



First element essential to understanding foreign policy making in Iran is the institutions which are: The Supreme Leader, the Assembly of Experts, the Legislative, the Executive, and the Judiciary.

Iran's Foreign Policy under President Rouhani: Pledges versus Reality

Cumhurbaşkanı Ruhani Yönetiminde İran Dış Politikası:
Gerçeklere Karşı Taahhütler

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Özet

İran'ın dış politika prensipler altı kategoride toplanabilir: anti-emperyalizm, kendi kendine yeterlilik, bağımsızlık, anti-milliyetçilik, mustazafinleri desteklemek ve anti-Siyonizm. İran'ın seçimle göreve gelen yeni cumhurbaşkanı Hasan Ruhani ve kabinesi, görev süresi boyunca ılımlı ve yapıcı bir dış politika izleyeceklerini halihazırda belirtmiştir. Bir taraftan, İslam devriminin özünde yer alan ve Ayetullah Hamaney ile Uzmanlar Meclisi tarafından korunmakta olan İran dış politikasının bu prensipleri gözönünde bulundurulacak olursa, Cumhurbaşkanı Ruhani'nin İran dış politikasını ülkenin nükleer programını devam ettirecek ve aynı zamanda ekonomisini iyileştirecek derecede ılımlı politikalar izlemesi pek kolay görünmemektedir. Ancak öte yandan da, İslam devriminin yaşadığı süre boyunca rejimin üzerinde kurulu olduğu ideolojik tabanın birden fazla defa terkedilmiş olduğu gerçeği de hatırlanmalıdır. Cumhurbaşkanı Ruhani ve kabinesinin halihazırda kanıtlanmış olan yetkinliği ve İran'ın uluslararası alandaki konumunu bu yeni dönemde iyileştireceklerinin sözünü vermiş olmaları, İran'ın yeni dönem dış politikasının iyimser bir açıdan değerlendirilmesini mümkün kılmaktadır.

The institutions and the articles of the Iranian Constitution, hence, produce the two of three dimensions of Iranian identity. These dimensions are Islamic ideology and anti-Westoxification. The third one is the Persian nationalism which disguises itself under the anti-Western sentiment.

Abstract

Foreign policy principles of revolutionary Iran can be summed up in six categories: anti-imperialism, self-sufficiency, independence, anti-nationalism, support for the mustazafin, and anti-Zionism. Iran's new president-elect Hassan Rouhani and his cabinet have already underlined that a foreign policy that is moderate and constructive will be pursued throughout his term in office. On the one hand, considering these principles of Iranian foreign policy that are embedded within the Islamic revolution and guarded primarily by Grand Ayatollah Khamanei and the Assembly of Experts, it seems very difficult for President Rouhani to reach a moderation level sufficient to remedy pressures on Iran's nuclear program and economy. On the other hand, however, the ideological basis upon which the regime in Iran stands has already had to be abandoned more than once throughout the lifetime of the Islamic revolution. Considering the proven expertise of President Rouhani and his cabinet members, as well as their promises for improvement in Iran's position in the international arena, new Iranian foreign policy may be viewed through optimistic lenses.

Keywords: *President Rouhani, Iran, foreign policy, moderation*

The making of Iran's foreign policy has proven to be a mixture of certain elements that are not only based on the internationalist claims of the ideology of the Islamic revolution of 1979, but also on Iranian national interests.¹It is significant to underline that the foreign policy of Iran

is composed of short-term, medium-term and long-term interests. Notable is that while short- and medium-term interests are based on Iran's national interests, Tehran's long-term interests lie within religious principles. This dilemma was perhaps best explained in the briefest way by an (unnamed) Iranian Foreign Ministry official stating in 1996 that "The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic has short-term, medium-term and long-term interests. The short- and middle-term interests are national interests, whereas the long-term interests are religious principles, such as helping the oppressed"² The existence of such a dualism is obviously one reason of difficulty in predicting foreign policy decisions of Iran since it allows Iranian leaders to create varying and changing interpretations of foreign policy principles at different times, under different conjunctures. In the course of 34 years of the Islamic revolution's foreign policy, the Islamic ideology has remained the same whereas its interpretation and application in the realm of foreign policy could not prove to be immutable. Once more, with the election of President Rouhani, it is expected that Iranian foreign policy will take a new turn in key issue areas, however prediction of the Iranian foreign policy under President Rouhani necessitates a close examination of Iranian identity, the political elite circles which are influential in Iran's foreign policy decision-making mechanisms, as well as the regional and international political atmosphere.

