

Viewpoints
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Upcoming UN Meeting Revives Hopes for U.S.-Iran Dialogue

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UNGA provides a convenient venue for foreign leaders to interact and has special utility for countries such as Iran that are estranged from the United States and thus have no embassies in Washington. With the election of a pragmatic new Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, suspense is building again. Will Rouhani shake hands with U.S. President Barack Obama at the annual luncheon for heads of state? Or, at a minimum, will Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif – a U.S.-educated former ambassador to the UN – chat in the hallway with Secretary of State John Kerry?

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As summer heat and humidity fade into cool and refreshing fall, diplomatic reporters are preparing for the annual gabfest known as UNGA—a two-week meeting in New York in late September or early October of senior officials from the members of the United Nations General Assembly.

UNGA provides a convenient venue for foreign leaders to interact and has special utility for countries such as Iran that are estranged from the United States and thus have no embassies in Washington. Since Iranian presidents started attending UNGA on a regular basis in the late 1990s, there has been anticipation that they might use the opportunity to “bump” into their American counterparts and jumpstart a process of reconciliation.

With the election of a pragmatic new Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, suspense is building again. Will Rouhani shake hands with U.S. President Barack Obama at the annual luncheon for heads of state? Or, at a minimum, will Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif—a U.S.-educated former ambassador to the UN—chat in the hallway with Secretary of State John Kerry? The United States and Iran could also find themselves in the same room if multilateral talks about Iran’s nuclear program resume; Syria—its civil war and recent promises to give up its chemical weapons—is another topic for potential U.S.-Iran conversation.

For reporters who have covered numerous UNGAs and followed the U.S.-Iran saga, however, anticipation is tempered by a history of missed opportunities. When the United States has been ready to take even a symbolic step toward Iran, Iran has often not reciprocated and vice versa.

In 2000, then U.S. President Bill Clinton stayed in the General Assembly chamber after his own speech to listen to then Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, an unusual sign of respect. But the Iranians—facing opposition from hardline elements at home—balked at even a presidential handshake.

A much bigger opportunity came the following year, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. UNGA was postponed until November to give New York City officials a chance to recover from the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. According to a U.S. diplomat,ⁱ then Iranian President Mohammad Khatami let the George W. Bush administration know that he would be bringing a large delegation to New York, including intelligence and military experts who could assist the United States in removing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that had harbored the 9/11 plotters. Khatami also asked permission to visit Ground Zero, to pay his respects to the 3,000 victims who included citizens from 80 nations, among them Iran.

But the Bush administration, whose mantra was to oppose “all terrorism of global reach,” rejected the Iranian overtures even as it later profited from Tehran’s cooperation in toppling the Taliban and constructing a new government for Afghanistan.

A senior Iranian diplomat told me several years later that the Khatami government felt it was important to be proactive on Afghanistan, not just because the Taliban and al-Qaeda were

mutual enemies but because “there was not another moment in US history when there was more of a psychological need for success on the US part. That’s why we consciously decided not to qualify our cooperation on Afghanistan or make it contingent upon a change in US policy, believing, erroneously, that the impact would be of such magnitude that it would automatically have altered the nature of Iran-US relations.”

Instead, Bush not only failed to give Iran credit but lumped it in with Iraq and North Korea as the “Axis of Evil” in his 2002 State of the Union address. Iran’s reformist camp was humiliated and further marginalized. Mid-level U.S.-Iran direct talks that had begun in the fall of 2001 continued for another year – mostly focused on Afghanistan and Iraq – but the Bush administration never replied to a 2003 Iranian-Swiss proposal for comprehensive negotiations on all the issues dividing the two countries. The United States got further bogged down in Iraq, and Iran used its considerable asymmetric power to promote anti-American militants in Iraq.

