

# CIDOB'S Conversations with ...



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## SEYED HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN

Former Head of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran (1997-2005) and Former Spokesman of the Iranian Nuclear Negotiation Team (2003-2005).

### One plus One Equals One plus One

Oleguer Sarsanedas

Ambassador Mousavian's tone is soft, as befits a senior negotiator with many years of experience in both government and diplomacy, and he sports a friendly smile. He believes rationality and common sense should preside over international relations, although he is—alas—well aware that this is not as usual as it ought to be, particularly in the case of the West's relations with Iran. The firmness in his eyes reveals a sharp, discerning mind. His stands are clear and assertive. His current avatar is research scholar (since 2009) at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.

It is a known fact that communication between the West and Iran is clouded by the nuclear issue and international sanctions. The nuclear issue has been turned into a zero-sum game. Is it due to the US lack of autonomy (from Israel) in foreign policy matters—particularly regarding Iran? Is it the lack of a comprehensive strategy for *rapprochement* with Iran since the 1979 revolution—while successive US administrations have aimed at regime change? Is it simply a case of geostrategic short-sightedness? Or is it a lack of political will—of good will, in fact? Mousavian believes all of these factors are at play here, “plus misunderstandings, plus miscalculations, plus misinterpretations, and plus misperceptions”.

He recalls the situation in the aftermath of the revolution, when the Arabs, the West and Russia all supported Saddam Hussein's aggression toward Iran: “They put up all the pressure (sanctions, covert operations and WMDs) to bring about regime change and break up the country. One million Iranians were either killed or injured in a war that lasted eight years (1980-1988). There were major miscalculations: Saddam achieved none of his aims (or his backers') and Iran, after the war, had grown into a major regional power.”

Are the current international sanctions backfiring? Mousavian says that if the goal of the sanctions is to hurt ordinary Iranians, then, in combination with economic mismanagement by the government, they have been successful. On the other hand, if such punitive measures are aimed at changing Iran's nuclear stance or policy—sanctions have failed miserably. As a case in point, prior to the sanctions, Iran had 1,200 centrifuges, was enriching at 3.5% and had a few kilograms of enriched uranium. Today, it has approximately 12,000 centrifuges, is enriching at 20% and amassed 8,000kg of enriched uranium stockpile. "The same phenomenon happened during the Iraq-Iran war: before the war, Iran did not produce a single bullet; in the aftermath of the war, Iran had built an expansive defense industry, achieving self-sufficiency in conventional weapons and even launching a satellite." To which he adds, cunningly: "The Chinese are the biggest beneficiaries of the Western sanction policy. They now enjoy the West's share of the Iranian market."

Mousavian's point is this: sanctions have not worked in the past, even in the case of a small country such as Cuba, and will certainly not succeed with Iran—a regional powerhouse, with vast human and natural resources, rooted in a history spanning thousands of years. Such countries will opt to advance toward self-sufficiency rather than give in to pressures. "Now Iran is self-sufficient in almost anything", he explains, "so, one (radical) school of thought is saying: let's pray to God every day to keep the sanctions! Why? Because we have one thing left to do: to make Iran's economy independent from oil—then, we could be like Germany, or Japan." Mousavian believes that if sanctions are lifted, Iran would side with the West. But if sanctions stay, "Iran will turn to the East."

Mousavian is adamant that the nuclear dilemma has nothing to do with the nuclear bomb—it has to do with the legitimate rights of Iran to enrichment under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Iran has signed all the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) conventions, including the NPT, which entail rights and obligations for all signatories. The West, however, "has chosen (contravening international law) to carry out a 'bully policy' by which Iran should have no right at all. This is a clear discrimination against a proud nation with a grand history and a rich culture." To Iran, the nuclear issue is a symbol: "National pride, cultural heritage and emotional factors are at play here. So, threats, accusations, humiliations are totally counterproductive. What Iran is demanding is respect—as a matter of dignity."

