

What Does Iran's Presidential Election Mean for Biden's Policy?



Featuring Frederick Kagan, Nicholas Heras and Nicholas Carl

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*The results of the Iranian presidential election in June 2021 will determine whether Iran shifts toward greater cooperation or increasing conflict with the United States. This uncertainty comes as the Biden administration is trying to reboot diplomacy with Iran using an ambitious agenda that goes beyond nuclear nonproliferation to include thorny issues such as the Iranian ballistic missile program and Iran's activities in the Middle East. In this episode of *Overwatch*, Nicholas Heras, Director of Government Relations at ISW, is joined by Frederick Kagan, Director of the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute, and Nicholas Carl, the Iran Team Lead at CTP, to discuss nuances in Iran's upcoming presidential cycle that will have a significant impact on what the Biden administration can expect to achieve diplomatically with Iran.*

Jacob Taylor:

This is *Overwatch*, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. This is the second episode in our mini series, focusing on US policy on Iran. On this episode, ISW Director of Government Relations, Nick Harris is joined by Fred Kagan, the director of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute and by Nicholas Carl, the Iran team lead at the Critical Threats Project for a discussion of Iran's upcoming presidential elections in June. These elections could have significant impacts on the delicate diplomatic dance between the Biden administration and Iran.

Nick Harris:

Hi, this is Nick Harris, director of government relations at ISW.

Fred Kagan:

I'm Fred Kagan director of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute.

Nicholas Carl:

My name is Nicholas Carl, and I am an analyst and the Iran team lead at the Critical Threats Project of the American Enterprise Institute.

Fred:

I'd like to start by talking a little bit with you about how the Biden team seems to be thinking about the Iranian presidential election. Do you think that they think that it's important that it matters who is president in Iran from the standpoint of their negotiation strategy?

Nick H:

Well, Fred, this is a really important question, especially because the Biden team has an ambitious agenda in getting Iran back into compliance with the nuclear deal, and then using the nuclear deal as a springboard to follow on agreements, to include some of the so-called sunset clauses, as well now, officially, according to Biden's incoming National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, on the Iranian ballistic missile program. The Biden team has sent mixed signals about how they will approach the reality of Iran's upcoming presidential elections.

On the one hand, they have made it known publicly that, from their point of view, they do have a window of opportunity while Rouhani is still the Iranian president to engage back into the nuclear deal and to begin follow-on talks. However, they're also mindful that Rouhani will only be there for a, as it's being called, six-month window, from the start of the Biden administration to the Iranian presidential elections and that whomever is Rouhani's successor, they will have to engage with across the negotiating table.

There's a bit of chatter around the Biden team that one of the concerns that they have is that although they know

that in the Iranian system, it is the Supreme Leader, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, as well as the Supreme National Security Council within the system that Iran has established that make a lot of the decisions, the president still has the ability to be an advocate for certain policy approaches that the Iranians take that can be conducive to, or against, the momentum of not only getting back into the nuclear deal, but also follow-on negotiations.

I think something that really has flown under the radar over the last several weeks as we venture 2021, is that now that the Biden team has seemingly put ballistic missiles back on the table, as a issue of concern that they do want to negotiate with the Iranians, that is, ballistic missiles are core to Iran's security strategy, and still unclear to me how the Biden team would be able to get any Iranian president, whether they're a so-called moderate or an extreme hardliner to buy into that type of negotiation.

So I do think that the presidential elections in Iran will matter, and they'll matter significantly to the Biden team, because whomever is president of Iran at the time that they try these follow-on negotiations will have impact on how the tenor of those talks go. Ballistic missiles is going to be really difficult if not impossible to touch, and I think that's really important because, in my mind, when Jake Sullivan came out publicly and said, "Yes, that has to be on the table," he talks about putting Iran in the nuclear box, he kind of put him and his team in a box by saying that, and that is exactly the type of talking points that some of the US regional partners will use with the administration to put pressure on them. That will only be accelerated by the fact that there's Abraham Accords, where these regional partners can actually coordinate more effectively than they could in that 2013-2015 period.

Fred:

Thank you, Nick. Do you think that the Biden team is imagining that anything that it does can influence the outcome of the Iranian elections?

