

MORE SIGNS IRAN MAY WANT NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

When Hassan Rouhani scored such a decisive and surprising victory in Iran's elections, many took this as a sign that the hard-liner positions of Amadinejad were ending and that a new, more moderate position for the country would emerge. Iran-watching is of course made difficult by the complex relationship between the civilian and religious sides of the government, but additional signs are now emerging both that Rouhani is indeed maneuvering toward a friendlier negotiation stance and even that some of the moves toward moderation began before the election was held and are therefore not just moves by Rouhani.

In today's New York Times, we see further support for the suggestion that came out earlier in the week that Iran is likely to name new Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif as the chief negotiator in talks regarding Iran's nuclear technology:

Mr. Rouhani's choice for foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, was confirmed by Parliament last week. The signals that Mr. Zarif would lead the nuclear negotiations were conveyed on Tuesday at a regular weekly news conference in Tehran by the Foreign Ministry spokesman, which was broadcast by Iran's Press TV Web site.

"Over the past 10 to 12 years, the negotiator has been the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. This may change," said the spokesman, Abbas Araqchi. "Rouhani may decide to appoint somebody else. Maybe the foreign minister, or anyone else that he deems fit."

For the spokesman to even make such a

speculative statement suggested that Mr. Rouhani had already decided that his foreign minister would be doing the negotiating henceforth and that Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final word on the nuclear issue, had agreed, despite his own deep mistrust of the West.

There has been some minor push-back on the speculation about Zarif, but this appears to be aimed more at the fact that an official announcement has not yet been made than the idea of Zarif taking the lead in negotiations:

In similar remarks on Tuesday, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Seyed Abbas Araqchi also rejected the AP report which alleged that Zarif would be leading the negotiations with the G5+1, saying, "No decision has yet been adopted in this regard."

Araqchi said the foreign ministry and other related bodies are "waiting for President Rouhani to choose the country's chief negotiator", and added, "Whenever he specifies the negotiating chief and team, the next step will be specifying the time of the negotiations."

After getting that "denial" out of the way, however, the article goes on to report on discussions already held between Zarif and the chief EU negotiator Catherine Ashton, but with Ashton identified as EU's "foreign policy chief", so that the conversation is merely foreign minister to foreign minister (emphasis added):

Also today, Zarif noted his phone talk with EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton earlier this week, and said, "Mrs Ashton expressed willingness to enter the nuclear discussions and we stressed

that achieving a solution is no [sic] difficult.”

Following the phone conversation on Monday, Zarif underlined Tehran’s readiness to resume talks with the G5+1 in a bid to reach a solution to the nuclear standoff between the two sides.

“Mrs. Ashton contacted me and expressed her desire to resume talks between Iran and the Group 5+1 and in response I reiterated that the Islamic Republic is willing to resume the negotiations,” Zarif said on Monday.

“In the phone conversation, I told Mrs. Ashton that we favor a solution instead of merely engaging in talks,” Zarif added.

On a separate front, Fredrik Dahl of Reuters reported on Monday that Iran may well be converting 20% enriched uranium into fuel for its reactor that produces medical isotopes faster than it is producing the 20% enriched material. As a result, the stockpile of material that is viewed as readily amenable to rapid enrichment to weapons grade may be declining:

Since Iran in 2010 began enriching uranium to a 20 percent concentration of the fissile isotope, it has produced more than the 240-250 kg that would be needed for one weapon.

But it has kept the stockpile below the stated Israeli “red line” by converting part of the uranium gas into oxide powder in order, it says, to yield fuel for a medical research reactor.

The diplomats, accredited to the United Nations’ International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), said Iran might even have stepped up this conversion in recent months.

If this is confirmed in the IAEA’s

quarterly report, due around August 27-28, the inventory of 20 percent gas will rise by less than the output, which has been about 15 kg per month.

One of the diplomats suggested the stockpile may show little or even no growth during the last three months, saying: "Everyone expects there to be as much or more conversion."

In a very encouraging move, Iran's Mehr News Agency carries an article today that cites and essentially restates the Reuters piece. What I find most important in the restating is this, where Dahl has referred to one of the diplomats in Vienna who was a source for the information:

But he and others cautioned against seeing it as a signal by the new Iranian president, Hassan Rohani, as the uranium conversion began in late 2011.

It would appear that Iran wants the world to know that recent moves toward a more moderate stance on its nuclear technology is not simply a function of Rouhani coming onto the scene. They want us to know that the move toward a smaller stockpile of 20% enriched uranium started moving away from Bibi's infamous "red line" well before the election.

I suspect that there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth among the diplomats in Vienna who usually serve as the source for the stories where AP reporter George Jahn (and occasionally Fredrik Dahl) fan up accusations against Iran for David Albright to then parrot. There seems to be a real opening for diplomacy to win out over war-mongering and that is a very welcome development for those who want a peaceful resolution to this crisis.