

Research Paper

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Middle East and North Africa Programme | November 2014

How Powerful is Rouhani in the Islamic Republic?

Summary

- One of the key questions about the negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme is how powerful President Hassan Rouhani really is within Iran's unique political system, and whether he and his colleagues have the ability to implement an international nuclear agreement despite their powerful opponents. As the country's chief nuclear negotiator in 2003–05, Rouhani agreed to suspend uranium enrichment and open nuclear facilities to International Atomic Energy Agency inspections, but Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, unhappy with the attitude of the Western powers towards Iran, halted the implementation of these arrangements.
- Rouhani and his associates emphasize that their objective is the resolution of the economic, administrative and international crises arising from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's two presidential terms. In this context, they regard their highest priority as being the conclusion of an agreement with the international community over the nuclear dossier – which has been, in their view, the major source of Iran's economic problems in the past few years.
- However, the president is faced with opposition within the ranks of some of the most influential state institutions: the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and *Basij* volunteer militias, the intelligence-security apparatus, the judiciary and the parliament.
- There is no doubt that Ayatollah Khamenei expects Rouhani to strive to achieve the removal of the sanctions against Iran, but he does not seem interested in sharing responsibility for any retreat from the nuclear programme. If he comes to the conclusion that the political costs of nuclear talks far outweigh the economic benefits they can bring, he will once again put an end to them.
- Should that happen, it will strengthen Ayatollah Khamenei's convictions about the dangers of any rapprochement with the West and about the potential for moderation in foreign policy. This impact could be even stronger than that of the failure of the 2003–05 nuclear talks.
- Ultimately, if those in Iran – such as President Rouhani – who favour interaction with the international community again fail in their efforts to strike a face-saving deal, they will never be able to return to the sphere of foreign policy in Iran. The departure of Rouhani's team from the political scene during the most sensitive stage of the nuclear issue would lead to the return to Iran's foreign policy apparatus of forces that oppose external engagement.

Introduction

One of the key questions being asked about the negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme is how powerful President Hassan Rouhani really is within Iran's unique political system. In other words, in a country where the key power-holder is the Supreme Leader, do Rouhani and his colleagues have the ability to advance their agenda and implement an international nuclear agreement despite their powerful opponents? This question is of particular importance because during the presidency of pro-reform Mohammad Khatami, Rouhani was in charge of the nuclear talks and reached an important arrangement with the international community, suspending uranium enrichment and opening nuclear facilities to International Atomic Energy Agency inspections; a few years later, however, Ayatollah Khamenei, who was unhappy with the attitude of the Western powers towards Iran, halted the implementation of these arrangements.¹

With this historical perspective in mind, an examination of the balance of power in Iran under Rouhani's presidency, and a review of the tools at his disposal and those in the hands of his powerful rivals, is critical. This paper examines Rouhani's chief priorities in the domestic and foreign domains; analyses the factors that help, and those that impede, his administration in attaining its goals; and assesses the relationship between the president and Iran's other institutions of power, including his influence on the country's security apparatus. Finally, the effects of the possible success and failure of the Rouhani administration, particularly in respect of the nuclear dossier as its most important priority, will be examined.

It should be noted that the focus of this paper is on the power balance within the Iranian regime. An examination of the role of the elite and of the discontented masses in the overall picture would require a separate study.²

Rouhani's priorities

Rouhani and his associates emphasize that their objective is the resolution of the economic, administrative and international crises arising from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's two presidential terms. In this context, they regard their highest priority as being the conclusion of an agreement with the international community over the nuclear dossier – which has been, in their view, the major source of Iran's economic problems in the past few years. Rouhani's much-reported assertion during the 2013 election campaign that to keep the centrifuges spinning is good only if the wheels of the economy also continue to turn is indicative of his view that the expansion of Iran's nuclear programme must not result in the breakdown of its economy.³

¹ A fundamental assumption in this report is that the Supreme Leader is the most powerful political player in Iran. This dominance is guaranteed through various mechanisms, including the Supreme Leader's control over all of Iran's military forces, the judiciary, the Council of Guardians (which vets election candidates), the intelligence apparatus, powerful economic foundations (the *Bonyads*) and various state supreme councils which in effect exercise more power than the parliament (such as the State Expediency Council, the Supreme National Security Council, the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council and the Supreme Council on Cyberspace).

² However, it is worth noting that currently in Iran there seems to be little possibility for effective action by 'outsider' critics of the regime. The political atmosphere for any action by these groups in Iran, which has always been very restricted, narrowed even more after the 2009 presidential election. Hardliners continue to be deeply concerned about the re-emergence of the 2009 protests and emphasize that they will not allow the regime's opponents to challenge state security.

³ BBC Persian, 9 June 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/06/130609_ir92_5_daysto.shtml.

