



IRANIAN NUCLEAR DEAL AND UNCERTAINTY POST-RAFSANJANI

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On January 08, 2017, Iranian politics suffered a major setback with the death of Iran's former President, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. He is considered a major architect towards the establishment of the fundamentalist system in Iran. Death of Ayatollah Rafsanjani has created a vacuum for the Moderate-Pragmatists¹ in Iran who may now feel deprived of their most influential supporter in the Islamic Republic. This comes at a crucial time when in the US a new administration has taken control in the US under President Donald J. Trump.

Ayatollah Rafsanjani was a significant figure in Iran's recent history as he was one of the prominent leaders of the 1979 revolution which overthrew the Shah. He was also an aide to Ayatollah Khomeini—father of the Iranian Revolution and the first Supreme Leader of Iran, the Commander-in-Chief during the long war with Iraq along with being the President of Iran for eight years. Ayatollah Rafsanjani was also involved in the suggestion of names for the

Supreme leader of Iran after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. Rafsanjani also headed the powerful Assembly of Experts, which selects the supreme leader, and was the chairman of the Expediency Council.²

Hashemi Rafsanjani's death will be a blow to the moderate and reformist politicians in Iran, because he was someone on which they could count. His absence might embolden the hardliners during the lead up to the next presidential election later this year in May. At the same time, Rafsanjani's death also means substantial weakening of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who relied upon him to gather support for his policies, both publicly and behind the scenes. This may drastically impede Rouhani's chances for re-election as president. Rafsanjani's death also represents an important generational shift away from the Iranian leaders who came of age fighting against the Shah before the revolution, to those who grew up during or after. This also makes Iranian President Hassan

Rouhani as the de facto leader of the moderates and reformists in the country. At the same time, Rafsanjani's loss will likely be a greater factor when it is time to select Iran's next Supreme Leader.

Additionally, the desire to change and reform is much stronger in Iran now. People seize every opportunity to express their opposition to the hard line politics and clerical regime. Under these circumstances, the new US administration's policies regarding the Iranian nuclear deal will definitely interfere with Iranian domestic politics. This will, in turn, give an excuse to the hard liners to describe the movement of Iranian ruling regime and support of people being inspired by the West. They believe Trump will adopt tough policies hostile to Iran and that this will undermine the reformers' attempts to build bridges with Washington.

The two issues are not unrelated. There was serious criticism to the Iran deal within certain sections, in the US also. Likewise, in Iran, the hardliners rallied against their President and the government against this deal as well.

However, it must be realised that the nuclear agreement between Iran and the Western nations derives its legitimacy and existence from UN Security Council³ and therefore makes the abandonment of this deal "difficult" but not impossible. The propagators and lobbyists in the US are keeping their fingers

crossed that the new US President, Donald J. Trump, will act "smart" by leading Iran to take steps in order to make it easier for the US to disavow this deal. But the unpredictability over what Mr Trump may actually do continues. The U.S. risks sparking a crisis with its European partners if it pulls out and attempts to make it difficult for foreign companies to do business in Iran. Still, the deal could fracture if the U.S. or Iran treads too stridently over any number of fault lines.⁴

Iran still faces unilateral U.S. sanctions over its ballistic missile testing, human rights record and support for U.S.-designated terrorist groups. The negotiations over Iran's nuclear program were never meant to address these issues or remove the related sanctions, but Tehran has still accused the United States of violating the nuclear deal by extending the sanctions last year.⁵

The worst case scenario is that if for any reason President Hassan Rouhani disappears from the Iranian political stage, there would be no one to fill the gap. He may well be replaced by a new hardliner and this could provide a good enough reason for President Trump to start re-negotiation of the deal and get the Iranian nuclear deal revoked.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹Moderate-Pragmatists in Iran is the middle group who are often as 'hard line' as the principalist but who are in favour of gradual reforms. Internationally, they are opposed to western and American values, but at the same time they believe that it is necessary to make some concessions to make Iran less isolated. Ayatollah Rafsanjani was a moderate and so is Iran's current President Hassan Rouhani.

²Expediency Council-It is an administrative assembly appointed by the Supreme leader set to resolve the differences or conflicts between the *Majlis* and the guardian council. But its main role is to act as an advisory to the Supreme leader. Members of this council are chosen by Supreme leader every five years.

Majid Sadeghpour, "Iran faces change with Trump's election and death of Rafsanjani", Iran focus, January 13, 2017, http://www.iranfocus.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=31141:iran-faces-change-with-trump-s-election-and-death-of-rafsanjani&catid=4&Itemid=109. Accessed on January 23, 2016.

³Security Council, Adopting Resolution 2231 (2015), Endorses Joint Comprehensive Agreement on Iran's Nuclear Programme, Security Council, 7488th Meeting, SC/11974, July 20, 2015, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11974.doc.htm>. Accessed on January 22, 2017.

⁴Tom DiChristopher, "Iran nuclear deal faces bigger threats than Trump's tough campaign trail talk", CNBC, January 13, 2017, <http://www.cnbc.com/2017/01/13/iran-nuclear-deal-faces-bigger-threats-than-trumps-tough-campaign-trail-talk.html>. Accessed on January 25, 2017.

⁵Ibid.