Nick H:

So there is some discussion that, if the process of re-engaging the Iranians to come into compliance and then the United States comes back into compliance with the nuclear deal, that there can be with the sanctions released that the Iranians would be provided as part of that process, some momentum that can be given to potential presidential candidates in Iran whom may want to take a more active, diplomatic approach with the United States and might trust that this Biden team is in fact willing and able to deliver benefits, particularly economic benefits, that the Iranians have been demanding, well, since the beginning of the nuclear negotiations throughout the 2010s.

I do think that, it might seem wistful thinking that a diplomatic approach to the US can take could influence Iran's lessons. However, I do think that there is some talk within the Biden team that, if they're able to get this right and by this right, re-engage in the nuclear negotiation process, in getting particular European allies the United States through sanctions relief and through the prospect of business relations with Iran, to show that there is a tangible benefit for the Iranians to play nice in follow-on diplomatic processes, that that could have an effect.

If it doesn't have effect directly on who would actually win the election, that it could definitely have an effect on the calculations and decision-making within the inner working of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in the inner regime so as to allow room for diplomatic process to run.

Fred:

Super. Thank you so much. So I think that's a great segue to start talking with Nick Carl, about the process of the Iranian presidential election and also the candidates, and thinking this through in a concrete terms from the Tehran perspective. So Nick, can you tell us, how does Iran choose a president? What's the process and what does the timeline look like this year?

Nicholas C:

Sure. Thanks Fred. So the Iranian presidential election process does mirror our own in some ways. It is a national election wherein the people come out to vote and support different candidates who will be elected for a four year term and then again, has the option to run for a second term, upon the conclusion of their first. The Iranian election system does diverge from our own, of course, in many key ways, which really makes meaningful reform and anything contrary to the Supreme Leader's will extremely difficult, if not near impossible, within the Iranian political system.

So within Iran exists this vetting body, called the Guardian Council. The core function of which is to review and approve every single candidate for any kind of elected office in Iran, to include members of parliament, as well as the president himself. The Guardian Council is an ultra-conservative body and has a long history of intervening heavily into Iranian elections to manipulate the results and get a president or a parliamentarian that is most in line with what they would like to see.

The Iranian presidential election campaign process does not last nearly as long as our own here in the States. Instead, presidential election candidates are usually confirmed only in the first few months, if not immediately before the presidential election, and the Guardian Council will approve it in those days. Right now, we do not have many confirmed contenders thus far, but there are, nonetheless, many who are rumored and likely to run as the election nears.

I would also add that the Guardian Council has become increasingly aggressive in its intervention into Iranian elections over the past year. In February 2020, the Guardian Council disqualified an unprecedented number of more moderate and centrist figures running for the legislative elections, and the net result of this was to advantage the more hard-line and principlist camps within the Iranian regime. One important point to note here is that Iran does not have political parties, or at least it's not focused on them as much as we do here in the United States. Instead, though, they have political camps and factions, which I think can ultimately be divided into three general groups. Hardliners, which are the far-right branch within the Iranian political system, moderates and then finally reformists.

Fred:

So Nick, you're talking about the Guardian Council qualifying or disqualifying candidates. What are the criteria on which the Guardian Council makes those kinds of decisions?

Nicholas C:

The criteria are subjective and unequally enforced. During the 2020 legislative elections, the Guardian Council largely disqualified candidates because of corruption and a lack of commitment to the Islamic Republic. It's things like this that the Guardian Council will use to disqualify the candidates that they believe are unfit for office, and they will largely do so on a sort of ideological basis, targeting those who they believe are too eager to concede to the West in negotiations, and other things that they believe are antithetical to the ideological principles upon which the Islamic Republic is founded.

Fred:

Can you tell us, finally, who appoints the members of the Guardian Council? Whom do they represent when they're making these decisions?

Nicholas C:

The short answer is the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. There are 12 members on the Guardian Council.

cil, six of which he appoints himself, and the other six are elected by the parliament as legislators. However, with that said, Khamenei still has complete control over who ultimately makes it onto the Guardian Council, however. He carefully controls the process because he realizes the influence and control this group has within Iran's political system. He assuredly approved and allowed the Guardian Council to intervene heavily into the 2020 elections and previous rounds, because he supported their efforts to increasingly homogenize the Iranian political space.

Fred:

So it's reasonable to suppose that the Guardian Council is doing its best to execute Khamenei's wishes, and from that, to extrapolate that the Guardian Council will allow candidates to run or bar candidates from running based on, at least, its understanding of which candidates Khamenei is willing to have run and which he is not. Is that correct?

