



Spotlight on Iran



October 20, 2013—Mehr 28, 1392

Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt

From the family grocery store to holding nuclear talks: Iranian website publishes more of President Rowhani's memoirs

On October 10, the Asr-e Iran website published extensive excerpts from an interview granted by Iranian President Hassan Rowhani a few years ago to the author of the book *Young Politicians*. The book, which included conversations with several Iranian politicians, was published in 2007 by Ettelaat, in a limited edition. The interview with Rowhani that appeared in the book took place in 2004 or 2005, when he served as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and head of Iran's nuclear talks team.

In the interview, Rowhani provided biographical information about his childhood, private life, studies at school, religious seminary and university, and about his political activity before and after the Islamic revolution. In the interview, Rowhani also spoke at length about the nuclear talks that he was in charge of under the Khatami administration and defended the conciliatory policy adopted by Iran in 2003. He also expressed his well-known views in recent years on the nuclear talks.

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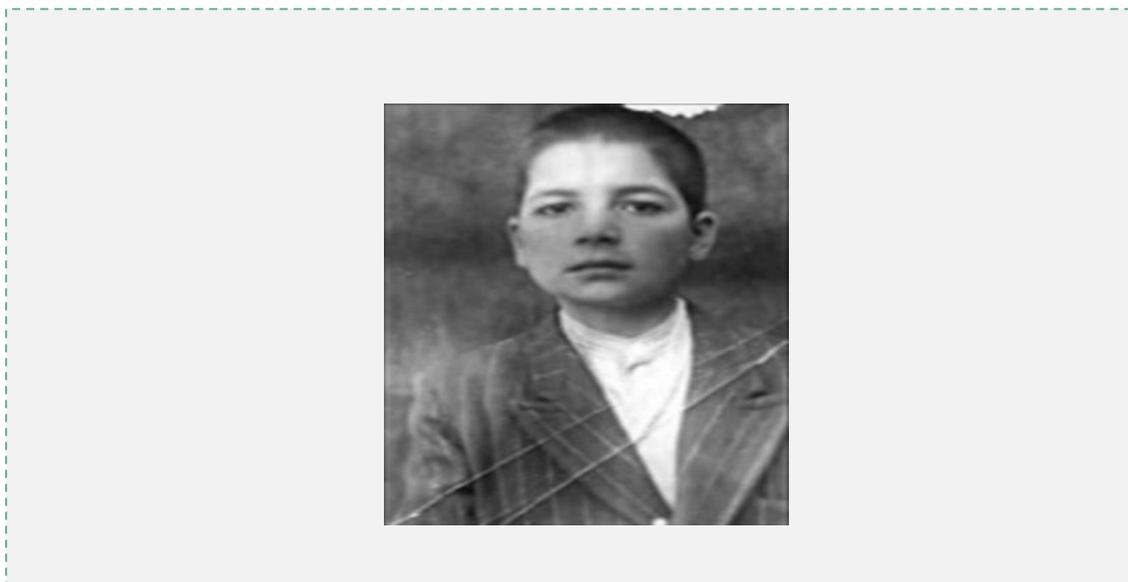
The interview with Rowhani that appeared in the book took place in 2004 or 2005, when he served as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and head of Iran's nuclear negotiations team under President Mohammad Khatami. In the interview, Rowhani provided biographical information about his childhood, studies, and activities before and after the Islamic revolution, and expressed his views on the nuclear negotiations that he conducted.



The cover of the book *Young Politicians*

Rowhani's childhood

Rowhani said in the interview that his first memories are from around the age of 2.5 to 3. He lived in Sorkheh in Semnan Province until he graduated from elementary school at the age of 12. Sorkheh was a village during his childhood and has since become a district (bakhsh)¹. He noted that he had nothing to do with the decision to upgrade the administrative status of Sorkheh.



Rowhani as a child, all the pictures are from: <http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/290922/>- خاطرات روحانی- (مخفیانه مدرس-خواندم-و-رفتم-دانشگاه)

¹ A bakhsh is an administrative unit in Iran that is subordinate to a sub-province (shahrestan), which is subordinate to a province. When Rowhani gave the interview, Sorkheh had the status of a bakhsh. It is evident from Sorkheh's blog that it now has the status of a shahrestan, <http://www.sorkhenews.blogfa.com/>.

He received his elementary education at a regular elementary school and not a religious school (*maktab*). He related that as a child, he was considered a “goody goody” and that besides attending school, he helped his father in his grocery store. It was a rural grocery store that sold a wide variety of products to the villagers. As a boy, Rowhani didn’t know the prices of the various products and would ask his father. In the summertime, when Rowhani was in fourth and fifth grade, he also used to help his father work in the small field next to the family’s grocery store. His father would pay him for his work.

Rowhani excelled in his studies and was always considered the top student in his class. He said he worked only in the afternoon and not during school hours, helping his father in the grocery store for an hour or two. Only in the summertime did he work during the day.



