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DEATH TO AMERICA, DEAL WITH AMERICA: IRAN'S KHAMENEI

By Arthur MacMillan

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's distrust of the United States loomed over nuclear talks for years but Iran's supreme leader ultimately did a deal because it served the nation's interests. Faced with conflicting pressures over a US-led agreement-needed to end crippling Western sanctions but deeply at odds with Iran's revolutionary rhetoric-he kept everyone guessing whether diplomacy would ever yield results. Hardliners in Tehran, brought up on chants of "Death to America", have repeatedly voiced opposition to the quest for a deal with a power derided as the "great Satan" ever since the Islamic revolution of 1979.

But to the millions of Iranians born since the overthrow of the US-backed shah, the international isolation and fear of war borne of the 13-year nuclear standoff have stalked their lives. Khamenei heard both audiences but the overriding factor that led him to the deal announced in Vienna on Tuesday, was the need to end the sanctions that have pulverized Iran's economy, analysts say.

"It is not a case of the leader trusting the United States or the other countries in the negotiations, but he wanted to solve this problem," said Amir Mohebbian, a political strategist close to Iran's leadership. "This nuclear deal makes the management of Iran easier for future leaders. He has shown that he leads rationally and pragmatically and the deal may also manage to change the face of the country." In numerous speeches Khamenei appeared ambiguous about the nuclear talks, consistently talking down chances of a deal but at the same time praising Iran's negotiators as trustworthy and brave. Whether as a

negotiating tactic or as an effort to assuage hardliners, he maintained the balancing act.

Pragmatism trumps rhetoric

But pragmatism is what Iranian officials say guides Khamenei, supreme leader since 1989 and soon to turn 76. In that regard, he is following in the footsteps of his predecessor, the Islamic republic's late founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who in 1988 reluctantly ended an eight-year war with now executed dictator Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Khomeini described the acceptance of a UN ceasefire as "worse than drinking poison", but Iran's economy flourished afterwards.

The current government hopes the same will happen after the nuclear deal. Rather than representing submission to the West, the agreement is likely to consolidate Khamenei's rule, according to Davoud Hermidas Bavand, a veteran political analyst at Tehran University. And whatever the evident contradictions of a pact with the "the great Satan", the core of Iran's nuclear program has been preserved.

The domestic imperative to end the deadlock was ultimately more important, Bavand said. "Ordinary Iranians felt involved in the negotiations and the leadership recognized that," he said. "Economic sanctions had a huge impact on the population, more than on the regime." The accord may also allow Khamenei to claim victory over Iran's regional foes, who accuse Tehran of malign military intent and a regional power grab. "It probably amounts to a marginal win over Israel, Saudi Arabia and even Turkey," said Bavand, describing the nuclear deal as a step forward for a war-ravaged Middle East. "In coming years it may well be seen as the measure that reduced regional tensions."

A new diplomacy?

The nuclear talks have signaled Iran's determination to escape the pariah status it endured under Rouhani's hardline predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Rouhani's eloquent foreign minister, the smiling, US-educated Mohammad Javad Zarif, personified the change in tone as head of Iran's negotiating team. Zarif said an accord could lead to cooperation between Iran and the West against Sunni Muslim extremists of the Islamic State group, who from their base in Iraq and Syria have launched attacks against both Shiite and Western targets.

But ultimately, it was Khamenei who made a nuclear deal possible. As supreme leader he has the final word on all matters of state. By approving secret talks with Washington in 2012 that led to formal negotiations with the P5+1 group-Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States plus Germany-he kickstarted a previously stalled diplomatic process. The lessons of the Iran-Iraq war were a major influence, said Dr Siavush Randjbar-Daemi, a lecturer in Iranian history at the University of Manchester.