Examination of Rouhani's public statements indicates that on a number of occasions the tone of his remarks about the conservative critics of his administration has been unexpectedly harsh, mainly in relation to the nuclear issue. The president has called the critics 'profiteers from the sanctions',⁴ and even 'uneducated'.⁵ In one speech, he went as far as saying that those critics who 'tremble' in fear of the nuclear talks can find a warm place 'in hell'.⁶

Officials in the new administration also emphasize that in addition to the effects of international sanctions, a large part of the breakdown of Iran's economy under Ahmadinejad's presidency is attributable to his mismanagement and to the chaotic political atmosphere within the country. Thus, another priority for Rouhani is apparently the restoration of domestic administrative order. In this regard, the new regime has undertaken a reorganization of the government, including the revival of the Management and Planning Organization (the successor to the Planning and Budget Organization, first established in 1948 but abolished by Ahmadinejad in 2007).⁷

On the other hand, it appears that many other expectations of Rouhani's administration, particularly in the political and cultural spheres, were not among his main priorities. This remains the case. For example, the president has been criticized for not fulfilling perceived promises in respect of revoking the house arrest of the Green Movement leaders Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi, or regarding the release of political prisoners. During an electoral campaign gathering, Rouhani had responded to a question on this issue by stating, 'I hope that the elections will narrow the gap [between the government and people] and that the future administration will be able to create a non-securitized atmosphere in the country. From my perspective it is not difficult to create conditions in a year when not only are these individuals [Green Movement leaders] no longer under house arrest but that those who are in prison because of the events of 2009 are also released.'⁸ At another campaign gathering, faced with the participants' demands for the release of political detainees, Rouhani had avoided addressing the issue directly by responding, 'Why only political prisoners? We should do something so that all prisoners are released.'⁹

Rouhani's undertakings in terms of international sanctions and foreign policy have been much more explicit. For example, he repeatedly spoke after his election about his administration's intention to resolve the nuclear issue quickly; and even came up with a time limit of 'three to six months' for this, which some commentators deemed too hasty.¹⁰

Many of the president's critics believe that the contrast in approach reflects the relatively low priority that he places on domestic political and human rights issues. For their part, many of his supporters attribute the difference to his 'realistic' understanding of the political structure of the country, which is not open to deep political change.

4 Official website of Iran's president, 28 December 2013, <http://www.president.ir/fa/73599>.

5 Official website of Iran's president, 4 February 2014, <http://www.president.ir/fa/74558>.

6 Official website of Iran's President, 11 August 2014, <http://www.president.ir/fa/79807>.

7 Iranian government official website, 20 August 2013, <http://dolat.ir/NSite/FullStory/News/?Serv=0&Id=230132>.

8 Press TV, 17 June 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=qpsLpbWi-II.

9 Rouhani election campaign speech, 8 June 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rR7fTT_b4Hc.

10 Transcript of Rouhani interview with Washington Post, 25 September 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2013/09/25/transcript-an-interview-with-hassan-rouhani/>.

Rouhani does not have a long record of trying to create political or social change. Over the last decade he has been a staunch defender of such concepts as political ‘bipartisanship’ or ‘pragmatism’, and these have been evident in his actions since he assumed the presidency. He has often emphasized his desire to reduce the internal political tensions and the securitized atmosphere that was imposed after the 2009 presidential election. None the less, he does not seem to be prepared to clash with those agencies that are under the direct supervision of the Supreme Leader.

Favourable conditions

The negative record of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency has probably played a major role in strengthening Rouhani’s position. Through their support for Ahmadinejad during his tenure, a new generation of hardliners conflicted harshly with other political groups in Iran, even including other conservatives.¹¹

Under current conditions – and unlike under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, when the various groups of conservatives were united in their attacks on the reformist administration – Rouhani’s hard-line opponents are not backed by a similar widespread ‘coalition’ of conservative groups. There are even certain conservatives, including some of those active in the economic sphere, who were in effect marginalized by Ahmadinejad’s hard-line supporters under the previous regime, and who now have an incentive to cooperate with Rouhani – including in foreign policy.

Meanwhile, the pro-reform and moderate groups who supported Rouhani in 2013 are almost all united in their support for the administration’s foreign policy, even though many of them have criticized the slow pace of domestic change.

At the societal level, too, the breadth of public support for the Rouhani administration’s stated key priority – mitigating the economic crisis stemming from the sanctions – is greater than was the public support afforded to Mohammad Khatami’s administration for its own key priority (i.e. political development). The economic sanctions imposed on Iran during Ahmadinejad’s presidency exerted unprecedented pressure on different sectors of the population and had a negative impact on the lives of most Iranians, whether in the cities or rural areas, and be they opponents or proponents of the regime, or religious or non-religious groups. Many groups that were closely linked to the government profited from the sanctions under the Ahmadinejad presidency, but there were also many conservatives who were harmed by them. Among the latter could be religiously pious citizens at the lower levels of society (who felt the impact of inflation on their daily lives), wealthy businessmen engaged in the import and export of goods, or even certain government authorities who encountered serious problems in importing equipment needed for their organization.

Such groups may have political differences with the Rouhani administration, but they none the less want it to bring an end to the international sanctions.

¹¹ This paper uses the terms ‘hard-line’ and ‘hardliners’ to refer to a specific group of conservatives who are the proponents of very strict policies on security, political and international issues. The term ‘conservative’ is also used more generally in the paper in reference to the various conservative religious groups who advocate the rule of the clergy and support Ayatollah Khamenei, but who are not necessarily in line with the views of the hardliners on domestic and foreign issues. The term ‘ruling conservatives’ usually refers to the Supreme Leader’s appointees or associates in a various powerful state institutions, most of whom are among the hardliners.

Impeding factors

Despite its diverse support base, Rouhani's administration also has powerful opponents, most of them within agencies that are under the control of the Supreme Leader. While not all of Ayatollah Khamenei's appointees are opposed to Rouhani's policies, the president's key critics are officials and media that are recognized as being close to Khamenei – such as the state-run television network, and the associations and news agencies associated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the *Basij* volunteer militias, the Supreme Leader's representatives in Iran's armed forces and in its cities, etc.