Foreign Policy Making in Iran

Of these elements that shape Iranian foreign policy, Iranian identity can be best understood

through an examination of the political institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran; its Constitution's articles pertaining to the regime's comprehension of foreign policy making, and Persian nationalism.

Institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran

First element essential to understanding foreign policy making in Iran is the institutions which are: The Supreme Leader, the Assembly of Experts, the Legislative, the Executive, and the Judiciary. The Assembly of Experts is composed of the high ranking Muslim clerics from all 30 provinces of the country and these experts are elected by the public. According to the Constitution, the Assembly of Experts is in charge of electing and disqualifying the Supreme Leader. However, the Assembly of Experts needs the approval of the Guardian Council, which is composed of twelve *ulama*. While six of the twelve members of the Guardian Council, whose chief duty is to check the compatibility of laws with the *Sharia* as stated in Article 96, are directly appointed by the Supreme Leader, the remaining six are appointed by the Supreme Judiciary Council. In this regard, it is worth underlining the fact that even though it looks as if the Assembly of Experts is elected democratically, this is not the case. As just stated, the remaining six members of the Guardian Council are appointed by the Supreme Judiciary Council, and this council is appointed by the *Mujtahid* who is directly chosen and appointed by the Supreme Leader.

At this point, it is useful to focus on the election of the president.³ The president of the Islamic Republic, according to Article 114 of the Constitution, "is elected for a four year term by the direct vote of the people." Nevertheless in practice, the nomination of the presidential candidacy is subject to the approval of the Assembly of Experts although not indicated overtly in the Constitution. As a consequence, contrary to what the Iranian Constitution states, it can be claimed that neither of the institutions except for that of the *Faqih*, is truly independent, and that the ultimate power to rule the country is in the hands of the *Faqih*. Therefore, in a system where a candidate's

candidacy is tied to the consent of the appointed, it is not possible to claim that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a democratic state. In developed countries, foreign policy is made by institutions, while it is the leaders who formulate and make foreign policy in developing countries.⁴ Iranian case, in this debate, suggests nothing different. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic, as discussed above, permits the accumulation of power under a single authority that is the Grand *Ayatollah*. Therefore, examining foreign policy decisions of Iran also goes through comprehending Ayatollah Khamenei and political elite circles' view of foreign elements which are discussed in the coming paragraphs.

Iran's Constitution

Second element to understand Iranian identity and its foreign policy is its Constitution. It is so because the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran reflects Khomeinism on foreign policy in the best manner possible. Therefore, pertaining articles of the Constitution are cited below:

Article 3 states that the duty of the Islamic Republic of Iran is to direct its resources to "...the complete elimination of imperialism and the prevention of foreign influence", and "framing the foreign policy of the country on the basis of Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unsparing support to the *mustadafin* of the world."

Article 43, concerning economy and financial affairs, underlines that "prevention of foreign economic domination over the country's economy [together with an emphasis on making] the country self-sufficient and free from dependence."

Articles 81 and 82 forbid "the granting of concessions to foreigners" and "the employment of foreign experts [except for situations when necessary and with the approval of the *Majlis*]."

Articles 145 and 146 too forbid the acceptance of any foreigner "into the Army or security forces of the country" and "the establishment of any kind of foreign military base in Iran, even for peace-

ful purposes". The common point of all these articles is the total elimination of all foreign elements from the country, regardless of their being Western or not.

In addition to these articles, Chapter X of the Constitution directly deals with foreign policy, reiterating the elimination of foreign elements which have the potential to obstruct the independence of the country.

Article 152 states that "The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the rejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of it and submission to it ...the defence of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with respect to the hegemonist superpowers."

Article 153 reads "any form of agreement resulting in foreign control over the natural resources, economy, army, or culture of the country, as well as other aspects of the national life, is forbidden."

