



Spotlight on Iran



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President's decision to hand over nuclear negotiations to Foreign Ministry raises expectations for progress in talks

President Rowhani's decision to hand over responsibility for the nuclear negotiations from the Supreme National Security Council to the Foreign Ministry has been met with positive reactions from Iran's media, particularly from the president's supporters in the political center and the reformist camp. Commentaries published in the Iranian media in recent days have expressed support for the decision, estimating that it will help promote the negotiations with the West, improve the nuclear decision-making process, provide the president with a more effective way of overseeing the negotiations, and allow for greater transparency in the negotiating process.

The reactions of Iranian internet users on news websites and social networks to the government's decision have been similarly positive, reflecting the Iranian public's expectations for progress in the negotiations with the West that will eventually result in the sanctions being lifted and lead to an improvement in their economic situation. Some of the reactions, however, reflect a recognition of the president's limited power when it comes to effecting a strategic change in the nuclear policy, largely determined by the Supreme Leader.

This weekend, after several weeks of speculations, the Office of the President of Iran formally announced that the Foreign Ministry will take over the nuclear dossier from the Supreme National Security Council. The decision to move the nuclear dossier to the Foreign Ministry, headed by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, reflects the efforts made by Iran's newly elected president to expand his government's influence in directing the nuclear policy and create better coordination between the government and the nuclear negotiating team in steering the talks between Iran and the West.

In an interview given to the Mehrnameh periodical in May 2012 following the release of his book National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy, Rowhani discussed the need to

improve the coordination between the government and the nuclear negotiating team. He argued that while the principles of the nuclear policy are set by the Supreme Leader, the government has an important role in directing the policy. Rowhani stressed that, even though the Supreme Leader is the one responsible for making decisions on the nuclear issue, the negotiating team has to be in tune with the government, since the negotiations have consequences with which the government needs to deal (Supreme National Security Council's Research Center website, www.csr.ir/Center.aspx?lng=fa&subid=-1&cntid=2497, May 7, 2012).

Seyyed Hossein Naqavi Hosseini, a member of the Majles Foreign Policy and National Security Committee, clarified this week that shifting the responsibility for the nuclear talks to the Foreign Ministry does not mean handing over the nuclear dossier from the Supreme National Security Council to the Foreign Ministry. He said that the council will remain in charge of the nuclear dossier and the nuclear decision-making process, while the Foreign Ministry will be in charge of implementing those decisions and negotiating within the framework of the decisions made by the council. Hosseini said that transferring the responsibility for managing the negotiations to the Foreign Ministry is intended to let Iran speak with a single voice on its foreign policy when addressing the international community (www.icana.ir/Fa/News/236036).

Reactions in the Iranian media to the government's decision

The decision to hand over the nuclear negotiations from the Supreme National Security Council to the Foreign Ministry has been met with positive reactions from Iran's media, particularly from the president's supporters in the political center and the reformist camp. Iranian Diplomacy, a website affiliated with pragmatic diplomatic elements, published a commentary this weekend to express its support for the move. The article said that the president's decision is not just administrative, but one that could have a positive impact on pushing forward the nuclear negotiations with the West.

The implementation of foreign policy decisions has to be handed over to individuals well familiar with the international political climate, the article said. Even though the main reason why previous rounds of talks failed lies with the conduct of the West, Iran is partly to blame as well as it did not negotiate properly. The Foreign Ministry has considerable negotiating experience, and it can therefore do a better job of negotiating on Iran's nuclear program. Compared to the Supreme National Security Council, the Foreign Ministry is also better equipped to make and implement foreign policy

decisions. Foreign Minister Zarif in particular is a highly skilled, experienced diplomat who enjoys the trust of the country's decision-makers. Accordingly, he will be able to fulfill the responsibility he has been entrusted with in a way that will lead to a better understanding with the West. Shifting the responsibility to the Foreign Ministry will also facilitate a more consolidated nuclear decision-making process and provide the president with a greater ability to oversee the talks with the West. This in turn will allow the president to comply with the demands of the public, who in the last election expressed their desire for a change in the nuclear policy.

Transferring the nuclear dossier to the Foreign Ministry is also a message to the West that Iran has transformed the very nature of the nuclear dossier from military to political. It is a signal to the West stating that Iran is interested in negotiations based on a formula whose underlying principle is a win-win situation. The Iranian Diplomacy website stressed, however, that shifting the responsibility for the negotiations to the Foreign Ministry is not an indication that Iran intends to give up on its legal rights or that the nuclear issue can be resolved very quickly. Solving the problem requires political will from the negotiating parties, since without it even the best diplomats will be unable to make progress towards a solution (www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/page/1921026).