Nicholas C:

Exactly, and to re-up briefly what I mentioned earlier, because the Guardian Council is such an ultra conservative body, the current head of which is an ultra conservative cleric by the name of Ahmad Jannati, they are naturally going to be biased against a lot of the more moderate, centrists and reform-minded political individuals within Iran.

Fred:

So I'm sorry, I want to get to the current stuff, but this just raises a fascinating question that we might just ask briefly, which is, so how did a guy like Hassan Rouhani get to be president in the first place?

Nicholas C:

Sure. There's a lot to unpack about Hassan Rouhani. First and foremost, a really important point about presidents in Iran generally is that, you don't get very far within the Iranian political space without having the confidence and trust of the Supreme Leader, at least to some extent. No individual has ever risen to the presidency within the Islamic Republic in its over 40-year history now, at this point, without already having held some kind of senior political position.

In the case of Rouhani, he was not only the secretary of the most senior defense and security policy body within Iran, the Supreme National Security Council, but he also had a prominent role in nuclear negotiations. The fact that he was able to become president did reflect at least Khamenei's amenability to consider some kind of economic philosophy more in line with what Rouhani supported. Rouhani very much so advocated for integration into the global economy, really entrenching Iran within international markets to complicate US efforts to isolate Iran politically. This runs a little bit counter, which I'll talk about a little bit later on if we would like, to some of the more hard-lined camps' economic approach, which is a lot more inherently autarkic and protectionist.

Fred:

I think if I recall correctly, Rouhani was the only candidate in his first election who might really have been regarded as moderate, and there was a field of quite a number of other hardliners who split the vote, the hard-line vote amongst each other, and really opened the path to him to win. I sometimes wonder if Khamenei wasn't a bit surprised that Rouhani even won. I wonder if that experience might shape the way that the Guardian Council goes about its business of vetting candidates this time around. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Nicholas C:

That's a great point. The hard-line camp within Iran is notoriously factitious, and this is another problem that they risk having again, this time around. As of right now, the vast majority of the likely and rumored presidential contenders for the 2021 Iranian presidential election come from this principalist camp. Most of them are former

and current IRGC commanders. That's the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps or others very closely tied to this circle. Closely tied to the IRGC, closely tied to Supreme Leader Khamenei and a lot of the more far right elements within the Iranian political space.

I think to answer your question more directly, the Guardian Council is going to be very conscious of this, this time around. They're going to probably decide which hard-lined candidates among, the ones that are interested in the presidency, is most in line with of course, what they, and by extension, Khamenei wants. So they're going to have to pick and choose very carefully. The problem though, is that at this point, there seem to be so many IRGC contenders running, there is a significant likelihood that we may see a military commander enter the Iranian presidency for the first time, at least meaningfully.

Fred:

Okay, let's get into it. Let's talk about who the obvious candidates would seem to be. Take us through the roster and who these guys are and what it might mean for any of them to get in to the presidency.

Nicholas C:

Sure. So as I said, there's three general camps within the Iranian political space, hardliners, moderates, and reformists. I think that the hardliners, right now, based on the momentum that they have seem to have, have the greatest likelihood at securing the presidency. Most of these guys are IRGC commanders to include individuals like Saeed Mohammad, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Parviz Fattah and Hossein Dehghan. Now at the end of the day, of course, each individual has their own idiosyncrasies and there's nuances between all of them, but there's general points we can make about this group of people who seem to have expressed interest in the presidency, to include the fact that, many of them, as I said, are closely tied to the IRGC, Iran's ballistic missile program, as well as the Guard's economic empire. All of these individuals who have, at one point or another, held some senior management role in the IRGC's efforts to completely monopolize broad swaths of the Iranian economy, which is actually one of the inherent structural flaws within the Iranian economy, that has gone a long way in aggravating the population and stoking a lot of the popular unrest that we've seen in Iran within recent years.

I can talk more about many of the other likely policies of these hard-line presidents, but to quickly entertain the idea that we may see a more moderate or reformist president in the next couple of months, I should also mention which officials are most likely to run for this position. There's two that come to mind in particular, Ali Larijani and Mohammad Javad Zarif. I'm calling these two out in particular for two primary reasons. The first is because they are not obscure figures within the Iranian political system. In fact, they are political titans who have a long history of holding some very senior regime positions within the Islamic Republic.

