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Introduction

The successful development of Iran’s status in the region is reflected in the Geneva nuclear capabilities agreement between Iran and the P5+1 countries. Since Iranian President Hassan Rouhani stated that “international relations are no longer a zero-sum game, but rather a multi-dimensional space in which competition and cooperation coincide,” the relationship between the Iran and the United States has moved in a new direction.

“Constructive engagement,” a term that has recently entered the lexicon of Iranian foreign policy, is part of the Iranian government’s attempt to reform the economy. This reform is necessary to meet the needs of Iranian society and strengthen Iran’s international status. It is clear that easing tension with the United States and the West is strongly linked with achieving these goals; indeed, Iran’s role as a mediator or enforcer in international geopolitics and economics cannot be denied.

The “Geneva Accord” (Joint Plan of Action) is fraught with adversities and obstacles, and there have been many recent debates on the consequences of Iranian-American rapprochement on the regional balance of power. Opinions vary – some believe rapprochement will reshape the region’s map and have a long term impact, while others
downplay the consequences of rapprochement and question the probability of its success.

This research project outlines and discusses the future of Iranian-American rapprochement and Iran’s expanding international role and impacts. The components of the project were written by Iranian affairs and international relations researchers and experts.

1. Iranian Foreign Policy: Future Directions
Will there be new changes in Iranian foreign policy? How realistic and sincere is the claim that Iran’s foreign policy has moved from negative confrontation to positive vision and interaction with the world? In this context, Dr. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, head of the Centre for Iranian Studies at the University of London, discusses changes in Iranian foreign policy brought about by Rouhani’s presidency in his paper titled *Iran in World Politics After Rouhani*, with particular focus on the persistent strategic preferences of the Iranian state.

2. Form and Future of Iranian-American Rapprochement
Iranian officials have suggested coordination and cooperation with the United States on a number of matters, the first being on the issue of terrorism. Three papers discuss this theme and address the following questions: What is the future of Iran-US rapprochement? Will relations between the two countries remain within the confines of an exchange of interests (called by Rouhani a “competition and cooperation” policy) or will they experience improvement in the future? What are the effects of this rapprochement on Iran's Arab neighbours, particularly Saudi Arabia?

Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian, former member of the nuclear issue negotiating team and visiting scholar at Princeton University, details trends within three different ideological schools in Iran's political arena with regard to relations with Washington in a paper titled *Future of Iran-US Relations*.

Farah Al-Zaman Abu Shuair, a Tehran-based researcher and media activist, offers internal reactions on rapprochement in a paper titled *Domestic Voices: Actors in Iran’s Political Arena*. She reviews Iranian political parties’ positions on the issue of Iranian-American rapprochement and looks at the reasons some reject rapprochement while others accept and defend it. The prominent Supreme Leader Institution Party is one
example – it does not impede negotiations with Washington about the nuclear issue but remains cautious about the success of rapprochement.

Dr. Mark Katz, professor of international relations at the American George Mason University, compares Iranian-American rapprochement with the unsuccessful model of US rapprochement with the Soviet Union as well as with the successful model of the US-China rapprochement in his paper titled **Mechanisms of Iran-US Rapprochement: Lessons from the Past**.

3. Iran-US Rapprochement and Security
Dr. Fatima Al-Smadi, a researcher at the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, addresses this theme in her paper titled **Iran-US Rapprochement: Where Does the Path to Jerusalem Cross?** The paper discusses effects of rapprochement on the Palestinian cause as well as monitors internal socio-economic indicators foretelling a shift in Iranian politics and discourse.

4. Rapprochement: Relationships and Influence
Papers addressing this theme examine the potential impact of the Iranian-American rapprochement on Iran's regional and international relations and reach.

"Smart cooperation" with Russia enabled Iran to change the game in Iraq and Syria, begging the question of whether this relationship with Russia will continue or be lost at the expense of Iran's newfound cooperation with the US? Answers to these questions are offered by Russian researcher specialist in international relations, Karina Fayzullina, in her paper titled **Iran-Russia Relations in Light of Iran-US Rapprochement**.

Iranian relations with Turkey are increasingly important and influential in the context of regional transformation witnessed by the Arab world, and Dr. Mohammad Jaber Thalji, researcher and specialist in Turkish affairs, addresses this in a paper titled **Iran-US Rapprochement and Iran-Turkey Relations: Potential Opportunities and Threats**.

Dr. Sebastien Peyrouse, research professor of international affairs at George Washington University, discusses the increasing role that Iran can play in Afghanistan and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) in his paper titled **Iran’s Growing Role in Central Asia? Geopolitical, Economic and Political Profit and Loss Account**.
5. Summary and Results
The concluding section offers the reader a comprehensive overview of findings and results from the project.
Abstract

Five strategic preferences have dictated Iran’s foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic revolution. However, it is important to note that a country’s policies do not suddenly shift with a change in government – strategic preferences are systemic, cultural and institutionalised. This paper addresses the Rouhani presidency’s modifications in the country within the context of enduring Iran’s enduring strategic preferences.

Introduction

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian foreign policies have oscillated around five strategic preferences which set the general contours of the country’s international relations. The current strategy of the Rouhani administration repackages these preferences but does not radically depart from them. The Iranian state, like any other state in the international system, holds and pursues national interests. It has been an analytical mistake to assume that these are merely tactical and short-term or that Iran after the revolution acts “irrationally” and ad-hoc. Undoubtedly, there have been serious shifts in the way Iran positions itself in international affairs – Rouhani is not Ahmadinejad (just as Barack Obama is not George W. Bush). (1) But the strategic
preferences of any state do not suddenly shift in total with changing governments. Strategic preferences are systemic, cultural and institutionalised. They have depth and longitude that go beyond current politics. President Hassan Rouhani is the surface effect of gradual changes in Iran’s domestic politics after the revolution, a product of a post-revolutionary generation yearning for reforms, but he is still operating within the general contours of the Islamic Republic’s strategic preferences as they emerged after the 1979 revolution. The following paragraphs will assess modifications the Rouhani presidency has brought about with a particular emphasis on the enduring strategic preferences of the Iranian state.

What are Iran’s strategic preferences?
The first strategic preference that has guided the ruling classes in Iran is geared to the idea of maximising economic independence. (2) This preference was inscribed into the Iranian constitution by the Sorbonne-educated liberals surrounding Ayatollah Khomeini at the beginning of the revolution, in particular the first Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and the first President Abol-Hassan Bani Sadr. (3) At the heart of it is the conviction — similar to Islamic economic theories authored by Ayatollah Motahhari in Iran and Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq — that a “just” welfare state should be at the centre of the economic system. While Iran has attempted to liberalise the economy in the recent years and tried to join to the WTO in the past, the country continues to keep a relative distance from multilateral institutions and radical neo-liberal reforms. The ruling classes continue to pursue a form of economic nationalism which partially manifests itself in the emphasis on mastering the full nuclear fuel cycle on Iranian territory. Rouhani is trying to present Iran more vigorously in international economic forums and in his recent speech at Davos he made it clear that Iran is open for business.

There is certainly a technocratic emphasis in his policies which are carried out by a very capable cadre of economic experts that he has appointed in key ministries. But it is highly unlikely that the Iranian state, in particular the powerful conglomerates affiliated to the Revolutionary Guards, will liberalise the economy to the degree that they lose their privileged position. There will not be a neo-liberal infitah (opening) policy comparable to what happened in Egypt under Sadat or in Tunisia under Ben-Ali. The Iranian economy will continue to be mixed and the state will ensure that it does not concede too much ground to the private sector or foreign investors.

Second, since the revolution, Iran has allocated immense ideological and material resources to the Palestinian issue with mixed results both for the Palestinians and Iran’s national interests. Yasir Arafat was the first major political leader to visit Iran after the
establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. The revolutionaries greeted him with
great fanfare and handed him the keys of the Israeli compound in Tehran which served
as a major centre for Israeli operations during the reign of the shah. Moreover, in an
effort to institutionalise the pro-Palestinian sentiments of his Islamic followers and the
Iranian left, Ayatollah Khomeini designated the last Friday of Ramadan to the liberation
of Jerusalem (so-called Quds Day). “The road to Jerusalem Passes Through Baghdad,”
was a prominent slogan of the millions of volunteers of the newly established Islamic
Revolutionary Guards Corps and their Basij militia during the devastating Iran-Iraq war
which drained the material and human resources of both countries for decades to come,
extactly because the war was charged with immense ideological venom. (4)

The Palestinian cause has been appropriated by the Iranian government as a way to
claim regional leadership and play a central role as the defender of Muslim rights. For
instance, religious leaders in Iran consider holy sites such as the Al-Aqsa mosque as
Islamic waqf (religious endowment) whose sovereignty should be shared by all Muslims,
not only Palestinians. There is also genuine support for the Palestinian cause within
Iranian civil society. Several non-governmental-organisations are involved in fund-
raising efforts and several Iranian hospitals provided free medical help to Palestinians
wounded in the successive intifadas in occupied territories. Rouhani has not broken from
these policies. Recently, Iran hosted a high ranking delegation of Islamic Jihad, there are
renewed talks with the PLO and the country continues to have cordial relations with
Hamas despite the fall-out over Syria. At the same time, there are nuanced shifts:
Iranian officials, quite comparable to the period under the reformist President
Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), have refrained from using labelling Israel as the
“Zionist regime“ and Rouhani has not targeted the country in the way his predecessor
Ahmadinejad did. In another parallel to the Khatami years, the current foreign minister
Zarif recently indicated the Iranian government would accept any final settlement the
Palestinians would agree to. Asked if Iran would recognize the state of Israel if the
Palestinian question would be resolved, Zarif replied:

“You see, that’s a sovereign decision that Iran would make but it will have no
consequence on the situation on the ground in the Middle East. If the
Palestinians are happy with the solution then nobody, nobody outside Palestine
could prevent that from taking place. The problem for the past 60 years is that
the Palestinians have not been happy. The Palestinians have not been satisfied
and they have every right not to be satisfied because their most basic rights
continue to be violated and people are not ready to address those rights.” (5)
Third, the revolution has buttressed a sense of grandeur in Iran’s historical consciousness which was equally apparent in the thinking of the shah. But whereas the shah’s dependencies on the west did not allow him to act upon his imperial mentality, the Islamic revolution turned Iran into an antagonist to US (and Israeli) hegemony in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) and the wider Muslim world in a grand effort to position the country as a major power in the international system. As such, Iran sees itself as a major competitor to US power in WANA and beyond, exemplified by the country’s stringent opposition to NATO forces and US military bases in the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and elsewhere in Iran’s immediate geo-strategic neighbourhood.

However, in this regard as well, Iran has initiated only a gradual shift in its foreign policies. For Rouhani and his administration, competition with the United States does not preclude establishing full diplomatic ties between the two countries. In conversations with Iranians close to the administration, the model of China is repeatedly invoked. China and the United States have serious differences in eastern Asia, not at least over the contentious issue of Taiwan. But the two countries have close economic ties and they have managed to liaise diplomatically as well. The future of Iranian-American ties could be similar. On issues of agreement – territorial integrity of Iraq and opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda groups throughout the Muslim world – Iran and the United States have a lot of reason to foster enduring security links.

On issues of disagreement such as Palestine and Israel, Syria and Hezbollah, the two countries are likely to tip-toe around one other and try to pursue their national interests without a zero-sum mentality that would antagonise the other side. Such a mitigated “cold peace” could be a major factor in stabilising the region. Both Rouhani and Obama campaigned on the basis that they will talk to the other side and indeed they are delivering that campaign promise. This move is tactical rather than strategic. As long as the current diplomatic process over Iran’s nuclear energy programme yields results that can be sold by both administrations as successes to their sceptical domestic constituencies, the common interest binding Iran and the United States together is likely to galvanise closer relations between the two countries.

Fourth, since the 1979 revolution, Iranian foreign policy elites have called for the empowerment of the “third world.” To achieve this, the Islamic Republic immediately ceased its membership of the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and became a strong advocate of the Non-Aligned-Movement. This policy has transmuted into a discourse accentuating the need for a multi-polar world order that is not dominated by a single superpower. Naturally, Iran perceives itself as one of the columns in such an international system together with Brazil, India, China, Russia, the European Union and
the United States. The non-aligned policy encapsulated in slogans such as na sharghi, na gharbi, jomhur-ye eslami (Neither East nor West, Only the Islamic Republic) has manifested itself in Iran’s close relations with likeminded governments in Latin America, in particular the Bolivarian vanguard in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador and Nicaragua. Iran has fostered close political and economic relations with these countries in the past decades. The former President of Brazil, Lula, even took the audacious step, together with Turkey’s Prime Minister Erdogan, to propose a solution to the nuclear impasse during the Ahmadinejad presidency which was rejected by the White House. While it is a priority of the Rouhani administration to mend ties with the West and to find a final solution to the nuclear impasse, Rouhani has already indicated that he will deepen Iran’s existing relations with Latin America. (6)

The fifth and final preference focuses on the ideal of Islamic communitarianism, something Iran’s ruling elites have discussed since the 1979 Revolution. The Iranian state pursues this primarily through the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the network of bonyads (foundations) that operate in the country’s clerical “Vatican,” Qom. While the symbols and imagery of the revolution were steeped in Iranian and Shia traditions, Ayatollah Khomeini was adamant to portray the revolution as pan-Islamic, indeed as a revolt of all the oppressed against their oppressors, not in order to extend the claim for leadership beyond the confines of the Shia minority within Islam. To that end, the revolutionaries instituted “unity week,” a culturally driven policy to institutionalise unity between Sunni and Shia. At the same time, Iran has never really sacrificed the country’s national interests to the pan-Islamic utopia. The ruling classes of the country have been very careful not to criticise Russia and China for their brutal policies against their Muslim minorities in Chechnya and the Xinjiang province respectively in order not to jeopardise Iran’s cordial relations with the two countries.

Similarly, Iran tends to support Christian-orthodox Armenia in their territorial dispute with Shia-majority Azerbaijan. There is no automatic pan-Islamic solidarity that the Iranian state can afford to pursue on every occasion. While closer cooperation between Muslim-majority countries is pursued through various institutions, the pan-Islamic ambitions of the revolution have been conscribed by the outfit of the Iranian nation-state which demands a state-centric rationality that does not lend itself to caliphatic adventures.
Domestic determinants of Iran’s international affairs

The five strategic preferences of the Iranian state continue to be salient during the Rouhani presidency, despite the apparent shifts in Iran’s international disposition. The bargaining position of the Iranian President is particularly strong because he has received the backing of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Ayatollah made it unmistakeably clear that the president has a green light to pursue policies of constructive engagement. Hence, and in many ways for the first time in Iran’s post-revolutionary history, the two most powerful institutions of the Iranian state emphasise cooperation and diplomacy in international affairs as a means to maximise Iran’s national interest.

This shift is exemplified in the cultural imagery of the Islamic Republic. In the current discourse, and discernible from Ayatollah Khamenei’s central policy speech accentuating “heroic flexibility” in Iran’s dealings with international adversaries, the Islamic Republic accentuates the pragmatism of Imam Hassan, the grandson of the prophet Mohammad and the third Imam of the Shia. (7) Addressing senior veterans of the Revolutionary Guards, Khamenei maintained that a “wrestler also shows flexibility for technical reasons sometimes, but he never forgets who his rival is and what his main goal is.” (8) Hence, whereas the revolutionaries of yesterday emphasised the romantic “heroism” and sacrifice of Hassan’s younger brother, Imam Hossein, who together with his family was killed by the armies of Yazid in the seventh century CE, today the ruling classes in Iran repeatedly refer to his older brother Imam Hassan, known for his pragmatism, level-headedness and politically accommodating strategies. Whereas the Hussein paradigm emphasises revolutionary change a la Che Guevara manifesting itself in Hossein’s self-sacrifice during the battle of Karbala, the “Hassan paradigm” symbolises pragmatism, exemplified in the peace treaty that Hassan signed with Muawiya when he voluntarily handed over to him the leadership of the Ummah (nation) in the seventh century CE.

But there are also concrete institutional changes in the foreign policy decision-making process of the Islamic Republic. For example, the nuclear dossier is now firmly in the hands of the foreign ministry, with no tangible interference by the conservative National Security Council. The foreign ministry itself has been staffed with the best and brightest of Iran’s post-revolutionary diplomatic cadres. In another sign of consensual policies between the President and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has repeatedly signalled to the influential Revolutionary Guards that they should not interfere in the current diplomatic process. Although Rouhani is not a radical reformist in domestic politics, there are incremental shifts away from the highly securitised atmosphere that was characteristic for the Ahmadinejad presidency, in particular after the mass demonstrations against his re-election in 2009. The regime’s censorship has been
slightly relaxed and Iranian civil society has started to function with fewer restrictions again.

It is analytically central to point out that Rouhani (and all the Presidents before him for that matter) are products and not drivers of these changes which are determined by the preference settings of Iranian society. This can be theorised as “pluralistic momentum” that continuously impinges on the realm of the state through a bottom-up-process, from Iranian society to the ruling classes. (9) The central characteristic of this pluralistic momentum in Iran is that the clerical establishment can no longer take for granted the allegiance of their client social strata.

Pluralism engenders competition and state policies have to be “sold” to an audience that is no longer obliged to “buy” from one source. In this “market situation,” the monopoly on political power is dissected. As a result, institutions and elites operating within the domain of the state have to organise themselves in such a way as to mobilise their respective constituencies. They enter into a competitive situation with other groups who follow the same political rationale. Comparing electoral campaigns in Tehran, Shiraz, Ahwaz, Tabriz, Isfahan, Boroujerd and other cities during the summer of 2005, it was rather remarkable that the presidential candidates, including Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, scarcely employed Islamic imagery or referenced the political will of Ayatollah Khomeini to further their agenda. The campaign of Rouhani was very similar – geared to specific issues rather than abstract slogans. In short, Iranian leaders understand that it is public opinion that matters.