Rowhani’s father’s house

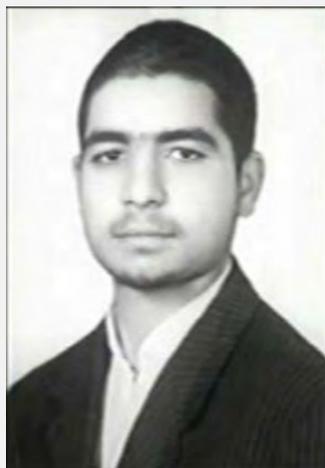
Religious studies, general studies and marriage

When Rowhani graduated from elementary school, he started religious studies. Rowhani related in the interview that it was his own decision to go to religious studies. His father was not a clergyman, because he was forced to go to work at an early age after his father’s death, but near the family home and family-owned grocery store there was a mosque used by the villagers. Rowhani often visited the mosque as a child,

especially in the months of Muharram² and Ramadan. During those months a cleric visited the village, who was sent especially from the city of Qom to lead the villagers in their religious ceremonies at the mosque. During his visits to the village, the cleric often stayed with the Rowhani family.

Rowhani noted that the number of clerics in Sorkheh was high in relation to the number of residents in the village (around 70 clerics out of a population of around 3,000). The village clerics used to purchase religious texts and products sold in his father's grocery store. Rowhani also used to read religious texts and began to display an interest in religious topics. The fact that Rowhani's forefathers (apart from his father) were clerics themselves encouraged the young Rowhani to turn to the study of religion.

Rowhani began his religious studies at the religious seminary in Semnan and a year later transferred to the religious seminary in the city of Qom. This was in 1961, when Rowhani was 13. He went to Qom unaccompanied by his family. However, he was not alone in Qom, since he met three friends there who had begun their religious studies before him. They, too, were from the village of Sorkheh. They were the Akhtari brothers: Abbas-Ali Akhtari, a member of the first (1980-1984) and seventh (2004-2008) Majles; Hojjat-ol-Eslam Mohammad-Hassan Akhtari, former ambassador of Iran to Damascus and head of the global Ahl-ol-Bayt association that operates at the Supreme Leader's Office; and Ali-Asghar Akhtari, who was also a cleric. Rowhani and the Akhtari brothers did not share a room, but their room was next to Rowhani's.



² The first month of the Islamic calendar is considered a month of mourning, culminating on the Day of Ashura, the anniversary of the death of Imam Hussein.

At some point Rowhani felt that religious studies at the seminary were not enough for him and he decided to begin studying general subjects at a regular high school. Carrying out the decision was not easy, because he had to hide his general studies from the religious seminary administrators, who would not have approved. He began studying at Alavi High School, which operated under the supervision of Ayatollah Beheshti,³ and continued his studies at other schools. Due to the clerics' opposition to the participation of religious seminary students in general studies, Rowhani had to attend general classes that were given during the summer when the religious seminary was not in session.

Thanks to his good academic achievements he managed to complete his studies in three years and, in 1969, began to attend the University of Tehran. He enrolled in law school as his first choice, political science as his second choice and sociology as his third choice. He was admitted to law school and began his studies.

During his freshman year at the university, Rowhani continued his studies at the religious seminary in Qom. However, a year later he had to stop his religious studies because he could no longer handle the difficulty involved in combining religious studies at the seminary and his university studies. His marriage during his freshman year at the university also made it hard for him to study at both the university and the religious seminary. Rowhani said that the decision to marry was made under pressure from his family. He became engaged in 1968 when he was 20. His parents insisted that he marry, and he had no objection⁴.

Rowhani would attend classes at the university wearing the traditional garb of the clergy. He noted that it was not easy for him and people used to tease him about it, especially in the cafeteria or restaurants. He told the interviewer that only one of his classmates was a cleric like him. The law school had a student body of 200 students per year. Fifty of them were women. Of the 150 male students, around 7-8 were religious, 10-15 were active in the struggle against the monarchy, and some were affiliated with the Mojahedin Khalq Organization or leftist groups. Most students were politically apathetic. His friends included religious students and students who took part

³ For further information about Alavi High School, see Spotlight on Iran from October 3, "Haqqani" and "Alavi": hotbeds for the growth and development of Iranian leaders, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20575>. Rowhani did not complete his secondary studies at this school and therefore he is not included among its alumni.

⁴ Rowhani is married to his cousin, Sahebe Arabi, who was 14 at the time of their marriage. Arabi, who refrains from media exposure, is a housewife.

in the struggle against the regime, but he was also friendly with the other students who were not religious and were not involved in political activity.



Political activity before the Islamic revolution

Rowhani began his political activity at an early age. He related that while he was still a student at the religious seminary in Qom, he was one of Ayatollah Khomeini's followers. At the age of 16, he was arrested for the first time after delivering a speech in the city of Tuyserkan, in Hamadan Province. In 1975, Rowhani stepped up his political activity, which was manifested primarily in giving speeches in Tehran and other provinces. In 1976, he gave a speech at the Hakim Mosque in Isfahan, after which they wanted to arrest him, but he managed to escape. In 1977, he managed to escape once again after security forces tried to arrest him following a series of speeches delivered in the city of Qom. He claims to be the first person to call Khomeini an imam in a speech in Tehran.