The best way to remove distrust between Iran and the West, Mousavian suggests, would be to cooperate on areas of common ground: "Cooperation on issues of common interest creates trust, and trust helps to solve disputes." To him, the nuclear dispute should not overshadow all other aspects: "Iran is much more than just this. Shouldn't both sides focus on other issues? Time has come to widen the scope." This, he explains, has been Iranian standard policy since the 1990s but the West, according to him, has been refusing repeatedly and in the end has reduced all issues to one—a dead end. "The nuclear issue is an invented issue", asserts Mousavian, "because Iran does not want the bomb."

Even though Israeli assessments have said ("sixteen times, now") that Iran had the bomb in the making, Mousavian offers several good reasons why Iran does not want it. Among them: religious obligations against nuclear weapons (based on the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's *fatwa*, the use of nuclear weapons and all other types of Weapons of Mass Destruction is forbidden or *haram*); the possession of nuclear weapons would provide only a short-term regional advantage (it would trigger a regional nuclear arms race, bringing Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia into the fold sooner or later); it would be an obstacle in the long-term for Iran's access to technological cooperation with developed countries (nobody wants to see Iran come under the kind of extreme international isolation levied

against North Korea); it would make no rational sense for Iran to use nuclear weapons, once acquired, against the US and Israel (who possess thousands and hundreds of nuclear weapons respectively), which would result in Iran's total annihilation.

Afghanistan and Syria could provide an opportunity for communication between the West and Iran, the sort of non-competitive common ground necessary to start talking and cooperating. "Iran and the US are supporting the same government in Afghanistan and Iraq –a government that is being opposed by everyone else in the region. This is clear evidence that common interests do exist." In fact, there are quite a few more: energy security, stemming organized crime and drug trafficking, refugees, regional stability, countering terrorism (Hezbollah, admittedly, is a matter of dispute, but "the real problem of the region is Talibanism"). And Iranians, reminds Mousavian, know the region very well.

He agrees that dialogue is possible if participants decide to talk with one another, rather than at each other –that is, if both buy into the idea of genuine engagement ("In communication, you have to reflect on the *why* first, so as to get to the *how*"). But, first, both sides should learn a few things about each other and the West, in particular, should have a closer understanding of the Iranian culture.

The two key concepts to grasp here are *Aberu* (saving face) and *Maslahat* (interest). By Iranian cultural standards, for instance, the solution to the nuclear issue must be face-saving for both sides. "If the West respects the rights of Iran under the NPT, this is *Aberu*: if Iran is not discriminated against, Iran saves face. Then, *Maslahat* can come into play: Iran would agree to almost anything on transparency (because Iran does not want the bomb), it would accept, for example, to cap enrichment at 5% --even though, under NPT rules it has a right to enrich up to 100% (the EU's current level is 96% and UK 97.3%). That is, Iran would be ready to accept measures that go beyond its obligation under international norms." And he adds: "That would be face-saving for the West too. There is no solution without face-saving."

Mousavian has repeatedly said that the possibility of a diplomatic resolution is still high, but he has also advised Washington that it needs to return to "Nixonian realism". By this he means *realpolitik*, not table tennis: "If the objective is regime change through a nuclear showdown, then it is (again) a huge mistake: it will not happen, there will be no solution." He points out that the Russians concluded, back in 2011, that the US and the West did not want a peaceful solution. "In this case", he says, "we would go toward confrontation."

What steps can the Europeans take? Play a role and say something. "When Europe was playing a role, we had no sanctions, no UN Security Council resolutions, and Iran was cooperating at the maximum level of transparency."

At this point, Ambassador Mousavian grabs a sheet of paper. "This is the equation that encapsulates the situation", he says, as he writes this down:  $1 + 1 = 1 + 1$ . He then looks up: "Rights *plus* lifting sanctions to one side, transparency *plus* no break-out capability to the other" –meaning: if Iran's rights are respected and sanctions waved, Iran would agree to maximum transparency under international rules (even to more intrusive inspections by signing the Additional Protocol) and unheard-of limits (to cap enrichment at 5% and limit its stockpile). He looks at his drawing and smiles: "One plus one, equals, one plus one: here you have the title of your piece!"