Article 154 emphasizes that "Iran has as its ideal human felicity throughout human society" and "while scrupulously refraining from all forms of interference in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the just struggles of the mustadafin against the mustakbirun in every corner of the globe."

Persian Nationalism

The institutions and the above-mentioned articles of the Iranian Constitution, hence, produce the two of three dimensions of Iranian identity. These dimensions are Islamic ideology and anti-Westoxification. The third one is the Persian nationalism which disguises itself under the anti-Western sentiment. The fact that nationalism in Iran at times remains subtle is mainly because the revolutionist claims of the regime are what guarantee its survival; and a means to justification of its certain foreign policy moves. Even though anti-Westoxification does not directly create a dilemma in foreign policy principles of Iran, when placed in the same equation, Islam and Persian nationalism does definitely create a dualism.⁵

The Political Elite Circles in Iran

In Iran there are three elite circles that are the "inner circle elite" which has the power to execute domestic and foreign policy decisions, "the administrative elite" who still has influence on decision-making, but less in comparison to the inner circle elite, and "the discourse elite" which can (usually) indirectly influence policy making via setting the political discourse.⁶ While the inner circle elite of Iran comprises of those whose legitimacy is embedded in the Islamic Law, the administrative elite includes the elected institutions of Iran, and the discourse elite is composed of the *bonyads* who have the ability, as a result of their economic power, to influence the inner circle elites.⁷ Therefore, closely observing all these three elites in Iran is key to understanding not only Iranian domestic policy, but also its foreign policy. As far as foreign policy is concerned, however, the primary focus should be placed on the inner circle and administrative elites because they are directly included in policy making processes and also because the support of the *bonyads* can be purchased by different factions, at different times.

Iran's Foreign Policy and President Rouhani

It is imperative that, with further industrialization, urbanization, and wealth, Iran needs to open to the outside world in order to sustain its development. This can happen either at the expense of its ideological principles, or in favor of them. Looking at the composition of the international order and states that are satisfied with the order of the post-1979 revolution until today, it appears that Iran has had no powerful ally with which it has shared its ideological objectives. Thus, not only challenging the status quo per se proves to be more difficult to afford for Iran, but also taking steps to ensure the country's development simultaneously becomes arduous due to different external pressures. The fact that Iranian ideology cannot produce a leading foreign policy, Iran finds itself, in most part, in pursuit of a reactionary foreign policy style. Iran's reactions that occur in its foreign policy decisions eventually form the ways as to how the state undertakes to deal with challenges on its way.



President Rouhani, who has been elected on June 14 and was inaugurated on August 4, will be no exception in his formulation of a foreign policy that will be responsible to the Supreme Leader on the one hand, and circumspect on the pressures that emanate from the outside, on the other.

Hence, it would be naïve to disregard the effects of international environment while analyzing Iran's foreign policy. President Rouhani, who has been elected on June 14 and was inaugurated on August 4, will be no exception in his formulation of a foreign policy that will be responsible to the Supreme Leader on the one hand, and circumspect on the pressures that emanate from the outside, on the other hand. Although President Rouhani's election campaign was based on the domestic issues such as corruption and the country's contracting economy, it should be remembered that these domestic issues are also tied very much to Iran's external relations. According to statements made by Iranian officials, current annual inflation rate is around 30 percent, and the Iranian rial has lost approximately half of its value. In order to find remedies to these economic issues, it is expected that Rouhani is going to pursue a foreign policy which may ul-

timately render Iran's relations with the United States (US) more cooperative. True that there is still a lot more to achieve for Iran and the US to mitigate their bilateral relations, although it is obvious that the turning point of the US-Iranian relations came with the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the US. This event was of a type that brought about opportunities and challenges to the relations between the two. Even though Iran was among the first states to send condolences to the US, and opened its airspace and port facilities to the US military personnel during the invasion of Afghanistan in 2002, relations were hampered shortly after. First, President Bush included Iran in the axis of evil list upon the Israeli discovery of tons of weapons aboard the *Karine A* en route to Palestinians.⁸ Moreover, the invasion of Iraq disturbed the already fragile balance the US and Iran was trying to maintain, because it was now not a weakened Saddam who neigh-

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bored Iran, but the US military. At the outset of the US invasion, Iran declared “active neutrality”, however worked to empower the Iraqi Shiites so that they could assume political power within the US-formulated Iraqi politics.⁹ Despite the Iranian help in reconstruction of both Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration continued to accuse Iran particularly “of meddling in Iraqi affairs and attempting to destabilize Iraq”.¹⁰ To conclude, at the end of the two presidential terms of Mohammad Khatami, the goodwill towards the US was demonstrated, however the long-standing distrust, divergent interests, and of course, ideology between the two states prevented them from enhancing cooperation in political and economic areas.

