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ROUHANI AND THE NEW GAME IN IRAN

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Iran has suffered the most serious terrorist attack in recent years. 17 people were killed and 50 others were wounded in two simultaneous attacks on the parliament and Khomeini's mausoleum this June. It was not an impromptu action. The chosen sites express the intention of the attackers to target the collective Iranian imaginary. They have created a feeling of vulnerability that was almost non-existent in the country before the attacks. Iran is no longer the oasis of security that the Revolutionary Guard had so actively been advertising. The attacks revealed the breaches in the Iranian wall.

In a region prone to conspiracy theories, the attacks occurred within hours of the start of the diplomatic siege against Qatar and a few days after the Iranian press echoed several incendiary statements of the Saudi government about Iran. The country had also just held a presidential election in which the candidate supported by the Supreme Leader was defeated by Hassan Rouhani, the moderate candidate supported by the reformers, a bet for a progressive opening rather than the hard-line.

The attacks seem clearly designed to destabilize the country from within. In a Middle East that faces frequent upheavals, Iran enjoyed a seeming calm. From a religion perspective, Iran is very homogeneous with more than a 90 percent of Shiite population. Persians are the predominant ethnic group demographically, historically and culturally. However, they account only for about 60 percent of the population. The peripheral regions are inhabited, among others, by Turkmen, Baluchs, Kurds and Arabs. In recent months there have been several incidents involving Kurdish people on the Northwest border and with Sunni militant groups in Sistan-Baluchistan province on the Southeast border. Many of these incidents have left casualties, although they have not been clearly explained by the Iranian authorities. Unlike these border incidents, the self-proclaimed Islamic State or ISIS has immediately claimed the attacks in Tehran. Yet the Iranian Intelligence Ministry promptly reported that the attackers were Iranian Kurds who had returned from fighting in Iraq and Syria.

The fact that the attackers are not foreigners has important implications for the country's delicate power balance. The struggle between the current president and the Revolutionary Guard to draw the course of Iran's foreign policy will be seriously affected by these attacks. Rouhani aims to tone down Iran's foreign policy

and use diplomacy to soften Iran's image abroad. However, the Revolutionary Guard - or Sepah - intends to be more offensive in Syria and Iraq and extend its influence within Iran. Although the main objective of this institution created by Khomeini in 1979 is "the protection of the Islamic system and the prevention of any foreign interference in the system", in practice it has an independent agenda focused on the legitimation of its existence through an active foreign policy and strong control within the borders of the country.

In this struggle to impose the narrative of the new foreign policy, the strength of President Rouhani rests on the legitimacy conferred by the polls - something that Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard lack. But it should not be forgotten that in the balance of interests encountered between the three pillars of the state in Iran - the President, the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guard, alliances and deals are the key to one vision imposing on others. The attack comes at the worst moment for Rouhani, who has been publicly faced by Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, for disagreements over the Iranian nuclear program. Khamenei has increased the regularity of his speeches and has not hesitated to use his sharp dialectic to harshly criticize Rouhani and his administration.

The great success achieved by the negotiating team led by Javad Sharif has been a double-edged sword in Iran. On the one hand, it opens the country again after a decade of isolation from the international community. But on the other hand, it means the end of the monopolies for many companies owned by parastatal agencies and the Revolutionary Guard -Khamenei's great ally in foreign policy and the internal control of the revolution. The economic openness and reforms that the government has in mind would therefore mean a serious weakening of the Sepah's financial muscle, something that they do not seem willing to accept.

The day after the bombings forty people were arrested and right afterwards, leaders of the Revolutionary Guard positioned themselves as the main source of information on the development of the events. The Sepah had not only made a move, but also overshadowed the government, while Khamenei opted for keeping a low profile. Thus, the Sepah has been reaffirmed as the leader of the response against ISIS, which has as well contributed to weakening the role of the army in this unwritten war between the two branches of the Armed Forces of Iran. The Sepah will not hesitate to attack the Kurdish or Baluch minority areas under the pretext of eliminating the ISIS' tentacles within Iran - in areas which mostly voted for Rouhani. An intervention by the Revolutionary Guard could lead to sectarian clashes if these regions feel abandoned by the government.

Rouhani has a complicated term ahead. The economic improvement resulting from the Joint and Comprehensive Action Plan - official name of the nuclear agreement - has not reached ordinary citizens. The major structural reforms are therefore felt to be more necessary than ever. Rouhani will have to face major lobby groups inside and outside the country that will try to block any substantial change in Iran's economic framework. And, at the same time, it must maneuver to avoid that fact that the response to these attacks does not lead to a sectarian conflict within the country. Rouhani's affable image, that characterizes him will be more necessary than ever in the coming months to face a number of challenges already outlined on the horizon. This administration has the key to launching the country back into the 21st century. However, the road is full of obstacles. It all depends on his ability to get around them.