The reformist daily Shargh also expressed support for the decision to transfer the responsibility for the nuclear negotiations to the Foreign Ministry. A commentary by Prof. Sadeq Zibakalam, a political commentator at the Tehran University, said that the government's decision is an important, crucial move after years of negotiations that have yielded no results.

Zibakalam, identified with Iran's political center, noted that the negative impact that the sanctions have had on the Iranian economy for the past decade can no longer be denied, especially in the last two years. Even those who rightly claim that economic mismanagement has contributed to the economic crisis are aware of the sanctions' negative influence. The failed negotiations have led not only to sanctions but also hit Iran's diplomacy and ties with the West and other countries. Iran's national interest is for the regime to become free of the limitations imposed on it by the nuclear issue and that have affected the country for the past decade.

The political commentator stressed that handing over the nuclear dossier to the Foreign Ministry will not necessarily lead to an immediate solution of the nuclear crisis. He noted, however, that it will be seen in the West as a positive step, showing that the new government in Tehran has embarked on a different path and lending credence to

Iran's claim about the nuclear program not being intended for military purposes. While the Supreme National Security Council is a defense body, the Foreign Ministry is a diplomatic one, and the nuclear negotiations should be managed from a diplomatic, not defense perspective. Just as Western countries view the nuclear negotiations from a diplomatic perspective and have not appointed generals or top military officials to do the negotiating, Iran, too, has to entrust the negotiations to diplomats.

Zibakalam pointed out another positive change that will be made possible thanks to handing over the nuclear negotiations to the Foreign Ministry. The meaning of the government's decision is that, from now on, the political and intellectual elites, journalists, Majles members, and media can be freer to express their opinion on the nuclear program, and even criticize both the program and the diplomatic conduct on the issue. As long as the nuclear negotiations were managed by the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, no criticism was possible on that important issue, to the detriment of national interests. It's unreasonable, Zibakalam argued, that, the issue being one of the most important for Iran, there was no climate conducive to a free debate, and that it wasn't until the debates shown on television on the eve of the elections that the candidates first criticized the way that the negotiations were held (sharghdaily.ir/?News_Id=19587).



President Rowhani and Foreign Minister Zarif

Ali Khorram, Iran's former representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency, also expressed his support for the decision to hand over the negotiations to the Foreign Ministry. In a commentary published by the daily Shargh, Khorram said that

foreign policy management requires diplomatic skills and expertise, and that these are concentrated in the hands of the Foreign Ministry.

According to Khorram, the nuclear dossier and nuclear talks have been handed over to the Foreign Ministry just when the new regime is adopting a more reasonable and moderate approach, which will make it possible to negotiate more successfully and in a way that will benefit Iran's national interests. After years of conduct that led to a dead-end and anti-Iranian resolutions in the international scene, the Iranian public expects the negotiations to be run transparently by professional experts, in accordance with national interests and with care taken not to provoke tensions in the international scene (sharghdaily.ir/?News_Id=19590).

Reactions by internet users on news websites and social networks

The reactions of Iranian internet users on news websites and social networks to the government's decision have been similarly positive. Most internet users expressed their satisfaction with the decision and their hope that it will facilitate a quick solution to the nuclear crisis vis-à-vis the West, which will eventually result in the sanctions being lifted and lead to an improvement in their economic situation.

A number of internet users estimated that the government's decision will allow it to improve its control of the negotiations and bring about a more reasonable and moderate stance in managing the talks. Many of them were particularly satisfied with the exclusion of Sa'id Jalili, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, from the nuclear negotiations and accused him of responsibility for the failure of the negotiations with the West and for the sanctions imposed on Iran during the Ahmadinejad administration. Many internet users had praise for the new foreign minister and noted that Zarif is a qualified, experienced diplomat who can successfully steer the nuclear negotiations, improve Iran's status, and promote its ties with the West.

However, while some expressed support for the government's decision, expecting progress in the negotiations now that the responsibility for managing them has been shifted to the Foreign Ministry, other internet users remained skeptical about the meaning of the decision. Some of them said that, in any case, the nuclear policy is determined by the Supreme Leader. An internet user wrote on the Facebook page used by President Rowhani that, since the foreign and domestic policy in Iran is

decided by the Supreme Leader, there will be no real change even if the nuclear dossier is entrusted to the Ministry of Islamic Guidance. Rowhani's election for president, he said, can lead to a certain change only in the economic policy. Other internet users said that progress in the negotiations requires an overall change in Iran's positions, and that the success of the talks depends on the position of the negotiators, not on their identity.

(Internet users' comments were culled from the Alef and Tabnak websites, as well as the president's Facebook page: alef.ir/vdcdf50fzyt0nj6.2a2y.html?197810, www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/343157, www.facebook.com/rouhani.ir)