Not only are some of the same top officials involved-Khamenei was then president, Rouhani was in charge of Air Command and Zarif worked on the UN ceasefire resolution-but the country was under pressure and a solution, however difficult, was needed. "The deal might not be the most heartfelt decision, but it is the most expedient one, even if that meant negotiating directly with the United States, despite all the mutual mistrust and suspicion," said Randjbar-Daemi. "Iran has offered concessions but it has also obtained key benefits, namely full acceptance of a domestic nuclear program, sanctions relief and an international role and position far less isolated than in 1988-89," he added. —AFP

JOHN AND JAVAD, THE ODD COUPLE WHO STRUCK THE IRAN DEAL

By Jo Biddle

At first glance, a loyal supporter of Iran's Islamic revolution and a Democratic ex-senator have little in common. Yet against the odds, John Kerry and Mohammad Javad Zarif have blazed their way into history. The tall, lanky American secretary of state, in his expensive tailored suits towers over his shorter, stouter Iranian counterpart, Zarif, in his traditional collarless shirts when they gather for choreographed pictures. But over months of risky, roller-coaster negotiations to strike an unprecedented nuclear non-proliferation agreement, they have both proved to be steely and at times wily rivals. Even Kerry's broken leg has failed to slow him down. They are on first name terms, calling each other John and Javad.

And while occasionally they share a joke, the relationship remains business-like, though tinged with obvious respect. That's perhaps no surprise, given their countries have not had diplomatic ties for more than three decades, and remain at odds over a slew of weighty issues, including Tehran's alleged support for Middle East terror groups. But it seems John and Javad were the right men for the right season, brought together as the world sought to end rising concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions. Speaking after yesterday's announcement of the deal, Kerry described his Iranian counterpart as "a tough capable negotiator, patriot, a man who fought every inch of the way for things he believes".

'We laughed and we smiled'

"We were both able to approach these negotiations with mutual respect, even when there were times of heated discussion. And he would agree with me-at the end of every meeting we laughed and we smiled and we had the conviction that we would come back and continue to process," Kerry said. Already there has been talk of a possible Nobel peace prize nomination. Yesterday's accord to curb Iran's nuclear program will only increase such speculation. Zarif, 55, was appointed foreign minister by President Hassan Rouhani in September 2013, and was quickly tasked with resuming the nuclear talks with a clear mandate to end the crippling sanctions against his country. A fluent English speaker with a PhD in international law from the University of Denver, he is a veteran loyalist of the

Islamic revolution that toppled the shah in 1979.

At the start of the talks it was Zarif who had the distinctive advantage, having already spent 20 years as a diplomat at the United Nations, where he was also Iran's ambassador from 2002-2007.

American officials on the other hand had little contact with Iranian counterparts since ties were snapped, although as a senator Kerry, 71, was part of secret US talks in Oman in 2012 to explore the possibility of reopening talks. Describing Zarif as "brilliant", Iran expert Suzanne Maloney said "he has the ability to sell policies that are fundamentally problematic from the American point of view, in a way that comes off as completely persuasive and appealing."

"It's a misunderstanding to believe that he is somehow more American than he is Iranian," the Brookings Institution expert cautioned. "He's very much a creature of the Islamic republic, and it's not accidental that he's managed to gain a very high-level position at a crucial time." But Zarif's long stint in the US earned him the hostility of the ultraconservative camps and he was sacked by incoming hardline president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. After six years in academia, Rouhani brought him back to the political fore, offering the promise of rehabilitation.

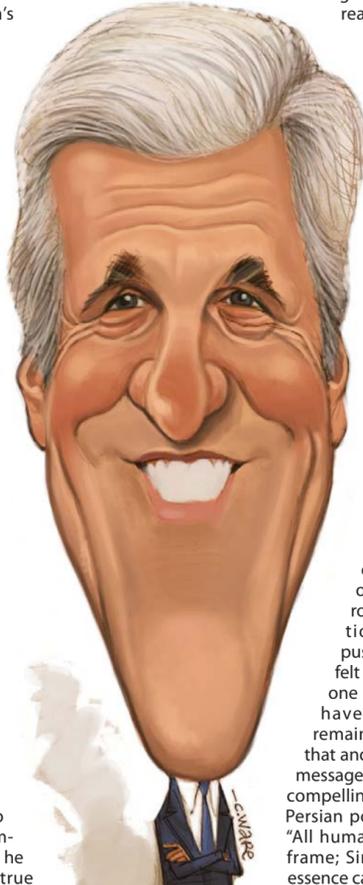
Deeply religious

Deeply religious, he was known to interrupt the negotiations to complete his daily prayers. After which he returned, saying "I fear only one true

power." Despite his faith, Zarif has come under fire from hardliners who suspect him of making too many concessions to the West. Yet, after marathon all-night sessions in Lausanne in April reached a framework accord, Zarif received a hero's welcome in Tehran.

