

Iran and the E3+3: Waiting for Mr President

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This opinion piece was originally published on [Euobserver.com](#) on 3 June 2013. Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi is Researcher on our [Iran project](#) and a Visiting Fellow at the British-based European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) think tank.

BRUSSELS - Late last month, the electoral campaign for the 11th Iranian presidential elections, scheduled for 14 June, officially began, opening the floor to the competing candidates to promote their views in TV debates, in an attempt to gain the Supreme Leader and the voters' endorsement.

The Council of Guardians - a 12-member body charged with overseeing the compatibility of presidential hopefuls with constitutional criteria - concluded its

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vetting process on 21 May, saying that just eight out of 686 candidates can run.

In view of the eight men's profiles, it seems likely the candidates' standpoint on the nuclear issue and on Iran's strategic posture toward the West might be the main issue in the vote in June.

Three of them have been involved - in different degrees and under different administrations - with the nuclear dossier and have held negotiations with the E3+3 (Britain, France, Germany, Russia, China and the United States), the group of world powers trying to curb Tehran's nuclear ambition.

Saeed Jalili - one of the candidates, who benefits from the support of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei - is currently the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council and its chief nuclear negotiator.

He has held the post since 2007.

Hassan Rouhani, one of two candidates considered closer to the "reformist" faction, is the former head of Iran's nuclear negotiating team between 2003 and 2005.

Ali Akbar Velayati, another Khamenei-endorsee, is one of the leader's senior foreign policy advisors.

While never appointed as chief nuclear negotiator, Velayati has extensive knowledge of the file. His name also came up in alleged secret bilateral meetings between Iran and the US in 2012.

All the other candidates talk about the nuclear issue while campaigning on TV.

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After all, it is having a crippling effect on people's day-to-day life.

In the last two years, the EU, the US and the UN have heaped sanctions on Iran, aggravating economic mismanagement by its current President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Due to the Council of Guardians' screening, which left out of the race several names considered controversial by the establishment - Hashemi Rafsanjani and Esfandiar Rahim Mashai stand out among the disqualified candidates - the political spectrum of the competing candidates is very narrow.

But the presidential contenders still present different viewpoints on how they would handle relations with the negotiating partners - the US and the EU in particular - and how they envisage a solution to the nuclear question.

Rouhani and Velayati, while belonging to two different factions, seem more inclined to emphasise the role of diplomacy and compromise.

They have also spoken of the need to reverse Iran's Ahmadinejad-era isolation.

Jalili, on the other hand, is more likely to continue Iran's current policies and to highlight the importance of "resistance" rather than compromise.

Given that under Iran's constitution Khamenei is the ultimate decision-maker in all international and security matters, the president's role in engendering a shift in foreign policy is limited.

But the president still functions as an important spokesman and can exert a degree of influence on the Supreme Leader's thinking.

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So much is evident from how differently the nuclear file has been handled at various points over the past decade.

The E3+3, which is following out a "dual-track" policy of sanctions and diplomacy, seems aware of the slim chance that a new president might make a shift in foreign policy.

This is why its negotiators are waiting for the results of the election before engaging in a new round of nuclear talks with Iran.

The “wait and see” approach was interrupted when the EU foreign policy chief and E3+3 chairman, Catherine Ashton, met Jalili in Kazakhstan on 15 May.

The meeting was described as “useful” by both sides, but no date was announced for the next round of negotiations.

It is likely to happen until after Ahmadinejad hands over power to his successor in August, potentially opening a new chapter in the long-running dispute.

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