The second reason why I'm calling them out is because they are probably the best the Biden administration can hope for. The reason I say this is because neither is a reformist in the way that some may want, they are actually more moderate or center right individuals, at least relative to the Iranian political context, but they do share, to varying degrees, President Hassan Rouhani's economic philosophy of integration into global markets. These are individuals who will be more willing to try and preserve the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and promote things like international standards related to anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing standards.

These are individuals who will be more similar to Hassan Rouhani at the negotiating table than more of the hard-lined contenders presently are. A lot of the hardliners have historically opposed the JCPOA, whereas these guys have helped build it up. For a little bit more added context, Mohammad Javad Zarif is Rouhani's current foreign affairs minister and Ali Larijani was the parliament speaker for a number of years from 2008 till 2020, and he actually played a large role in passing the JCPOA through the Iranian parliament in a famous 15-minute session.

I'm happy to talk about one other point, which I didn't make earlier, which is a little bit of commentary on Khamenei's most likely long-term outlook at the moment. The reason why I'm calling this out is because over the past couple of weeks, there seems to be this dichotomy that's emerged within the Iranian policy discussion about whether their main priority is to neutralize sanctions versus lifting sanctions. The sentiment that seems to have been made clear by Khamenei to all of his subordinates as of late is that lifting sanctions is nice. They should try to do that if possible, but the true priority is neutralizing sanctions.

I think that this really speaks to really how Khamenei is looking at the problem right now, which is that, of course it's possible to secure some kind of economic relief through some kind of talks with the incoming Biden administration or any US administration for that matter, but I think that, based on his experience over the past four years, he has been thoroughly disenchanted, even more so than he initially was by the prospect of some kind of deal with the US you know, in his case, the JCPOA. I think that he is now extremely skeptical that any kind of agreement is really sustainable in the longterm.

So I think that there's going to be just inherently this constant desire around him to ensure that whenever we see the breakdown of the next agreement, then the next bargain between Iran and the United States, the Iranian economy needs to be prepared and in the best possible position it can in order to neutralize sanctions, to circumvent sanctions, to basically do everything they can to mitigate any kind of real economic pressure. So for this reason, I'd be admittedly quite surprised if Khamenei was actually ultimately to endorse a candidate like Ali Larijani. That doesn't take away from my opinion, that I think that he's a likely contender, but the prospect of him actually winning seems just increasingly low when we consider the possibility that Khamenei is not going to really entertain, very genuinely, some kind of long-term agreement with the United States.

Fred:

So, I want to crystallize a point that is coming out of our discussion that I think is extremely important for American policymakers to understand. If I'm understanding you right, the Iranian discourse, especially as it relates to the presidency and policies, isn't so much about the question of whether to negotiate with the US on the nuclear deal or not, as it is about how the Iranian economy should fundamentally relate to the rest of the world. Those who oppose negotiations are generally proceeding from a view that Iran does not benefit from deep engagement with the global economy, and in fact has benefited in many respects from being isolated and from the sanctions.

Whereas the people we call moderate reformers, like Rouhani and Zarif and Larijani, think that Iran should and must integrate economically and, therefore, because of that, favor negotiations about the nuclear deal. So that the real primary issue that we need to be tracking as we understand what's going on in Iran, is where the presidential candidates, where the president, where the parliament and, ultimately, where the Supreme Leader stand on this fundamental issue of the orientation of the Iranian economy, vis-a-vis the rest of the world economy. Have I captured that reasonably accurately?

Nicholas C:

Precisely. Hardliners generally believe that Iran should rely on its internal capacities and support domestic industries in order to "neutralize sanctions." They believe that relying on Iran's domestic capabilities and through things like illicit trade, they can do enough to basically completely negate the effect that international sanctions have on the Iranian economy. So this is a very different take from the more integrationist approach of individuals like Rouhani, Zarif and Larijani. The important thing to note about all of this is that yes, of course the Iranian president's power is limited within the Islamic Republic, but it's still true that the Iranian president is one of the most key advisers to the Supreme Leader. So this is really going to dictate what kind of voice Khamenei has and who he's listening to when he contemplates how to engage the United States, how to engage Europe and what to do with the JCPOA.

