

# Rouhani's latest statements infer Iran's position unlikely to change

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Following his return from New York, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani briefed the press on key takeaways from the 74th UN General Assembly (UNGA). The points he raised indicate that diplomatic efforts failed to bear fruit and that Iran maintains the expectation that the other side to bring solutions to the table.

The Iranian narrative:

The strategy of "maximum pressure" employed by the US has been defeated and has left the US administration in a quagmire it desires to exit as soon as possible.

Rouhani's presence at the UNGA circumvented a "conspiracy" designed to close the road to diplomacy.

Iran is stronger now than it was at this point last year.

The defeat of "maximum pressure" and the US quagmire

It was anticipated that, short of a US retaliation against Iran, the latest events in the region (downing of the US drone, mining of tankers, drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities, etc...) would reinforce Tehran's position by raising the stakes and placing those in favour of "maximum pressure" in a difficult dilemma: to change course on Iran or face an all-out war.

Considering Washington's appetite for war has been confounded and Iran's economic indicators are slowly improving while new sanctions are facing diminishing returns, it is not in Tehran's interest to change or soften its course and offer the US a way out of its current dilemma. Rather, Iran will continue collecting leverage points, which does not bode well for diplomacy.

"Conspiracy" to close the road to diplomacy circumvented

At home, Rouhani has justified his efforts to keep Iran within the JCPOA by framing diplomacy as the

main channel of resistance against those holding “anti-Iran” positions. Instead of portraying the entire US administration as nefarious – a common line that is repeated by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – Rouhani has identified specific groups, namely, “neoconservatives, Israel and lobbyists,” as holding an anti-Iran agenda which heavily influences President Donald Trump’s foreign policy.

In his latest statement, Rouhani claimed to have circumvented the latest “conspiracy” from the “anti-Iran” side at the UNGA, in part thanks to his Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE). Following the September 14 strikes on Abqaiq and Khurais, Iran said it was falsely accused of perpetrating the attacks by not only Saudi Arabia and the US, but also France, Germany and the UK in a later statement. Rouhani stated that HOPE’s offer of discussions between countries bordering the Persian Gulf helped demonstrate that, contrary to accusations, Iran was not seeking to escalate tensions and that it was subject to a conspiracy aimed at closing the road to diplomacy.

Iran is stronger now than it was at this point last year

It is clear that the high stakes surrounding security in the region led leaders of the E3 (Emmanuel Macron, Boris Johnson, Angela Merkel) to focus their attentions on persuading their Iranian counterpart to enter negotiations with Trump. Nonetheless, Rouhani has interpreted his delegation’s popularity as a sign that Tehran’s leverage has greatly increased since last year. He also claimed that E3 leaders told him individually that Iran’s position and power had notably improved over time. The country’s defence minister’s claims that the strategy of “maximum pressure” has evolved into a strategy of “maximum mendacity,” is a good indicator of how the Iranian side has misconstrued the urgency of the situation for having the upper hand.

Shortly after returning from New York, Rouhani travelled to Armenia’s capital Yerevan to attend a summit of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which Iran is set to join by the end of October with a free trade agreement. Although Iran’s accession to the EEU was on the table before the US’s withdrawal from the JCPOA, it helps Iranian officials’ promote the rhetoric of Iran as not an isolated player on the world stage, and as a nation striving to create new partnerships to shield itself from western pressure. If the agreement goes forward, it will be the first time the Islamic Republic has joined an economic bloc in its history. With Iran’s accession, the EEU will represent a market of 260m consumers. It will boost the export of 500 Iranian goods without tariffs and increase the republic’s bilateral trade with Russia, a country with which it is setting up a payment system not backed by SWIFT. For the last six months Iran’s economy has shown signs of recovery, albeit slow, which Rouhani was quick to highlight: the rial has regained 40% of its value over the past year and the

inflation rate is finally decreasing.