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*Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf*



**Is Khamenei Ruling out Dialogue with Trump?**

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Attached please find the 30<sup>th</sup> issue of *Persian Gulf Observer*, titled "Is Khamenei Ruling out Dialogue with Trump?" by The Ezri Center's research fellow, Yossi Mansharof.

*The Persian Gulf Observer: Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf* is published periodically by The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies at the University of Haifa, expressing the views and analysis of the Ezri center's researchers on various issues concerning the Persian Gulf region and the countries which lay by its shores.

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# Is Khamenei Ruling out Dialogue with Trump?

By Yossi Mansharof

The meeting with Iran President Hassan Rouhani proposed by US President Donald Trump shows that the American administration intends to institute direct contacts with Tehran, including a meeting between Trump and Rouhani, while simultaneously exerting diplomatic and economic pressure on Iran. Mahmoud Vaezi, Rouhani's chief of staff, revealed on July 18, 2018 that during Rouhani's visit to the UN General Assembly in September 2017, Trump invited him to a meeting eight times. Rouhani rejected the invitation, almost certainly because he had not received approval for it from Supreme Leader Khamenei, but it appears that Rouhani's supporters disclosed the American offer to meet in order to signal to the Iranian public that he is responsive to the feelings of extensive sections of the Iranian public who support dialogue between Tehran and Washington.

Restoring relations between Tehran and Washington was already a major issue in the 2013 Iranian election campaign, when Rouhani was elected to his first term as president. At the time, the American administration of Obama did not hide its wish to restore relations with Iran. In this framework, Obama made a series of far-reaching concessions to Iran, reaching a peak with the nuclear deal that will allow Iran to attain nuclear capability despite the temporary restrictions imposed on its nuclear program. Obama also regarded Iran as a senior partner in managing crises in the Middle East. Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry thought that the nuclear deal with Iran would strengthen the pragmatic faction in the Iranian regime and lead Khamenei to extend the dialogue between Tehran and Washington to additional issues. Khamenei, however, rejected the possibility of a meeting between Rouhani and Obama out of hand.

The primary motive for this rejection lies in Khamenei's fear of what he called "cultural penetration" of Iran by the West, spearheaded by the US, which he thought was liable to pose an existential threat to the Islamic regime in Iran. In his speeches in recent years, Khamenei stressed the threat to the regime resulting from Western cultural penetration. Khamenei's frequent reiteration of this warning reflected the gravity of the threat that he detected and his growing anxiety about such a threat. Despite Obama's conciliatory policy, Khamenei and the faction that he leads fear that the American administration aims to bring about a velvet revolution in Iran. The regime's downfall will be the result of massive penetration of Iran by American culture that will nullify the substance of Iran's Islamic-revolutionary culture. Such a development will jeopardize the unique character of the Islamic regime in Iran, its resistance to the US, and its perception of the US as "big Satan," which constitutes an important element of the regime's identity.

Since Trump's initiative for a meeting with Rouhani was revealed, leading figures in the regime in Tehran have engaged in a vigorous dispute on the subject. On the one hand, Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps have emphasized their opposition to direct negotiations with Washington. They explained, among other things, that such dialogue at the present time, when the US is exerting heavy economic pressure on Iran, signifies failure. On the other hand, Rouhani's circles in the Iranian parliament have expressed willingness to accept the American proposal for direct negotiations. As part of this policy, which Rouhani's camp has in effect been promoting since the 2013 presidential elections, popular Iranian news website Asr-e Iran, which belongs to Rouhani's camp, published an opinion column calling for a positive response to Trump's request. This call is a continuation of Asr-e Iran's advocacy of a renewal of relations between Tehran and Washington in recent years. The website explained that a renewal of relations does not mean agreement with American policy. Nevertheless, as part of Rouhani's obedience to the policy shaped by Khamenei, Rouhani and Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Ghassemi announced that the Iranian government rejected the American call for negotiations between the two countries.

Despite the announcement of the refusal, it should be noted that Khamenei's policy of refusing to conduct a general dialogue with Washington on all of the issues on the agenda between the two sides does not rule out discussion about an individual issue when Iran believes that this will serve its national interest. This happened in the past when Iran and Washington held talks about the future of Iraq in the second half of the preceding decade (at the height of the Iraq war) and about the future of Afghanistan at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. This also happened in 2011 when, with mediation by Oman, Tehran and Washington opened negotiations on the issue of the Iranian nuclear program that produced the nuclear deal in 2015. Despite intensive efforts by the Obama administration, Tehran officially adhered to its non-recognition of the US. This was reflected in the absence of signatures when the nuclear agreement was announced in Vienna in 2015.

The shuttle diplomacy recently conducted by the Omani Minister of Foreign Affairs in Tehran and Washington therefore gives the impression that Oman is again, as in the past, playing the role of mediator between Iran and the US, even though Tehran officially denies that Oman is again playing the mediator role. It appears that while Tehran is seeking to restrict the discussion with Washington to a specific subject in accordance with Khamenei's policy, the Trump administration is determined to also discuss with Tehran a range of other issues on the agenda, including Iran's missile program, Iran's expansion in the region, its support for terrorism, and possibly its recurring calls for the destruction of Israel.

The American administration has taken an important step towards initiating a dialogue with Tehran by declaring that it does not seek the overthrow of the Iranian regime and is not considering a military campaign against Iran, as reflected in the statement by American Secretary of Defense James Mattis. It consequently appears that at this stage, the voices in the Trump administration advocating a relatively moderate attitude towards Iran have the upper hand over the view led by National Security advisor John Bolton, who advocated the Iranian regime's overthrow. This policy is designed to breach the wall of distrust between Tehran and Washington, which is casting a .heavy shadow on the possibility of a fruitful dialogue between the two sides

At the same time, given the great suspicion in the Khamenei camp about the intentions of the US, it is very doubtful whether Khamenei will allow Rouhani to meet with Trump, because this measure will be interpreted as Iranian recognition of the US and a dramatic change in Iranian policy with no appropriate quid pro quo from the US. If the Trump administration continues to insist on conducting a general dialogue with Tehran going beyond the nuclear issue, the Iranian regime will have to explain to its people why it is persisting in its refusal, despite the growing economic pressure on Iran, which is likely to become even more substantial this November, when more extensive sanctions in oil and banking in Iran are due to be added to the existing sanctions. In the absence of convincing explanations, there is a chance that protest in Iran will increase and the pressure that Trump can exert against Tehran will become stronger.

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