Rouhani's opponents have mainly focused on the administration's policies to reduce tensions with the West, and specifically with the United States. Their stance appears to be in line with that of Ayatollah Khamenei, who has repeatedly expressed his opposition to the normalization of relations with the United States. The Supreme Leader considers talks regarding the country's nuclear dossier and relations between Tehran and Washington as two separate issues: even though he supports a relative softening on the nuclear issue, he does not have an interest in breaking the taboo of establishing relations with the US administration.¹²

Iran's hardliners are also harsh critics of many of the administration's social policies. For example, they have criticized Rouhani for ignoring their requests for more censorship of the internet. The hardliners have in recent months notably intensified their pressure for stricter enforcement of the hijab for women in public places.

Ayatollah Khamenei and his entourage are, furthermore, clearly very sensitive about the return to power of reformists who have a history of challenging the Supreme Leader's views. This sensitivity has been particularly evident in the course of the debates in the Majlis over Rouhani's government appointments. Following his election, the president's reformist nominees for three ministries – education; science, research and technology; and sport and youth affairs – were rejected by the assembly's deputies. Conservatives in the Majlis subsequently rejected the second and third nominees for the sport and youth affairs portfolio, requiring a then unprecedented fourth nomination on the part of the president.¹³ In August 2014, a year into Rouhani's presidency, the Majlis voted to impeach and remove from office the Minister of Science, Research and Technology, mainly on the grounds that he had appointed to his ministry figures allegedly close to the protests that had followed the 2009 presidential election.¹⁴ In October and November 2014 the Majlis voted against Rouhani's two further nominees for the position of science minister.

This does not mean there are no reformists in Rouhani's cabinet. What it does indicate is that Ayatollah Khamenei and his close aides do not tolerate the presence of those whom they call the 'seditionists' (referring to figures who questioned the validity of the 2009 presidential election) in the administration. They are also very keen to ensure that reformists are not placed in certain positions, such as posts related to security issues. It is for this reason that the ministers of intelligence, the interior, defence and justice are all conservatives.

¹² Ayatollah Khamenei's official website, 5 October 2013, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=24132>.

¹³ BBC Persian, 17 November 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/11/131117_131_sport_iran_minister.

¹⁴ Fars News Agency, 20 August 2014, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13930529000094>.

Aside from the restrictions that have been imposed by the Supreme Leader and allied conservatives, the reality must not be overlooked that Rouhani is a ‘centrist’ and not a reformist politician. In other words, even if he had complete freedom to choose his own cabinet members, most of his appointees would come from among centrists rather than reformists.

The limited role for the reformists in the administration has prompted many of their number to criticize Rouhani on the grounds that he has come to the presidency because of the support – and votes – of those who expect changes in the political and human rights situation of the country. In their view, the Rouhani administration has an obligation to take concrete measures to, for instance, revoke the house arrest of the leaders of the Green Movement, release political prisoners, and reduce pressure on political and social activists.

The improvement in the administration’s relations with the more conservative political factions has also complicated Rouhani’s relations with reformists who had hoped he would ease some of the restrictions affecting the cultural and social sphere. In fact, many conservative politicians and clerics who have demonstrated their preference for Rouhani over his hard-line rivals have very narrow cultural views – and expect the administration to advance such views. For example, a large number of senior conservative clerics, and particularly a number of traditional *maraje-e taqlids* (literally, ‘sources of emulation’, the highest-ranking clerics in Shia Islam), neither tolerate the presence of women and Sunni Muslims in high political positions, nor accept any relaxation of police controls over women’s dress or youth behaviour. However, women, minorities and young people constituted large groups who voted for Rouhani, and have called for improvements in their situation. This means that the president is faced with competing demands: the modernizing demands of those who supported him at the presidential election; and the reactionary demands of the traditional conservatives whom he needs to appease.¹⁵

Rouhani’s problems with state agencies

This section briefly summarizes the problems that the President has had with the most influential institutions – including the Supreme Leader, the IRGC and the *Basij*, the intelligence-security apparatus (with a focus on the IRGC Intelligence Agency, the Ministry of Intelligence, and the police and the Ministry of the Interior), the judiciary and the Majlis.

The Supreme Leader

In a system in which the Supreme Leader exercises the decisive power, probably the most important political tension facing the Rouhani administration is how to balance and manage his relations with Ayatollah Khamenei – whose views are closer to those of the hardliners than those of the moderates. Where Rouhani’s views differ from those of the Supreme Leader, the president may

¹⁵ It must be noted that even though Rouhani received the highest percentage of votes in the Sunni provinces of Sistan-va-Baluchistan and Kurdistan at the 2013 election, the president has not appointed a single Sunni provincial governor, out of concern to prevent a backlash from the traditional conservatives and particularly Shiite *maraje-e taqlids*, something that has been criticized by the Sunnis. Similarly, despite the hopes that female voters had invested in Rouhani, he has not appointed a single female minister to his administration. It appears that the president, who knows that he was not the preferred presidential choice of the Supreme Leader, does not wish to create a confrontation with the high-ranking clerics over such issues as a female cabinet minister or a Sunni provincial governor while he is engaged in a bitter conflict with the hardliners over the nuclear issue.

have to make decisions that are not necessarily in line with his preferred ideology, but which are instead determined by pragmatism and prudence.