Secondly, all institutions attached to the state are under pressure to produce results, especially in the economic sphere. In turn, the pressure to produce results in a competitive situation engenders the rationalisation of policies. This explains why both reformers and conservatives advocate economic growth and public participation in the political and cultural process. In a pluralistic situation where political parties become marketing agencies of the state, reform ceases to be a monopoly of self-declared reformist parties. In other words, the reform agenda is necessarily intrinsic to the political process comprising all state institutions. It transcends the mono-causal conservative-reformist divide because the functioning of the whole state apparatus depends on public participation. Public relations with the client social strata, lobbying, fund-raising, involvement with the secular economy – the Islamic Republic is dependent on the country’s civil society in all these aspects of the affairs of the state. In such an interactive situation it is not impossible (for conservatives and reformists alike) to sell policies to a population of consumers without taking their wishes concerning the content of those policies into account. As such, Rouhani is a surface effect of these dynamics and
his reconciliatory foreign policies, especially towards the west, reflect the preferences of mainstream of Iranian society.

There are sociological factors for the capacity of Iranian society to drive this pluralistic momentum: In 1980, at the beginning of revolution, there were merely 175,000 students and 15,000 lecturers spread around 20 cities in Iran. In 2012, there were four million higher education students and over 110,000 lecturers in 120 cities. In 2010, Iran ranked higher than Brazil and Turkey in the United Nation’s Human Development index. (10) According to the British Royal Society, the number of educational publications in Iran increased from 736 in 1996 to 13,238 in 2008, the fastest such growth in the world. (11) In addition, the number of internet users rose dramatically, a monumental 13,000%. (12) In 2012, Iran announced the establishment of a nanotechnology centre and allocated 4% of its GDP to research and development as a part of a comprehensive plan for science. This is one of the highest allocations for research in the world. Thus, the Islamic revolution has seriously expanded the geography of knowledge in Iran which in turn has had an effect on the preference setting of Iranian civil society.

Conclusions

Iran under Rouhani has changed, in particular with regard to the country’s international affairs and attitudes towards reconciliation with the United States. But these nuanced changes are tempered by the enduring strategic preferences of the state which will continue to guide the international affairs of the Islamic Republic. These preferences of the Iranian state do not preclude closer relations with the United States or even a tacit accommodation of the issue of Israel. But they make it impossible that Iran emerges as a subservient pawn. Ultimately, for the United States and the West, the Iran of the future will not be the Iran of the Shah. Every Iranian president after the 1979 Revolution has been voted into office to deliver Iran’s national interest and to move the state towards more democracy and accountability. These preference settings of Iranian civil society have been boosted by the Arab revolts which have demonstrated that the new yardstick of politics in the region is not ideology anymore, but rather democracy, respect for human rights and social equality. President Rouhani is merely the latest manifestation of these realities of contemporary Iranian society and the regional context in which Iran is embedded.

Dr. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, head of Centre for Iranian Studies at the University of London.
Refrences:

(2) See Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, Iran in World Politics (London: Hurst, 2008) and more recently, Maaike Warnaar, Iranian Foreign Policy During Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Actions (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

(3) Mehdi Bazargan resigned amidst the US hostage crisis. Abulhassan Banisadr fled the country to Paris where he continues to live in exile until today.


(9) Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic, part 4.


(12) The Royal Society, Knowledge, Networks and Nations, 65.
Future of US-Iran Relations
Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian *

Abstract
The election of Hassan Rouhani has been the start of a new path for Iran’s foreign policy, including its relationship with Washington. This paper discusses three schools of thought prevalent in Iran’s regime towards the US, ranging from those who believe America is addicted to hegemony, to those who believe there is inherent antagonism between Iran’s Islamic system and the West to those who represent a more moderate stance, including current President Hassan Rouhani. The paper concludes that if relations between Iran and the US improve, there will likely be pressure from the US on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its other allies in the region to minimize tension with Iran, particularly in order to solve conflicts in the region from Lebanon to Afghanistan without losing Saudi or Iran as allies.

Introduction
When Hassan Rouhani took office in June last year, Iran faced numerous challenges. Chief among them were Iran’s convulsive relations with the West, in particular the US, the crisis over Iran’s nuclear program and an economy which was spiralling downward.
Rouhani, along with many economists in Iran, believed that mismanagement by
Ahmadinejad’s team was partly responsible for the state of Iran’s economy, but that
sanctions had also made a profound impact. It was based on these challenges that
Rouhani simply but effectively outlined his election platform for the masses clamouring
for change in Iran's future after eight tumultuous years of Ahmadinejad’s presidency. “It
is good for the centrifuges to spin (enriching uranium), but the wheels of Iranian
factories should also spin,” he remarked during his campaign. (1)

In the aftermath of his landslide victory, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei,
endorsed the concept of “heroic flexibility” in relations with the United States. This was
in contrast to prior years of mostly uninterrupted opposition to direct talks with
Americans, especially since 2003. Moderate Hassan Rouhani’s determination to alter the
trajectory of Iran’s foreign policy from confrontation to cooperation coupled with
Ayatollah Khamenei’s cautious support of engagement with the US paved the road to an
unprecedented meeting between the two states’ foreign ministers.

**Iran’s three schools of thought towards the US**

There are three schools of thought in the nezam (Iran’s political system) with respect to
relations with the United States. The first school of thought, to which Ayatollah
Khamenei subscribes, is that America cannot escape its addiction to hegemony. As a
result, the Islamic Republic of Iran rejects American domination and believes that the
US’ strategic objective is to topple the nezam and establish a new system that, like the
Shah’s regime, accepts a patron-client relationship.

Because of their deep-seated mistrust toward the US, advocates of this school of thought
view any American sponsored reconciliatory efforts with utmost suspicion. However, this
school of thought does not categorically reject rapprochement between the two
countries.

In March 2013, Ayatollah Khamenei stated that he is “not opposed” to direct talks with
the United States but he remarked that he is also “not optimistic.” (2) On January 9,
2014, he remarked, ”We had announced previously that if we feel it is expedient, we
would negotiate with Satan [the US] to deter its evil.” (3)

Even with respect to restoring Iran-US relations, Ayatollah Khamenei has publicly
remarked, “We have never said that the relations will remain severed forever.
Undoubtedly, the day relations with America prove beneficial for the Iranian nation, I will
be the first one to approve of that.” (4) He has articulated several similar statements.
This necessarily demonstrates he has not closed doors on dialogue and even restoring relations with the US.

Ayatollah Khamenei’s pessimism about the outcome of talks and cooperation with the US is not unfounded. Rather, it is from his own historic experiences between the two countries.

Before and after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Iran conducted direct talks with the United States. Although the talks centred around the situation in Afghanistan, Iran sought to open dialogue and cooperation with the United States. The focus of the talks after September 11 was directed toward cooperation between the two governments aimed at unseating the Taliban. Through the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, the armed opposition group to the Taliban which was equipped and financed by Iran, Iran effectively cooperated with American-led forces in bringing down the Taliban.

In later efforts to establish Afghanistan’s new government, Iran’s contribution was crucial. Ambassador James Dobbins, leader of the US delegation, explains the role of Javad Zarif, Iran’s then-Deputy Foreign Minister and Iran’s current Foreign Minister, as follows: “Zarif had achieved the final breakthrough, without which the Karzai government might never have been formed.” (5) But only a few weeks later, President Bush branded Iran as one of the components of the “axis of evil.”

Then, in 2003, Iran unofficially signalled a “grand bargain” to the US government in another rapprochement effort aimed at resolving all of the disputed issues between the two states. That bargain was also declined by the American administration.

Later in 2003, the monumental dispute between the two countries over Iran’s nuclear program emerged as a centre of contention. The author of this report acted as the Deputy of the then Secretary of Iran’s National Security Council, Hassan Rouhani, as well as the spokesman for Iran’s nuclear negotiating team. Between 2003 and 2005 in negotiations with the EU3 (Britain, France, Germany), the major obstacle to reaching an agreement was US insistence on the notion of “zero uranium enrichment inside Iran.” The situation was defined well by Britain’s Foreign Secretary at the time, Jack Straw. Speaking at a panel in the BBC in July 2013, he remarked, “We were getting somewhere, with respect, and then it’s a complicated story, the Americans actually pulled the rug from under [President Mohammad] Khatami’s feet and the Americans got what they didn’t want.” (6)
These experiences led Ayatollah Khamenei to believe that Americans are not prepared to compromise over less than “regime change” while he has, over and over again, acquiesced to opening doors for reconciliation to no avail.

The second school of thought, advocated by radicals, asserts that there is inherent antagonism between Iran’s Islamic system and the West. They argue that the way to success is sheer resistance until America recognizes Iran and respects its identity as is. In their view, negotiation with the United States means accepting defeat and must be considered the ultimate red line.

Hossein Shariatmadari who advocates this camp argues the US insists on bringing Iran to the negotiating table in order to destroy its stature as the “flag bearer of struggle against global domination.” He asserts that Iran’s resistance to the US has made it the role model for all freedom fighters in the Islamic world, viewing that:

“America’s intention is to break this model apart by talking to Iran...They want to give this impression to the movements in the Islamic world that the Islamic Republic of Iran, your strategic and ideological ally...[after long years of resistance] had no final choice other than to sit with and talk to America.”

The third school of thought represents the moderate camp. Notable figures ascribing to this trend are Iran’s former President, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and the current Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani. They agree with the notion that the US seeks regime change if it is able to do so. However, they contend that enormous common interests exist, both economically and politically, and that these interests mutually suffer as a result of hostile relations between the two countries. For example, they maintain that jihadists and extremists are a common and dangerous adversary of Iran, the US, and its allies in the region. Therefore, they should cooperate to root them out or at least contain them. To underscore this school of thought, they believe that through serious negotiations and engagement, it is indeed possible to utilize the common interests and reshape the US’ position toward Iran’s nezam.

In an interview during his election campaign, Rouhani said, “Eight or ten years ago we could talk about reducing tensions with the US...Now, we are in the stage of hostilities...we must first diminish the hostilities back to tension and then try to defuse them.”

Over the last 25 years, or since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the first and third schools of thought have oscillated between cooperation and rejection while the second
camp has relentlessly sought to prevent enduring talks and any notion of improving relations between Iran and the US.

**Rouhani’s position in Iranian politics**

Among politicians, few possess Rouhani’s credentials and background. In the 1980s during Iran’s war with Iraq, he held close relations with the commanders of Iran’s military and the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) when he served as Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. He served for eight years as Head of the Foreign Policy committee of the Iranian Parliament, 16 years as the Secretary of the National Security Council and was Iran’s leading nuclear negotiator between 2003 and 2005. This places him in extremely exclusive company with political figures possessing a deep understanding of Iran’s foreign policy as well as scrupulous details of Iran’s nuclear crisis.

Additionally, having served without interruption for 23 years as Ayatollah Khamenei’s representative in the National Security Council until his election last June, Rouhani was in contact with every corridor of power in Iran.

These qualities place Rouhani in a rare position in Iran, empowering him to negotiate with the power elite, including the Supreme Leader, while he also negotiates with world powers over Iran’s nuclear standoff. The temporary and voluntary suspension of uranium enrichment between 2003 and 2005 resulted from Rouhani’s negotiating skills, even though Ayatollah Khamenei was fundamentally reluctant about suspension.

It is therefore prudent to claim that Rouhani today, as a moderate who is determined to end the nuclear issue and move toward détente with the US, holds a particular position in Iran’s politics. Cementing his place in Iran’s politics is the backing of Iran's Supreme Leader and considerable support of the Iranian population. The US’ calculations should account for Rouhani's stature and sincere efforts if their real intention is to untie Iran’s impossible nuclear Gordian knot through diplomatic processes.

**Challenges facing US-Iran relations**

Due to profound mistrust between the two states, although perhaps more palpable on the Iranian side, the fate and future trajectory of relations between the US and Iran will undoubtedly be determined by the outcome of the Geneva accord, known as the “Joint Plan of Action.” As far as both parties are concerned, there will be no other bilateral engagement activated unless a comprehensive deal is reached on the nuclear issue. The
reason is simple. Rouhani and his team, including his Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, cannot convince the Supreme Leader and other followers of the first camp that even if the United States' ultimate intention is to topple the regime, these intentions could be reshaped through honest and serious talks, negotiations and confidence-building measures. A meeting between the US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif parallel to the Munich Security Conference in February 2014 confirms this viewpoint. The situation in Washington is very similar because Obama cannot convince Congress and pressure lobbies for a Grand Bargain with Iran.

According to reports, in response to Kerry raising the issue of Syria and urging Iran “to show a willingness to play a constructive role in bringing an end to the conflict,” (10) Zarif said that “he did not have the authority to discuss Syria and the focus of the meeting was on nuclear negotiations.” This was a clear response to US policy preventing Iran from participating in the Geneva II conference on Syria. (11) However, Iran has been prepared to participate unconditionally in multi-lateral talks to find solutions for ending the tragedy in Syria.

In November 2013, Iran’s Supreme Leader offered supportive and forceful remarks to Iran’s negotiating team. “No one should consider our negotiating team as compromisers...These are the children of revolution...No one should belittle an officer doing their job...We strongly support our diplomacy team,” he said. (12) Despite this resounding support, there are still sporadic hardliner critics of the manner in which Zarif and Rouhani have handled the nuclear issue thus far. However, the mood in general is silenced, adopting a wait-and-see approach. The main challenge to the Geneva interim accord and ultimately, a peaceful resolution to Iran’s nuclear crisis, comes from abroad, primarily the United States.

The pro-Israel lobby and some members of Congress insist that putting pressure on Iran is the only way to force change in its behaviour. Senator Menendez is a primary sponsor of the sanction bill called the “Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act,” which in practical terms is a complete oil embargo on Iran. Menendez argues that, “Current sanctions brought Iran to the negotiating table and a credible threat of future sanctions will require Iran to cooperate and act in good faith at the negotiating table.” (13)

But this argument is flawed, espousing that sanctions were the only reason why Iranians were persuaded to sign the Geneva interim agreement. The reality is that despite all the pressure that sanctions would impose on Iran’s economy, if the US would not have departed from its decade-old policy of “no enrichment on Iranian soil” and would not have accepted compromise on uranium enrichment (even though limited in amount and
level) as part of the final agreement, the Geneva interim agreement would not have materialized.

President Obama recognized that insistence on zero enrichment was unrealistic and unachievable. To those who criticize his administration’s acceptance of enrichment in Iran, he says, “I can envision a world in which Congress passed every one of my bills that I put forward. I mean, there are a lot of things that I can envision that would be wonderful.” (14)

That said, there are indications that the US administration also continues to misread the situation and seeks to impose demands that might jeopardize, and result in the failure of the Geneva accord. At a Senate hearing on February 4, 2014, Wendy Sherman, Chief US Negotiator to the talks with Iran remarked, “We know that Iran does not need to have an underground, fortified enrichment facility like Fordow...[or] a heavy-water reactor at Arak to have a peaceful nuclear program.” (15)

These implied demands are deal breakers. Shutting down these facilities would halt a monumental financial and human capital investment that was several years in the making, at the will of a foreign power. This is in total contrast to one of the pillars of the revolution and the Iranian nezam’s resistance to foreign domination. In fact, Iran’s resistance to forgo uranium enrichment emanates from the same worldview. In addition, submitting to such demands would incur high political costs to the decision makers who have constantly linked the nuclear program to the notion of national pride and would make them vulnerable to charges of selling out the country’s dignity.

Javad Zarif wasted no time responding to Wendy Sherman’s statements, declaring that shutting down nuclear facilities was impossible. He said, “Iran's nuclear technology is non-negotiable and comments about Iran’s nuclear facilities are worthless... Ms. Sherman should stick to the reality and stop speaking of impossible things even if it is only for domestic consumption ... since reaching a solution can be hindered by such words.” (16) The reality is that specifics of Iran’s nuclear activities are negotiable when it pertains to production levels and extent as well as implementation of surveillance and monitoring measures to ensure that Iran does not divert its nuclear program toward weaponization. However, for reasons mentioned earlier, closing down its facilities is not negotiable. (17)

Meanwhile, the US rationale behind demanding shutdown of those facilities is weak. The first reason is because no country has ever developed an atomic bomb as a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – in other words, under its supervision.
Even the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003 before testing its first nuclear bomb three years later. Iran’s government chooses to remain as a signatory to the NPT. If they sought to develop nuclear weapons, they could legally withdraw from the NPT after giving a three month notice to the IAEA and then reconfigure the program for the production of nuclear weapons without legal ramifications.

Second, if Iran intends to acquire atomic weapons covertly, it is illogical they would consider doing so in known facilities under threat of shutdown. Iran would not invite draconian sanctions by insisting on continuing overt nuclear activities. If Iran did not truly desire peaceful nuclear activity, it could close the recognized facilities, appearing to give in to foreign demands, and work clandestinely.

**A make-or-break deal**

The nuclear deal is pivotal in determining the future of US-Iran relations. The fact is that reaching an agreement between Iran and the P5+1 states is predominantly influenced by agreement between Iran and the US. This is because from September 2003, the beginning of the Iranian nuclear crisis, to September 2013, the US blocked any realistic deal. Therefore, if the two fail to overcome their differences, there will be no deal. And if they succeed, others will most likely come.

Success in striking a deal on the nuclear issue will close a bitter chapter in the troubled relations between Iran and America and will open doors to progress in other areas of dispute. Perhaps more importantly, the two countries could then cooperate on stabilizing the crisis-torn Middle East, from Lebanon in the West to Afghanistan in the East. Together with its allies in the region, the US, in cooperation with Iran, can shape a regional security system to fight the most imminent threat to the interests and security of all parties involved: the rise of extremism and jihadist groups. Under the current circumstances, Iran and the US cannot afford to be enemies because the primary beneficiary of this situation is the escalation of terrorist groups spilling over from one country to the next.

The question remains, what if the Geneva interim agreement fails? In such an eventuality, the US will most likely impose tougher sanctions on Iran. As a result, communication and dialogue between Iran and America will likely cease and the pattern of previous years, meaning the exchange of threatening rhetoric from both sides, will again result in the culmination of hostilities.
This situation would inevitably cause the current moderate policies of Iran to be pushed to the side-lines and radical politics would return in Tehran. Irreconcilable and conflicting policies on both sides of the fence cannot indefinitely continue. History demonstrates that when governments fail to overcome their differences through dialogue, the only other alternative is to seek a military solution.

