

# WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
JUSTICE AND WITNESS MINISTRIES

700 Prospect Ave.  
Cleveland, OH 44115-1110  
Phone: 216.736.3700  
Fax: 216.736.3703



**Peter Makari**

**Area Executive for Middle East and Europe**

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**“Khodahafez,”**

The salutation “*Khodahafez*,” which means “God be with you,” is reportedly the way President Obama concluded his telephone call with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani last week. It also marks the close of a remarkable few weeks of diplomatic activity on Syria and Iran. The flurry of surprising events is evidence that no matter how difficult a problem seems or how remote a possibility true engagement may feel, diplomatic engagement is always worth pursuing.

Elected in June of this year on a slogan of “prudence and hope,” President Rouhani has already made a significant impression on the global community with his September 19 op-ed in the *Washington Post* and appearances on many US and international media outlets, all in the context of his visit to the US to address the United National General Assembly last Monday. His rhetoric and style are emphatically different from his predecessor, Mahmud Ahmadinejad. In these few days, President Rouhani has repeatedly emphasized tolerance and understanding, recognized the atrocities of the Holocaust, and expressed willingness to engage in negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the hostage crisis, no US president has had direct contact with his Iranian counterpart, until this week. 1979 was a defining moment for Americans in US-Iranian relations. Similarly for Iranians, 1953 was a defining moment in which the CIA orchestrated a clandestine and successful operation to overthrow Prime Minister Muhammad Mussadagh who, among

other things, had nationalized Iran's oil industry. Both dates are important for the US and Iran; yet, as time passes, for more citizens of each country, both are becoming historical events—not living memories. Even so, distrust and enmity have prevailed, with only occasional hope for direct engagement, let alone reconciliation.

In his speech at the UN General Assembly, President Obama made clear “what will be my policy during the remainder of my presidency.” He listed readiness to “use all elements of our power, including military force, to secure our core interests in the region;” “ensure the free flow of energy from the region to the world;” and “not tolerate the development or use of weapons of mass destruction.” He went on to say about Iran, “The roadblocks may prove to be too great, but I firmly believe the diplomatic path must be tested.”

In 2003, the United Church of Christ adopted a resolution at its General Synod entitled, [“US Policy in the Middle East”](#) which “call[ed] on the U.S. government to base its policy on principles of human rights and human justice and to refrain from narrowly acting with U.S. economic interests in mind.” It supports healing through engagement, and consistent application of international law. All of these commendations apply ten years later, and can be employed in our nation’s engagement with Iran.

“Khodahafez” is a common expression in Farsi, but the literal meaning is especially poignant. “God be with you” is an expression of care, an acknowledgement of faith, and a prayer of hope. In the UCC, we like to say, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking.” We hope and pray that President Obama’s word of salutation to President Rouhani is followed by a comma, that there is more yet to come that can help bring about God’s vision of justice and peace in the world.

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