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# Hassan Rohani and Javad Zarif's Work Plan

## Hassan Dai

**ABSTRACT** The election of Hassan Rohani, the phone call between the president of the United States and the president of Iran, and the interim nuclear agreement in Geneva have nourished the hope that Iran intends to resolve the impasse over its nuclear program and improve relations between the two nations. Under immense pressure, the supreme leader is being forced to compromise, although temporarily, with his critics; he has called for “heroic flexibility” in foreign policy. How far this “flexibility” can or might go depends on various factors, including Rohani’s and his foreign minister Javad Zarif’s view of Iran’s position in the world and the solutions they propose to overcome the challenges. They believe that the United States and Iran could mutually benefit from regional cooperation if the United States accepts Iran’s nuclear capability and its regional influence. They vow to intensify the “Iran lobby” in the United States and to exploit divisions in Washington over Iran. They count on the U.S. trade lobby and political circles that support a U.S.–Iran strategic partnership.

**KEYWORDS** Barack Obama; Congress; diplomacy; Hassan Rohani; Iran; Israel; Javad Zarif; lobby; negotiation; nuclear

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## BACKGROUND: HEROIC FLEXIBILITY

On September 27, 2013, as Iranian President Hassan Rohani was wrapping up his four-day trip to New York, President Obama called to have a 15-minute discussion that ended with both parties agreeing to negotiate. This was the first conversation between a U.S. and Iranian president since the creation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. The previous day, Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif also made history by meeting one on one for half an hour on the sidelines of a six-party nuclear discussion. These talks helped to establish a new round of negotiations between Iran and the 5+1 states that resulted in an interim agreement in Geneva to curb Iran’s nuclear activities.

These developments have nourished the hope that the Rohani–Zarif team could resolve the impasse over Iran’s nuclear program and improve

U.S.-Iran relations. Unfortunately, many Iranian observers acknowledge that the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, holds ultimate authority in the Islamic Republic with the Revolutionary Guard being wary of the new president's ambitions.

In fact, the euphoria over the Rohani-Obama phone call ended quickly when, upon his arrival in Tehran, Rohani was welcomed by a group of hard-liners who threw shoes at him and harsh criticism by conservative websites and newspapers close to the supreme leader. Additionally, the head of the Revolutionary Guard publicly denounced the phone call between the two presidents as a "tactical mistake" by Rohani. Khamenei himself then intervened, declaring that some of what happened during Rohani's visit to New York was inappropriate. This turn of events is a strong reminder of the previous failed overture by former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami with the United States in the 1990s when the supreme leader barred him from improving relations with the United States.

Meanwhile, the Iranian regime is currently experiencing the most difficult conditions in decades as the economic sanctions have crippled the Iranian economy, the population is on the verge of a rebellion, and Iran's main regional ally, the Syrian regime, faces an existential threat; thus, Iran's regional policy is at an impasse. As a result of these challenges, opposition to Khamenei's foreign and domestic policies has dramatically increased within the regime, with the opposition to the regime comprising key figures and groups led by the former president, Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Under immense pressure, the supreme leader is being forced to compromise, although temporarily, with his critics. Agreeing to Rohani's victory in the presidential election, his tacit support to a limited overture to the United States and the public call for a "heroic flexibility" in foreign policy are illustrations of his difficulty in ignoring rival factions and growing obstacles to his policies.

How far this "flexibility" can go in nuclear negotiations and relations with the United States will depend on various factors that make realistic predictions difficult or impossible. They include the economic and political situation in Iran, the factional infighting and the balance of power between the two main rival camps, regional developments, and the future of economic sanctions against Iran.

This article attempts to provide an analysis of what could be considered a work plan by the new government in foreign policy and notably in regards to the United States and how the Rohani-Zarif team might try to influence U.S. policy toward Iran. By examining the plan, it is possible to obtain a realistic view of the Iranian regime's tactical steps and better understand its strategic goals. Such view will help aid understanding of Iran's new approach in future nuclear negotiations.