For Kerry, a practicing Catholic, sealing the deal to curb Iran's nuclear program after almost two years of talks is also a legacy-making victory, halfway through his tenure as America's top diplomat. It has even greater resonance for the former Massachusetts senator and failed 2004 US presidential candidate after his quixotic bid to strike a long-elusive Middle East peace deal spectacularly collapsed last year. Zarif and Kerry first met at the start of the talks at the United Nations in September 2013, when the Iranian diplomat surprised everyone with the huge smile which never seemed to leave his face.

In the months since, he has gained a reputation for being charming and articulate. Yet, officials say in the negotiating room he has at times grown emotional and even angry, when pushed too hard on something he felt he could not deliver. Zarif is also one of only a few Iranian officials to have a Twitter account, which remains banned in Iran. He has used that and YouTube effectively to push his message to the US. His profile includes a compelling quote from the 13th century Persian poet, Saadi, which reads in part: "All human beings are members of one frame; Since all, at first, from the same essence came." —AFP



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TIMELINE OF IRAN'S 13-YEAR STANDOFF

World powers yesterday reached a historic deal curbing Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief after an 18-day negotiation marathon in Vienna. The accord seeks to end fears dating back 13 years that the Islamic Republic may try to build nuclear weapons, an aim it has always denied. Here is a summary of the main developments during the long standoff.

2002-2004: Undeclared sites

In August 2002, an exiled Iranian opposition group reveals the existence of undeclared nuclear facilities. Iran invites the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to carry out inspections and says its activities are peaceful. In 2003, Iran agrees with Britain, Germany and France to suspend suspect activities but the following year goes back on the pledge. In 2004, the IAEA says it found no evidence of a secret weapons drive but cannot rule out undeclared materials. In Paris talks, Iran again agrees to suspend certain activities.

2005-2008: Escalation and enrichment

In August 2005, under hardline president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Tehran produces uranium gas, the precursor to enrichment for providing the core material for a bomb. European nations break off negotiations. In 2006, Iran breaks IAEA seals on its Natanz enrichment facility and begins enrichment. The IAEA refers Iran to the UN Security Council, which in July passes the first of six resolutions. In August, Ahmadinejad inaugurates a heavy water plant at Arak, raising fears Iran might be seeking weapons-grade plutonium. December's second UN Security Council resolution comes with sanctions attached. The US and EU follow suit. By November 2007, Iran says it has at least 3,000 centrifuges for enrichment, which in theory would allow it to produce enough enriched uranium for a nuclear bomb in less than a year. Today it has nearly 20,000, of which half are active. In December 2007, a US National Intelligence Estimate report says "with high confidence" that in 2003 Iran halted efforts to develop nuclear weapons, but "at a minimum" is keeping open an option to resume.

2009-2012: Advances and allegations

In September 2009, US, French and British leaders announce Iran is constructing an undeclared enrichment site at Fordo, built into a mountain near Qom. In October, Iran agrees to swap low-enriched uranium for reactor fuel. But the deal unravels and in February 2010 Iran begins enriching uranium to close to bomb-grade-for nuclear medicine, it says. Another fuel swap plan, this time involving Brazil and Turkey, falls apart. In 2011, the Russian-completed Bushehr power reactor-first begun by Germany's Siemens-begins operating. In November 2011, an IAEA report, collating "broadly credible" intelligence, says that at least until 2003 Iran "carried out activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device". The following month the US Congress passes legislation sanctioning lenders who deal with Iran's central bank. In January the EU bans all member states from importing Iranian oil. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose country is widely assumed to have nuclear weapons, brandishes a diagram of a bomb at the UN General Assembly, calling for a "clear red line" to be drawn under Iran's program.

2013-2015: 'Serious' talks

Newly-elected Iranian President Hassan Rouhani vows in 2013 he is ready for "serious" negotiations. He and US President Barack Obama hold an unprecedented phone conversation. In November an interim deal is agreed freezing some of Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for minor sanctions relief. Two deadlines-July and November 2014—to agree a final deal are missed. In April 2015, Iran and major powers agree in Lausanne, Switzerland the main outlines of a final deal. In late June talks begin in Vienna seeking to finalise the accord, but several deadlines are missed over 18 tortuous days of talks. EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif announce on July 14 the conclusion of a deal, describing it as "historic" and a "sign of hope" for the entire world. —AFP