Ayatollah Khamenei has announced only limited and conditional support for Rouhani's administration and its nuclear policy. In a number of speeches prior to the June 2013 presidential election, the Supreme Leader was critical of the nuclear negotiations team under the Khatami presidency – which had been led by Rouhani – and of that team's 'retreat', which had, according to Khamenei, brought no results for Iran. When the new round of nuclear talks began under Rouhani's presidency, Khamenei expressed support for the negotiating team in uncharacteristic terms. He later stated that he was not optimistic about the results of the talks, but that he still saw no 'harm' in them.¹⁶

Following the presidential election in 2013, some conservative media alleged that the ballot box (no. 110) that was sited at the office of the Supreme Leader's, and which thus contained the votes of Ayatollah Khamenei and members of his entourage, held fewer than 20 votes for Rouhani. This was said to compare with 200 votes and 124 votes, respectively, for candidates Saeed Jalili, a former nuclear negotiator seen as a close ally of Khamenei, who came third in the national results, and Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, the popular mayor of Tehran, who came second.¹⁷ The prominent hard-line cleric Ahmad Alam-ol-Hoda (the Friday prayer imam of Mashhad) subsequently emphasized that Khamenei had stated with regard to the total number of votes assigned to Saeed Jalili: 'These four million votes show that there is a [positive] potential in our society.'¹⁸ None the less, while Ayatollah Khamenei apparently favoured Jalili over Rouhani for the presidency in 2013, he was unwilling to manipulate the electoral process in order to propel his preferred candidate to the presidency.

This reluctance to pay 'any price' in favour of Jalili was seemingly influenced by the impact of the experience with the Green Movement following the 2009 presidential election, which had undermined the legitimacy of the state, as well as by the sensitive situation with regard to the nuclear dossier. It can be assumed that the pressures on Iran's economy stemming from international sanctions and the high costs of Ahmadinejad's policies for the regime had convinced Ayatollah Khamenei that he should give Rouhani an opportunity to bring about an end to sanctions and improve economic conditions.¹⁹ However, this does not necessarily mean that the Supreme Leader intends to support other policies that Rouhani pursues in the domestic and international domains. Khamenei is notably wary of many of the President's supporters, from the reformists to close associates of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. During a meeting with members of Rouhani's cabinet in August 2014, Khamenei stated explicitly that they should keep their distance from the 'seditionists'.²⁰

The Supreme Leader has also expressed concern about the possibility of the normalization of relations with the United States, and has criticized certain government decisions and actions in this

¹⁶ Fars News Agency, 3 November 2013, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13920812000942>.

¹⁷ BBC Persian, 20 January 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2014/01/140120_139_analysis_khamenei_nuclear_geneva.shtml.

¹⁸ BBC Persian, 24 December 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/12/131224_139_jannati_minority_regime.shtml.

¹⁹ It is very clear that Ayatollah Khamenei and his allies, who strongly supported Ahmadinejad between 2005 and 2011, are unwilling to accept any responsibility for the chaotic state of the country under the latter's presidency.

²⁰ Official website of the Supreme Leader, 27 August 2014, <http://www.leader.ir/langs/fa/index.php?p=contentShow&id=12191>.

regard. For example, he was critical of Rouhani's highly symbolic telephone conversation, prior to his departure from the UN General Assembly in New York, with US President Barack Obama in September 2013.²¹ Subsequently, plain-clothes forces assaulted Rouhani's motorcade on his return to Tehran, throwing shoes at his car and chanting anti-US slogans.²² Protesters also disrupted a speech by Rafsanjani in Kermanshah with chants of 'Death to America', in an apparent response to a note published on his website stating that the former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had agreed with Rafsanjani that the practice of chanting 'Death to America' should end.²³

Such activities by plain-clothes elements against Rouhani and Rafsanjani suggest that a priority for them is to prevent the authorities under Rouhani from crossing the key red line determined by the Ayatollah Khamenei with regard to the normalization of relations with the United States.

At the time of writing, however, it appears that in general there is no serious conflict between the Supreme Leader and the President. Still, Ayatollah Khamenei is mindful that the authorities under Rouhani should not cross the red lines that he has set on various fronts – ranging from the normalization of relations with the United States to the entry of 'secessionists' into the administration. He generally supports the president's efforts to resolve the nuclear issue. In response, Rouhani and his colleagues are well aware of the sensitivities of the Supreme Leader, and refrain from taking any steps that may appear to be in direct challenge to the latter's views. Relations between the Supreme Leader and the president can best be characterized in terms of a mutual effort to control internal tension regarding the nuclear issue.

This formula will of course continue only as long as prospects and hope for settling the nuclear issue exist. If Ayatollah Khamenei completely loses faith in the resolution of the issue, he may take a harder line towards Rouhani and his administration. Furthermore, the Supreme Leader's relative support for the president on the nuclear issue does not mean that he will refrain from criticizing the administration's policies in other areas, or that he prevents his own allies from doing so.

The IRGC and the *Basij*

Under the Ahmadinejad presidency, the IRGC and the paramilitary *Basij* acquired a wide range of economic powers in addition to their influential role in Iranian politics.²⁴ The IRGC thus became the largest economic contractor in Iran, implementing major government projects in various fields. An increase in the political influence of the IRGC and the *Basij* – whose extensive support assisted Ahmadinejad's election victories in 2005 and 2009 – enhanced their ability to lobby for greater economic hold. However, the main reason for the deepening of their influence in Iran's economy under Ahmadinejad was the impact of international sanctions, which caused the activities of the country's private sector to shrink.