## THE WIN-WIN DOCTRINE

Rohani and Zarif's foreign policy and their work plan is based on a doctrine they call a "win-win" or "mutual benefit strategy for Iran and the U.S." This doctrine was first publicized by Ali Akbar Velayati, the former foreign minister and current adviser to the supreme leader. In an interview with *Shargh* newspaper, he declared: "If the world recognizes the Iranian hegemony in the region and realizes that there will be no peace and stability in the region without Iranian cooperation and agreement, then the U.S. and Iran can cooperate and mutually profit from this collaboration. This is Iran's winning card that we should use in nuclear negotiations in a way that can guarantee our strategic goals."<sup>1</sup>

Sadegh Kharazi, a former Iranian diplomat who previously worked with Zarif both at the foreign ministry and Iran's mission to the UN, gave a very interesting interview to *Asharq Al-Awsat*<sup>2</sup> and explained the win-win doctrine:

It would be their greatest strategic blunder if some people think that Iran is opening itself because of crisis or lack of opportunities. Iran is a very important country, with regional and international influence. Iran must utilize its global and international capabilities. No doubt, Iran and the U.S. have common interests and face common threats in the region. Iran and the U.S. are the closest countries to each other in securing common interests and defusing common threats in the region. Iran and the U.S. can develop a new definition of cooperation and security. These two countries have common grounds for discussions. Without Iran's presence, the security of the region and the Persian Gulf is not possible. The security cordon of Persian Gulf and Middle East will not be realized without Iran's participation.

Rohani and Zarif have outlined this doctrine in various speeches and interviews since taking office, emphasizing that they do not see Iran as vanquished

and claiming that despite domestic and external challenges, the Iranian regime still holds winning cards that could be used to overcome the current crisis. In a meeting with the members of the Iranian parliament, Zarif stated<sup>3</sup>:

We believe the U.S. is not a super-power and we can defeat the U.S. and Israel in the diplomatic arena. We should believe in the power and capacities of the revolution and the country. The United States and the Zionists want to show that Iran has no room to play. But we have both the power and the capacity. We know the rules of the game and we can play the best game.

The new government believes that the last presidential election has given the regime legitimacy and has brought domestic stability. In the region, they claim that Iran is still the dominant force in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine; thus, the United States cannot ignore or defeat Iran and both countries should seek a new approach and recognize each other's vital interests. In his first public interview with Iranian TV on August 22, Zarif said:

The opposing side [the U.S.] still has not yet understood that you cannot progress at the expense of others. You cannot have security and create security for your people at the expense of others. If it was possible, September 11 would never have occurred; if it was possible, Americans would feel completely secure. This shows that the basis of thinking is incorrect. In international relations, we say that this is a zero-sum game. A zero-sum game does not have meaning in the world anymore. If America is pursuing a zero-sum game in the international relations scenes both they and the opposing side will lose. Numerous experiences have shown that America was not able to create security for itself with this view of a win-loss game. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Americans imagined that a unipolar system was created with the leadership of the Americans, later developments showed that this was a false notion.<sup>4</sup>

On November 1, Zarif attended the Pugwash Conference in Turkey and explained what his doctrine means in nuclear negotiations. According to The Back Channel, Zarif said:

On the nuclear issue, I believe the problem we have faced in the last ten years is we have both seen the nuclear issue as a zero-sum game; we have articulated two seemingly opposing objectives, and each tried to make gains for one objective seemingly at the expense of the others. The result has been that ten years ago, Iran had less than 160 centrifuges spinning, now it has over 18,000. While ten years ago, Iran's economy was prospering, now sanctions are hurting the wrong segment of the population. I hope we have come to understand that approach was wrong.<sup>5</sup>

According to Back Channel, Zarif told the conference that he is proposing a new approach in nuclear negotiations that they accept the West's objective of Iran never having a nuclear weapon, and that the West should accept Iran's objective of having a peaceful nuclear energy program that includes domestic enrichment, with mechanisms to verify it not be used for military purposes. Iran's nuclear know-how and technology are now "homegrown," Zarif said, to explain why he thinks it is in the West's interest to accept Iranian enrichment. You "cannot kill all our scientists and kill our program. . . . You cannot destroy the technology. How to ensure [the program] is peaceful: allow it to operate in a transparent fashion; you cannot push it under the carpet."<sup>6</sup>

According to Zarif, in regional affairs, the United States and Iran should also seek cooperation and recognition of each other's influence and vital interests. During his speech at the Asia Society in New York, Rohani offered to help the United States to stabilize the region:

It is unfortunate that, as we speak, many countries in our region wrestle with domestic and/or international issues and challenges with grave repercussions for other regional and international actors. There is no doubt that they mostly consist of issues of interest and concern to many regional and global actors who need to join forces and make common efforts to address them.