President Ahmedinejad’s foreign policy sat on two pillars. One of them was “accommodating policy” while the other can be named “alliance policy”.¹¹ With the “accommodating policy”, Ahmadinejad aimed at “expanding cooperation after Saddam’s fall with the main Arab world actor ... and seeking direct talks with the US”.¹² Indeed, President Ahmadinejad’s emphasis on regional relations aimed at turning the Middle East as well as Central Asia and Caucasus to regions which are self-reliant and free of extra-regional powers (meaning the US).¹³ On the other hand, with the “alliance policy” Ahmadinejad did seek ways to avert a possible US attack against Iran by allying Tehran with regional and extra-regional states, and also aimed to “regionalize” the nuclear issue so that Iran’s nuclear program would be justified *vis-à-vis* Israel’s nuclear capabilities and the conflict with Palestinians.¹⁴ In addition to these

pragmatic means of policy, President Ahmadinejad’s chanting “wipe Israel off the map” was very radical, yet still far from “the frenzied early days of the revolution, as even the New Right recognized that a less belligerent approach was the best means of ensuring Iran’s ascendance in the Middle East”.¹⁵

With regard to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran has supported the territorial integrity of this country since then. Although Iranian and American interests over Iraq converged on overthrowing Saddam Hussein and preventing Iraq from becoming a military power again, Iran was not utterly comfortable with the US as its new neighbor. This was so because especially “for Ahmadinejad and his allies, America is both a source of cultural contamination of the sacred Islamic lands and a rapacious capitalist power exploiting indigenous resources”.¹⁶ Relations between Iran and Iraq entered into a new era when Saadun al-Dulaimi, then defense minister of Iraq, visited Iran where he apologized from Iranians for all Saddam Hussein had done to Iran, and thus Iraq’s apology opened the way for a number of trade and cooperation agreements.¹⁷

President Rouhani is known to be predisposed to pragmatism; and an apt negotiator who is already proven to deliver certain concessions in suspending Iran’s nuclear program voluntarily during Khatami’s presidency although at the same time he supports its continuation. Accommodating and alliance policy strategies might well be followed by President Rouhani given that even until the end of President Rouhani’s term

Iran will continue to remain a middle-power within world politics, a fact which not only would restrict Iran, but any other country retaining the same level of power. Notwithstanding, it does not mean that President Rouhani will continue to follow a reactionary foreign policy. Contrary to this, what he exactly aims is to achieve a rather proactive foreign policy. Thus, it can be anticipated that Tehran will indeed actively seek ways to change Iran's hostile and uncooperative image in the eyes of the West.

Furthermore, President Rouhani has pledged to avoid the bombastic style in diplomacy that reached its peak during Ahmadinejad's two presidential terms, which in particular undermined the opening of rather smooth channels of communication with the outside world.¹⁸ While promising so, President Rouhani has also noted during the inauguration of the new foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif that he and his cabinet will not abandon the principles of the Islamic Republic. Therefore, what can be expected to change in Iran's foreign policy from now on will be a considerable level of easing the tension with the West (and in particular with the US), and a series of steps and negotiations to alleviate the pressures on Iran's nuclear program as well as its economy.

Aside from President Rouhani himself, Iran's new foreign minister Zarif who is now also the chief nuclear negotiator of Iran¹⁹, and Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of Atomic Energy Agency of Iran are known to be pragmatic and moderate statesmen who are likely to provide President Rouhani's term in office much support in the nuclear talks processes.²⁰

Against all odds that have emerged over the nuclear program of Iran, it is observed that Iran - European Union trade relations continued to flourish. Although the EU introduced additional restrictive measures against Iran in 2010 and 2012, trade with the EU accounts for almost one third of Iran's overall trade. The promised-

moderation in the diplomatic language of Iran is also likely to decrease threat perception of the EU from Iran to a level where economic relations between the two can be boosted further; the EU's democratic decision-making institutions may not be able to turn a blind eye to the business circles' call for further improvement in trade with Iran.