If the US’ goal is to make sure Iran’s nuclear activities are, and remain peaceful, this is achievable by ensuring the maximum level of transparency and monitoring measures in the framework of the NPT. Given the unstable situation in the Middle East, logic dictates that the adoption of a realistic approach toward the crisis over Iran’s nuclear program will preclude an unfortunate collapse of the Geneva interim agreement which many view as the last opportunity for a diplomatic settlement.

**Effects of Iran-US rapprochement on Iran’s neighbouring Arab countries**

There are currently two schools of thought in neighbouring Arab countries with respect to their relations with Iran. The one led by Saudi Arabia and some other Arab countries view these relations in the framework of a zero-sum game. This school of thought is concerned that better relations between Iran and the US would undermine their weight in the region in favour of Iran. Therefore, they see themselves in perpetual competition with Iran.

Moderates in Arab countries led by Oman advocate the second school of thought which views better relations between Iran and the US as best serving the interests of all countries in the region. Peace between Iran and the US, according to this school of thought, may open a path for the formation of regional cooperation, stability and peace between Iran and its neighbours, most importantly with Saudi Arabia. This will secure a stable flow of oil which is in the interests of the US and its friends and allies, as well as Iran. Additionally and perhaps more importantly, it creates a unified power to root out a common adversary of terrorism and extremism.

Iran’s moderate mind-set, supported by the Supreme Leader, is in line with Oman’s view. The current Iranian nezam’s doctrine is to reshape Iran’s foreign relations with all countries, particularly Iran’s regional neighbours, in a win-win framework. The moderates in Iran maintain that relations based on a zero-sum game are shaky, unstable and even perilous.

If Iran’s relationship with the US improves, it is rational to expect the US will urge actors in Saudi Arabia and other Arab allies to abandon their confrontational policies toward
Iran. This is important because not only does the explosive situation in the Middle East necessitate cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia as two regional powers, but also because the US cannot pursue a coherent foreign policy if Saudi, its strategic ally, is in constant conflict with Iran while the US seeks to cooperate with Iran to address the region’s crises from Lebanon to Afghanistan.

Therefore, it is safe to assume that if Iran-US relations are to improve, although previously unimaginable, the US might effectively mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its other Arab allies to open a new chapter after years of strained relations. If the US and Iran can make strategic shifts in their relations, there is no reason Iran and Saudi Arabia cannot follow suit. Such a shift would facilitate establishing a regional cooperation system in the Persian Gulf and beyond.

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Domestic Voices: Actors in Iran’s Political Arena

Farah Al-Zaman Abu Shuair *

Abstract

This paper highlights views on Iran-US rapprochement held by actors in Iran’s political arena and outlines reasons some parties reject it while others not only accept but also defend it. At the forefront of these is the institution of the Iranian Supreme Leader that plays a role overshadowing all others in the country. The Supreme Leader does not prevent negotiations with the United States within the framework of the nuclear issue but remains cautious in the face of any practical rapprochement. This paper examines the Iranian government’s point of view as well as that of reformists who do not reject the principle of convergence, addresses the position of fundamentalist and hard-line Revolutionary Guards who reject any restoration of such relations and ends with an examination of Iranian public opinion that puts lifting the economic embargo imposed on Iran at the top of its priority list, regardless of the means used by politicians and policymakers to achieve this objective.
Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States have a long history of conflict. Diplomatic relations between them were severed after the 1979 Islamic Revolution’s victory in Iran. However, over the years, Tehran and Washington have held several meetings to discuss regional issues of mutual interest, such as events in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as met in the same room on several occasions parallel to nuclear talks.

Iran today is different. The first signs of change loomed on the horizon after moderate President Hassan Rouhani took office and adopted open communication with the West. This is in addition to positive signals to the US by Rouhani and other Iranian parties after eight years of radical conservative rule and after tough sanctions were imposed on the country because of its nuclear programme. These included a ban on oil imports from Iran and a boycott of Iranian banks. The sanctions which had been imposed over the past eight years have had negative consequences on the Iranian people and on the overall economic situation, causing Iranians to look for politicians who would adopt new policies to revitalize the economy and reopen the country.

Many Iranian politicians have adopted moderate language in support of dialogue with the West lifting economic sanctions became a popular demand holding priority over other issues. However, the question of negotiating with an old enemy which follows a policy of isolating Iran and was the main cause of sanctions has sparked controversy among political currents in Iran whose political discourse and perception of the West in general, and the US in particular, are different.

This paper will shed light on differing positions of key political actors in Iran regarding rapprochement with the US, reasons of those who oppose and motives of those who support convergence. It will also address the view of the Iranian people whose priority is resolving Iran’s economic woes. In terms of policymakers, some are supporters, while others are cautious and suspicious of the United States. Policymakers in Iran include various powers and political tides, so it is natural that domestic views on Iran-US rapprochement will differ. The first five sections of the paper discuss the domestic voices amenable to some type of rapprochement, the next two sections discuss the domestic voices of those absolutely opposed to rapprochement with the US and the final section preceding the conclusion discusses Iranian public opinion on rapprochement.
Supreme Leader as an institution

The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ali Khamenei, has the final word on the country’s strategic issues, of which the Iranian nuclear issue and relations with the United States constitute the most important. The leader has chosen to work under the banner of “heroic flexibility.” Iran’s conditions today are different, particularly in view of the fact that there are so many issues in the region which are being reshuffled. Tehran now needs more flexible attitudes without making fateful concessions. (1)

Regional and domestic circumstances have made it necessary for the Supreme Leader to give the government more room to reach a nuclear deal with the West, allowing Iran to breathe an economic sigh of relief and implying revival of its institutions, a fact that will benefit everyone. But when it comes to normalisation directly with Washington, the personal stance of the Leader and his small circle of his advisors, such as his military affairs adviser, Rahim Safavi, and his representative in the Revolutionary Guard Corps, Ali Saeedi, will be different.

The Supreme Leader already expressed that he was not optimistic about positive results from nuclear negotiations. (2) Earlier, he defined the meaning of dialogue with the US as, “engagement, and this means to get something for a price. What can we give America and what will it give us in return? The problem for them lies in the fact that Iran sticks to the line of true Islam, and they want you to abandon this line. Are you ready to offer this price?” (3)

In another speech, Khamenei insisted, “Iran does not trust the United States. The US government has no logic, behaves in a superior fashion towards others and does not fulfil its promises. Iran cannot agree with a government that serves the Zionist network across the world. But we support the diplomatic moves of our government despite the lack of optimism on our part as to what the American side will offer.” (4)

He reiterated that position during the thirty-fifth anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran when he confirmed his support of Rouhani’s government. He directed his speech to those who had criticised the policies of openness and the manner of dialogue with major countries, asking them to give the government more time. “The politicians who criticise negotiations with major powers on Iran’s nuclear programme are invited to show some leniency towards the government, which took office only a few months ago and should be given more time to advance in its plans,” he said. He then blasted the US, saying it would have toppled the Iranian government if it had had the
opportunity and adding that Washington had adopted an approach characterised by domination and interference in his country’s internal affairs. (5)

It is notable in this analysis as well that the Leader did not object to the phone call between Rouhani and Obama after the last UN General Assembly meeting in New York nor did he object to bilateral meetings between the foreign minister, Mohammed Javad Zarif, and US secretary of state, John Kerry, parallel to talks between Iran and the P5+1. He also announced his support for the negotiating team formed by Rouhani, calling on all parties inside Iran to give them space; however, it is clear the Leader maintains a cautious stance. He stands against any rush towards normalisation of bilateral relations with Washington but does not completely close the door on the possibility of better ties with the West in general in hopes this will improve Iran’s domestic situation, image abroad and at the very least reassure the world of Iran’s good intentions after his country’s isolation.

Khamenei seems to want to say that Iran has decided on dialogue with the “devil” only to ward off potential disasters. This cautious and pessimistic attitude also explains how the Leader, at this stage, occupies the middle ground between the government, which does not reject rapprochement with Washington, and those who outright reject this convergence, such as the Revolutionary Guards and hard-line conservatives.

The position and motives of the Supreme Leader can be summarised as follows:

1. Despite his lack of optimism about the results in the long run, Khamenei agrees implicitly to limited convergence with the US, seeking to resolve outstanding issues on the country’s nuclear programme and hoping to ease economic sanctions. At the same time, he is careful about opening the door to dialogue on many aspects of bilateral relations between Tehran and Washington. In the current conjuncture, he is prepared to give the green light for negotiations between the two countries exclusively in relation to the nuclear issue.

2. Iran’s interests, including regional and national security roles, require the adoption of “heroic flexibility” dialogue.

3. There are historical reasons behind Khamenei’s caution about the rush to normalise relations with the United States. This attitude stems from his leadership of the Islamic Revolution, meaning he cannot outright condemn the “Death to America” slogan dating to the beginning of the revolution. Moreover, many in Iran cannot forget this slogan or ignore it after years of hostility.
4. The Leader is trying to entrench all trends in Iran with his cloak. Therefore, he prevents condemnation of the government’s efforts yet adopts the position of those who have been hostile to America historically. He also tries to bridge the gap between the people and political powers created after the high price Iranians paid as a result of the economic embargo.

5. These positions taken by the top authority in Iran means that it wants to keep up with regional and international developments and attempt to end its isolation. This is in addition to having the embargo and consequent pressure lifted while maintaining its national security.

Rafsanjani and the moderates
With the reasons for hostility against the US vanishing, Rafsanjani and the moderates support conditional convergence based on confidence-building. This view seems to be the strongest among all parties for as long as the Leader continues to use the “heroic flexibility” discourse which has gained a majority of the public’s support.

This moderate line, the third stance between the right and the left in Iran, emerged after the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, with its most prominent historical symbol being Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a companion of Imam Khomeini, and second in importance after Khamenei. Rafsanjani is a pillar of the regime, is regarded regionally and internationally as a symbol of Iranian moderation, and is a strong supporter of Rouhani.

For a long while, he has been regarded as a controversial figure. He has argued that the slogan “Death to America” was neither mentioned in the Qur’an nor in Islam, and that Khomeini had not objected to discarding the slogan. (6) This sparked much confusion in various circles in Iran, especially among hard-line clerics. (7)

Rafsanjani believes it is natural for Iran to resume relations with the US, but only if the causes of the crisis are settled. Like the majority of Iran’s political leadership, he believes that there has been historical enmity from Americans against Iran starting after the Islamic revolution and that Washington adopted and nourished hostile policies designed to isolate Iran and demonise it internationally.

On the other hand, Rafsanjani believes that Iran needs to rebuild itself from the inside, and to improve itself regionally and international in order to improve its global image. In his opinion, this means the ability to confront US policy, compelling it to review its
previous position and negotiate with Tehran. Rafsanjani emphasises “facing US policy with moderation and openness” because that would mean the US would decrease its campaign to demonise Iran. (8)

During his two presidential terms, Rafsanjani adopted a policy of rebuilding Iran after the end of the eight-year war with Iraq. He improved the country’s relations with other countries in the region and with Europe. He repeatedly said that America was the primary world power, and asked about whether there was any difference between Europe, China and the United States, “If Iran has dialogue with these countries, he asked, why not with America?” (9)

Rafsanjani and his companions do not advocate making concessions to the US because they regard hostility with the US government as political rather than ideological. However, they favour rapprochement with the US because it can provide Iran with a way out of the economic blockade. This view contradicts slightly with the position that mistrusts the US and believes that America wants to inhibit Iran’s movement.

**Iranian government under Rouhani’s leadership**

President Rouhani is considered close to Rafsanjani, who is also the head of the Expediency Council. However, Rouhani’s government is considered the operational arm for the implementation of Iran’s foreign policy, and this is seen in the fact that the government is trying to implement Rafsanjani’s policy of moderation. However, the government remains within the limits set by the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards, forced to reconcile between the different views in the country.

Rouhani enjoys good relations with the Supreme Leader, and is a prominent member of Hozeh. He also holds the key of diplomacy in his hand, and sees easing hostility with other countries as the solution to the Iranian nuclear dilemma. He claims to have full authority to negotiate with the West on Iran’s nuclear programme.

Rouhani appointed Mohammad Javad Zarif, who had extensive contacts with the Americans during Rafsanjani’s and Mohammad Khatami’s presidential terms, as foreign minister. He also transferred the nuclear issue from the National Security Council to the Foreign Ministry and handed it over to moderates. This gave the government’s position a diplomatic form that is premised on the alleviation of negative foreign policy discourse toward the US and the West, with emphasis on non-negotiable issues.
Since the presidential campaign, Rouhani has promoted the idea that solving Iran’s problems lay in two areas: foreign policy first and the economy second. The most notable problem is sanctions imposed on Iran. (10) Rouhani’s programme stresses the need for interaction between Iran and other countries, and even the integration of its revolutionary regime with the international community, under the approach of what he called “constructive engagement.” This is in addition to intensifying efforts to develop Iran’s relations with others, and giving a greater role to diplomacy to take on difficult questions such as the nuclear programme, and relations with the US and neighbouring countries, especially those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

In an article in the Washington Post titled, “Why is Iran Seeking Constructive Engagement?” Rouhani explained the new Iranian approach toward the world and announced the beginning of a new era in his country’s interaction with the world according to an agenda of dialogue, reconciliation and constructive engagement.

“The world has changed. International politics are no longer a zero-sum game but a multi-dimensional arena where cooperation and competition often occur simultaneously. Gone is the age of blood feuds. World leaders are expected to lead in turning threats into opportunities,” he wrote. Rouhani stressed he intended to follow a policy of reconciliation and constructive dialogue. He directed his words to the international community and the US, pointing out that diplomatic convergence did not mean making fateful concessions, but rather was a commitment to the principle of equality and mutual respect to dispel fears that hamper relations and achievement of common goals. (11)

The president and his government’s stances do not reject the principle of direct negotiations with the US but rather indicate a desire to resume relations. (12) Rouhani argues if rapprochement with the US meets the requirement of “heroic flexibility” set by the Supreme Leader, it will achieve the following:

1. Lifting of the economic embargo imposed by the US on Iran, the release of frozen Iranian assets in US banks, and even lifting of other western sanctions.

2. Convergence will provide recognition of Iran’s right to possess a nuclear programme with its obligation to fulfil the Geneva Accord and the agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Rouhani addressed the Supreme Leader after the Geneva agreement and confirmed his loyalty, (13) hoping to get a green light to continue with his efforts as long as they met the Leader’s conditions.
3. Recognition of a regional role for Iran because rapprochement with the US will lead to bilateral cooperation on Middle East issues and a resolution of some of the region’s crises, such as the Syrian crisis.

4. The Iranian government is concerned with the implementing the views of citizens who elected it. Rouhani repeatedly mentioned this in his speeches when he talked about his intentions not to betray those who voted for him economically or politically. This matter requires rapprochement with the most influential power in the world. (14)

**Reformists**

The reformist trend led by former president Mohammad Khatami and his supporters, who are still under the cloak of the Islamic Republic, experienced a revival after Rouhani won presidential elections. This came after its absence from the political scene since the 2009 election crisis, when reformists supported Mir Hossein Mousavi’s dispute of election results.

This trend’s vision seems clear and explicit, and favours rapprochement with the US and direct dialogue with it (15) based on the following:

1. Rapprochement with the US is consistent with the political discourse of the reformists, who have long questioned continued hostility with the US at a time when rapprochement may gain much benefit for Iran.

2. Any rapprochement with Washington implies a return of the reformists to the political arena and the rise of this trend after years of absence. It has been noted that after the election of Rouhani, the door had been widely opened for the reformists, their newspapers and their books. Rumours also began to circulate on the impending end of the house arrest imposed on 2009 presidential candidates Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi.

3. During the two presidential terms of Khatami, the reformists suspended uranium enrichment and chose pacification to alleviate pressure on Iran. They fear military action against Iran and therefore encourage diplomacy and direct dialogue with the USA.

4. The reformists have repeatedly pointed out that any relationship with the US does not necessarily mean departure from the Islamic Republic’s system. This is an
attempt to distance themselves from the 2009 accusations that some of them had plotted against the regime. (16)

Despite the reformists’ explicit call for remedying what hard-line politicians had ruined with Washington, they have increasing fears that the focus of Rouhani’s government on reforming Iran’s foreign relations and improving relations with the West will be at the expense of internal reforms and support for political and cultural freedoms inside Iran. (17)

Religious establishment or Hozeh (Shia higher learning academies)

Within Iran’s religious establishment, there are clerics affiliated with the fundamentalist current and others who are moderate. According to various statements, the viewpoints of hozeh clerics are close to the Khamenei’s viewpoint. (18)

It is no secret, however, that some of the hozeh clerics have reservations about the actions of the militants and their harsh criticism of government policies in approaching the West and beginning dialogue. These clerics believe Iran is passing through circumstances that require internal unity more than ever before, and they focus on the need to maintain internal unity of the country. They also believe it is necessary to spare Iran any additional problems between political groups which may detract from attempts to solve the economic crisis, the main demand of all Iranians.

The religious establishment argues that if convergence is the key to lifting the burden on citizens, there is no harm in it. Many clerics see nothing negative about negotiating with the West to resolve the nuclear issue, and nothing negative about opening discussion with the US as long as red lines are not crossed and principles of the Islamic Republic are not violated. According to them, negotiations can maintain Iranians’ dignity and save the country from paying the price of the economic embargo imposed on it. (19)

Apart from these five trends, there are also those who are absolutely opposed to reaching out to the “Great Satan,” and their viewpoints will be discussed in these two final sections.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

This institution absolutely stands against any rapprochement with the US. A number of its senior officials harshly criticised the Geneva nuclear accord with the West and the foreign policies of Rouhani and Zarif, arguing that such policies tend towards western
liberal politics. Last September, the IRGC commander, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, even criticised the Rouhani-Obama phone call, describing it as premature. However, the Supreme Leader’s support of Rouhani and the nuclear deal kept the conservative elements within the IRGC under control. This can be deduced from a recent statement by Jafari in which he said, “The Revolutionary Guards will keep silent about this issue because we do not want to give the opportunity to anyone to meddle inside Iran.”

There are a number of reasons for the Guards’ opposition:

- The IRGC regards the US as a force of global arrogance which antagonises the Islamic Republic of Iran and argues that Iran should not deal with a force established on domination and hegemony in the world.