My country, as a major power in the region, is fully prepared to move in this direction and spare no effort to facilitate solutions to these issues, thus contributing to the maintenance of international and regional peace and stability. Under these circumstances, we consider the efforts by certain capitals aimed at portraying Iran as a threat and undermining Iran's credibility in the region and in the world as counterproductive, and they should cease in the interests of peace and tranquility in the region and beyond.<sup>7</sup>

Rohani's government believes that some political circles in Washington are willing to accept this option but other influential centers and lobbies oppose such prospect. Therefore, Rohani and Zarif have elaborated a work plan in the United States to counter the influence of Tehran's enemies in Washington.

## **ROHANI'S WORK PLAN IN THE UNITED STATES**

### **Smile Diplomacy**

Rohani's primary task is to improve the Iranian regime's image abroad by demonstrating that the

new government is departing from the fiery rhetoric used by former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In an interview<sup>8</sup> with Iranian State TV, Javad Zarif declared that “Iran’s foreign policy will not change but a new ‘tone’ and a softer ‘language’ will be used to present the ‘true’ image of Iran.” The supreme leader’s senior foreign policy adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati, also told the Associated Press that Iran will not reverse course in its nuclear policy but will use a new language to make its case:

Repeating the same language that we had before, I don’t think it is useful. We have to talk with a different language. The same purposes but a different language. . . . Foreign policy, including the nuclear issue, is in the hands of the leadership of this country. Khamenei has set the “principles” and the government has to abide by them, so Rohani’s administration will follow the same trend strategically as the former government. Iran must change from a technical and tactical point of view.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, Ahmadinejad’s harsh rhetoric was a necessary tool to advance Tehran’s regional and strategic goals during the Bush administration. However, since then, Tehran’s regional and domestic situations have radically changed. The soft language of Rohani more adequately serves the interests of Islamic Republic of today.

During the presidency of Ahmadinejad (2005–2013), the Iranian regime was feeling strong and emboldened as the oil revenues were very high and the United States was stuck in the Iraqi quagmire. The supreme leader and the Guard saw a historic opportunity to defeat the United States in Iraq and extend Iran’s dominance in the region. Hezbollah’s symbolic victory in its war with Israel in 2006 and the 2009 war between Hamas and Israel further strengthened Iran’s position in the region.

Through Ahmadinejad, the supreme leader was able to carry out his aggressive foreign policy without compromise. The Holocaust-denying declarations were aimed at mobilizing fundamentalist recruits in the Middle East; Ahmadinejad’s alliances with socialist governments in Latin America were intended to mobilize the “left” and antiwar activists in the United States and recruit them to the pro-Tehran lobby in Washington.

Then, in 2009, the euphoria ended for the Iranian regime with the Iranian people’s uprising and later, in 2010, with the failure in nuclear talks and the start of the U.S. and EU crippling sanctions against Iran.

These two major developments put a halt to the supreme leader’s aggressive foreign policy and forced him to redesign his strategy. This new strategy was to compromise with rival factions and to agree to Rohani’s victory in the presidential election. Rohani’s charm offensive is the regime’s response to the immense challenges threatening the Islamic Republic’s survival.

## Twitter Diplomacy and the Trip to New York

Rohani and his foreign minister, Javad Zarif, are trying to present a peaceful, friendly, and responsible image of the Iranian regime. They use Facebook and Twitter to connect with Western audiences while social networking sites are still banned in Iran. The most revealing example of the Iranian charm offensive occurred in September when Rohani and Zarif used Twitter to send their good wishes to the Jewish people on the occasion of Rosh Hashanah.

In September, Rohani’s trip to New York displayed the Iranian regime’s ability to plan and execute a successful public relations campaign; as the former Israeli Defense Force (IDF) intelligence chief Amos Yadlin explained<sup>10</sup>:

The final weekend of September 2013 saw the Iranian charm school at work in full force, with a campaign comprising every component of a sophisticated public diplomacy strategy: moderate advance articles in leading newspapers signed by past and present Iranian presidents; TV interviews at the leading networks with senior female journalists (with the hijab and without); background discussions with senior analysts; non-belligerent speeches at the United Nations that said “the right things” and avoided the extreme rhetoric typical of Iran’s most recent former president; meetings of foreign ministers that were a thing of the past; and—on the way to JFK Airport—an historic telephone conversation between the Iranian and U.S. presidents.