Fred:

Thank you, Nick. So I think just to round off this part of the discussion, it's very important that Americans keep in mind that what seems obvious to us is not obvious in Iran. It seems obvious to Americans and most people take it for granted that, any country under heavy sanctions, such as Iran, would want to get out from under those sanctions and should be willing to make a lot of compromises to do so, but that proposition is very far from being universally held in the Iranian political elite and particularly among the likeliest candidates for president in Iran.

I think that that's a factor that deserves more attention than I think it sometimes gets in our considerations of Iranian policy and its future. Let me go back just a second to the rundown of hardliners that you offered. Can you talk a little bit about whether it matters from the American perspective, which of those guys wins? If it's going to be one of those guys and not one of the moderates or reformers that we would presumably prefer to see?

Nicholas C:

Yes. So as I mentioned before, there are some nuances between these candidates. For example, some of them come from just completely different generations within the IRGC, but one really important point to call out is that some of these guys, in the context of negotiations with the United States, have held extremely prominent roles within the IRGC, to include very senior positions within the components of the Guard involved in their ballistic missile development. A lot of these guys have long histories of supporting this, maintain very adamantly that as, Nick mentioned earlier, the Iranian ballistic missile arsenal is a key component to their defensive structure.

So the thought of negotiations on the ballistic missile front or Iran's regional activities, it's going to be an increasingly tough sell for a lot of these guys who have held such important roles in building this up over the past couple of decades. Some of the individuals I'm calling out, particularly in this context, are people like Hossein Dehghan or Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. Another tangential point, which I think is also really important and worth calling out, is that these guys too, also have very long histories of brutal oppression against the Iranian people throughout their history. People like Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf have supported ruthless crackdowns against popular Iranian protests. So if Ghalibaf becomes president, this will only increasingly enable very brutal oppression against the Iranian people.

Fred:

Okay. So, I'm going to ask you to do something really hard and do your best, and I fully expect you to be wrong, but we should at least offer to handicap this race for our listeners, keeping in mind that we don't even know yet, which of these guys is actually going to run. We don't know which of them the Guardian Council is going to approve and we certainly don't know how the Iranian people are going to vote. But, even so, if you had to handicap who the likely candidates are going to turn out be, the ones who actually run and are allowed to run, that would be great and, if you have any thoughts about amongst them who might win, you can offer them but I think that that's even more tenuous.

Sure. I think the individuals we need to pay the most attention to right now is, as I mentioned firstly, Hossein Dehghan, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the current speaker of parliament, then, likely, Ali Larijani as well. I would call out these three as in my view, being those most likely to run. Ghalibaf and Dehghan can be paired together as, I think, very similar presidents. I think that they would enact and support very similar policies. Larijani being the biggest divergence among those three, because of, generally, his economic approach and positions.

Nicholas C:

I would also call out two other individuals that we have not yet mentioned in the context of this conversation, and that is Saeed Jalili and Ebrahim Raisi. Both of these individuals absolutely fit into the hard-line faction, but unlike the individuals we've previously discussed in this context, they are not IRGC commanders.

Instead, however, they have long held positions supporting a lot of the same things that individuals like Dehghan and Ghalibaf support: brutal pressure against Iranian people, aggressive behavior and adventurism abroad, and a hard line on negotiating on Iran's missiles and external activities. Saeed Jalili would be an interesting president because of his past experience in nuclear negotiations, but I'm inclined to think that he would be a lot more like Ebrahim Raisi, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf or Hossein Dehghan in the context of the JCPOA and other engagements with the West, just because of his very close alignment with Khamenei and the rest of the principlist faction.

Fred:

We could talk more about what it would mean for Zarif to become president, given how closely associated he is with the nuclear deal, except, I believe, that he's announced that he will not be running. Is that correct?

Nicholas C:

That's true. Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean that he won't run, but you are right in acknowledging that, at this time, he has denied that that's a possibility.

Fred:

So assuming that Zarif stands by his announcement that he won't run or, that the Guardian Council would disqualify him if he tried to, which I think is quite possible, the only real moderate figure in here is Ali Larijani, and that would be an interesting race, I think, if he carried that banner against the IRGC commanders that you've discussed, or against Raisi, whom, of course, Rouhani handily defeated in the last presidential election, but who was, nevertheless, among the very, very shortlist of people often being discussed to succeed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, when he dies or hands over a responsibility for his post. I think that as look at the past trends in Iranian presidential elections, the smart money would have to go on a hardliner president this time, don't you think Nick?