- The Guards consider any agreement between Iran and the US a threat to the ideological basis of the IRGC’s power. The IRGC sees itself as responsible for maintaining the institution of velayat-e-faqih (rule of the jurist), the protection of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its national security and the gains of the Islamic revolution. Also, any Iran-US rapprochement could mean a serious decline in the role of the IRGC because it regards America as the “Great Satan.”

- The IRGC is an Iranian force that protects the so-called axis of resistance. It supports Hezbollah and Palestinian resistance factions in addition to being the military establishment which secures the interests of the Islamic Republic across the world. It is a force stationed in Gulf waters to confront US military presence there. Thus, any relationship with America will necessarily mean a decline in this role.

- Considering the economic crisis, there are virtually no alternative options for the Guards to the foreign policy pursued by Rouhani. However, they lead very important economic sectors inside and outside Iran. This began during Ahmadinejad’s tenure as president to save the local economy and to circumvent the embargo imposed on Iran. There is no doubt the success of Rouhani’s foreign policy, specifically rapprochement with the West, would reduce this economic role, particularly if a significant portion of the sanctions are lifted. It is clear that Rouhani is aware of this issue as he has called on the guards to reduce the role of the military in the economy. Rouhani was armed with the Supreme Leader’s words regarding the need of this institution to distance itself from the political arena and with the popular momentum which supports a nuclear deal with the West.
Radical fundamentalists

This group publicly condemns all negotiations, convergence or relations with the US. Some members of the Iranian parliament from this current criticised government policies, the president and the foreign minister, arguing that the interim agreement between Tehran and the P5+1 which was drafted February and is subject to further modifications is in the interest of the western countries while its advantages to Iran are modest. They add the agreement exposes the Iranian nuclear programme to danger.

This group argues the government has made significant concessions by agreeing to cease part of Iran’s nuclear activities in return for a partial easing of international sanctions, and believes that the interim agreement did not guarantee this right. (24)

Around 100 radical fundamentalists waited for Rouhani’s return from the UN General Assembly meeting at Mehrabad airport in Tehran, expressing their anger at his phone conversation with Obama, and chanting “Death to America.” This trend does not trust the US and refuses to sit with the Americans at the same table, (25) for the following reasons:

- Historically, the US is an enemy that attempted to pre-empt Iran’s Islamic Revolution and sow discord inside Iran to overthrow the Islamic regime.

- Hostility with the US has been the key reason for all of Iran’s achievements over the past three decades.

- Any political or other relations cannot be established without making concessions, and the radicals do not agree to make any concessions.

- Radical fundamentalists believe any rapprochement between Tehran and Washington will imply modifying domestic politics, which means marginalisation of their role within the country.

- Some conservatives repeat certain statements against rapprochement or dialogue with the US with the aim of setting limits to Rouhani’s foreign policy, demanding that the US should first change its behaviour towards Iran.

Despite the fact that the Supreme Leader does not oppose the government’s actions, one cannot underestimate the ability of conservatives who have the power to curb and possibly abort Rouhani’s rapprochement policy. They have a strong grip on the country and have key instruments of power, including their strong presence in the Shura Council. They can withdraw confidence from the foreign minister or any minister in the
government, and can approve new laws and force the government to implement them. For example, some MPs began to prepare a draft resolution to increase uranium enrichment by 60 per cent. If this resolution is voted upon, the Geneva Accord and any unexpected conciliatory Iranian approach toward the United States would be undermined. Finally, they repeatedly cite the Leader, claiming he does not trust America, and that he is not optimistic about the course of nuclear negotiations.

**Iranian society**

The election of Rouhani ended a crisis that Iran had faced since the 2009 protests. With Rouhani as president, Iranian citizens’ expectations of an end to their economic woes have increased. This has become the basic requirement of all Iranians, irrespective of how it might be achieved.

After Rouhani’s return from the UN General Assembly and after receiving severe criticism, he initiated a poll to gauge Iranians’ opinions on reshaping their country’s relations with the United States. Soon thereafter, a presidential spokesperson announced that the opinion poll revealed 80 per cent of those who participated agreed to change in the course of Iran-US relations, and 20 per cent did not want to develop relations, but were split on the use of the slogan “Death to America” on formal occasions and Friday sermons. Some argued the phrase should continue to be used, while others argued it needed to be struck from the country’s vocabulary. (26) Despite the lack of recognition of the results of the poll because it was considered informal, it is possible to at least somewhat classify Iranian voices from the street. Iranians, as mentioned earlier, want a sound economic system following long-term sanctions which have had toxic effects on them and their livelihoods. (27)

All else equal, the economy is the decisive factor. It concerns even the Iranian citizen who is fanatically nationalist, and will not agree to make a fateful concession that will affect their sovereignty. Most important for all citizens, despite their opinion on rapprochement, in terms of foreign policy are those issues that affect their day-to-day living.

The Iranian citizen agrees with the politicians, in some way, that the US was the cause of the embargo, isolation and demonisation on the international stage. However, there is a difference between Iranians regarding the type of confrontation, and the method of reviewing their country’s foreign policy.
Some Iranians who support convergence feel it should be on the basis of two peers (in other words, the Iran and US acting as peers), and all of them agree it would help Iran in openness towards the outside world and settling many of their country’s issues. They believe that if reasons for enmity disappear, there should be no enmity. Among these groups are young people in major cities, businesspeople, industrialists and traders who have been influenced by sanctions and currency devaluation.

Those who reject convergence and even the removal of the slogan “Death to America” from the public lexicon mostly live in rural areas and villages. They constitute the main base for Basij militia recruitment and Hozeh seminary students. All of them cling to the view that America is the historical enemy of Iran which supported the Shah who was overthrown by the Islamic revolution and is an ally of Israel and other enemies of Iran.

**Conclusion**

Active parties in the Iranian political arena agree the US followed hostile policies towards Tehran, and was the reason for the mobilisation of international pressure against it over the past decades. Differences of opinion on Iran-US convergence between political groups in Iran represents an articulation of positions in a manner that will maintain the political balance in the country regarding a strategic and almost doctrinal issue that concerns the Islamic Revolution.

Although each party is firmly committed to its position, this articulation and these differences indicate that Iran is now waiting, testing the intentions of the West and awaiting removal of the ambiguity regarding certain regional realities and future developments.

It is certain that for the first time there is something approximating an Iranian internal consensus regarding the review of relations with neighbouring countries, the West and the US. The vigilance of all Iranian parties regarding the approach of the dialogue and rapprochement with the US will remain the country’s main issue in the upcoming period. It is also clear that the compromise approach approved by the Supreme Leader is convenient to everyone to deal with this matter at the current stage because it is not in any party’s interests to increase internal tensions.

The results of negotiations on a final nuclear deal between Iran and major powers will have the decisive word in the internal equation of Iran. If the government achieves success and resolves the nuclear issue as well as succeeds in significantly easing
sanctions, the reconciliatory and moderate approach will be enhanced and will gain further public support.

If, however, Washington does not respond quickly to Rouhani’s openness, it will negatively affect his legitimacy and strengthen his opponents’ arguments. The Supreme Leader may then withdraw support for Rouhani’s government if Rouhani goes too far in his openness with the US and the West without Khamenei’s consent. However, most Iranian analysts believe such a struggle is unlikely because Rouhani is a son of the regime and because everyone is keen to find internal consensus formulas to prevent unproductive conflicts around rapprochement.

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Mechanisms of an Iran-US Rapprochement: Lessons from the Past

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Abstract
Starting with a discussion of the 1970s Soviet-American and Sino-American rapprochement efforts, this report examines the factors which caused the first to fail and the second to succeed. The key difference is the former was based on an effort to control nuclear arms, while the latter was based on an effort to unify against a common geopolitical threat. In light of these findings, the report makes predictions about the likelihood of success for the current Iranian-American rapprochement efforts and concludes that in the event Iran reneges on any deal it signs with the US, any future efforts at rapprochement will necessarily require larger concessions from Iran.

Introduction
Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, several attempts have been made to improve Iranian-American relations, but these past efforts all failed. However, the present effort to do so since Hassan Rouhani became president of Iran in late 2013 appears to be far more serious. An important catalyst for the rapprochement process is that both
presidents Obama and Rouhani want to pursue it. Yet despite some significant progress on the nuclear issue, there are many important differences between the US and Iran that are still outstanding, as well as a long history of mutual animosity. This being the case, what are the prospects for success or failure of the ongoing Iran-US rapprochement effort?

The answer to this question is not yet clear, and may not be for some time. There have been past cases in which rapprochement efforts were undertaken between the US and governments with which it long had acrimonious relations. Two of the most noteworthy of these efforts occurred in the 1970s between the US and the USSR on the one hand, and between the US and China on the other. These two attempts at rapprochement had very different results: the USSR-US rapprochement effort was short-lived and led to a period of very hostile relations between Washington and Moscow. The China-US rapprochement effort, though, was highly successful in establishing relatively good working relations (though not a close alliance) between Washington and Beijing.

This paper will discuss the bases of both the Soviet-American and the Sino-American rapprochement efforts of the 1970s, identify the factors that led to failure in the former and success in the latter, briefly look at whether these factors were present in other rapprochement attempts, and in light of all this discuss what lessons these previous rapprochements may have for the ongoing Iranian-American rapprochement effort.

1970s era Soviet-American rapprochement effort

The main basis for the Soviet-American détente of the early 1970s was a mutual desire to limit the nuclear arms race and reduce the prospects for a devastating nuclear war. While the US had had a larger nuclear arsenal than the USSR from the outset of the Cold War until the late 1960s, America was bogged down militarily in Indochina as well as other distractions, allowing the Soviet Union to catch up with and (by some measures) even surpass America in terms of nuclear weapons. Washington, then, had a strong incentive to reach an agreement limiting Moscow’s growing nuclear arsenal. The Soviets, for their part, were well aware that the US was ahead of them technologically. Thus, Moscow had a strong incentive to prevent Washington from eventually capitalizing on this advantage by reaching an agreement limiting the American nuclear program.

From November 1969 to May 1972, the American and Soviet negotiators engaged in Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). On May 26, 1972, these negotiations culminated in the signing of the SALT I agreements which placed limits both on American and Soviet strategic offensive—intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and submarine
launched ballistic missile (SLBM)—and strategic defensive—anti-ballistic missile (ABM)—arsenals. This gave rise to great hopes for the emergence of a less hostile and more cooperative relationship between the two superpowers not just in the nuclear sphere, but more generally.

Problems soon emerged. Many in the US Congress were upset that SALT I allowed the USSR to have more offensive nuclear missiles than the USA. Washington and Moscow agreed to rectify this, and later in 1972 embarked on talks aimed at achieving a SALT II agreement in which the two sides would agree to equalize and reduce their nuclear arsenals. Further, it soon became clear that détente did not extend to what was then known as the Third World. While the American military withdrawal from Indochina in early 1973 marked the end of the US’ large-scale Cold War era intervention in the Third World, it also ushered in an era of interventionism on the part of the USSR and its allies there, including in Angola (1975), the Horn of Africa (1977-78), Cambodia (beginning 1978), and Afghanistan (beginning 1979).

Soviet support for Cuban intervention in Angola, the Soviet-Cuban intervention in the Horn of Africa, and Soviet support for the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia all caused tension in Soviet-American relations, and each of these events interrupted the ongoing SALT talks. Nevertheless, an elaborate SALT II accord was negotiated and signed by President Carter and Soviet leader Brezhnev on June 18, 1979. Ongoing Soviet-American tensions (including ones related to Marxist interventionism), though, served to delay ratification of SALT II by the US Senate. And when the USSR invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, Soviet-American tension increased dramatically. President Carter withdrew SALT II from Senate consideration. Rapprochement was dead and the Soviet-American Cold War resumed in earnest.

What underlay the failure of this Soviet-American attempt at rapprochement were different expectations about what would result from it. The American side expected that Soviet-American progress on nuclear arms control would lead to a more broadly cooperative relationship, including in the Third World. The Soviet side, by contrast, saw détente as limited to the field of nuclear arms control (which both sides benefited from) while the overall Soviet-American competition continued, especially in the Third World. From the Soviet viewpoint, the American withdrawal from Indochina and reluctance to intervene elsewhere in the Third World provided an opportunity to expand Soviet influence which Washington could hardly expect Moscow to forego. Further, the event that ended this attempt at Soviet-American rapprochement—the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—was seen in Moscow not as an offensive move but as a defensive one aimed at preserving an allied Marxist regime the West had seemed to accept when it
came to power in the previous year. Finally, Moscow was truly baffled that the American response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan included Carter’s withdrawal of the SALT II accord from the Senate since this agreement was (in Moscow’s view) as beneficial to American interests as it was to Soviet ones. (1)

1970s era Sino-American rapprochement effort

Although China’s first nuclear test in 1964 and subsequent acquisition of nuclear weapons was of great concern to the US and other governments, the Sino-American rapprochement of the early 1970s did not include a Sino-American nuclear arms control agreement. Indeed, this Washington-Beijing rapprochement had nothing to do with nuclear weapons and was founded instead on joint fear of what appeared to be the growing Soviet threat to both.

It was also advanced by growing perceptions among American and Chinese leaders that the other country was not as threatening as previously feared. The American withdrawal from Indochina served to reassure Beijing about American intentions. Similarly, a Chinese shift from supporting anti-American to supporting anti-Soviet forces in the Third World helped assuage Washington’s concerns about Chinese intentions. Once Beijing determined that it needed America as an ally vis-à-vis the USSR and that Soviet influence in the Third World was expanding, the Chinese decision to de-emphasize support for anti-American revolution made eminent strategic sense.

While important differences remained between them over the disposition of Taiwan as well as over continued tension between China and some of America’s Asian allies, Washington and Beijing basically agreed to contain these issues. Sino-American cooperation was further solidified beginning in the mid-1970s by the decision of the new Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, to embrace the world market and by the dramatic growth in trade between China on the one hand and America and many of its allies on the other hand (including Asian allies with which China differed). (2)

By 1991, Chinese cooperation with America and its allies had grown so strong—especially in the trade realm—that Sino-American rapprochement was able to survive the end of the perception of a common Soviet threat which had been its initial impetus. This process basically continued for the next two decades. Recently, though, the US and others have become increasingly concerned about Chinese intentions toward some neighbouring countries, Chinese maritime claims to what America and many others regard as international waters and the rise of China generally. (3) So far, Washington and Beijing have managed to contain their differences and continue their fruitful
economic cooperation. Yet, even if Sino-American relations do seriously deteriorate, the rapprochement between the two countries that began in the early 1970s has remarkably lasted for over forty years so far.

Reflections on rapprochements

A comparison of the 1970s-era Soviet-American and Sino-American rapprochement efforts suggests that rapprochement based primarily on an agreement to control nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction and does not include an end to ongoing competition for influence in third countries is unlikely to succeed. On the other hand, rapprochement that begins with cooperation against a common geopolitical threat and includes a reduction in competition for influence in third countries as well as increasing trade relations is far more likely to succeed. The question remains, however, whether or not outcomes of just two rapprochement efforts four decades ago serve as a useful guide to understanding what will succeed now.

As mutual fund prospectuses state, past performance is not an indicator of future performance. Still, subsequent cases suggest that the factors determining the success or failure of these two 1970s-era rapprochement efforts were also at work in most other efforts in which America was a party. The basis for the end-of-Cold War (late 1980s-early 1990s) Soviet-American rapprochement was far broader than nuclear arms control. It was facilitated by Moscow withdrawing not just from countries in the Third World where it had been competing for influence with the US, but also from Eastern Europe and the non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union which Washington had not expected Moscow to withdraw from simply. (4) On the other hand, reaching additional Russian-American arms control agreements has not prevented the deterioration in Russian-American relations since the rise of Putin, under whom Moscow has resumed its competition for influence with Washington in several countries (albeit not as many as during the Cold War) and has limited Russian integration into the world market economy. (5)

By contrast, the successful Vietnamese-American rapprochement of the mid-1990s had nothing to do with nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction, but was based instead on the Vietnamese military withdrawal from Cambodia at the end of the Cold War, joint Vietnamese-American concern about the rise of China, and Vietnam’s growing integration into the world market economy. (6)

An attempt to achieve a nuclear accord was at the very heart of the attempt to improve American relations with North Korea. This attempt at rapprochement, however, failed.
miserably as a result of Pyongyang going forward with its nuclear program, continuing its threatening behaviour toward two important American allies (South Korea and Japan), and Pyongyang’s fear that opening itself up to the world market would undermine its self-isolated regime. (7)

The Libyan-American rapprochement of the early 2000s involved both a Libyan agreement to renounce weapons of mass destruction as well as to halt its support of terrorism in other countries. Washington’s rapprochement with Gaddafi ended, though, when America—along with some of its Western and Arab allies—intervened to support his opponents in overthrowing him in 2011. (8) The Libyan-American rapprochement, then, does not quite conform to the pattern of success or failure found in other rapprochement efforts. However, this is not surprising given Gaddafi was truly an outlier in terms of his behaviour.

It is with all this in mind that the discussion can now turn to the ongoing Iranian-American rapprochement effort.

Present Iran-US rapprochement effort

Until recently, Iran-US rapprochement has more closely resembled the Soviet-American rapprochement effort than the Chinese-American one. What has allowed the degree of progress that has already occurred in the ongoing Iranian-American rapprochement effort has been an increased Iranian willingness to reach an agreement in the nuclear realm since Rouhani replaced Ahmadinejad as president of Iran in August 2013. A secret Iranian-American diplomatic initiative led to an interim agreement between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) in which Tehran pledged to suspend enriching uranium above commercial grade and take other measures in exchange for some relief from international economic sanctions previously imposed on Iran. (9) Negotiations are currently underway between Iran and the P5+1 on an agreement that would further resolve the nuclear issue as well as reduce international economic sanctions against Iran.