In the campaign to improve the Iranian regime’s image, Rohani was assisted by pro-engagement and appeasement circles in Washington that turned the trip into a Hollywood-style show as Ray Takeyh, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations explained<sup>11</sup>: “The public relations rollout of Hassan Rohani can best be compared to the unveiling of a new iPhone by the late Steve Jobs. The Iranian president is placed at the center of a media frenzy, with scores of interviews, receptions where the

global elite can mingle with the latest curiosity from Tehran and, finally, a speech at a high-profile gathering.”

## **Exploiting the Political Divergences in Washington over Iran Policy**

The new Iranian government believes that one of its winning cards is its ability to exploit the divisions in Washington over U.S. policy toward Iran. In his first public interview<sup>12</sup> with Iranian TV, Zarif declared: “The U.S. political system is not homogeneous in regard to Iran. These divisions over Iran provide us with opportunities to maneuver in Washington and advance our interests.”

In early October, Zarif met with the Iranian parliament’s Foreign Policy and National Security Committee to brief the members on his trip to New York. The Mehr news agency reported Zarif’s declarations: “The Islamic Republic of Iran has the power and capacity to challenge the U.S. and Israel in the international arena. To achieve this we must believe in the abilities of ourselves and of our diplomatic team. We are mistaken in thinking there is a unified voice in America. By utilizing the opposing views in the U.S. we can be the winners in the [diplomatic] scene, and, of course, we can take advantage of the Zionist regime’s weaknesses.”<sup>13</sup>

## **Iran’s Past Experiences in Attempting to Exploit Divisions in Washington**

Zarif is obviously hoping to repeat the success he enjoyed in the United States while serving as Iran’s ambassador to the UN between 2002 and 2007. Then he was able to establish close relations with U.S. senators and representatives, other political figures, and think tanks that opposed George Bush’s policy toward Iran. These relations, which were accompanied by a large-scale lobbying campaign, weakened the White House’s pressure on Iran. In his confirmation speech<sup>14</sup> to parliament, Zarif explained that during his time in New York, he had the approval of the regime’s higher authorities to establish contacts with anti-Bush politicians within the United States to attempt to cause a division among the decision makers to neutralize the White House’s policy on Iran. One of Zarif’s partners in this endeavor was the Washington-based National

Iranian American Council (NIAC) led by Trita Parsi. The government press in Iran considers the NIAC to be the Iran lobby in Washington (see NIAC fact book<sup>15</sup>).

During a defamation lawsuit<sup>16</sup> filed by the NIAC against one of its critics, some of its internal documents and, more specifically, e-mail exchanges between Javad Zarif and NIAC president Trita Parsi were released; these shed light on Tehran’s attempts to influence U.S. policy toward Iran. These e-mails<sup>17</sup> show Zarif’s relations with members of Congress and reveal how Iran’s ambassador and the NIAC coordinated efforts to neutralize U.S. pressure on Iran.

## **How Zarif Exploited Political Divisions in Washington**

According to e-mails, in April 2006, Zarif gave Parsi a copy of the “Iranian 2003 offer for grand bargain”<sup>18</sup> that was subsequently released to the press and used in a campaign to prove that Iran was ready for peace and dialogue while the United States was merely seeking war with Iran. A few weeks later, Parsi launched the Iran Negotiation Project and started to arrange meetings between members of Congress and Zarif. Then, in an October 25, 2006, e-mail, Parsi told Zarif about Congress members who had decided to oppose George Bush’s policy on Iran and requested a meeting with him:

Also, happy to hear that you will meet with Gilchrest and potentially Leach. There are many more that are interested in a meeting, including many respectable Democrats. Due to various reasons, they will contact you directly (partly to avoid going through Jeremy Stone). Their larger goal is to meet with Iranian elected parliamentarians.

Gilchrest is a great guy, low-key but very respected among Republicans as well as the Democrats. These members are very disillusioned with the Bush foreign policy and are tired to sit on the sidelines as Bush undermines the U.S.’s global position. As a result, they are willing to take matters into their own hands and they accept the political risk that comes with it.<sup>19</sup>

The next day, Zarif responded, “I am always open to these meetings. Your help is always welcome. I leave the modalities to your discretion.”

In October 2006, another e-mail suggests that Ambassador Zarif was back from Tehran and had brought a proposal for those members of Congress who had expressed interest in meeting with him.

