its nuclear program, if only temporarily.

The US withdrawal from the JCPOA thus sets the groundwork for renegotiation of the agreement in a manner that will truly ensure its ultimate objective of blocking Tehran's road to the Bomb. But this will depend to no small extent on the Europeans seeing the Iranian regime for what it is, judging it by its actions on the ground, and rallying behind Washington.

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- No. 28 The IDF Force Structure (Hebrew) May 2014
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- No. 30 IDF Challenges (Hebrew) August 2016