Along with his political speeches, Rowhani was involved for a time with the publication of the oppositionist journals Ba'sat and Entegham, both published in Qom.

His activity after the revolution and conducting the nuclear talks

After the revolution, Rowhani set up the army's ideological-political division. In 1979, he participated in the first Majles elections and became a member of the Majles at the age of 31. In the interview, Rowhani expanded on the nuclear talks that he had been in

charge of under the Khatami administration and defended the conciliatory policy adopted by Iran in 2003, and especially its agreement to suspend uranium enrichment. In this interview, which took place, as stated, in the middle of the previous decade, Rowhani expressed his well-known views in recent years on the nuclear talks. These views were also expressed in his book *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy*, published in 2012, and in an interview with the magazine Mehranameh around the time the book was published.⁵

Rowhani said that when the Iranians first began dealing with the nuclear case in 2002, he was not associated with this matter in any way, and it was handled by the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After the nuclear case was first discussed by the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Supreme National Security Council held its first discussions on this matter and asked the officials in charge of the issue to provide reports to the Council. According to Rowhani, the reports made to the Council by senior officials underestimated the importance of dealing with the nuclear case in the framework of the Board of Governors. It soon became clear that an international consensus against Iran was developing and the Supreme National Security Council began working seriously on this issue. At meetings that were held with the leaders of the three branches it was decided to appoint one person to be in charge of the nuclear case. According to Rowhani, the suggestion to appoint him was made by the foreign minister at the time, Kamal Kharazi.

Rowhani noted that he is pleased with the conduct of the team holding the nuclear talks and claimed that had Iran conducted itself differently, this would have presented far more problems for the country. He elaborated on the criticism of Iran's decision to suspend uranium enrichment and claims that the government's conciliatory policy was not serving Iran's national interests. Rowhani said that the criticism stems from ignorance or from political and party considerations.

He emphasized that he is not the one who decided on the principles of the nuclear talks policy and that the decision on this matter was made by the heads of the three government branches and by the Supreme National Security Council and was approved by the Supreme Leader. Had the Leader opposed the policy that was

⁵ See excerpts from this interview in Spotlight on Iran for the Week of May 9-16, 2012, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20332>.

decided upon, said Rowhani, he would have expressed his position and could have said that the policy crosses the regime's red lines. It is inconceivable for the Leader to disagree with the policy on the most important issue related to Iran's national security and to remain silent.



Rowhani discussed the demand made by some of his critics, for Iran to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). He claimed that such a withdrawal would not solve any problem and would even exacerbate the problems facing Iran. Iran's withdrawal from the treaty would lead to the immediate transfer of the nuclear case to the UN Security Council. This would mean divesting Iran of all its nuclear technology. The Security Council has more extensive powers than the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency and has the ability to adopt more severe resolutions against Iran and even to forbid it from enriching uranium altogether. The influence of the United States at the Security Council is also greater than at the Board of Governors.

Rowhani said in the interview (like similar statements that he has made in recent years) that Iran's agreement to suspend its uranium enrichment enabled it to make progress in nuclear technology. Had it resigned from the NPT, it would not have been able to realize the technological progress that it has achieved thanks to the agreements signed with representatives of the European Union. He stressed that the suspension of uranium enrichment should not last long (the interview was granted before Iran resumed uranium enrichment in 2005) and that Iran is operating in accordance with a clear strategy. Iran has never kowtowed to the West and has never pleaded with Europe, and documents published on this issue in the future will attest to this.

Politics, the nuclear issue and family life

In response to a question on this matter, Rowhani said that the nuclear issue is also discussed in his talks with his family. His family members do not criticize the policy that he leads, but wonder why he agreed to assume such a heavy responsibility.

He said that when he served as head of the nuclear negotiating team, he was deprived of rest for a whole year, including weekends and Muslim holidays. He would get up at 7 a.m. and leave office at 9 p.m. This was hard for his family, but since they understand that his work is intended to serve the country, they are pleased with it.

He himself is pleased with his life, although it is by no means easy. At the age of 14 he already joined the political struggle against the regime and his family had to endure periods of escape and arrest. He continued his activities even after the revolution, serving as a member of the Majles, as a council member in charge of the broadcasting authority, he was involved in managing the Iran-Iraq War and at one time served as head of the war headquarters and air defense commander. After the war, he joined the Supreme National Security Council, serving at a time of crises faced by Iran. So his life has not been easy, but a man who feels he is doing his job in the service of the citizens has reason to be pleased (<http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/290922/>-خاطرات-روحانی-مخفیانه-). (درس-خواندم-و-رفتم-دانشگاه