The main impetus for this Iran-US rapprochement effort is the Obama administration’s belief that Iran can be persuaded to forego acquiring nuclear weapons coupled with Iran’s desire to end economic pain resulting from the combined impact of increasing sanctions and misguided economic policies pursued by Rouhani’s predecessor, Ahmadinejad. But like the Soviet-American rapprochement effort of the past, Washington and Tehran are far from completely resolving their differences over the
nuclear issue. As Fareed Zakaria noted after interviewing President Rouhani, “Iran and America have fundamentally different views about an acceptable final deal.” (10)

Also like the Soviet-American rapprochement effort, the current Iranian-American one does not seem to extend to third countries where they have differences such as Syria and Lebanon where Iran continues to support its various allies. (11) And while Iran would undoubtedly like to see international economic sanctions against it removed so that it can sell more oil and gas on the world market, the Iranian government has not shown any sign of being willing to restructure its non-oil economy to focus on exporting goods and services to the world market the way China did.

A continuation of this trend bodes ill for the prospects of the current Iranian-American rapprochement. Very recently, though, there have been tantalizing signs that Tehran is sensitive to these concerns about third countries on the part of Washington and at least some of its allies. In early February 2014, influential University of Tehran Professor Nasser Hadian asserted that Tehran “is increasingly concerned that Syria may not hold together if President Bashar Assad stays in power,” and that since there is no viable military solution for Syria, “Iran believes the most viable solution is an election—organized and supervised by the international community—to choose the next government.” (12)

In addition, Iranian officials have recently adopted a friendlier approach to America’s ally, Israel. While Iranian officials have usually refused to participate in meetings where Israeli officials were speaking, the Iranian delegation remained present when the Israeli Water and Energy Minister spoke at the renewable energy conference held in Abu Dhabi in January 2014. Furthermore, the Israeli government responded in kind when Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon sat in the front row at a Munich Security Conference panel in which Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif spoke. The next day while being interviewed by German television, Zarif (in notable contrast to Ahmadinejad who questioned whether it even happened) recognized the Holocaust and described it as a “horrifying tragedy.” He also raised the possibility that if Israel and the Palestinians reached a peace agreement, Tehran might actually recognize Israel. (13) Despite continued misgivings on the part of Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israeli defence and intelligence officials reportedly view these friendly Iranian overtures as genuine. (14)

Iran and Turkey have long been rivals in the region, and they have supported opposing parties to the conflict in Syria that began in 2011. Despite this, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan visited Tehran in January 2014 and Iranian-Turkish relations are now improving—especially in the trade realm. (15) Iran also seems to be trying to exercise
good relations with at least some of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Tehran has long had good relations with Oman and Dubai. Recently, Qatar, Kuwait, and Abu Dhabi have appeared more optimistic (to varying degrees) about the possibility that their ties to Tehran can improve. However, Iranian relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain remain acrimonious. Riyadh and Manama both see Iran as a supporter of Bahrain’s Shia opposition against its Sunni monarchy, while Riyadh and Tehran oppose each other’s policies in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. (16)

What all this suggests is that since Rouhani became president, Tehran has increasingly come to realize that if it really wants rapprochement with America, it must reduce tensions with most (if not all) of America’s allies in the region. What remains to be seen is just how much Iran is actually willing to do this. Are Tehran’s friendly overtures toward some GCC countries, Turkey, and even Israel a sign that it is now willing to pursue more cooperative relations with them permanently, or is Tehran just doing this temporarily until it can secure a nuclear agreement and sanctions relief? Even if Tehran genuinely wants to pursue improved relations or just lessen tensions with some of America’s friends in the region, is it willing to reduce its support to its traditional allies in Syria and Lebanon in order to do so, or does Tehran think it can somehow improve ties with America’s friends while simultaneously aiding the Assad regime and Hezbollah? Finally, does Tehran hope that improved Iranian-American relations will eventually lead to improved ties between the Kingdom and the Islamic Republic, or does Tehran think that improved Iranian-American ties will result in Washington being less supportive of Riyadh in a continuing saga of Saudi-Iranian competition in the region?

There are no clear answers to any of these questions yet. Looking back at both the Soviet-American and the Chinese-American rapprochement efforts of the early 1970s (as well as subsequent ones), what does seem clear is that if Tehran seeks to resolve the nuclear issue while continuing to pursue policies that America’s friends in the region regard as threatening, then the ongoing Iranian-American rapprochement effort is not likely to succeed. However, if Tehran seeks both to resolve the nuclear issue and either improve its ties or minimize its differences with America’s friends in the region, then the ongoing Iranian-American rapprochement effort is far more likely to succeed.

Recent Iranian statements and actions aimed at defusing tensions between Iran on the one hand and Israel, Turkey, and some GCC states on the other hand have raised expectations that Tehran may be pursuing genuine rapprochement that includes either resolving differences over third countries or at least de-emphasizing them. However, if it turns out that Iran is only doing so temporarily for the purpose of getting Washington to sign on a nuclear accord and reducing sanctions against Iran that will enable it to
more readily pursue policies that America’s friends in the region find threatening, then
the ongoing Iranian-American rapprochement effort is likely to prove short-lived even if
a nuclear accord is reached. Indeed, the ensuing disappointment likely to arise in
Washington over being duped by Iran will only mean that just like Gorbachev, Iran will
have to make even greater concessions in order to overcome the legacy of a
rapprochement effort that failed if it later decides once again to pursue a successful
rapprochement effort with America.

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Abstract
This paper examines trends in Iranian politics on the Palestinian issue through phases of history and analyses the potential impact of Iran-US rapprochement on Iranian political attitudes towards Palestine. The paper argues there is a shift in Iranian policy towards the Palestinian issue which emerged prior to rapprochement and direct negotiations with Washington. This shift is attributable to changes within Iranian society and both internal and external challenges at the social, economic and political levels. The study concludes that Iran would likely support a resolution acceptable to the Palestinians, citing several indicators as proof of this possibility. This issue has been debated several times within the Iranian political establishment but only gathered momentum with the advent of Rouhani to power, particularly after Tehran’s direct negotiations with Washington. However, it is also expected that Iran will attempt to fix its relationship with Hamas and strengthen it given Rouhani cannot simply disregard the opposition’s power and influence with regards to rapprochement with Washington nor its resistance to concessions on the Palestinian issue. It is not inconceivable that Iranian hard-liners
towards Israel would cling to their position, especially given their high positions within security forces and the Revolutionary Guards.

**Introduction**

This paper examines trends in Iranian politics on the Palestinian issue through phases of history and analyses the potential impact of Iran-US rapprochement on Iranian political attitudes towards Palestine. The paper argues there is a clear shift in Iranian political discourse towards the Palestinian issue, and believes that this shift emerged prior to rapprochement and direct negotiations with Washington and is directly attributable to changes that affected Iranian society as well as internal and external challenges at the social, economic and political levels.

The study argues that trends in Iranian politics towards the Palestinian cause passed through several stages. The first phase took on an ideological dimension with the concepts of solidarity and Islamic unity interpreted in alignment with the broad ideological strokes of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. However, due to the social transformations and political challenges within Iran, the discourse began to take a realist pragmatist turn in international relations, particularly given the Islamic Republic’s growing recognition as a significant international player and its objective of strengthening its regional position. This accords with the “Future Vision” document launched by Iran some years ago which projected that Iran would become the foremost regional power by 2025.

It could be argued that this pragmatic utilitarian dimension emerged during the first Rafsanjani presidency and continued into the Khatami era with a brief resurgence of the ideological dimension during the first presidency of Ahmadinejad. During his second term, Ahmadinejad was impelled to return to the path drawn by Rafsanjani. With the advent of Rouhani, who is very loyal to Rafsanjani’s robust support of Iran-US rapprochement and who has inherited a challenging economic and political legacy, a resurgent utilitarian dimension has become increasingly evident in Tehran’s political strategy.

**Revolutionary discourse and foreign policy towards Palestine**

The Iranian constitution provides a basis for foreign policy stipulating that protection of the vulnerable is the core function of the state. Article 11 of the Constitution directs that the Islamic Republic should formulate its general policy according to the dictates of the Union of Islamic Peoples and seek to achieve political, economic and cultural unity of the
Muslim world. Article 152 provides that the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy must be based on the rejection of any kind of hegemony or acceptance thereof, obliging it to defend “the rights of all Muslims” and Article 154 provides that while the Islamic Republic is committed to non-interference in the affairs of other countries, it is obliged to support and protect the right of oppressed people against their oppressors. (1)

These principles align with the Islamic Republic of Iran’s ideological vision, since protection of the vulnerable is a fundamental principle of the Islamic Revolution and an important element of Khomeini’s revolutionary thought and his worldview of skewed relationships between the world of “superiority” and the world of “vulnerability.” This is viewed as a religious obligation which outweighs the value placed on material interests. Consequently, Iran's support for the Palestinian cause, its depiction of Israel as an illegal entity and its opposition to an unfair peace process are wholly consistent with the theoretical revolutionary foundations of Iran and the significant credibility it officially claims to adopt. (2)

Yasser Arafat was the first major political leader to visit Iran after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. He was received warmly by the revolutionaries who handed him the keys of the Israeli embassy which had operated a centre of Israeli operations during the Shah’s regime. For researchers in this field, the Islamic revolution’s influential role on the path of the Palestinian cause is impossible to disregard.

Following the revolution, the Islamic Republic has undeniably provided extensive assistance to the Palestinian cause, regardless of whether Iran actually achieved the role and position it sought in return. Iranian support encompassed both material and the ideological support. In real terms, practical support for the Palestinian cause within Iranian civil society included fundraising efforts by many non-governmental organizations as well as Iranian hospitals providing free medical assistance to Palestinians wounded in successive uprisings in the occupied territories.

In the early years of the revolution, expressions of support for the Palestinian cause extended across the political spectrum in Iran from Islamic and left-wing orientations to western-educated Iranian intellectuals. Under direct instructions from Ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic institutionalized support for the Palestinian cause through adoption of various events, notably “Jerusalem Day” in which the last Friday of Ramadan each year was dedicated to calling for the liberation of Jerusalem. On this day, mass marches are officially organised in various Iranian cities. “The Road to Jerusalem Passes through Karbala” emerged as a popular slogan which spread through the ranks of the Revolutionary Guards and the backing of Basij forces. This political slogan also gained
great popularity among religious and political parties, (3) with Khomeini and his supporters playing a major role in its vigorous promotion (4) and in turn determining Iran’s foreign policy path. (5)

In the field of political competition and conflict, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad referred to this slogan as one of the most important guidelines of Imam Khomeini (6) during his famous electoral debate with Mir Hussein Mousavi in 2009. This was widely interpreted as a perpetuation of the policy to export the revolution to neighbouring countries.

Nonetheless, in Iranian politics today there is a definite decline in the influence of this particular political stream advocating support for Palestine based on the ideological basis discussed above. With the advent of President Rouhani to power and the breadth of Iran-American rapprochement, Iranian foreign policy towards the Palestinian cause seems to have shifted to “accept what is acceptable to Palestinians.”

**Palestinian cause and dilemma of internal debate**

In recent years, Iran has witnessed a clash between the so-called “revolutionary constants” and the national interest, with the Palestinian cause exemplifying this clash. The 2009 Iranian presidential campaign exposed the Iranian political scene to overt debate which was extremely rare in Iran prior to that year. In parallel with the formal debates which brought together the four candidates, many other debates were occurring on the streets among Iranian citizens, especially the youth, who exchanged accusations and relentlessly defended their candidates. Iran’s foreign policy and “supporting the resistance” were common themes in street debates.

The followers of the first philosophy - a position defended by many in Iran today - expressed the view that their problems must be prioritized above support provided by the Iranian government for Palestine and Lebanon’s resistance movements. By contrast, the followers of the second philosophy, comprised mostly of mainstream fundamentalist adherents, advocate a position stemming from that of Imam Khomeini: they assert that they “cannot consider the Palestinian and Lebanese fights as an external subject.” (7)

In fact, opposition to Iran’s support for the resistance in Palestine and Lebanon was evident among groups in Iranian society even before the 2009 presidential elections. This issue took various forms ranging from political jokes to the exchange of mobile text messages employing ancient folkloric poetry to discuss “the milk from Hassan's cow which goes to Palestine’. (8)
Perhaps Iranian sentiment was expressed most clearly on Jerusalem Day in 2009, when the slogan “No Gaza, no Lebanon, Just Iran,” appeared for the first time in Iran whereas the slogan “Death to Israel” had been repeated for thirty years. The new slogan was sharply criticised by political figures and members of parliament. (9) Former President Mohammad Khatami asserted that such speech was a dangerous mistake because Jerusalem Day is “a symbol of resistance to the occupation and oppression (as) launched by Imam Khomeini and defended by the Iranian people.” (10) This resulted in a reformed logo stating “I sacrifice my soul for Iran, Gaza and Lebanon.” (11)

The viewpoints that oppose Iranian ideological rhetoric on the Palestinian issue are based on the following arguments, namely:

- Iran is a priority that comes ahead of other issues, including Palestine.
- The Iranian government gave unduly excessive attention to the Palestine issue accompanied by negligence and disregard for the violation of human rights in other parts of the world.
- The Iranian government exploits the Palestinian issue and supports the resistance to reinforce its grip inside Iran and abroad. (12)

Critics of Iran’s support for Palestine and the resistance say the Iranian government exploits the issue for their own interests. They view it as a cover for internal tyranny and stress that the national interest should have supremacy in determining foreign policy; therefore, they call for “a reasonable defence” for the Palestinian cause that does not conflict with the national interest. (13)

In fact, to treat Iran as bearing a single unified position towards the Palestinian cause is erroneous and limits assessment and understanding of the Iranian case. Iran is a large state populated by more than seventy million people with a wide spectrum of intellectual currents, elites and research centres that follow diverse streams. Thus, it is shortsighted to consider only one position with respect to any political argument, regardless of its importance. In reality, attitudes within the Islamic Republic of Iran towards both the Palestinian cause and Iran’s rapprochement with Washington cannot be confined to just two opposing orientations; rather several broad trends can be identified, including:

1. **Official political orientation:** this reflects the official Iranian position toward Palestine and the resistance characterized by hostility to Israel. However, the most significant development since Rouhani’s rise to power is that the institution of the
Presidency has dropped out of this category. The recent rhetoric of the Iranian Foreign Ministry signals a decline in the influence of this front which previously enjoyed pre-eminence for decades.

Followers of this approach regard the Hamas movement as being most closely aligned with their position against occupation when compared to the Fatah movement, and they believe that this religious and ideological alignment justifies providing extensive support to Hamas. With Ahmadinejad’s accession to power in 2005, Iran returned to the early Islamic Republic’s slogans, namely, ‘This revolution will not be complete until Jerusalem’s liberation.’ Ahmadinejad’s Holocaust rhetoric and removing Israel from existence are themes that were first raised by Imam Khomeini. (14) Given the controversy caused by his statements, the opposition have posed critical questions about the efficiency of Ahmadinejad's government and its foreign policy, accusing him of exposing Iran's interests to risk. (15)

Advocates of this trend strongly defend the protection of Palestine and hostility to Israel. (16) They view their opponents who want to decrease support for the resistance as displaying weakness and indulgence in front of enemies and accuse them of being tools in the hands of the West, occasionally even describing them as internal enemies. (17)

In this respect, it is necessary to distinguish Ahmadinejad's rhetoric during his first term from that of his second presidential term. The latter, though it still maintained commitment to the resistance and the Palestinian cause in its lexicon, also began to focus on the national dimension, and even spoke of “friendship with the Israeli people.” (18) It must be noted that recent attempts by the Rouhani regime to mitigate the consequences of Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy clearly focus on Iran’s stance towards Israel.

Any analysis of this policy position must emphasise that its followers control the media within the Islamic Republic. The leaders of the media establishment in Iran follow the Supreme Leader, and they also control the decision-making mechanisms in a number of important institutions, such as the Revolutionary Guards, the Shura Council and indeed the whole leadership institution headed by Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution. Consequently, this stream is well-placed to express its position through mass mobilisation for marches and demonstrations such as Jerusalem Day (19) and the Day for Fighting Global Superiority (20) whereas the same opportunities are not available for other streams of policy orientation.
2. **Advocates of realism**: This particular political perspective, noting that the Islamic Republic has prioritised the Palestinian issue for thirty years, considers that it should now be re-evaluated in a realistic manner. They assert that Iran’s traditional position has and will continue to cost Iran dearly and that it conflicts with Iran's national interests. (21) In this regard, critics have raised controversy by maintaining that Iran’s support of Hamas and Islamic Jihad does not stem from any Islamist or humane motive, but instead emerges from regional and international competition for geopolitical dominance with America and the Arab regimes. Conversely, others assert that Iran exploits tensions against America and Israel within the region in order to serve its own interests, especially with regard to Iran’s nuclear file. (22)

Acknowledgement is due here to the foreign policy statements of the reformist movement, and to the reformist press which over time developed and popularised slogans such as “strengthening the realistic perception of the Palestinian cause.” Since Rouhani’s ascension to the presidency and his quest to resolve the Iran’s dilemmas, this trend has begun to take on a new impetus after being crushed for years.

3. **Internal priority**: This policy trend takes a clear economic and social focus. It agrees with the realist position that Iran’s priority must be to direct financial support inside the country based on the principle that Iran’s poor are more deserving of support. (23) They prefer to limit Iranian support at the political level. Based on the idea that “a lamp needed at home is denied to the mosque,” (24) elements within the Iranian public believe there has been excessive support for Palestine and that resources used for external assistance could be put to better use internally. Increasing levels of deprivation and economic challenges have led to public complaints.

An in-depth analysis of Iran’s recent challenges reveals how difficult it would be for the state to maintain its previous levels of support but still meet the demands of a citizenry that has witnessed social transformations affecting multiple generations within a single community and widening socio-economic gaps. This has resulted in a concentrated estrangement between the first and second generations of the revolution on the one hand and the fifth generation on the other.

The first generation demonstrates dynamic, vital and proactive characteristics, with a clear ideological bias towards the Palestinian cause, while the second generation maintains strong enthusiasm towards the Palestinian cause. The third generation witnessed the economic and cultural reconstruction of the Rafsanjani era from 1997, culminating in the 1999 student protests and unleashing suppressed anger arising from years of conflict and limitations on freedoms. With this generation, public demands
emerged for internal issues to be given priority above external ones, including the Palestinian cause. The fourth and fifth generations intensified this trend and are the most distanced from the ideological propositions imposed by past governments which put the Palestinian issue at the forefront of its programme.

