Until recently, Tehran had ruled out direct talks with Washington; at least the issue wasn’t openly discussed in the upper echelons of government. Right after Obama was elected to a new term as president this past November, his Iranian counterpart, Ahmadinejad, proposed to America’s leaders in a press release that the two countries hold direct negotiations. He said that direct American-Iranian talks would be highly effective in finding a way to end the years-long relations crisis between the two countries. Iranian Foreign Minister Salehi later confirmed that negotiations are could happen, but he said that this kind of initiative requires the permission of the country’s spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has yet to issue a public statement about dialogue with the Americans.

However, the ban on discussions of the topic by Iran’s expert community has apparently been lifted, and local political analysts and experts have begun addressing the likelihood and desirability of direct talks with the US government. A review of Iranian sources shows that there are virtually no heated discussions. Most authors support negotiations, and many of them indicate that they are highly likely and could begin soon.

Their optimism is based on a positive assessment in Iran of Obama’s reelection to a second term, which is seen as favoring the establishment of direct official contacts between Tehran and Washington. The well-known Iranian diplomat M. Harrazi, who served twice as deputy foreign minister, points to Obama’s willingness to depart from unilateralism in international affairs, and “open a new chapter in relations between the United States and the Islamic world.” The political analyst divides Obama’s first-term policy towards Iran into two parts. Harrazi believes that in the beginning Obama tried to “turn a new page in relations with Iran” and he tried appealing to the Iranian people. However, resistance to this policy by anti-Iranian forces within the United States prevented him from taking concrete steps to normalize relations with Tehran. On the contrary, he was forced to go along with the hostile US policy towards Iran. The sanctions against Iran were significantly toughened, and American diplomats led a campaign to get sanctions resolutions adopted in the United Nations. In particular, Obama succeeded in getting Russia to go along with them. Russia ended its military-technical cooperation with Iran and canceled a contract to sell Iran S-300 air defense systems. Toward the end of his first term, Obama also convinced the European Union to impose an oil embargo against Iran and introduce unprecedented financial restrictions, including a ban on transactions with Iranian banks in the international SWIFT system. In short, Obama’s “sins” against Iran are many; nevertheless, many Iranian experts believe a Romney presidency would have been even worse for Iranian-American relations.

Second, Obama’s decision to completely revamp his administration was welcome — especially the decision to name former Democratic Senator John Kerry Secretary of State. According to Iranian analysts, unlike Clinton, Rice and Albright, Kerry as Secretary of State will strive to resolve international problems by diplomatic means without ceding State Department authority to the military in the Pentagon, something that generally leads to an earlier use of military force by the Americans.

“It is unlikely that the current administration will insist on initiating military aggression against Iran,” Professor D. Bawand said in commenting on the likelihood of a US military response to the capture of an American UAV on the Persian Gulf coast. The parties took a diplomatic approach to resolving the issue by working through the UN Secretariat, where their mutual claims are now pending. That is seen as a positive signal that the new American administration is willing to take a balanced foreign policy approach to relations with Iran. On the whole, Iranian experts anticipate that Obama’s second term will see a reduced military threat from the United States, but they feel
it is less likely that Obama’s new administration will ease the pressure of sanctions on Iran’s economy.  

For example, Professor K. Sajadpur’s article “Forecasting U.S. policy toward Iran up to 2016” asserts that Washington will maintain its sanctions policy against Tehran. He believes that America’s allies will continue supporting the White House’s unilateral sanctions, but he doesn’t anticipate that the UN Security Council will adopt international sanctions against Iran in the hope that Russia and China will stick to their positions on the issue.

It is essential to Iran that the sanctions be lifted or eased. Despite optimistic rhetoric by officials who say the sanctions aren’t very effective, Iranians are experiencing the burden in full measure. As Iranian Economic Affairs and Finance Minister Hosseini has said, the country could lose a total of at least $50 billion during the current Iranian year. By some estimates, that sum would build more than 30 nuclear power plants like the 100-megawatt plant at Bushehr. These calculations should give the Iranian authorities who are steadfastly defending their large-scale nuclear program cause to think seriously about the economic consequences of their continued intransigence. Indeed, the US goal of using economic pressure to force Tehran to give up its nuclear ambitions has that changed.

Although expert circles believe there is little likelihood Iran will make serious concessions, analysts are studying the routes to compromise that offer Iran the biggest payoff. Most of them point to the lack of results from the P5+1 negotiations on Iran’s nuclear program, and they don’t anticipate a breakthrough during the upcoming P5+1 meeting in Istanbul. Many experts believe Iran needs direct talks with the United States specifically to discuss acceptable conditions for possibly slowing development of its nuclear program in exchange for a gradual lifting of sanctions.

In his article “The War in Gaza and Iranian-American Negotiations,” the Iranian Americanologist Ahadi argues that a direct dialogue with the United States was being planned in November 2012 before the next round of the P5+1 talks. However, he believes that the political events in the Middle East immediately following the announcement of upcoming negotiations after Obama’s election to a second term interrupted the dialogue. He says Israel’s eight-day Operation Cloud Pillar in the Gaza Strip was linked to a plot by Tel Aviv to prevent direct negotiations between Washington and Tehran from getting underway. Even though Israel doubtless had other reasons for attacking Hamas’s infrastructure, that link isn’t as complicated as it might appear. The attack on Gaza was a provocation to disrupt the Iranian-American contacts that were taking shape. It wouldn’t have been difficult for Israeli politicians to foresee Iranian support for Hamas and calculate the likelihood that Iran’s position on the Palestinian issue would be sharply criticized in the United States and the countries of NATO. Indeed, Tehran was once again accused of funding and arming Hamas terrorists. Israel was thereby able to discredit the new American initiative regarding negotiations with Iran, hand Obama’s opponents a strong argument, and “freeze” the idea of a dialogue, which the United States immediately stopped talking about.

In conclusion, I would note that there is another factor making direct negotiations with the United States desirable for Iran’s leaders, including its religious leaders, as well as for the country as a whole. After all, the two countries have had no diplomatic relations for more than 30 years, and their grievances with each other have long since grown into a direct confrontation that is keeping the entire international community on pins and needles and Iran’s economy in a discriminatory mode of isolation from the world’s centers of technology, science, finance and trade. The United States has a history of engaging in direct bilateral contacts with Iran — on Iraq and Afghanistan, for example. The United States doesn’t reject the possibility of such negotiations even now. This time, however, it would be nice if the Americans entered official negotiations treating the Iranians as partners with equal legal standing representing a country recognized by the United States government that after 33 years has proven its worth and is a role model in the Muslim world.

To what extent are such negotiations possible during Obama’s second term? The Iranian expert community seems to believe in them, and time will tell whether they are right.

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