Parsi wrote: “Hope all is well and that you are back from Tehran. Would love to get a chance to see the proposal or to understand more what it entails. If it is substantial, then certainly members of Congress may find it a reasonable offer, even if the White House doesn’t. tp.” Then, in February 2007, Parsi requested a new meeting with Zarif to discuss the plan of two members of Congress to establish communications with the members of Iran’s parliament. He wrote: “Would you have time to meet next Friday? I am having a meeting with Gilcrest and Meeks, and they asked for our assistance in getting some communication going between the parliamentarians.” Samuel Gardiner, one of NIAC’s expert witnesses in the defamation lawsuit, testified<sup>20</sup> that a group of Congress members who opposed Bush’s policy toward Iran met regularly to coordinate their efforts and planned to meet members of the Iranian parliament.

## Congressional Diplomacy

Zarif was also attempting to reestablish contacts with members of the U.S. Congress; he had told<sup>21</sup> the Iranian parliament that some of the lawmakers were willing to initiate “Congressional diplomacy” with Iran. Similarly, President Rohani had reportedly told<sup>22</sup> the Iranian parliament that “several Congress members met with him in New York and offered to create ‘friendship with Iran Congressional Caucus.’” The reformist journal *Babar* published an editorial<sup>23</sup> on October 15, 2013, that emphasized the importance of creating an Iranian–U.S. friendship committee in the U.S. Congress “Creation of ‘Iran-U.S. parliaments friendship committees’ should be taken into consideration by policy planners. Its creation in the U.S. Congress is a positive step toward preservation of our interests.”

## Intensifying the Anti-Israel Crusade in Washington

Rohani and Zarif’s work plan is based on a consensus within the regime’s elite about the role and influence of Israel in Washington. The Iranian leadership views Israel as the bullying force that prevents the U.S. administration from accepting the Iranian influence in the region and, consequently, Israel prevents a strategic partnership between the

United States and Iran. Iran’s leaders see Israel as the main force behind sanctions and pressure on Iran. They believe that the marginalization of Israel and the weakening of its influence in Washington will help Iran to attain its strategic goal. Therefore, the anti-Israel crusade is an integral part of Iran’s overall campaign to influence U.S. policy on Iran.

Iran’s anti-Israel campaign in Washington began during the Bush administration when the catastrophic invasion of Iraq revived the public debate over the Israeli influence on U.S. policy in the Middle East. Tehran launched its campaign to hijack this debate and morph it into a crusade that blamed Israel for the U.S.–Iran impasse and depicted the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) as the bullying organization that forced the U.S. administration to follow Israeli demands and ignore the Iranian readiness for compromise, thus maintaining a hostile attitude toward Iran.

The campaign was designed to influence public opinion and shape U.S. policy toward Iran by presenting the Iranian regime as a victim, rather than a party responsible for the turmoil in the Middle East and the hostility toward the United States. In his first public interview<sup>24</sup> with Iranian TV on August 22, 2013, Zarif explained Tehran’s intentions to exploit political divisions in Washington and intensify the anti-Israel crusade. He declared the following:

I see the intensifying of sanctions by the U.S. Congress as fear of the extremists and Zionist regime. The extremists are worried that the discourse of the new Iranian administration will decrease conflict. Because their interests are in conflict [and] they do not want to give permission to prepare the ground toward a path for a solution. They are terrified of the discourse of the new administration. They are not worried about our nuclear program, but they have set the ground to terrify the world of Iran. We have to take this ground from them.

Hence, you see that on the eve of President Rohani’s inauguration, the Israeli lobby and the supporters of Zionist regime in the US, AIPAC, mobilized to bully the Congress to approve new sanctions.

One hundred thirty members of Congress who have a realistic view signed a letter saying that there should be dialogue with Iran. Four hundred members signed the new sanction bill. These members signed the bill because of pressure from the Zionist’s lobby because these 130 who wrote the letter are also part of the 400; this is an interesting point about US politics, and we need to have a more sophisticated view of U.S. policy and understand it and use it.

The fact that, of these 130 representatives who wrote the letter, perhaps only 20 of them gave a negative vote to

the sanctions shows how many people there are who want to terrify the representatives and pursue a policy of intimidation. It shows how much the extremists and the Zionist regime are fearful that there is a new discourse at work in Iran and that it could influence their interests.

The U.S. political system is not homogeneous in regard to Iran. We see that sometimes, the US should carry the interests of Zionist regime [Israel] on its shoulders. This overlapping of Israeli interests undermines the U.S.'s own interests.