**Iran’s priorities and foreign policy**

Despite differences between Tehran and Hamas regarding the Syrian revolution, Iran’s general policy was to avoid attacking Hamas. Influential parties in Hamas also attempted to restore the relationship and bridge the gap, with both sides finally concluding that they need each other. Over the years, Iran has successfully supported the Palestinian issue and has filled the vacuum created by Arab regimes’ bias towards the option of negotiation with Israel. This role cannot continue in its previous form, as Tehran’s successful convergence with Washington will not bear the desired fruit inside Iran without a real shift in Iranian foreign policy. As has been the case with a re-interpretation of Khomeini’s arguments and his speech on the relationship with the United States, it seems the door is open to re-evaluate Iranian foreign policy on the Palestinian issue in light of recent political developments.

Iranian policy toward the Palestinian issue is best described as compound. There is a formal discourse that defends the need to continue providing financial, military and political support to the Palestinian parties engaged in the armed struggle to liberate Palestine, while simultaneously vilifying those who engage in the negotiation process. At the heart of this discourse, different perspectives are emerging to discuss various options of settlement, including the proposed “referendum,” and “accepting what is acceptable to the Palestinians.” Between juggling its national interests and maintaining “revolutionary constants,” the Iranian regime found itself struggling to establish a position which maintains it as a key player on the Palestinian issue while at the same time prioritising its internal imperatives and regional aspirations. It is evident the needs of Iranian society in addition to rapprochement attempts with Washington have created sufficient pressure on the regime to induce notable changes in policy towards Palestine.

Internal policy problems, the challenges of the nuclear issue and Iran’s relationship with the US (dialogue versus conflict), are the three themes which dominated the overall political discourse in Iran during the June 2013 presidential election campaign. The Palestinian cause was not a headline issue in the electoral programme of any candidate except Saeed Jalili. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani dedicated much of his electoral platform to a call to codify the rights of citizenship. (25) Rouhani and other candidates utilised large portions in their electoral manifestoes to focus on Iran’s economic
situation, (26) a fundamental reason for revisiting Tehran’s relationship with Washington.

It was clear that a new foreign policy direction would emerge under Rouhani. He sharply criticised what he described as a policy of “concentration on deceptive logos” that lack strategy, alluding to the foreign policy blunders of former President Ahmadinejad on the “Holocaust,” and “removing Israel from existence.” In Rouhani’s opinion, Ahmadinejad’s policy had serious negative consequences (27) such as the designation of Iran as the number one threat to global security as well as exposing Iran's weak strategic options. (28)

During formal debates prior to Iran’s eleventh presidential election in 2013, 56% of the questions raised in the second part of the debate between the eight candidates focused on domestic policy. Internal concerns were the dominant focus of both the questions and the answers whereas the less dominant primary foreign policy focus was Iran’s relationship with America. (29)

Of the sixteen questions posed in the debate, seven questions were related to issues of diplomacy and nine to internal affairs. This means that 56 per cent of the questions focused on domestic policy and the system of government while 44 per cent focused on issues of diplomacy and foreign policy. Only 14 per cent of the diplomacy and foreign policy questions addressed Palestine and other Middle Eastern affairs.

**End of “bloody feuds” era**

For a significant period before the Rouhani era, there were groups that advocated for a politically realistic view of Israel. Although they deem it an aggressor state, they believe in the option of settlement; therefore, they do not view Hamas as the best option for Iranian support unless it accepts the settlement process. This position initially emerged with the advent of the reformists in Iran and matured during the nineties. The newspapers of that period reported quite frankly that Iranians should not be more Palestinian than the Palestinians because even the Palestinians had begun to accept and recognize Israel.

To support their argument, they cite the signing of the Oslo Accord by the PLO in 1993 as well as ongoing negotiations by the Palestinian Authority. This group calls for easing the sensitivity to Palestine and a reduction in hostility towards Israel as a path to reducing international opposition to the Islamic Republic. (30) Reduced sensitivity does not necessarily mean formal recognition of Israel, but advocates of this view recommend
that Iran should join the international community in dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. (31) In practice, Iran has embarked on measures aimed at defusing the tension and reducing sensitivity, including the announcement by the Iranian Foreign Ministry that Iran would not take any action that would destroy Israel. An Iranian proposal to perform a referendum in all the occupied territories was also mooted.

Advocates of this position allege that the Palestinian issue and other revolutionary concepts such as “anti-superiority” have been abused by the ruling elites as a means of appropriating influence and benefits to this ruling class while manipulating the emotions of supporters both internally and externally.

In Iran today, the foreign policy discourse has shifted towards the view that “international relations are no longer considered a zero-sum game, but rather a multi-dimensional room in which competition coincides with cooperation.” The era of “blood feuds” has come to an end’ (32) and world leaders have to “turn threats into opportunities” as President Rouhani noted in his Washington Post article published September 2013.

“Constructive engagement,” a term which recently entered Iran’s foreign policy dictionary, signalled a diversion from the pursuit of Rouhani’s “measure and hope” strategy in order to reform the economy, meet the needs of Iranian society and reinforce Iran’s international status. Achieving this correlates fundamentally with calming tensions with the United States and the West and is also linked to the Iran’s ability to invest in influential affairs as a mediator or through other significant roles.

During the first decade of the Islamic Revolution, Tehran adopted prevailing rhetoric that called for “defending the rights of the oppressed,” and the Palestinian issue naturally appeared at the forefront of this call. Although this call was driven by moral imperatives, it is impossible to disregard Iran’s quest for “leadership of the Islamic world.” In subsequent decades this quest has evolved, acquiring various dimensions related to Iran’s international relations role and its search for recognition as an influential actor.

The pertinent question today is whether or not Rouhani represents a coup against these policies. Recent events under the Rouhani regime cannot be described as a coup against the legacy of the past; however, it is impossible to disregard various policy shifts that collectively confirm a concrete policy change which will have significant consequences for the future and in a manner similar the Khatami era. The term “Zionist entity” is now absent from the statements of Iranian officials when discussing Israel. Further, the tone of intimidation and the threat of Israel’s removal from existence are absent from
Rouhani's discourse as if he is offering an apology for the tone that prevailed during Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005 to 2013).

Current Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has been speaking about acceptance for a settlement approved by the Palestinian parties. On the recognition of Israel, we find a tone that surpasses the tone of the previous government:

“This is a sovereign decision that Iran will take, but it will not affect the situation on the ground in the Middle East. If the Palestinians are happy with this solution, no one outside of Palestine can stop it. The problem over the past six decades is that the Palestinians have not been satisfied and they are right not to be satisfied because their basic rights are still violated and they are not willing to compromise on these rights.” (33)

Since the revolution’s victory, Iran has continually opposed the establishment of US military bases in its neighbourhood, describing them as a clear threat to its national security, regardless of whether those bases were in the Gulf region or in Central Asia. However, this concern has not prevented Iranians today from discussing “security cooperation” despite this historic opposition which cannot be subtracted from internal Iranian calculations. Rouhani, together with supporters from among the reformers and the Rafsanjani stream, does not negate the quest for full diplomatic relations with the US. It seems that the Chinese model for rapprochement with the US is preferred by the Iranians as it is rapprochement based on mutual interests. For Iran, confronting Al-Qaeda is the most prominent motive for boosting and sharing security-related interests. In the same context, Iran will show clear flexibility on the Palestinian issue to maximize mutual benefits and persuade the US of closer relations.

During the past few months, the political behaviour of Iranian officials has exhibited a conciliatory tone toward Israel. This tone carries messages to reassure the US which is keen to preserve the interests of its Israeli ally in the midst of its negotiations with the Iranians. In a departure from the past when Iranian diplomats would avoid Israeli officials, the Iranian delegation elected to remain in the room while the Israeli Minister of Energy delivered a speech at the Energy Conference held in Dubai in January 2014. Israel reciprocated the courtesy at a security conference in Germany when the Israeli delegation listened attentively to the speech of the Iranian Foreign Minister. Zarif’s statements in Germany garnered attention in the global media because he acknowledged the occurrence of the Holocaust, and termed it a “brutal tragedy.” Following his speech at the Munich conference, Zarif told the German television channel Phoenix, “We have no position against the Jews and hold them great respect within Iran and abroad.” (34)
Conclusion

Many questions have been raised about the delicate margin in which Iran’s policymakers must operate to simultaneously create a balance between the revolution’s legacy and realistic requirements and the national interest and ongoing transformations within Iranian society. Iranian officials recognize that the dynamics of change required and expected of them, especially on the Palestinian issue, will not always be tactical but rather will require concrete and influential steps.

Today, Rouhani and his team adopt a philosophy that is based on the opportunity for his country to “transform threats into an opportunity,” and this will be achieved only by a change in discourse and foreign policy. This is the first step towards opening a new page with the US, then the West, and perhaps even with Israel. The interest in Iran’s internal problems by Rouhani’s team, supported by the position of a cross-section of Iran’s public, calls for a foreign policy that serves Iran’s relations with the outside world.

The Geneva agreement on the Iranian nuclear file reflects part of the dialogue with the US, addressed in the following areas:

1. **Conflicts in the region:** While it is necessary for the US to acknowledge the failure of its past policies in dealing with Iran, Iranians also admit the Islamic Republic’s policy toward Washington and the region (implicitly including Israel), especially during the last eight years, was wrong.

2. **Cooperation:** This area is open to several issues, including confronting Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria.

3. **Dilemmas and major injustices approach:** The Palestinian issue appears at the forefront of these issues, with many references to the possibility of Iran’s acceptance of a solution approved by the Palestinian side, a debate which has appeared on the Iranian political scene more than once and has gained remarkable support since the advent of Rouhani to power and after direct talks with Washington. Hence, the Iranian government has begun to attach greater importance to relations with the Palestinian Authority and the PLO, and arrangements are made for a visit by Mahmoud Abbas to Tehran.

Notwithstanding these advances, rapprochement with the United States will most likely be a political rapprochement and exchange of interests rather than openness at all levels. One reason for this is that Iranian policy planners realize that Iranian openness toward the United States and full normalization of relations would effectively reveal the
disconnect between revolutionary rhetoric and slogans and what the community wants. This would in turn expose the fragility of the domestic situation and the divergence between the regime and its citizens in views on this issue.

The power and influence of opponents to rapprochement with Washington cannot be underestimated and opposition to making concessions on the Palestinian issue will not be insignificant. Thus, it can be expected within the Iranian establishment the hard-line attitudes against Israel will be maintained, especially since the hardliners occupy advanced positions in security forces and the Revolutionary Guard. If the “Geneva Accord” falters, and if Tehran fails to achieve significant economic gains and easing of sanctions, the hard-liners may increase in strength and Rouhani may be unable to continue to advance his negotiation agenda. Therefore, it is not inconsistent with “the flexibility of Iran” to see an Iranian effort to repair the relationship with Hamas and significantly strengthen it.

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(2) Mohammad Bagher Soleimani, Players of the Peace Process in the Middle East, Tehran, 2000, 204.

(3) Saskia Maria Gieling, Religion and war in revolutionary Iran, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 115.

(4) Mohammad Mohaddessin, Islamic Fundamentalism, (Anmol Publications PVT. LTD, 2003), 126


(7) Refer to this article published by a researcher at the London-based Al-Hayat newspaper on June 12, 2009, titled “Iran: Electoral Competition Includes Funding ‘Hezbollah’ and ‘Hamas.’” The article is available at this link: http://www.daralhayat.com/portalarticle/d/26535.

(8) “ is a widespread folkloric Persian poetry verse about Hassan’s cow that does not have milk because its milk is sent to India. After the Gaza War in 2008-2009, phone messages were exchanged, including a political joke that said the Ministry of Guidance will change this poetry given ridicule from social implications of the phrase. The new verse was instead, “Hassan’s cow whose milk sent to Palestine.”

(9) The slogan "No Gaza, No Lebanon" caused the Iranian parliament on Sunday, April 4, 2010 to terminate the reformist cleric Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, Chairman of the Committee for the Defence of the Palestinian people’s uprising playing a key role in the establishment of the Lebanese Hezbollah in the 1980s. This followed claims by conservative deputies accusing Mohtashamipour (who supported Mousavi in the election) of planning for demonstrations to topple the Islamic Republic’s regime.
(10) Khatami issued statements during a meeting with a student committee for the protection of Palestine. It was published by the website Jahan News on August 31, 2010 at the following link:

(11) See comments of the reformist deputy in the Iranian Shura Council Abdullah Kaabi about the slogan "Hum Gaza Hum Lebanon Ganem Fdaa Iran" meaning "I sacrifice my soul for Iran, Gaza and Lebanon," published on January 26, 2011 on the Persia News Agency website available at the following link:

(12) In this context, the writings of Mohsen Kadivar in The Green Movement Strategy: Iran is Priority to Palestine are significant and can be found posted on the official website on June 24, 2010:

(13) Refer to the interview conducted by Mohsen Kadivar with Voice of America on 22 June, 2010, published on their website: http://www.kadivar.com/Index.asp?DocId=2529&AC=1&AF=1&ASB=1&AGM=1&AL=1&DT=dvr also available on June 22, 2010 at:

(14) Text of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government's platform published August 16, 2005:

(15) This is clear in a comparison conducted by Dr. Mohsen Aminzadeh, former adviser at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the reformist era between the foreign policy of Ahmadinejad's government and the government of Khatami. He gave a lecture on this topic to students at the University of Zahra in Tehran and published by Persia News Agency on May 6, 2010 and available at:

(16) See questions and answers section on the website "Andishe Qom" regarding the duty towards Palestine (undated), available at this link:

(17) See an article of the critic and journalist Faraj Srkohi titled "Palestine Issue: Clear Government Policy and Vague Opposition Handling," on June 21, 2010 available at:
http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f3_palestine_islamicrepublic_opposition/2049149.html.

(18) Mashaei, who heads the Cultural Heritage Foundation, declared in a press conference in Tehran last Sunday "for the thousandth time I declare and in a stronger way than before that we are friends of all the peoples of the world, even in America and Israel," adding, "I am proud of what was stated by me previously and do not feel the need to be corrected, no enmity between us and the peoples of the earth" and expressed regret for the saying that citizens of Israel are not civilians but soldiers. This has led to angry reactions within the Iranian Shura Council which questioned Mashaei about the intent of his statements. Details of this case can be found in a news report published by the researcher dated August 15, 2008 on AlJazeera.net, titled "Deputies in Iran Call for Punishment of Official Who Described Israelis as Friends," available at:

(19) Jerusalem Day is an annual event opposing Israel's occupation of Jerusalem. This day is marked by anti-Zionist demonstrations in some Arab and Islamic countries and Arab and Islamic communities around the
world. Iran was the first to propose this event after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The call was led by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran at the time. In August of that year, he said, "I invite Muslims all over the world to devote the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan to be Jerusalem Day and to declare international solidarity of Muslims in support of the legitimate rights of the Muslim people in Palestine."

(20) Anti-Superiority Day, an annual event on November 4 every year in which marches are conducted across Iran to commemorate Iranian students breaking into the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979.

(21) See an article by Saeed Ghasemi Nejad titled "Israel, Iran and the Democratic Green Movement" dated April 25, 2010 and published at this link: http://www.bamdadkhabar.net/2010/04/post_3432.


(23) There are conflicting figures in Iran on poverty, with estimates of ten to fifteen million poor persons in the country. According to figures provided by Ali Askari, the economic adviser to the president of Iran during a roundtable session held for student movements in May 2008, 20% of Iranians or up to 15 million people are classified under the absolute poverty line. The reformist Etemad newspaper published a lengthy article on the front page titled "Tsunami of Poverty and Weakened Development" by Dr. Zahedi on April 20, 2008. See http://aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/D77C3C2C-1FEA-4171-9AD3-38839C35D9E2.htm?wbc_purpose=Basic_Current_Curren.

(24) On Jerusalem Day in 2009, Iranian protestors raised placards that read "a lamp needed at home is denied to the mosque." In the place of "home," the demonstrators placed Iran's map. In the place of the word "mosque," the demonstrators placed a picture of the Dome of the Rock Mosque. In other words, money needed at home in Iran should not be sent to Palestine. Refer to the aforementioned article by Shahidi 2009 for more information.


(26) Hassan Rouhani, Government of Measure and Hope, Electoral Platform, (Tehran, 2013), 21-43. Rouhan's programme uses phases to help the Iranian economy emerge from what seems to be a chronic economic crisis in the country. Implementation of the government's "rationalization plan of government subsidies" in 2010 resulted in high prices of basic commodities in an unprecedented manner. Unemployment among young people increased and the economic sanctions imposed by America and the West deepened the crisis, especially with the inclusion of Iranian oil on which the Iranian economy mainly relies. Inflation reached 35 per cent in March 2013 and unemployment approached 13 per cent, with unofficial figures indicating even higher inflation and unemployment.


(29) Observations recorded by the author during a visit to Iran in June 2013.

(30) Shahidi 2009.

(31) Saeeda Lotfian, "Iran and the Middle East: Hard Choices and Realistic Attitudes" (0), 191.


Abstract

A stronger Iran as a result of Iran-US rapprochement would suit Russia’s regional interests, particularly Russia’s tendency in foreign policy to prefer strong partners without wishing to meddle in foreign affairs. Iran-US rapprochement has wrongly given the impression that this will create tension between Moscow and Tehran. In the context of constant change on a global and regional scale, this report analyses the current state of affairs in the Middle East through the prism of Iran-Russia and Russia-US relations. It seeks to interpret the logic of behaviour of each with regard to their geopolitical position and regional interests. It also predicts the possible future of Iran-Russia relations related to the economic and political cooperation in the Central and South Asian region.

Introduction

Iran’s emergence from isolation is another twist in the events that have engulfed the Middle East in recent years. The post-1979 Islamic Revolution stagnation of Iran-US relations has given way to tremendous and thorough transformation as well as warmer
relations. American positions in the region are rather unsteady and require a fresh look, whereas for Iran re-entry into the game is the most favourable choice with no alternatives given current circumstances.

