

Interview with Hans Blix

In the coming days, six world powers and Iranian officials will convene in Geneva for a new round of negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program. What are the chances for a breakthrough?

I believe that there is a certain eagerness on both sides to strike a deal. In the US, President Obama clearly cornered himself with regards to Syria by pledging to not let the use of chemical weapons go unpunished. Similarly, with regards to Iran, President Obama declared that he would never allow Tehran to develop nuclear weapons. Now there is a clear interest in the US to get out of that corner and not to get too entangled in Iran. After all, the Americans do not have the faintest idea what would happen the day after a bombing campaign -- be it in Syria or in Iran. This is the US-side of things. But also in Iran, there seems to be an eagerness to come to some sort of understanding. It is clear that the country is currently in a very bad economic situation. The sanctions and economic pressures have tanked the economy and homegrown mismanagement has made bad things worse. It seems to me, that these two trends in the US and in Iran are currently converging.

Does this mean that you are optimistic concerning the prospects for an agreement at this point in time?

Not necessarily. On the one hand, I do have the impression that there does not seem to be real objection to Iranian uranium enrichment to up to 5 percent amongst Western powers. True, there is a Security Council resolution on that question, and so they have not formally given up on that demand. However, I feel that there is room for compromise on that issue. As concerning the question of enrichment up to 20 percent, the Iranians might be willing to compromise. But on the other hand, the closing of the Fordo reactor might be a different matter, as will be the Arak heavy water reactor. Finding a solution here might prove more difficult, as President Rouhani will have to take into account public sensitivities at home. He simply cannot leave the negotiations as someone who gave in to every single Western demand. So in these issues, there is still quite a lot of distance between both sides. But I do not want to be too skeptical. If a deal can be concluded in the upcoming talks, wonderful. But also the other side of the equation will come into the picture: How far will the Western side be willing to go in the easing of sanctions? There will be strong pressure against this from the US-Congress and from Israel. As an outside observer, I feel that perhaps a residuary solution is worth exploring: Any deal that stipulates in concrete terms how many centrifuges and what kind of centrifuges and where these centrifuges be located would be criticized in Iran as peeling off Iranian rights. If President Rouhani signs any such agreement, he could be severely criticized as selling out Iranian entitlements. Taking that into consideration, it could seem easier for Iran to act alone.

Could you elaborate?

Perhaps we should be looking into parallel commitments, not into a binding nexus. After all, that is what George W. Bush the elder and President Gorbachev did in the 1990s. If we focus on parallel commitments, the Iranians could suspend certain actions as a sovereign state based on an assessment of their economic interests without being seen as merely bowing to outside pressure. This might seem more like Psychology than anything else, but 60 percent of the conflict is Psychology.

The electoral victory of Hassan Rouhani has brought about a change in language in Tehran. How do you assess this?

Clearly, there is now a much more sophisticated and experienced leadership in Iran than before. The recent change in leadership is a big opportunity because we now have a leadership in Tehran that strives to satisfy the economic interests of the Iranian people. The Iranian government now wants the sanctions lifted and wants to ease the isolation. Of course, we currently do not know how far this will go, but it is quite a contrast to the previous president, who thrived on confrontation with the US and tried to score points with the Arab street, whenever the opportunity arose. And given the often humiliating Western rhetoric vis-a-vis Iran, there was ample opportunity for that.

Certainly, the nuclear question is essential. However, it is hardly the only field where perceived Western and Iranian interests seem to clash. How do you see the prospects for a more comprehensive detente with Iran focusing also on Afghanistan and Syria?

That would be a possibility. In Diplomacy, it is a traditional approach to widen the playing field when one is stuck in a specific matter. There has already been extensive debate about this before, concerning Afghanistan and Iraq. And I believe that Iran has been rather helpful to US-interests in Afghanistan and at the end of the day also in Iraq. However, I wonder if a straightforward comprehensive diplomatic agreement based on a *quid pro quo* would be the right approach. That would certainly be more challenging than parallel unilateral commitments.

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