21 Official website of the Supreme Leader, 5 October 2013, <http://www.leader.ir/langs/fa/index.php?p=contentShow&id=11153>.

22 Khabar Online, 28 September, <http://khabaronline.ir/detail/315102/Politics/government>.

23 Mehr News Agency, 14 October 2013, <http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/2155832>; Scott Peterson, 'Is Rouhani bringing an end to Iran's 'Death to America' chants?', Christian Science Monitor, 4 October 4 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/2013/1004/Is-Rouhani-bringing-an-end-to-Iran-s-Death-to-America-chants>.

24 Just a few weeks after coming to power, Rouhani publicly emphasized that the IRGC should not strive to turn itself into a 'competitor' to the country's private sector, and added that it would be best if the force operated in few large fields in which the private sector was incapable of performing. Nevertheless, many analysts doubt that Rouhani's administration can in practice limit the IRGC's economic role and influence in the country.

As the sanctions widened, many private companies in Iran could no longer import the raw materials and equipment necessary for their activities as they lost the ability to transfer and move their money internationally. At the same time, the sanctions forced many foreign companies operating in Iran to leave the country and thus vacate the arena of domestic business competition. The entire sanctions-based gap was filled by companies affiliated with the IRGC, since these not only knew how to circumvent the international sanctions better than did their private sector competitors, but also received unofficial support for their activities from a range of state agencies.

Nevertheless, it appears that the unprecedented international sanctions imposed on the banking and oil sectors in the summer of 2012 made life difficult even for *Basij*- and IRGC-affiliated companies and individuals, many of them now blacklisted under the sanctions regime. This new pressure on the IRGC was so strong that the force was faced with serious difficulties in a number of areas of economic activity – particularly those dependent on imports and exports and on the transfer of funds to and from Iran.

Some analysts therefore believe that, despite the windfall gains made by the IRGC under the Ahmadinejad presidency because of the sanctions, these new sanctions in particular meant that the profitability of several business areas in which the force was involved was eroded towards the end of his time in office. As a result, even though the ending of some sanctions would be to the detriment of the IRGC, in some sectors it may actually benefit. An easing of sanctions would, for example, assist a number of economic and industrial projects handled by the IRGC that have latterly suffered problems in importing the necessary technology and raw materials.

The position of the IRGC on the Rouhani administration's foreign policy, particularly the nuclear talks, has none the less been mostly critical. During Rouhani's first year in office, the IRGC-related media –including three large news agencies, a newspaper and a dozen or so websites – maintained a consistent stance of strong opposition to the administration's foreign policy and the nuclear talks. After Rouhani protested about this to the Supreme Leader, the latter summoned the managers of some of these outlets and admonished them, urging them to moderate the level of criticism. In a speech in May 2014, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, Gen. Hassan Firuzabadi, publicly called on the media affiliated to 'the armed forces' to cut their criticism of the administration.²⁵ The level of criticism over the nuclear talks in IRGC- and *Basij*-affiliated media subsequently declined, but a negative tone has been maintained on other issues. For example, these outlets have continued to warn about what they refer to as the close ties of some government officials to the 'secessionists', and have criticized the administration's policies with regard to the internet, the press, cultural issues and women.

In addition to such criticism of the administration and its policies, *Basij* forces have also engaged in various other activities in effective opposition to the administration's foreign policy. The paramilitary force played a key role in organizing and holding various conferences (such as one titled 'We Are Concerned'²⁶ in May 2014, and the 'Red Line'²⁷ conference in July) that criticized the nuclear talks. *Basij* activists have also been challenging the administration's authority on the streets

²⁵ BBC Persian, 10 June 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2014/06/140610_139_saeidi_sepah_media.shtml?print=1.

²⁶ BBC Persian, 4 May 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/blogs/2014/05/140504_139_political_blog_we-are-worried.

²⁷ BBC Persian, 17 July 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2014/07/140717_157_nuclear_redlines.

of Tehran and some other cities. In September, for example, the *Ansar-e Hezbollah* vigilante group,²⁸ which largely comprises *Basij* members, announced its intention to warn women on the streets directly if their attire was not sufficiently Islamic, even though such action was opposed by the Ministry of Interior and the wider Rouhani administration.²⁹

It can thus be concluded that the IRGC and the *Basij* have been effective in opposing the administration and its policies since Rouhani came to office. Moreover, it is unrealistic to analyse the positions of the IRGC and the *Basij* independent of the Supreme Leader. The approach of these two forces towards the administration is a reflection of Ayatollah Khamenei's preferences – as has been the case under previous presidencies. For instance, following the Supreme Leader's guidance, the media outlets affiliated to the IRGC and the *Basij* scaled back their criticism of the administration over the nuclear talks. The absence of similar instructions to rein in criticism of the administration in other areas implies that the Supreme Leader has no particular objection to such opposition.