Nicholas C:

I do, and for a number of reasons. First and foremost, because so many Iranians at this point are entirely disillusioned with the political process and this really showed in the 2020 parliamentary elections when Iran saw historically low turnout. The problem though, is that the regime, particularly the IRGC, still maintains the capacity to mobilize a lot of their supporters, particularly those from the paramilitary besiege organization, which is a component of the IRGC and, it is this massive state-administered, social, economic and cultural organization, among many other things, that penetrates every aspect of Iranian society.

The IRGC has a very long history of mobilizing these besiege members, these millions as electoral foot soldiers to go out and support their preferred candidate. I think additionally, Khamenei has clearly demonstrated his preference for more hard-line individuals to take senior political offices. That, I think, was clearly indicated during his support for the Guardian Council's mass disqualification of centrist figures in the parliamentary elections.

I think that Khamenei has concluded that Iran does need to increasingly homogenize its domestic political space and, I don't necessarily think he's willing to risk having another individual like President Hassan Rouhani after a lot of the terrible turmoil and unrest that Iran has experienced within the past couple of years. I think this is a very real fear of Khamenei's and this may just further compel him to viciously support and even manipulate the elections in favor of a hard-line contender.

Fred:

I agree with you about that, although it is an odd way of viewing the world to blame the turmoil that has engulfed Iran on Rouhani. Don't you think?

Nicholas C:

Absolutely. A lot of the popular unrest we've seen in Iran over the past couple of years have been entirely fueled by a lot of the policies that are actually most supported by these hard-line contenders. When mass demonstrations and protests broke out at the end of 2017 and stretched into early 2018, as reflected in a lot of the protesters' chants, they were opposing things like Iranian political involvement in Lebanon, or Palestine, and the squandering of resources on things like foreign adventurism.

Fred:

So what you're describing is a situation in which it's possible that the Supreme Leader will work to ban moderates, or see to it that moderates lose, on the theory that, somehow, having a moderate president contributed to the unrest and, thereby will empower the hardliners, whose policies actually were the things that drove most of the unrest, which would suggest that, if a hardliner becomes president again, we're likely to see more unrest and, furthermore, we're likely to see more vicious crackdown on that unrest. Is that fair?

Nicholas C:

Exactly. I think one of the key problems here is just a fundamental misconception of what is causing the popular unrest in Iran these days. Khamenei views a lot of this through the lens of what he describes as a "soft war" that he believes Iran is fighting against the United States. To define this term, it's basically what the regime uses to describe the ideological and cultural conflict that they believe the West is waging against the Iranian regime. They believe that things like sanctions or information operations are used to increasingly foment internal opposition to the Islamic Republic and, by extension, foment things like rockets.

So, Khamenei is not really inclined to look inwardly and actually begin to diagnose a lot of the problems, a lot of the structural flaws in the economy that people or groups like the IRGC have facilitated, and instead blame foreign actors and provocateurs. So long as Khamenei is unwilling to fundamentally change some of the core characteristics of how the Islamic Republic is run, we are going to continue to see a lot of internal opposition and, yeah, at the end of the day, more brutal crackdowns, greater authoritarianism, something that all of these hardliners have a penchant for.

Fred:

That's a depressing prospect for Iranian people, for people who care about human rights, and for the US as well, and our interests in the region. I think one of the things that's most distressing here is that, it's really not clear to me that the US is seeing Iran and the situation in anything like the way that Iran or, at least its regime, the Supreme Leader, is seeing Iran and the situation. I think the prospect of miscommunication and talking past one another seems to me to be very high in this circumstance, but I think we can identify some things we should take away from certain candidates being allowed to run or not allowed to run, and the implications of some of these guys winning, for policies that the US cares about. I believe that Dehghan is called the father of the Iranian missile program. Is that correct, Nick?

Nicholas C:

That is correct. He has a long history of supporting Iran's missile development. So this is going to be a personal issue, something that he's really deeply invested in, when he considers the prospects of negotiations on this very thing with the incoming Biden team.