The Iranians should mobilize and confront this small group of warmongers that try to bully the U.S. and impose their anti-Iranian and anti-American intentions. The real threat in the region is the Zionist regime. The real nuclear threat is the Zionist regime, the threat against human rights is the Zionist regime. The real threat of war, expansionism and occupation is this regime.

We should explain to the public that the "Iran threat" is a myth fabricated by these warmongers. We should explain that the real threat is the Zionist regime and not Iran.

In his speech at an event<sup>25</sup> organized by the CFR and the Asia Society, Rohani denounced Israel for demonizing Iran:

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to conclude by briefly touching upon the Iranian peaceful nuclear energy program, which has been subject to enormous hype over the past several decades. You know that—how many predictions regarding how close Iran was to acquiring a nuclear bomb proved to be baseless? We can trace these predictions back to the early 1990s. Throughout this period, alarmists kept trying to paint the face of Iran as a threatening one to its region and the whole world, a claim that has always turned out to be utterly false. And we all know also who the chief agitator is and what purposes are to be served by hyping this issue.

In his interview<sup>26</sup> with ABC, Zarif vehemently attacked Israel for demonizing Iran and falsely presenting Iran's peaceful nuclear program as a plan to develop nuclear weapons. Again, in his interview<sup>27</sup> with NBC, Rohani called Israel "an occupier and usurper government, which does injustice to the people of the region and has brought instability to the region with its warmongering policies."

## **An Iranian Lobby in the United States**

The new government intends to enhance and expand the pro-Tehran lobby in the United States and use the Iranian-American community to build a strong "Iranian lobby" in Washington that could counter AIPAC's influence and assist the government's efforts at diplomacy.

In his first public interview<sup>28</sup> with Iranian TV on August 22, 2013, Zarif explained how AIPAC is forcing U.S. politicians to adopt anti-Iran policies and he asked Iranian-Americans to mobilize against the Israeli lobby in the United States:

We see that sometimes, the U.S. is carrying the interests of Zionist regime [Israel] on its shoulders. This overlapping of Israeli interests undermines America's own interests.

The Iranians should mobilize and confront this small group of warmongers that try to bully the U.S. and expose their anti-Iranian and anti-American intentions. The real threat in the region is the Zionist regime. The real nuclear threat is the Zionist regime, the threat against human rights is the Zionist regime. The real threat of war, expansionism and occupation is this regime.

Similarly, President Rohani has publicly vowed to empower the "Iranian lobby" in the United States to confront the Israeli lobby and declared<sup>29</sup>:

The next thing we wanted to do in New York was to soften the negative atmosphere that the Israelis always create in the U.S. against our country. They fabricate lies to demonize our nation. We wanted to limit this space for the Israelis and make American public opinion aware that many of the things that are said against us are not true. Of course, you know that Israel has a strong lobby in the U.S. and a lot of influence in the Congress. They have done a lot of work and we need to fill the vacuum and create a strong Iranian lobby in Washington that could counter AIPAC's campaign against Iran. I think the Iranians who live there should take first steps in this regard. I proposed this in my meeting with the Iranians [in the U.S.] and said that all Iranians in America are our voice and should echo the Iranian realities. A lot of work needs to be done in this regard, as well.

In a long interview<sup>30</sup> with *Aseman* magazine on August 31, 2013, Zarif explained that the government's intentions are to dedicate resources, to use the Iranian-American community to create a powerful lobby and to oppose AIPAC.

## **Iran Lobby or Iranian Lobby?**

Rohani and Zarif's plan to strengthen the "Iranian lobby" and convince Iranian-Americans to participate in this campaign is questioned by observers in Iran. They point out that Iranians within the United States are largely opposed to the regime and would almost certainly avoid any kind of involvement with a lobby that could ultimately benefit the current regime. Ali Bigdeli, a well-known Iranian expert in international affairs told the reformist *Babar*<sup>31</sup>



newspaper that: "Comparing the Iranian community in the U.S. to the Jewish community is wrong because a significant part of our community is in 'bad' terms with our government and, therefore, transforming such a hostile community to a lobby that could oppose AIPAC is impossible."