Intelligence-security apparatus

The IRGC Intelligence Agency

The IRGC Intelligence Agency was established after the 2009 presidential election. Previously, the intelligence activities of the IRGC came under the auspices of the so-called Intelligence Deputy of the IRGC. In 2009 this office was elevated to the status of an independent agency, the chief of which was appointed direct by the Supreme Leader.³⁰

One of the agency's key priorities is the elimination of the possibility of a repeat of the protests that followed the 2009 election. Thus, the agency carefully monitors not only the activities of Iran's trade unions, human rights activists, journalists and political dissidents, but also those of reformists and even moderates who were critical of the 2009 electoral process and its outcome. Because many of these groups and individuals were among those who backed Rouhani in 2013, it would not be an exaggeration to say that one of the main responsibilities of the agency is the control of a great proportion of the president's supporters.

The IRGC Intelligence Agency has put many reformers, even including allies and relatives of former president Rafsanjani, under surveillance, and has created dossiers on them. Among those targeted has been Rafsanjani's son Mehdi Hashemi Rafsanjani, against whom the agency filed numerous financial, political and security charges (even including alleged espionage for Western governments).³¹

²⁸ *Ansar-e Hezbollah* is known for its violent street interventions over the last two decades. It is made up of *Basij* paramilitary members and has always been supported by the authorities of the Revolutionary Guards and the *Basij*. It has been engaged in such tactics as attacking student gatherings, fiery opposition to 'non-Islamic' cultural productions such as books, films, etc., and warning women who are not properly dressed according to their interpretation of Islamic rules.

²⁹ BBC Persian, 15 September 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2014/09/140915_139_hijab_ansar_hezbollah.shtml.

³⁰ BBC Persian, 8 October 2009, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2009/10/091008_op_sepah_restructuring.shtml.

³¹ Page 2 of the judiciary's indictment against Mehdi Hashemi Rafsanjani indicates that 568 pages of the documents upon which the judicial case is based are according to reports submitted by the IRGC Intelligence Agency. In October 2014 the entire indictment was published via a few websites and several blogs run by *Basij* members; this was not lawful, because under Iranian law it is illegal to publish an indictment before the court's verdict is issued. A few days later, however, most (although not all) of the websites that had published the indictment took it down, but it was still available on a number of sites at the time of writing. See the indictment's text (in two parts) via <http://antifasad.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/First-part.pdf> and <http://antifasad.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Second-part.pdf>.

One of the clear signs of the confrontational approach of the IRGC Intelligence Agency *vis-à-vis* the Ministry of Intelligence within the Rouhani administration is the critical stance that websites affiliated with the agency take against some of the policies and measures of the ministry. Such outlets are active in publicizing the remarks of hard-line figures opposed to the administration's intelligence policies, essentially accusing the ministry of not being sufficiently determined in countering 'secessionists' and 'enemies of the Islamic Republic'.

The IRGC was in intense competition with the Ministry of Intelligence even under the Ahmadinejad presidency, when successive intelligence ministers (Gholam Hossein Mohseni-Ejei and Heydar Moslehi) were in complete ideological harmony with Ayatollah Khamenei. Under Rouhani, the agency has even more reasons to engage in parallel activities to those of the ministry.

The Ministry of Intelligence

According to the law that established the Ministry of Intelligence in 1983, it has primary responsibility for intelligence in Iran.³² However, other agencies under the direct supervision of the Supreme Leader engage in parallel intelligence activities.

It was probably concern about such activities that motivated the Rouhani administration to activate the Coordinating Council for Intelligence Agencies, led by the Minister of Intelligence.³³ (Such a council had been provided for in the 1983 legislation cited above, but it had remained dormant.) Nevertheless, there is no indication that the council has been taken seriously by the Supreme Leader's entourage.³⁴

The current Minister of Intelligence, Mahmoud Alavi, has repeatedly stated that he intends to promote the rule of law within the ministry, and to avoid the use of violent methods against Iran's citizens. None the less, there have been considerably fewer changes within the ministry under President Rouhani than had been expected.

While the Ministry of Intelligence is under the control of the executive branch, Alavi was apparently not Rouhani's preferred candidate for this position. In fact, since this is one of the ministries of which the leadership has to be approved by the Supreme Leader, in reality the president had little real choice in his appointment. Alavi is a member of the traditional conservative camp in Iran. His political record does not put him at the hard-line edge of the Iranian regime, and he has always been a supporter of Rafsanjani. Nevertheless, Alavi has no experience in intelligence-security management, and this alone has given cause for concern among some Rouhani supporters. They have suggested that the new minister may not be able to bring about structural and/or organizational changes to the ministry, and that hard-line elements from the previous administration will remain active within the ministry.

³² Majlis Research Centre website, <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/90795>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ In October 2014 Fars News Agency published a list of 16 intelligence agencies in Iran that are being 'coordinated' within the 'Intelligence Coordination Council'. This news report made some Iran watchers conclude that there are 15 parallel intelligence agencies competing with the Ministry of Intelligence. The reality is that most of the services mentioned in the Fars report are entities that have the role of providing security or counter-intelligence within different agencies. Examples are the counter-intelligence units in the Artesh (Iran's regular army) and the joint chiefs of staff. Because of this, most of these agencies are not comparable with the IRGC Intelligence Agency, the activities of which are similar to those of the Ministry of Intelligence.

Such concerns have increased because of the continued security pressure on critics of the government across the board in Iran – some of which is exerted by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence. These agents made headlines in October 2013 by such actions as intimidating the families of foreign-based journalists and aggressive behaviour towards the daughters of Mir-Hossein Mousavi and his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, an academic and sculptor also held under house arrest, at a family meeting.³⁵

The police and the Ministry of the Interior

From an administrative perspective, Iran's police forces are under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior, but the high-ranking commanders are selected and removed by the Supreme Leader in his capacity as commander-in-chief.