Fred:

So on the one hand, if we see Dehghan choose not to run or be disqualified, we might retain a little bit of potentially cautious optimism that the regime might be willing to, at least, have discussions with us about the missile program, but if Dehghan is a leading candidate and, even more, if he actually becomes president, that would seem

a pretty clear statement that that's just not going to happen and that the regime is just turning away from that kind of discussion entirely.

On the other hand, if we saw Ali Larijani become a prominent candidate and, if he won, that would probably tell us something about the Supreme Leader's willingness to go another round with the kind of economic approach that Rouhani has been pursuing, which in turn would seem to indicate, at least, a greater willingness on the part of the Supreme Leader to be serious about negotiations with the Biden team as he was about negotiations with the Obama team.

The other candidates probably tell us a little bit less about the specific issue, I think, except in the general sense that you've already identified, that the Guard commanders and hardliners are probably going to argue against making meaningful concessions to get sanctions lifted and some of them might even argue against the desirability of having sanctions lifted at all. The more moderate candidates might go the other way, which leaves us with the last issue, which I'll just discuss again briefly, since Nick Harris had brought it up at the beginning, which is how important is it even, that who is the Iranian president, considering how complete is the Supreme Leader's control over everything that happens honestly, in the regime, but particularly over this kind of issue?

I think it matters in the way that Nick Harris had identified. The president is *ex officio*, a member of the Supreme National Security Council. He has a right to give his opinion and the Supreme Leader will listen to it. If you have a president who is strongly advocating, as Rouhani was, for a nuclear agreement, including making sacrifices in order to pursue an economic approach, that might sway to Supreme Leader more in that direction. If you have an Iranian president strongly making the case in the other direction, it could conceivably sway the Supreme Leader in that way.

So, the president doesn't have control over this issue, but he has a voice and we've seen in the past that that voice can matter. Beyond that, I think there will be a question that will emerge as to who controls the actual negotiations, because that hasn't been a fixed thing in Iran. When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was president, the Supreme Leader widely lost confidence in him, pretty quickly, and took the nuclear portfolio away from him and took it himself and had it run out of the Supreme National Security Council. He apparently trusted Rouhani more and he allowed Rouhani to retain the portfolio and, specifically, the negotiations.

I think it will be very interesting to see, therefore, not only who is the next president, but also where the portfolio for negotiations rests, and whether the Supreme Leader allows that portfolio to rest with the president or whether he takes it back to the Supreme National Security Council. If he allows the portfolio to stay with the president, then we need to consider just one other factor, I think, which is that if the president is responsible for negotiations, his ability to make deals happen or make them not happen, within parameters set by the Supreme Leader, of course, is not insignificant.

The person who's actually doing the negotiation has some ability to offer more flexibility than the Supreme Leader might want, and then hope to persuade the Supreme Leader to accept it, which is, in fact, I think largely what Rouhani did. Or, alternatively, to make himself very difficult and make the negotiations stall or fail or otherwise just make it very hard going if he wants to drag his heels when the Supreme Leader wants to make a deal.

If the president does either of those things overtly enough, of course the Supreme Leader can take the negotiations away from him, but I think we shouldn't dismiss the significance that the president would have in actually being the negotiator, if the Supreme Leader allows him to have control over the negotiations from the standpoint of being able to influence whether we get to a deal or not, and in what kind of timeframe and on what terms again, within limits set by the Supreme Leader, but not necessarily fully in accord always with exactly what the

Supreme Leader would like.

So I think this is a very important issue, and I think it's going to matter to the US who becomes president in Iran, and we'll be able to read a few more tea leaves about what the Supreme Leader intends and what Tehran's policies are likely to be, from the process actually, and from the outcome of this election. But at the end of the day, it is the Supreme Leader who is Supreme, and he will make the decisions about whether Iran will pursue an agreement, whether it will accept an agreement and whether it will continue its nuclear program, missile program, et cetera, or change.

We have entered a period in which it seems actually eminent this time, it's been on and off eminent for many, many years, that Khamenei will either die or be incapacitated, and the issue of who will become Iranian's third Supreme leader will become dominant, and that will be an epochal moment in the history of the Islamic Republic, as Khamenei has been Supreme Leader of Iran for three decades. And any transition of that magnitude is a major thing and will be major for Iran and the region and for us, and that is the topic that we will explore in our next session. Thank you both.

Nicholas C:

Thank you, Fred.

Nick H:

Thank you very much, Fred.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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