

## Can Rouhani or Obama deliver on any deal?

By Fareed Zakaria

Hassan Rouhani presents himself as a striking contrast with his predecessor. For the past several years, the president of Iran has held a breakfast meeting with a small group of journalists during the opening of the U.N. General Assembly. In recent years, the event had become a depressing routine. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad — dressed in his trademark shabby suit — would saunter in, ramble and rant about the dangers of U.S. hegemony, deny the Holocaust and taunt his invited guests. (By the end of his tenure, there was one change; his suits got nicer.) Rouhani, by contrast, arrived punctually, elegantly attired in flowing clerical robes, and spoke intelligently and precisely about every topic discussed. His only peroration was against “Iranophobia”; he implored the media to visit Iran and present the real picture of his country to the world.

“The nuclear issue can be resolved in a very short time,” Rouhani said, showing a surprising degree of optimism about an issue that has proved extremely difficult. “The world wants to be assured that our program is peaceful, and we want to help them gain that confidence.” (The meeting was off the record, but he allowed a few of his answers to be made public.) The economic sanctions against Iran have taken a heavy toll. Rouhani spoke forcefully about the damage to ordinary Iranians — denying people food and medicine. He suggested that both the United States and Iran have made miscalculations but said that was in the past. He was hopeful about better relations.

I came away willing to believe that Rouhani is a pragmatist. (“Moderate” is a misleading term for the head of a quasi-theocratic regime.) He wants to end his country’s isolation. But it remains unclear whether he has the authority to act on behalf of his government. Consider what happened Tuesday, when the Iranians turned down a White House offer of a brief meeting with President Obama. Rouhani explained that he had no problem “in principle” with the handshake but said that this was a “sensitive issue” and that it would have been the first such meeting in 35 years, so steps have to be taken with proper preparation. One has to wonder: If Rouhani does not have the freedom to shake Obama’s hand, does he have the freedom to negotiate a nuclear deal?

The Tehran government has another side, made up of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, the special force whose political influence has grown over the past decade. These people are hawkish on all foreign-policy issues. They also profit from the sanctions because their businesses have become the only path for trade and smuggling. Perhaps the most encouraging news from Iran in the past two weeks was that its supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, publicly addressed the Guard and said its role was in national defense, not “policy.”

U.S. doubts about Rouhani’s power can be addressed only over time and through Iranian actions. But Iranians probably also have doubts — about Obama’s power. After all, the new Iranian president appears willing to cooperate on the nuclear issue in return for a relaxing of the sanctions crippling his country. But can Obama provide any such relief?

Iran has dozens of layers of sanctions arrayed against it. Some are based on [REDACTED]. Security Council resolutions, others are decisions by the European Union, others are acts of Congress and still others are executive orders by the U.S. president. Obama can unilaterally lift only the last, which are the least burdensome. The most onerous by far are the sanctions passed through acts of Congress, and those will be the most difficult to lift.

In theory, it's possible to devise a rational process that requires concrete actions from Iran, verifiable checks by inspectors and then a reciprocal easing of sanctions by the United States. But that would require Congress to behave in a rational manner — which is a fantasy today. The most likely scenario is that any agreement with Iran — almost regardless of its content — would instantly be denounced by Republicans as selling out. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) has already gathered 10 other senators who insist that, unless Iran dismantles most of its civilian nuclear program and becomes a liberal democracy, none of the sanctions can be eased.

The Obama administration is conscious of the other side of American government. Much of the macho rhetoric emanating from the administration about Iran has seemed designed to inoculate it from charges of being soft. The reality is that it remains unclear whether Iran can say yes to a nuclear deal — and equally unclear whether the United States could. Rouhani and Obama are probably each looking at the other and thinking the same thing: Can he deliver?

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