Fouad Izadi, a well-known conservative policy expert, criticized Rohani's approach of placing hope in the U.S. Iranian community to create a meaningful pro-Iran lobby in the United States. He told<sup>32</sup> Fars News Agency that:

Our past efforts to create a strong lobby in the U.S. by Iranian-Americans have failed and, as a result, the two or three people who are getting our money and claim that they have a powerful lobby in U.S., are not truthful and they have not been successful. Therefore, what we need is to go over the Iranian community and seek partnerships with other groups and organizations in the U.S. that could support our policies. For example, former President Ahmadinejad had established good relations with American anti-war groups and he met with them in New York several times. They can help to organize demonstrations in streets to oppose war and sanctions. The majority of those who can help us are not Iranians, and, therefore, we need to go to them and not limit ourselves with the Iranian community.

After Rohani's return from New York, the Center for Strategic Studies, an institute affiliated with the office of the president, convened a consulting session<sup>33</sup> with a group of prominent foreign policy analysts who presented an advisory report in which they evaluated his trip and detailed their recommendations. The group, led by Rohani's chief of staff Nahavandian, recommended that the idea of Iranian lobby be abandoned and the regime should strengthen an "Iran lobby" comprising non-Iranians.

They emphasized the importance of relations with two specific entities in the United States that traditionally help the Iran lobby: antiwar groups and the oil lobby.

### **Iran Regime's Relations with U.S. Antiwar Groups**

The relationship between the Iranian regime and some U.S. antiwar groups began during the George W. Bush administration. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the antiwar movement and opposition to Bush's policy in the Middle East gained support in the United States. In 2005, after Ahmadinejad became

president, Iran resumed its nuclear activities and the hostilities between Iran and the West escalated. As a result, the U.S. antiwar movement feared a new war in the region, voiced its concern, and criticized U.S. animosity toward Iran. As the antiwar movement's opposition to U.S. policy toward Iran became more vocal, the Iranian regime and its American proxies and allies decided to use this popular movement to further their political agenda. In 2005, the Iranian government launched an ambitious plan to connect with American antiwar groups, recruit among them, and use their social networks in a grassroots effort to influence public opinion and prevent the imposition of tougher policies and sanctions against Iran.

One particular episode best demonstrated the troubling nature of the relationship between the Iranian regime and part of the American left and its peace movement. In September 2008, when Ahmadinejad came to New York to attend the UN General Assembly, the Iranian mission at the UN invited the peace and religious groups to meet with him. One-hundred-fifty representatives of these groups participated in a reception with Ahmadinejad,<sup>34</sup> some of them praised the Iranian regime and offered help to combat U.S. pressure on and sanctions against Iran. At the end of ceremony, Ahmadinejad received a gift and joyfully expressed his desire to be a member of the American peace movement.<sup>35</sup>

### **Energy Diplomacy, Oil Lobby**

Rohani's oil minister, Bijan Namdar Zanganeh, who also held the same position under former President Mohammad Khatemi, has a good record of attracting major international companies to Iran's oil industry. In August 2013, in a meeting<sup>36</sup> with a private sector representative, he said, "In the present situation, after the foreign minister, the oil minister with a very active energy policy will play the role of the second foreign minister." *The Economist*<sup>37</sup> of London echoed Zanganeh's declaration and reported: "Mr Zanganeh hopes that offering juicy deals to Western oil firms will make them lobby their home governments to ease sanctions." A report<sup>38</sup> on the BBC website highlights the regime's objectives in using oil to influence the West's policy.

Iran probably will try to use oil contracts as an incentive to resolve the nuclear dispute. Offering large projects with contracts that are more attractive to Western companies

may persuade these countries to show more flexibility in nuclear talks. Certain media outlets even talk about offering certain projects to U.S. oil companies, a move that Tehran hopes will lead to improved relations with Washington. This whole scenario is only possible if at the least some of sanctions are lifted.

Bijan Khajepour, an Iranian oil broker and the founder of Atieh Bahaar, a Tehran-based oil consulting company, explains Zanganeh's strategy in an article written for *Al Monitor*<sup>39</sup>:

Dealing with the negative impacts of sanctions will evidently need to be his main priority. To address the lack of foreign investment and technology, Zanganeh will adopt two approaches: On the one hand, he will return to his "energy diplomacy," whereby his ministry will utilize oil and gas opportunities to help the government achieve its foreign policy goals. For example, in 2000, when Iran discovered the largest onshore oil reservoir (Azadegan), Zanganeh's ministry presented that project to Japanese investors as a way of encouraging Japanese companies to lobby their government for better relations with Iran. It is expected that Zanganeh will try to use oil and gas opportunities as a means to compel international companies to work against the existing sanctions regime as well as to once again lobby for better relations with Tehran. On the other hand, Zanganeh will address the shortcomings in the legal aspects of operating in Iran and improve the contractual and operational structures so that companies that are not affected by Western sanctions, such as Asian companies, will engage the Iranian market more aggressively.