Under the Khatami presidency, the police often acted against his administration's policies, but this has not been the case under Rouhani. For example, when *Ansar-e Hezbollah* said it would send vigilantes to enforce the dress code for women, the police announced that they managed to 'convince' *Ansar-e Hezbollah* not to commit such illegal acts.³⁶

The interior ministry is led by a conservative, Abdol-Reza Rahmani Fazli. Rahmani Fazli is close to the Majlis Speaker, Ali Larijani, and, like the latter, was among the staunchest opponents of reformists under Khatami's presidency. He later ran into problems with Ahmadinejad and his team.

Although the ministry is the administrative authority that appoints provincial governors, these are the representatives of the executive branch (i.e. not specifically of the interior ministry). Their selection is made on the recommendation of the minister, and with the approval of the cabinet. As a result, Iran's provincial governors are currently a mix of reformists and moderate conservatives.

It may be concluded that President Rouhani does not enjoy a very secure position in his relations with the various intelligence and security services. He does have what might be termed relative control over part of Iran's intelligence apparatus (the Ministry of Intelligence), while other elements (most notably the IRGC Intelligence Agency) oppose his policies. On the other hand, there is not enough evidence to indicate that the police force acts in opposition to the policies of the administration.

The parliament (Majlis)

The majority of representatives in Iran's 290-member parliament, the Majlis, are conservatives, because of the systematic disqualification of reformist and independent candidates by the Council of Guardians prior to the 2012 parliamentary elections. About 90 Majlis deputies are affiliated with the so-called 'Steadfast Front'.³⁷ Since Rouhani's election to the presidency, they have been strongly opposed to him and to the policies of his administration, including its foreign policy. On a number of occasions they have successfully won the support of dozens of other conservative deputies against the administration's programme.

³⁵ Kalemeh website, 26 October 2013, <http://kaleme.com/1392/08/04/klm-162750/>.

³⁶ BBC Persian, 24 September 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2014/09/140922_l26_ansar_iran_hijab_police.

³⁷ The Steadfast Front is recognized as one of the most hard-line organizations among conservatives. This group, which is close to the hard-line clerics such as Mohammad-Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, supported Saeed Jalili in the 2013 presidential election.

The organized efforts of hard-line members have meant that the Majlis has managed to pass unprecedented laws despite the opposition of Rouhani's team – such as a law to prohibit 'the promotion of birth control' and others authorizing the confrontation of women deemed to be violating Islamic dress code. Meanwhile, the number of reprimands of cabinet ministers by Majlis representatives has increased markedly compared with those under the Ahmadinejad administration. A report published in June 2014 indicated that deputies had either reprimanded ministers or summoned them for questioning on more than 4,000 occasions since Rouhani took office.³⁸

However, Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani and his allies have been cooperating with the Rouhani administration, and have taken important measures to neutralize the pressure exerted against the administration by hard-line conservative deputies.³⁹

Overall, the Majlis has probably created more problems for the administration than many predicted when Rouhani first came to office. Hardliners in parliament have demonstrated very well that under specific conditions – such as when the administration is accused of being unwilling to implement Sharia rules, or of cooperating with the 'secessionists' – they can disrupt Rouhani's policies effectively. Despite this, so long as Ayatollah Khamenei continues to offer his relative support for the nuclear talks, these deputies will not be able to disrupt that process. For example, the Majlis has the potential to pressure the administration by requiring the ratification of any possible agreement with the P5+1 group (comprising the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany). It is clear that the Supreme Leader has not as yet wished the Majlis to do so, although this could change in the future.

The judiciary

During Ahmadinejad's last two years as president, he repeatedly attacked the judiciary in his speeches and accused it of being politically motivated. Furthermore, several of Ahmadinejad's colleagues were subject to charges of financial irregularities that time, leading the president to warn the judiciary that his cabinet members were a red line. Rouhani and the judiciary have not had similar public clashes as yet, but despite this apparent calm in their relations, it is clear that their views differ significantly on various political, social and security issues.

For example, the judiciary has been heavy-handed against journalists, reformists and critics during Rouhani's presidency, and has not shown any willingness to ease up on those detainees in connection with the 2009 protests. More important, the judiciary has not only continued to carry out judicial executions, but has in fact increased the number of such instances compared with the pattern over the previous two decades. Between July 2013 and the end of June 2014 there were 852 judicial executions in Iran.⁴⁰

³⁸ Fars News Agency, 10 June 2014, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13930320000100>.

³⁹ Larijani has of course also received specific political concessions in return for his support. An example of this is Rouhani's Minister of the Interior, a well-known conservative close to Larijani, who was apparently appointed to the position because of a deal between the president and the speaker.

⁴⁰ United Nations General Assembly, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, August 2014. <http://shaheedoniran.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/A-69-356-SR-Report-Iran.pdf>.

During the 2013 presidential campaign, Rouhani promised to take measures to improve human rights and to try to secure the release of the political prisoners who had been in detention since the 2009 election. The continued repressive actions of the judiciary have thus weakened Rouhani's domestic credibility. The president has meanwhile indicated that his top priority is the resolution of the nuclear issue, and that he has no intention of being dragged into a battle with Khamenei's appointees over human rights.