In addition to its nuclear program, other issues that top the agenda of Iranian foreign policy are Israeli-Palestinian conflict, its support for Hezbollah, and the support for the Assad regime. All these issues are interconnected for Iran. As far as Turkey's relations with Iran are considered, for Iranian pragmatists, improved ties with Turkey on economic matters not only means improving Iranian economy, but also decreasing its dependence on the West despite the fact that Iran has criticized the Justice and Development Party government in Turkey for its stance against Bashar al-Assad. Therefore, deterioration in Iran's economic relations with Turkey seems unlikely.

Overall, President Rouhani's election may and should be viewed as an opportunity for not only Iran, but also for the outside world to improve bilateral ties, and promote stability and prosperity in the Middle East. There are more positive signs given by the new president and his cabinet than negative ones that Iran's foreign policy in this term will help Iran to correct its radical image and recuperate its economy to a certain level. It cannot be, however, possible to claim that every single problem of Iran will be resolved during the presidency of Rouhani. If and when the moderation level of President Rouhani pushes the limits of Islamic principles, it should be expected that Grand Ayatollah Khamenei will overtly support opposing factional elements (which is usually the hardliners²¹) within the elite circles against the Rouhani government –a move which might curb President Rouhani's efforts to achieve his promises.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Although anti-nationalism is one of the principles of Iran's foreign policy, the paradox continues to lie within being able to maintain the internationalist character of a revolution while not protecting one's national interests.
- 2 Christin Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf Policy: from Khomeini to Khatami*. London; New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003, p. 14.
- 3 The Constitution of Iran was amended in 1989. According to this amendment, previously existing prime ministerial post was abolished, and all prime ministerial powers were transferred to the president. During the first 10 years, it was Ayatollah Khomeini who guided and checked the Iranian foreign policy. Mainly due to this reason, I chose to study the first decade of the Iranian foreign policy without making much mention of either the prime minister or the president.
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- 5 Suzanne Maloney, "Identity and Change in Iran's Foreign Policy", Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett. (eds.) *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2002, pp. 95-101.
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- 7 Raket, "The Political Elite in the Islamic Republic of Iran: From Khomeini to Ahmadinejad", pp. 113-114.
- 8 Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran: continuity and chaos* (1st ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 153.
- 9 Kamran Taremi, "Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Occupied Iraq, 2003-05", *Middle East Policy* 12(4), 2005, pp. 28 – 47.
- 10 Taremi, "Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Occupied Iraq, 2003-05", p. 40.
- 11 Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam", *The Washington Quarterly* 33(1), 2010, pp. 173 – 189.
- 12 Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam", p. 173.
- 13 Abbas Maleki, and Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, *Reading in Iran's Foreign Policy After September 11*. Charleston, S.C.: Book Surge, 2008, pp.78-79.
- 14 Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam", p. 173.
- 15 Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the world in the age of the Ayatollahs*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 237.
- 16 Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the world in the age of the Ayatollahs*, p. 240.
- 17 Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the world in the age of the Ayatollahs*, p. 22.
- 18 "Iran's Hassan Rouhani pledges 'slogan-free diplomacy'", BBC News Middle East, August 17, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23744267> (accessed on August 20, 2013).
- 19 President Rouhani's decision to assign the task of nuclear negotiations within the foreign ministry can be interpreted as a sign of a stronger will to ensure more talks and eventually reaching far more consensus with the EU3+3.
- 20 "Official: Iran Foreign Ministry to handle nuclear talks as part of new approach", The Washington Post, August 20, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iran-foreign-ministry-to-handle-nuclear-talks-as-part-of-new-approach-with-world-powers/2013/08/20/ba7afa7e-0972-11e3-89fe-abb4a5067014_story.html (accessed on August 20, 2013).
- 21 Ali Banuazizi, "Iran's Revolutionary Impasse: Political Factionalism and Societal Resistance", *Middle East Report* 191, 1994, pp. 2 – 8.