Under normal circumstances, Iran is typically portrayed as a Russian ally. Some experts tend to view Moscow-Washington-Tehran relations as an eternal triangle in which Iran is only allowed one of these partners. This is a fallacy stemming from a now-out-of-date twentieth century interpretation framework. The framework theorizes that rivalry between major powers for the purpose of world dominance necessitates ousting other deities from the political Olympus. Until recently, this concept has undeniably served as a firm theoretical background. However, it is doubtful that such a potent regional power as Iran seeks to be swayed by either Moscow or Washington. Besides, antagonism between Tehran and Washington is so deeply rooted that in forthcoming years a diametrical turn of both powers is hardly plausible.

As for the Russian stance, post-1991 foreign policy is drastically different from the Soviet type of dominance in which confrontation was the only practiced method of interaction with the US. Though a sizeable sector of elites is still apt to consider America as their main geostrategic opponent, practically speaking there are no pretensions to jostle for recognition in the Middle East in the post-World War spirit.

Thus, the question whether Iran is inclined to cooperate with the United States at the expense of Russia on other issues is fundamentally inaccurate. Each party is able to work on an elaborated mechanism of interaction to meet the interests of one another. The right question is whether Iran and the US are actually ready to cooperate so closely that it results in teaming up against Russia. It is in fact quite the opposite, for a certain warming of Iran-US relations would suit Moscow’s interests because it would mean the presence of a stronger ally coupled with calculated behaviour and intelligent tactics.

In this vein, this report analyses the current state of affairs in the Middle East through the prism of Iran-Russia and Russia-US relations. It seeks to interpret the logic of behaviour of each with regard to their geopolitical position and regional interests. It also predicts the possible future of Iran-Russia relations related to the economic and political cooperation in the Central and South Asian region.

**Uniting against old allies?**

It is implausible that the US genuinely seeks to consolidate its forces with Iran against its conventional partners such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. (1) Just a few years ago,
loosening of the Iran-US knot was inconceivable. The most intemperate players insisted on strengthening sanctions and even considered an air strike on nuclear facilities, resulting in a scenario of continued and long-standing conflict.

The Arab Spring has entangled seemingly stable relations of the States with their allies. Attempts to make friends with the new democratic leadership in Egypt failed with July 3, 2013 military coup. Muddled Libyan intervention and refusal to attack Syria further damaged US relations with their allies. The Saudis symbolically took offence by rejecting a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council in a diplomatic demarche against what they deemed unfair in the political world order.

Absence of any relations with Iran – along with inconsistency in the reaction to the Arab awakening – turned out to be one of the deficiencies of American policy. The regional situation ripened to such an extent that it needed a radical solution. The US was faced with taking the step towards normalisation, following the lead of Israel by insisting on the Iranian threat, or taking a laissez-faire attitude and leaving things as they had been for many years.

Plans for a full-fledged land operation against Iran or even an air strike on its territory were dismissive and unrealistic. Had the US chosen this route, this would have affected all the Shia-dominated parts of the Gulf and Levant states as well as Russian buffer zones such as Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. The only party that clings to the threat of nuclear or non-nuclear Iran is Israel. This was recently manifested in an Israeli lobby group that pushed the US government for toughening sanctions. Even with Obama’s milieu opposing the counterproductive measures, Israel Economics Minister Naftali Bennett was dispatched on a mission to Washington with a message aimed at bending congressmen to approve tougher sanctions and cutting out Iran’s oil exports.

Common sense seems to have prevailed over “war-mongers” appeals. As White House adviser on energy to the former president George W. Bush, Bob McNally, put it, ”The only thing stronger than love for Israel in Congress is aversion to another military conflict. There is a concern about tightening sanctions so much that it would lead to a conflict.” (2)

Confrontation with Iran began in 1979 practically excluded the United States from a large sector of Middle Eastern politics implemented by the Shia establishment. However, this weakened the structure of traditional US coalitions. The decade of war in the Middle East, Bush’s democratisation initiatives and chaotic reaction to the Arab revolutions left the US “lame in both legs.”
Accumulated fatigue from endless clashes, a combination of circumstances and ideology guiding the White House instead of rationality, exorbitant and unreasonable military expenditures in the face of domestic economic troubles and the inability to manage and direct heterogeneous regional processes have all pushed the American government to revise its methods of cooperation with the Arab world. (3) It is positive that American desire to reconcile with ostracised Iran is not dictated by ambitions to continue brave and risky “adventures” in the Arab world in a fashion similar to that of the previous neoconservative administration. The American public seems to have realised the crucial necessity of climbing out of the quagmire of collisions that have drained the US and set it at odds with the Muslim world. (4)

Likewise, Iranian society is tired of the ceaseless encounters with the Western world. Economic sanctions seriously limit the potential of the Islamic Republic and curb its economic growth. The 1979 Islamic revolution completely usurped pro-Western elites. The 1980s war with Iraq strengthened hostility towards the West because it took the side of Saddam Hussein. To this effect, president Ahmadinejad became the hero of his time. The logic of events during the period of his presidency made his persona the most suitable for that time’s atmosphere, particularly as neighbouring Iraq and Afghanistan were blazing under the fire of American military campaigns. As a main regional rival counterbalancing Iraq, Iran raised its role and reputation in regional affairs as a result of the 2003 American invasion.

Sanctions against Iran’s nuclear programme were unjustifiable given that Israel and South Korea were – and still are – permitted to develop their respective nuclear capabilities. Ahmadinejad will also be remembered as one the few local leaders who actually denounced the occupation of Palestine. All of this made him appear brave to both Sunni and Shia groups; however, such statements and stances resulted in corresponding retaliatory actions on Tehran by the US and the international community.

At the current time, Iran, like the US, is exhausted with the continual confrontation. Last year created a time to melt the ice of frozen conflict for both and elites signalled their readiness for cautious rapprochement. However, this does not suggest a decision by the Islamic Republic and the US to conspire against the remaining world powers, including Russia, in the short-term.
Moscow, Washington and Tehran over Damascus

From its inception, a part of Russian establishment tainted by experiences of the Colourful Revolutions viewed Arab Spring with suspicion. Russia itself went through the two changes of polity during relatively short period, in 1917 and 1991, and its apprehension of revolutions is almost instinctive. This does not mean that Moscow put their stakes in counteracting political transformation in the Arab world, including Tunisia, Egypt or Libya. Yet, the intentions of Western powers and their allies to decide about the organisation of other states and impose their will by what Russia sees as explicit material and ideological help to rebels caused strong objections by Moscow in Syria.

The Syrian regime – as well as the former Egyptian regime – comfortably allowed Americans to orchestrate Middle Eastern politics for many years. With this new dynamic, the US administration began frantically searching for “the right side of history” and calling the world to overthrow “bloody dictators.” Unfortunately, the right side keeps changing, with Egypt as a prime example, and opponents and tyrannical governments sometimes begin to act in the same manner. On the other hand, the absence of an official ideology in Russia allows it to cooperate with any government that comes to power in any post-revolutionary state. For instance, in February 2014 Putin wished success in the Egyptian presidential race to Abdel Fattah al-Sisi during his productive visit to Moscow. Less than a year ago, in April 2013, Moscow welcomed another Egyptian president, the deposed Mohammad Morsi.

With constant political transformation in the region, the US has been forced to prepare itself for further change. In recent decades, the use of force has been the primary mantra of America’s foreign policy. It was successful when the target was military elimination of an enemy. However, the Iraqi and Afghan cases demonstrated that military occupation of a state with further moulding of its domestic organisation is ineffective. The policy of relying on natural rifts and contradictions between the actors malfunctions when traditional balances of power are failing. It is key to note the Syrian regime turned out to be a teammate of the worst enemy, while the least democratic American ally, Saudi Arabia, supported manifestation of the people’s will in Damascus. Counting on regional conflicts to exclude the rise of an excessively influential hegemon is a complicated response to the popular uprisings.

The Russian position on Syria has been perceived rather negatively. Many consider that Moscow’s support of Bashar Al-Assad has been caused by the desire to preserve “the last ally in the Middle East,” to maintain control over the Tartus base or retain commercial contracts. However, others argue that it is not the regime the Kremlin protects. The foreign ministry, which has been maintaining contacts with Syrian opposition throughout
the conflict, considers that fighting groups should compromise among themselves without overseas political pressure. (5)

Russia believes it is maintaining preservation of the most basic norms of the international law violated in Libya. “No State shall organize, finance, or incite terrorist or armed activities directed towards the violent overthrow of the regime of another State, or interfere in civil strife in another State.” (6) Russia views its support of the attack on Libya as a mistake though the UNSC’s resolution had not implied a war for regime change. Moscow’s intransigence in Syria is much more than the pursuit of direct personal interests. (7) It believes the future nature of international norms of conduct in terms of use of force, conflict resolution and responsibility of the participants will be extensively defined by settlement of the Syrian crisis. At some level, the Kremlin realises that the thorough change of world affairs philosophy is inevitable and it does not seek to impede it. Instead it endeavours to smooth the transition by diplomatic prevention of forced meddling while still ensuring realisation of its self-interests.

This position coincided with Iran’s great unwillingness to bend further under the regional bloc headed by the US. Unlike dictators swept away by the tide of the revolutions in the Arab world, Iran hosts true elections, allowing certain political diversity and outpouring of popular will. Its economic, technologic and political potential is very different from its reputation as a pariah on the international scene. For Iran, preservation of the Shia-friendly Syrian regime is not the only objective. Iran is like Moscow – it is aware that the future regional and global structure of power depends on the outcome of the Syrian crisis.

It should be noted that the rift between Washington and the Iran-Russia axis is not as large as the media portrays. Washington could have bombed Syria, but it hesitated to meddle and use military force for a number of reasons. The US had no real interest in the Syrian campaign – defending democracy with Al-Qaeda mercenaries fighting against Assad as well would have bought it nothing. Net gain of hypothetical intervention to Syria would have been comparable to the profit of the military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. American support for democracy is often selective – for example, there was little American comment on the crushing of the Bahrain uprising. Moscow believes that Saudi Arabia and France, old allies, pressured the US to act in Libya and Syria. Moscow also believes that is why the US was so eager to cooperate with the Kremlin on chemical disarmament and the Geneva II peace talks.
Iran-Russia: common grounds and perspectives

The position of Russia as a dominant world power was lost when the Soviet Union fell. While there has been some interest in its markets, the Kremlin maintains it has no intentions to dominate the Middle East. Even arms exports to the Middle East are inferior as compared to contracts with Southeast Asian states, in particular India, China and Vietnam. Not only does Russia lack the capabilities to operate as a superpower, but it also has lacks the willingness to assume responsibility for the actions of potential clients. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian presence on the world scene significantly reduced to that of a local player with limited ambitions and resources.

This feature of the Kremlin’s policy known as “Russian pragmatism” is supposed to secure stability and safety for the country without involvement in risky and costly ventures. Immunity in exchange for stable development is the key idea behind Russian foreign policy. However, the size of Russia along with its Soviet heritage and its status as a UNSC permanent member and a nuclear power necessarily make it significant participant in world politics.

Bilateral relations with Iran should be examined in this context. First of all, Iran had never been close to the USSR in the post-revolutionary years – communist ideology was incompatible with Islam according to Ayatollah Khomeini. The détente of the 90’s and the ongoing pressure on Iran from the West drew Tehran closer to Moscow. The cooperation was forced – growing tensions with the US and its allies and the Cold War victory threw outcast Iran into the arms of a young Russian state still suffering from an inferiority complex of a defeated superpower. Russia then took over construction of Iran’s Bushehr nuclear power plant, something no other state could undertake.

Practically speaking, Russian interests in the region are not based on ideological premises although Iran is still rendered an ally. For instance, following the UNSC decision introducing tougher sanctions on Iran in 2010, Russia refused to fulfil the contract on the S-300 anti-aircraft missile system delivery. The abrogation initiated by the then-president Dmitry Medvedev was surprising both in Russia and overseas, for the UN sanctions that had banned certain arms exports were not meant to affect the deal with Moscow. In response, Iran lodged a $4 billion lawsuit in a Geneva arbitration court against Rosoboronexport, an arms exporter. Iran continues to insist on the delivery of the S-300s. Overall, Medvedev’s support of the sanctions and his statements on the nuclear threat demonstrated that Russian pursuits had little to do with a standoff against America.
On the other hand, Russian economic cooperation with the Middle East, including Iran, leaves much to be desired. Over the last 20 years, economic, military and political cooperation have been rather scanty. The Russian export-oriented economy depends on hydrocarbons trade, and the government does not pay any serious attention to the development of other sectors.

The significance of ties with Iran is strategic. Apart from a resolution of the Syrian conflict and progress of peaceful nuclear energy projects, there are a number of activities requiring participation of powerful actors. Some of Moscow’s vital interests directly linked to Iran are delimitation of the Caspian Sea, participation in the Shanghai Security Organisation (SCO) and concerns about troublesome neighbours such as Afghanistan or Tajikistan. Experts agree that Iran’s position on the international scene will be reinforced if sanctions are lifted; in turn, they predict this would have a positive effect on regional affairs. (8)

In the 1990s, Iran’s participation in ceasing the civil war in culturally-close Tajikistan has caused it to cooperate with Moscow to settle the country’s conflict. Iran was an intermediary of the intra-Tajik peace negotiations. In 1997, Iran became one of the guarantors of the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan. (9) The potential of Iran’s influence is great due to its historical and cultural proximity. Unlike China and other regional players, stability of the Central Asian region for Tehran is more than just market considerations. Nor can the US, located on the other side of the world, be a guarantor of peace and accord.

In this respect, Iran’s participation in the SCO shall have a positive impact on regional stability. (10) The well-being of Central Asia, known as Russia’s underbelly, is essential for Moscow because its economic and political integration is a top strategic priority of the Kremlin in the coming years. Since 2005, Iran has held observer member status in the SCO. Lifting UN sanctions would allow it to become a permanent member. Participation of such a powerful new member is alluring for Moscow because it will counterbalance China’s influence in the organisation. The Asian region is a relatively new world centre whose prominence will be increasing on a global scale. According to some prognoses, the role of the US as a world and regional power is expected to decrease after the withdrawal from Afghanistan. This would amplify the rise of other powers – other observers such India and Pakistan intend to join the SCO as permanent members as well.

Limitation of trade under the international sanctions blocks development of bilateral Iran-Russia cooperation in the economic sphere. Payment operations are hampered and
large Russian companies avoid the Iranian market in order not to lose business contacts with the US. In particular, Gazprom and Lukoil gave up oil field explorations due to the sanctions. The oil and gas sector in Iran suffers from a lack in investments and the government can only cover a third of the needed $250 billion. (11) In the beginning of February 2013, a message on the upcoming Iranian-Russian deal linked to sanctions removal was released. A broad memorandum on economic cooperation could be signed as early as this summer. It proposes swaps of Iran’s oil in exchange for Russian commodities and investment in the second nuclear power plant in Bushehr. In the event the agreement on oil delivery to Russia is implemented, the shipment will be sent through the Caspian Sea. (12)

Delimitation of the Caspian Sea is a chronic regional problem that will not be solved without Moscow and Tehran collaboration. Russia opposes plans of delimitation, for pending status of the sea precludes the countries of the eastern cost from expanding the routes of hydrocarbon supply to Europe, Russia’s exclusive partner. Iran lays claims to one-fifth of the Caspian, which is considered an excessive demand.

It is unlikely that Iran can challenge Russia as a fuel supplier to Europe. In the better days of the Brussels-sponsored Nabucco project, Iran was promoted as a potential contributor to gas pipeline capacities. These plans turned out to be implausible due to international sanctions. Today there is no functioning or projected European oil and gas infrastructure that could involve Iran. Even if the sanctions are lifted, South Asia and Southeast Asia are the faster-growing markets. Their governments are interested in attracting more energy resources. For several years, Iran has been competing with Turkmenistan over construction of a pipeline to Pakistan and India.

In sum, easing Iran’s political and economic isolation would allow Moscow and Tehran to exercise more control over the regional political and economic affairs, especially coordination on policies in the Asian region which promises continued reinforcement of the partnership.

**Conclusion**

Beginning with the fall of the Soviet Union, close cooperation between Moscow and Tehran grew out of demystification with the US and other superpowers. Iran felt constricted, with the only available path leading to Moscow. Current and slow normalisation of Iran-US relations gave birth to speculations that Iran will trade friendship with Moscow for Washington’s preferential treatment in Arab politics. However, this is hardly possible for a number of reasons.
First and foremost is the very nature of politics. An unpredictable and unstable environment complicates reliable long-term policy-making. In the meanwhile, steadfast alliances of the twentieth century have disappeared. The status quo no longer works, demonstrated in the manifestations and fluctuations of the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt and Syria. World powers and potential leaders with solid experience manipulating, bankrolling and bullying have failed to subdue multidirectional flows of events. Under these circumstances, Iran, a regional power in and of itself, is not prone to be fashioned in a manner suitable for either Kremlin or the White House. Feelings of self-respect and national pride will not allow Tehran to come under American influence after decades of confrontation. Despite his moderation, reformist Hassan Rouhani was an eyewitness to the Iran-Iraq war and possesses rich experience with Iran’s foreign policy.

Secondly, the US is unable to dupe its traditional regional allies. Pro-Israeli lobby in the US government would not tolerate an about-turn of the administration to Tehran. The internal contradictions bereave Americas of an opportunity to build a long-term strategy based on complete reconciliation with Iran.

Historical superiority of Iran and its ambitions are obvious. The centre of Shia culture and politics with rich pre-Islamic and Islamic statehood experience, its reinforcement in would balance the weight of the Sunni-oriented regional alliances in Moscow’s eyes. Lifting sanctions would inevitably widen the circle of Iran’s potential partners, something Moscow does not seek to limit.

Kremlin strategists assume that it is better to be a desired partner rather than a hopeless friend. At times Moscow afforded pressure and disbalance in decision-making. But common ground and understanding the advantages of cooperation outweigh the disparity. Thawing of Tehran’s relations with Washington would benefit strategic partnership with Moscow in political and economic spheres. This includes SCO membership, coordination of policies in the Caspian, Central Asian and South Asian regions, regulation of gas markets and management of the energy resource channels. To advance bilateral relationships, Moscow would prefer to see an independent and strong ally although this will also require genuine adjustability and flexibility from Moscow itself.

*Karina Fayzullina is a researcher specialising in Russian affairs.

References:


(6) See the UN Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation Among States in Accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.