In 2005, Khatami left office and was replaced by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. During his eight years as president, Ahmadinejad never missed an UNGA meeting or a chance to outrage U.S. public opinion with inflammatory rhetoric, which included denying the Holocaust, threatening Israel’s existence, and suggesting that the United States was responsible for 9/11. In his final appearance last year, the former Iranian president said that the Iranian people were better off than before he took officeⁱⁱ despite the punishing sanctions imposed on Iran for advancing its nuclear program. Ahmadinejad did express regret that the United States had not responded to *his* occasional overtures, seemingly oblivious to the fact that his rhetoric and behavior – as well as the brutal regime crackdown on protesters following Ahmadinejad’s disputed 2009 re-election – had made it almost impossible to achieve a breakthrough.

Now, Ahmadinejad is history and Iran’s new face is that of a psychologically less needy, Western-educated cleric, a former nuclear negotiator and long-time fixture in the Islamic Republic.

Rouhani and his foreign minister, Zarif, have been working assiduously to sweeten the atmosphere for UNGA through public statements, including active Twitter and Facebook campaigns that have sought to cancel out Ahmadinejad’s Holocaust denial by congratulating Jewsⁱⁱⁱ on their new year.

Rouhani plans three speeches in and around UNGA – one before the assembly on September 24 just a few hours after Obama speaks; a second before the Non-Aligned Movement, which Iran currently chairs; and a third before a nuclear disarmament group. He will meet with the press, and Zarif is also likely to give interviews and make use of a digital Rolodex that includes dozens of influential former and current U.S. officials.

On the nuclear issue, Rouhani has tweeted about his desire for a “win-win” formula that will preserve Iran’s right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy while providing confidence that it is not seeking to develop nuclear weapons. Iran has also taken concrete steps to lessen concerns about a potential nuclear breakout by reducing the amount of 20-percent enriched uranium^{iv} that it is stockpiling, in a form suitable for easy conversion to weapons-grade uranium, and delaying the activation of a reactor that could produce plutonium, another potential fuel for bombs.

The Syrian crisis has also provided a new opportunity – and challenge – for Iranian neo-reformists. Rouhani and Zarif have vociferously condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria – without, as of mid-September, blaming the Syrian government. However, Rouhani’s mentor, former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, has accused^v the regime of Bashar al-Assad of gassing its own civilian population. A chance to push Assad aside and promote a less blood-stained Syrian leader will come if Syria holds presidential elections next year as scheduled.

Iran has long sought to be part of multilateral discussions on ending the Syrian civil war, which has drained the Iranian treasury and negated the Iranian narrative of siding with the oppressed. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced after meeting with Kerry on September 13 that there will be consultations on the sidelines of UNGA about organizing a peace conference in Geneva. The Russians have pushed for Iran’s inclusion in such a conference and U.S. opposition appears to be diminishing now that Ahmadinejad is out of power.

Ultimately, of course, the decision about whether the United States and Iran will restore some semblance of normalcy to their relations will be made by Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Khamenei, who was Iran’s president in the 1980s when that position was less influential, paid his only visit ever to the United States in 1987 to participate in UNGA. He gave a harsh anti-American speech, listing Iran’s numerous grievances against the United States – from the 1953 coup that re-installed the Shah, to America’s support for then Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War that was still ongoing.

Khamenei worries most about a U.S. cultural invasion that is hollowing out the Islamic Republic from within. However, he has not ruled out relations with the United States if they are perceived as being in the interests of his government.

“Let them not make trouble, let them not intervene, let them not bully, let them recognize the Iranian nation’s rights,” Khamenei said earlier this year^{vi} in response to a critical speech by Vice President Joe Biden. “Then they will receive a commensurate response from Iran.”



The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

ⁱ <http://www.amazon.com/Bitter-Friends-Bosom-Enemies-Confrontation/dp/B0046LUGXK>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/politics-and-controversy-follow.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://backchannel.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/09/6144/iran-fm-presidents-rosh-hashana-twitter-diplomacy-stirs-amazement-disbelief/>

^{iv} <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/iran-reduces-enriched-uranium-stockpile>

^v <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/09/2735/alleged-rafsanjani-audio-blames-assad-for-chemical-attack/>

^{vi} <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139643/akbar-ganji/who-is-ali-khamenei>

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