None the less, Rouhani's administration has been more resistant to the pressures of some judiciary actions in certain non-political spheres. An example of this is the determination of the telecommunications ministry to expand internet and 4G mobile services to Iranian people, despite the judiciary's opposition. Even Rouhani has himself engaged in public criticism of those conservatives who 'oppose the expansion of modern technology' and internet usage.⁴¹

In all, it is safe to say that there is not the slightest inclination on the part of Iran's judiciary to adopt less hard-line policies. In simple terms, while the judiciary has not so far taken direct action against Rouhani's administration, it is clearly active against the president's election promises in certain areas, and plays a key role in discrediting the president among those who voted for him in 2013.

The implications of Rouhani's success or failure

In view of the opportunities and problems that face Rouhani's administration, his success or failure in attaining his specific goals – particularly the resolution of the nuclear impasse – will have a long-lasting impact on Iran's political scene.

If the administration were to succeed in resolving the nuclear issue and achieving the removal of international sanctions, this would inevitably raise the stature of moderates both in public opinion and within the political system. Not only would such success make it difficult for hardliners to compete with the moderates in future elections, but it will also represent a major defeat for those who criticize flexibility in foreign policy.

It seems that Ayatollah Khamenei's negative remarks about the possibility of failure in the nuclear talks has created a form of political and ideological obligation among some of his supporters to find evidence for the 'prediction' of the Supreme Leader.

Over the past seven years, Ayatollah Khamenei has on six separate occasions presented a similar commentary about the reformists' efforts to reduce tensions with the West under the Khatami presidency. In this commentary, his message has been that the response to the approach of Iran's reformists was a hardening of US positions *vis-à-vis* Iran. In this respect, the Supreme Leader has repeatedly emphasized that it was during the period of the 'flexible' reformists – and right after

⁴¹ The judiciary has stated that it believes some measures by Rouhani's administration, such as the expansion of the internet to broadband, are illegal. It has said that it believes that such decisions, and those regarding the internet and other cyber issues, should be taken by the Supreme Council on Cyberspace (which operates under the direct supervision of the Supreme Leader, and which includes representatives of the three branches of government along with other senior military and security officials) while the administration continues to take decisions about the implementation of controversial issues regarding the internet.

Tehran's active cooperation with the United States against the Taliban – that the then US president, George W. Bush, labelled Iran as being part of the 'axis of evil'. Khamenei has also stressed that the suspension of uranium enrichment in 2003 (which was agreed to by Rouhani in his capacity as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator) resulted in a more aggressive US stance towards Tehran.⁴²

Rouhani, for his part, revealed some astonishing facts about Khamenei's complicated attitude towards the 2003 agreement in his 2011 book *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy*. Rouhani relates that, prior to signing the agreement with the foreign ministers of the United Kingdom, France and Germany (which eventually became known as the Saadabad agreement), he contacted the office of the Supreme Leader but received absolutely no response. He therefore went ahead and signed the agreement on the assumption that Khamenei was not against it.⁴³ This same agreement subsequently became the object of sustained criticism by Khamenei's appointees and eventually by the Supreme Leader himself.

Ayatollah Khamenei may adopt the same approach in relation to the recent nuclear talks. There is no doubt that he expects Rouhani to strive to secure the removal of the sanctions against Iran, but he does not seem interested in sharing responsibility for any retreat in terms of the nuclear programme. This may be why the office of the Supreme Leader did not react to some news stories about his reported opposition to the Joint Plan of Action signed by Iran and the P5+1 in November 2013.⁴⁴ If Khamenei came to the conclusion that the political costs of the nuclear talks far outweigh the economic benefits that they may bring, he would once again put an end to them. Should that happen, it would strengthen the Supreme Leader's convictions about the dangers of any rapprochement with the West and the potential for moderation in foreign policy. The impact could be even stronger than that of the failure of the 2003–05 nuclear talks.

Ultimately, if those in Iran – such as President Rouhani – who favour interaction with the international community again suffer failure in striking a face-saving deal, they will never be able to return to the sphere of foreign policy in Iran. The departure of Rouhani's team from the political scene during the most sensitive stage of the nuclear issue would lead to the return to Iran's foreign policy apparatus of forces that oppose external engagement. These forces would most likely demonstrate a behaviour completely different from that of the current administration, even if international pressure reaches yet greater heights.

⁴² BBC Persian, 11 September 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/09/130911_139_analysis_nuclear_rouhani_khamenei.shtml.

⁴³ Rouhani, Hassan, *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy*, Expediency Council Centre for Strategic Research, 2011, p. 177.

⁴⁴ In January 2014 a few Iranian hard-line politicians spoke of the Supreme Leader's opposition to the accord. A member of the Majlis national security committee, Javad Karimi Ghodousi, has even emphasized that at a meeting with high-ranking government officials, the Supreme Leader blamed the nuclear negotiations team for 'not insisting on Iran's nuclear rights'. The publication of news reports such as this did not produce any reaction from the associates of Khamenei, despite the fact that within the Iranian regime there is very deep sensitivity about the validity of what is attributed to the Supreme Leader.

About the author

Hossein Bastani is a political analyst at the BBC Persian Service. Before leaving Iran for France in 2004, he was the Secretary-General of the Association of Iranian Journalists (the sole nationwide union of Iranian journalists, which was banned by the Iranian government after the 2009 presidential election). Since 1998 he has published more than 2,000 analytical pieces on Iranian politics, especially on events concerning the ruling conservative faction.

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