Mehdi Hosseini, a veteran in dealing with Western oil companies, has been appointed by Zanganeh as "the President of the committee that will review all oil contracts in the Oil Ministry." Hosseini has stated that the goal is "to pursue the policy of making oil contracts more attractive." In the past 30 years, the Iranian regime has pursued the policy of auctioning off the nation's assets at below-market prices to achieve its foreign policy goals. Several years ago, Hadi Nejad Hosseini, the former deputy oil minister revealed<sup>40</sup> the unprecedented auctioning of oil and gas by the Ahmadinejad government that offered a \$225 billion discount in gas prices to both India and Pakistan in an attempt to encourage both countries to reach a deal and to sign an agreement and begin the gas pipeline known as the "peace project."

## Stimulating and Incentivizing Western Oil Companies

The regime's efforts to use oil leverage to influence Western policy is by no means new. Traditionally,

major oil companies have been Iran's main ally in the West and especially within the United States. This has had significant influence in shaping the U.S. policy toward Iran. (See the report *The Trade Lobby and U.S. Policy with Iran*.)<sup>41</sup> Iran has the world's fourth-largest oil reserve and the largest natural gas reserve. According to the oil lobby, a friendship with Iran will open up Iranian oil as well as the gas sector to U.S. corporations. It will also bring stability to the region as well as the oil supply industry in the Middle East while allowing access to much cheaper oil and gas from Central Asia.

In the early 1990s, Hashemi Rafsanjani's government signed a pre-agreement<sup>42</sup> with the U.S. oil company Conoco for a project within Iran. The U.S. oil giants considered it to be a positive signal and started a campaign to soften public opinion about Iran and ask the U.S. administration to green light business with Iran. Then, in 1997, the so-called reformist Mohammad Khatami became president and launched a charm offensive in the hope of softening Western attitudes toward Iran. American business interests grasped the opportunity and launched a lobbying campaign to change the U.S. policy toward Iran while attempting to remove the economic sanctions. The National Foreign Trade Council (NFTC), representing large U.S. corporations, joined forces with the oil giants to launch its own lobby arm called USA\*ENGAGE. Khatami's presidency was the beginning of a pro-engagement lobby that has continued to grow in power and influence since 1997.

Following the failure of negotiations between Iran and the international community in 2010, crippling sanctions that included the energy sector were imposed on Iran. As a result, the oil companies' lobby in the United States has been sharply curtailed. The Rohani government and Zanganeh have launched a new campaign in the hopes of rekindling the attractiveness of Iranian oil and gas. They are attempting to do this through the promise of sweet deals, anticipating the jump-starting of their main allies (the big oil companies) lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C.

## CONCLUSION

The Iranian regime is faced with serious challenges, the greatest of which are the economic sanctions imposed by the West because of Iran's nuclear

program. At the same time, however, Iran believes that the regional developments and U.S. foreign policy weaknesses can provide priceless opportunities to buy time, weather the storm, and overcome these challenges. Rohani's presidency, Zarif's active diplomacy, and the supreme leader's "heroic flexibility" could help the regime to fend off the perils and seize the opportunities.

Ten years ago, in 2003, Iran was in a similar situation—its secret nuclear program had been revealed and the U.S. presence in Afghanistan and increasing international pressure threatened the Islamic Republic. At that time, Rohani and Zarif played a pivotal role in using opportunities created by the U.S. administration's strategic miscalculations that were the result of its desire to invade Iraq. Rohani and Zarif helped Iran buy time, defeat the United States in Iraq, extend its hegemony in the region, and expand its nuclear program.

The new Iranian government perceives the United States to be currently much weaker in the region compared with 2003 and believes that Iran is in a much better position to push back against U.S. pressure.

Iran sees the growing rift between the United States and Israel and observes the division between the Congress and the White House. These divisions provide golden opportunities to influence U.S. policy in relation to Iran.

However, Tehran's main weaknesses are domestic challenges—the greatest being the disastrous economic situation and the attendant potential for social unrest that could jeopardize the existence of the regime. These challenges are forcing the regime to seek an immediate end to economic sanctions. Therefore, time is probably not on the regime's side to play its regional cards against the United States or exploit divisions in Washington.

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