

# Iran's Leader, Denouncing Holocaust, Stirs Dispute

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As he conducts a high-profile good-will visit to New York this week, Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani, says he is bringing a simple message of peace and friendship. But on Wednesday, Mr. Rouhani set off a political storm here and in Iran, with an acknowledgment and condemnation of the Holocaust that landed him in precisely the kind of tangled dispute he had hoped to avoid.

Mr. Rouhani, in an interview on Tuesday with CNN, described the Holocaust as a "crime that the Nazis committed towards the Jews" and called it "reprehensible and condemnable." It was a groundbreaking statement, given that his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, denied the systematic extermination of Jews during World War II. Mr. Rouhani largely repeated his comments in a meeting with news media executives on Wednesday.

But a semiofficial Iranian news agency accused CNN of fabricating portions of Mr. Rouhani's interview, saying he had not used the word Holocaust or characterized the Nazi mass murder as "reprehensible." Mr. Rouhani spoke in Persian; officials at CNN said they used an interpreter provided by the Iranian government for the interview, which was conducted by Christiane Amanpour.

The dispute over his comments reflects the extreme delicacy of the Holocaust as an issue in Iranian-American relations. More broadly, it speaks to the political tightrope Mr. Rouhani is walking, trying to negotiate a nuclear deal with the United States that will ease sanctions to please everyday Iranians, without provoking a backlash by hard-liners.

Such careful calculations prompted Mr. Rouhani to eschew a handshake with President Obama at the United Nations General Assembly. After weeks

of conciliatory moves, including Iran's freeing of political prisoners, Iranian and American officials said they believed Mr. Rouhani needed to placate hard-liners in Tehran, who would have bridled at images of an Iranian leader greeting an American president.

“Shaking hands with Obama would have won Rouhani huge points with the Iranian public, but it would have caused Iran's hard-liners a conniption,” said Karim Sadjadpour, an expert on Iran at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Mr. Rouhani avoided other land mines at the United Nations. His comments to the General Assembly, though less inflammatory than those of Mr. Ahmadinejad, touched on similar themes and grievances: the lack of respect for Iran, the West's refusal to recognize its right to enrich uranium, and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.

But when Mr. Rouhani sat down later with Ms. Amanpour, he moved into fraught territory. Asked whether he shared his predecessor's belief that the Holocaust was a myth, Mr. Rouhani replied, according to CNN's translation, that he would leave it to historians to judge the “dimensions of the Holocaust.”

But he added, “In general, I can tell you that any crime or — that happens in history against humanity, including the crime that the Nazis committed towards the Jews, as well as non-Jewish people — is reprehensible and condemnable, as far as we are concerned.”

The Iranian news agency Fars, which has ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, posted its own translation of Mr. Rouhani's answer, and claimed that he did not use the word “reprehensible” and that he said historians should be left to judge “historical events,” not “the Holocaust.”

That translation resembles more closely the way Mr. Ahmadinejad used to discuss the issue. In an interview with CNN in 2012, he said: “Whatever event has taken place throughout history, or hasn't taken place, I cannot judge that. Why should I judge that?”

In what appeared to be an effort to head off criticism of Mr. Rouhani, Iran's official Islamic Republic News Agency reported Wednesday that the chief of staff of Iran's armed forces, Maj. Gen. Hassan Firouzabadi, said the president had presented Iran's clear and revolutionary stands in his United Nations speech.

Mr. Ahmadinejad's refusal to recognize the Holocaust became a symbol of Tehran's implacable hostility. For Israel, it is evidence that Iran is bent on its elimination, and this is why Israel is so determined to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

While American Jewish leaders characterized Mr. Rouhani's remarks as a modest step forward, they remained deeply skeptical of Iran's intentions and its readiness to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

"Assuming the accuracy of the translation, for me his comments are duly noted," said David Harris, the executive director of the American Jewish Committee. "But he's only acknowledging, and rather belatedly, the universally acknowledged truth of the last 70 years. That does not warrant a standing ovation."

Israeli officials reject Mr. Rouhani's claim that the factual details of the Holocaust are a matter best left to historians. In fact, some analysts say, even raising doubts about the scope of the genocide is itself a form of Holocaust revisionism.

A statement issued last week by the office of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared, "It does not take a historian to recognize the existence of the Holocaust — it just requires being a human being."

Mr. Netanyahu, rattled by Mr. Obama's desire to engage Iran, has warned that Mr. Rouhani, with his professorial demeanor and moderate tone, is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Yet Iran's hard-liners, Mr. Sadjadpour said, "probably view him as sheep in wolf's clothing."

The complex political crosscurrents were on display in the Iranian news media's coverage of Mr. Rouhani's day at the United Nations. A reformist newspaper, Shargh, published pictures of Mr. Rouhani and Mr. Obama during their speeches, with the headline "Perhaps Another Time" — a reflection of the letdown among average Iranians about the missed opportunity for a handshake.

But another paper, Kayhan, which is close to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei expressed horror over the possibility that "the clean hand of our president would for moments be in the bloody clench" of Mr. Obama.

Advisers and analysts close to the government in Tehran said that after weeks of conciliatory statements and gestures by Mr. Rouhani, the excitement had gotten out of hand.

“We need to gain something from the Americans, before we pose and smile with them,” said Hamid-Reza Taraghi, an official who is one of the few trusted to interpret the speeches of Ayatollah Khamenei. “Of course, Mr. Rouhani also needed to convince some at home that he is not making any wild moves.”

Mr. Rouhani himself suggested that a meeting would have been premature and might actually have jeopardized the longer-term goal of striking an agreement on the nuclear program. Speaking to editors and columnists in New York on Wednesday, he said, “I believe we did not have enough time to make it happen.”

“If we do not take our first steps carefully,” he said, “we may not at the very least be able to obtain mutual goals that are in our minds.”

White House officials, though deflated, said Mr. Rouhani’s decision showed he is an astute political player who knows how to calm hard-liners at home while charming audiences abroad. Those are skills they say he will need to navigate the treacherous waters of Iranian politics.

“The issue of the relationship between the United States and Iran is incredibly controversial within Iran,” said a senior administration official. “For them it was just too difficult to move forward with that type of encounter at the presidential level, at this juncture.”