Iran-US Rapprochement and Turkey-Iran Relations: Opportunities and potential threats

Dr. Mohammad Jaber Thalji *

Abstract

Iran-US rapprochement is only one of the factors pushing the Turkish government to approach Iran for better relations. Turkey’s strategic interests have served to push the two nations towards restoring relations despite their disagreement on the Syrian crisis. Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, the countries have enjoyed relatively healthy relations. It is now expected that the two countries will search for common positions on Syria, but this will not happen immediately. Although this Iranian-Western, particularly Iranian-US, convergence may bring short-term economic benefits for Turkey, it could harm its strategic interests in the region in the long run by increasing Iran’s regional influence at the expense of Turkey’s.

Introduction

Last year saw significant developments at the internal and external levels for both Turkey and Iran, prompting them to review their relations which had become tense because of the Syrian crisis. One of the most important developments was Iran-US
rapprochement after the nuclear agreement between the P5+1 group and Iran on November 24, 2013, a result of the openness policy adopted by the new Iranian president mid-2013. Due to a range of factors which coincided with Iran-US cooperation, Iran and Turkey moved to restore their relations despite continuing disagreement over the Syrian crisis. Turkey expressed its satisfaction with the Iran-US relationship, and Turkey’s foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, said, “It is a target that Turkey has long sought to achieve and exerted great efforts to reach. This convergence will contribute to increasing economic cooperation between the two countries and reducing tension in the region.” (1)

Despite the optimism about and warm reception by Turkish leaders, Turkey also considers the threats that may result from this cooperation, especially since Turkey-Iran relations have always manifested political competition, even at the best of times. This competition was evident, for example, in Iraq after US occupation, despite the existence of strong trade links between the two countries. It also emerged strongly in the Syrian crisis, a factor that has made the relationship extremely tense. The Syrian crisis has caused a severe deterioration and rift in the relations between Turkey and Iran. Initially, relations between the two countries improved rapidly after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) took power in Turkey. In the period leading to the Syrian crisis, Turkey played an important role in reducing political pressure and trade restrictions imposed on Iran, in cooperation with other international powers such as Brazil. This was apparent particularly when Turkey and Brazil voted against the decision taken against Iran at that time. (2) The agreement concluded between Brazil, Iran and Turkey on May 17, 2010 concerning the Iranian nuclear issue was an important attempt by Turkey to find a peaceful solution to this challenge. Turkey’s basic strategy in its relations with Iran was represented by its quest to reduce tension between Iran and the West. The Turkish government was widely criticised for seeking to strengthen relations with Iran at that time, and its actions were described as a change in its political orientation. (3)

Iran-US rapprochement is a new factor that, together with a range of other internal and external factors, catalysed Turkey and Iran to re-examine their strained relationship. Inherent in this re-examination is a range of opportunities and threats at the regional level.

This paper investigates the effect of Iran-US rapprochement on Turkish-Iranian relations under the new set of variables that have appeared on the political scene during 2013 and examines possible positive and negative results for Turkey. These two objectives are expressed in these two questions:
1. What is the impact of the Iran-US rapprochement on Turkish-Iranian relations?

2. What opportunities and threats might Turkey face as a result of Iran-US rapprochement?

**Iran-US rapprochement and changes to Turkey-Iran relations**

The visits between the Turkish and Iranian foreign ministers over the past months are considered important steps in reducing tensions between the countries, signalling a desire by both states to restore joint cooperation tying them together before the Syrian crisis. (4) Efforts to activate Turkish-Iranian relations are not coincidental. They are correlated with external and internal factors related to the new US political attitude toward Iran and Syria, the inability of both countries as regional powers to absorb the Syrian crisis, the recent exposure of Turkish-US relations to incongruence on more than an issue, the Turkish government’s feeling that it is exposed to internal and external threats and Iran’s desire to reshape its foreign strategy. (5) Both Turkey and Iran have recognised that, in spite of their differences on regional key issues, especially the Syrian crisis, both should invest in their points of agreement and compromise for the interests of both countries, particularly in the area of trade cooperation.

Examples of contradiction and convergence and their impacts on political relations between the two countries are evident in the heated exchange between their foreign ministers in Switzerland one week before Erdogan’s visit to Tehran. (6) This new phase in Turkish-Iranian relations is that the Syrian crisis is no longer the sole determinant of the relationship between the two countries as it has been for the past two years. Therefore, the new Iran-US relationship is not the only impetus motivating restoration of relations between the two countries, as evidenced by the Turkish inclination to establish strategic relations with Iran – just before the outbreak of Syrian crisis – in spite of the hostile relationship between Iran and the US. The Turkish government has moved towards Iran based for a combination of factors that advance its strategic interests in the region. This Iran-US convergence only served to boost these factors.

In spite of great interest in the US’ new strategy toward Iran, it seems that Turkish politicians view Iran-US convergence with realism. The Turkish president, Abdullah Gul, criticised the notion that the latest Iran-US understanding would lead to a change in strategic relations in the region, saying this was exaggerated. (7) However, the Turkish foreign ministry maintains its strategy of anticipating events and attempting to participate in them, instead of avoidance and waiting for results. Its involvement in the
Iran-US rapprochement process is to seize opportunities and minimise threats as much as possible.

Issues related to Iran are considered key in relations between Turkey and the US. The table below presents results from a study by the Foundation for Global Strategic Studies in Turkey (USAK) indicating issues related to Iran were at the top of the agenda of visits by US officials to Turkey during the past four years, followed by issues such as the fight against terrorism, Syria, Iraq and Israel. It is expected that Turkey will enter impending Iran-US relations, and will participate in any political project that may result in positive outcomes.

<table>
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<th>Agenda items for US Officials visiting Turkey (2009 – 2013)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
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<td>Fight against terrorism</td>
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<td>Democracy in Turkey</td>
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<td>World Views</td>
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<td>Africa</td>
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<td>Turkish Model</td>
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*Source: USAK Amerika Araştırmaları Merkezi*

**Failure of regional powers to resolve Syrian crisis**

The Syrian crisis tops the factors influencing Iranian-Turkish political relationships, even contributing to confrontation between the two sides. The consensus among world powers on holding Geneva 2 to find a solution to the crisis shows the failure of influential regional powers led by Turkey and Iran in the management of this crisis. Hence, we can conclude that the timing of Davutoglu’s visit, parallel to Geneva 2, was an attempt by
the two most influential regional powers to restore their roles by taking advantage of common points of understanding, especially in trade relations. (9)

Turkish-American relations were in harmony with respect to the Arab Spring and the Syrian crisis, but the past year brought with it a divergence of views, especially with regard to the US’ inability to take a firm decision against the Syrian regime even after its use of chemical weapons against civilians. Further divergence came with the White House’s unclear position on labelling the military coup in Egypt. These issues represented a lack of harmony between global and regional powers. (10) Although Turkey’s inclination to converge with Iran is consistent with Iran-US rapprochement, Turkey is seeking for a new strategy to resolve the Syrian crisis, preserve its strategic interests, and search for alternatives to offset its strained relations in the Western and Arab arenas.

Looking for alternative communication channels
The Turkish government found itself facing several internal and external pressures and challenges during the last year, including events at Taksim Square, corruption files opened by the judiciary against people close to the ruling AKP and the clash with the Fethullah Gulen group. The government was also faced with political differences with many countries in the region such as Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, in addition to its strained relationships with Syria and Iran. Turkish foreign policy has thus sought to reconsider its position at the regional level. (11) Turkey’s strained relationship with an important regional power such as Egypt obliges it to rethink its relationship with Iran to prevent itself being isolated at the international and regional levels, especially after the emergence of a Saudi-Egyptian axis supported by France and Iran-US rapprochement. (12) At the domestic level, it can be inferred that America has its hands in the recent threats encountered by the Turkish government, especially in the last security operation on December 17, 2013, in addition to hints by AKP leaders on the presence of external forces in domestic anti-government movements.

From Iran’s side, rapprochement with the US can be reversed at any time if Iran draws red lines with respect to its nuclear programme. An example of the incomplete picture of this convergence is the exclusion of Iran from the Geneva 2 conference. (13) At the domestic level, economic pressures inside Iran have increased with a high rate of inflation and price increases. Economic sanctions have caused a loss of nearly 65 per cent of its petroleum products revenue. The deficit in foreign currency also caused a drop in the value of the Iranian Riyal to unprecedented levels during the past few years.
Thus, both Turkey and Iran are seeking to compensate for their losses on regional and global levels.

The threat of Kurdish militias in north-eastern Syria

The Kurdish question is one of the primary concerns of the Turkish government. It obliges the government to rethink its relationship with states that have Kurdish populations, such as Iran, Syria and Iraq. Turkey felt threatened when the Popular Protections Units (YPG) of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) made military gains in parts of north-eastern Syria near the Turkish border after benefiting from the struggle between Syrian opposition forces and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), pushing it to closer relations with Iran. The Kurdish issue was of serious importance, raised by Erdogan during his January 29, 2014 visit to Iran. Iran and Turkey share common concerns with regard to the separatist Kurdish groups in their countries which collaborate with Kurdish organisations in Iraq and Syria. The Kurdish issue is a common thread of cooperation ensuring some level of continued positive relations in the future. This cooperation could contribute to easing Turkish fears of the impact of Kurdish militias on its eastern and southern borders.

Iran-US rapprochement and the future of Turkey-Iran relations

Iran-US cooperation increased the complexity of international relations networks in the Middle East. It is difficult to determine the nature, prospects and limitations of the effects of this convergence. Putting aside opportunities that such convergence can bring to some regional powers such as Iraq and Syria, others see it as a clear threat. Convergence can be a threat and an opportunity for Middle Eastern states, depending on the nature of their relations with Iran and the US. Countries that have hostile relations with Iran, such as the Arab Gulf states and Israel, have felt the seriousness of this convergence and expressed dissatisfaction with it. Turkey has viewed this convergence as a fait accompli and sought to take advantage of the opportunities that can be realised from it, minimize the risks that it can produce and officially announce its support for this rapprochement.

Economic opportunities

The US and European Union have eased economic sanctions on Iran after resolving the ambiguity related to the centrifuge, the most sensitive issue of uranium enrichment. Turkey has long sought to establish stronger trade ties with Iran, but its efforts were obstructed by economic sanctions on the latter. Western powers have frequently
criticised Turkey because it sought to establish trade relations with Iran. However, after the recent Iran-West cooperation, and if the sanctions are mitigated, Turkey may take advantage of the opportunity to increase its foreign trade and access to energy sources with more ease and at affordable prices. (19) Some analysts believe that Iran-West, particularly Iran-US cooperation, can bring short-term benefits for the Turkish economy, but will harm Turkish strategic interests in the long term. (20) This is because this convergence could lead to increased Iranian influence in the region at the expense of Turkish influence.

In spite of the many possibilities projected for the future of the Iranian-American convergence, Turkey seems to have drawn a strategic line with respect to its trade relations with Iran, one that can be inferred from high-level visits exchanged between the parties, including the most important recent visit of the Turkish prime minister to Iran, and the announcement of a high level of trade cooperation between the two countries which will be activated with Rouhani’s upcoming visit to Turkey. (21)

The table below indicates that despite the rapid increase in trade volumes between the two countries since the AKP assumed power, 2013 witnessed a significant reduction in the volume of trade because of the sanctions imposed on Iran. (22) Economic objectives have been identified as priorities of this visit, despite the heavy political tension resulting from the Syrian crisis. (23) Erdogan announced that Turkey aimed to increase the volume of trade between the two countries to $30 billion in 2015. (24)

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<td>Value (Billions of USD)</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>6.69</td>
<td>8.05</td>
<td>10.22</td>
<td>5.43</td>
<td>10.68</td>
<td>16.05</td>
<td>21.88</td>
<td>13.5</td>
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Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey

In contrast to the Turkish rush to boost economic relations with Iran to the highest level, the US has taken a more conservative approach because it believes it is not yet time for such a level of trade relations. US reservations were expressed by US Treasury Advisor David Cohen, charged with supervising the implementation of sanctions on Iran, during a visit to Turkey on December 19, 2013, when he pointed to the nature of the sanctions imposed on Iran and the necessity to abide by these measures. (25) Cohen advised Turkish companies to postpone doing business with Iran as sanctions remained on Iranian banking, energy and shipping sectors in spite of the nuclear deal between the
Looking for common ground on Syria

Turkish relations with Iran and Syria have not been tied to the relations of these countries with the United States. Davutoglu highlighted this when he indicated the cause of the worsening relationship between Turkey and Syria came after the Syrian regime had fought against and killed its own people. Before the crisis, he said, Turkey had insisted on strong ties with Syria despite the latter’s negative relations with Western powers. Contrary to Turkey’s hopes, western powers led by the US were unable to resolve the political conflict resulting from the Syrian crisis and took a diplomatic approach to find a solution to the conflict.

This caused Turkey to be held back in dealing with this crisis, being forced to find diplomatic ways to reduce the potential damage that could be caused by the crisis. It is expected that the next period of Iran-Turkey relations will include attempts to forge common ground on Syria, even though this has not yet been the case. It is also expected that Turkey will rethink its policies on Syria and be forced to use less assertive strategies if it wants to be party to the ongoing international dialogue on the issue. In contrast, the high level of convergence between Iran and the US is expected to witness the US attempting to influence Iran on the Syrian crisis. To demystify the future in this regard, the outcomes of Geneva 2 will give clearer indicators on the positive or negative impacts of Iran-US rapprochement on Turkey.

Among the first indications of Turkey’s bid to find common ground with Iran on the Syrian crisis was Davutoglu’s comment in a press conference in Tehran about Turkey’s opposition to the presence of foreign fighters in Syria and his suggestion that everyone should be opposed to foreign fighters. In spite of explicit Iranian support to the Syrian regime, Turkey has sought to differentiate between its position against the Syrian regime and its relations with Iran. Turkey also seeks to ease the contradictions that can arise from its role in NATO and the presence of NATO forces in Turkey on the one hand, and the presence of US military bases on its territory and its relations with Iran on the other. For example, Turkey reassured Iran after the latter felt threatened by the NATO Patriot missile defence system placed in the Turkish areas of Jiyhan, Adana and Injirlik. Turkey confirmed that the defence system was not directed at Iran, but aimed to protect Turkish territory against possible Syrian attacks.
Likelihood of Turkish-Gulf rapprochement

After the military coup in Egypt caused tension in the relationship between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and Turkish-Arab relations more generally, Iran-Turkey tension began to ease, especially given Iran-US convergence. Countries that could be affected by this convergence, such as Turkey and the Gulf states, felt the need to act together. (33) Turkey also sought to restore relations with Iraq on political and business issues. Trade relations between Turkey and Iraq developed significantly over the past year, especially in the energy field. Turkey had imported 51 per cent of its energy from Iran before 2013; this figure fell to 28.5 per cent in 2013 and it offset this shortfall by importing Iraqi oil. Imports of Iraqi oil rose from 10 per cent of total oil imports in 2012 to 32 per cent in 2013. (34) By strengthening relations with Iran, Turkey will seek to alleviate the sectarian crisis that struck the region and appeared clearly in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. (35)

Probability of declining Turkish and rising Iranian role

Before US-Iran convergence at the end of 2013, and before the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, Turkey played mediator between the two countries. That role is no longer justified since the two parties meet directly. The continuation of this convergence may give Iran greater opportunities to increase its influence in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.
Thus Iran’s role will become more important than Turkey’s with regard to western powers, especially the US, in their attempts to reach their goals through non-military means. (36) Among the expected results of Iran-US cooperation is the wide latitude given to Iranians to exercise political influence over Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and the Arabian Gulf. This will, in turn, limit the regional role of Turkey. (37)

Turkey, which adopts a flexible and pragmatic foreign policy, will not stand by and allow this to happen. It will try to participate in any political process related to core issues in the region, especially the Syrian crisis. Turkey will try to balance its relations with Iran and the Arab Gulf states and will seek to achieve a greater degree of harmony between these relations to maintain ties with all the regional powers and still be able to face threats that may arise from any Iranian role.

**Conclusion**

Last year saw significant developments at both the internal and external levels in Turkey and Iran. These have contributed to the tendency of both countries to review their relations which took a tense turn after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis. The most important development in 2013 was the opening of a new page in Iran-US relations after the nuclear deal between the P5+1 and Iran. Despite the importance of Iran-US cooperation in motivating Turkey to restore ties with Iran, this factor is not the only motivation for restoring ties between the two countries. Turkey had a tendency of establishing strategic relations with Iran before the outbreak of the Syrian crisis and despite previous hostile relations between Iran and the US. Thus, the Turkish government moved towards Iran based on a combination of factors that will help Turkey reach its strategic objectives in the region. Iran-US cooperation boosted these factors from different dimensions.

Despite the fact that Turkey’s attempt to strengthen relations with Iran has coincided with Iran-US convergence, Turkey is seeking to resolve the Syrian crisis, preserve its strategic interests through this convergence and look for alternatives to offset its strained relations with the Western and Arab worlds. The Turkish government has found itself confronting several internal and external pressures and challenges, including events of Taksim Square, corruption cases opened by the judiciary and the confrontation with the Gulen group. Also, it found itself facing political differences with many countries in the region such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Israel, in addition to Syria and Iran. Therefore, Turkish foreign policy already sought to reconsider its regional policies. Among the important and fundamental factors that caused Turkey to restore its relations with Iran was its fear of the Popular Protection Units of the Kurdish Democratic Union.
Party (PYD), which had made military gains in north-eastern Syrian near the Turkish border after benefiting from the struggle between Syrian opposition forces and ISIS.

Some analysts believe the western, particularly American, rapprochement with Iran could bring short-term economic benefits for Turkey. In the long term, however, it could harm Turkey’s strategic interests by increasing Iranian influence in the region at the expense of Turkey’s.

Although this has not yet happened, it is expected the next period of Iran-Turkey relations will witness attempts to look for common ground on the Syrian issue. It is also expected that Turkey will review its calculations on this issue, and will be obliged to use a less assertive strategy if it wants to be privy to ongoing international dialogue on the Syrian crisis. On the other hand, with the rise in the level of the expected convergence between Iran and the US, it is expected the US is working to influence Iran’s policies regarding the Syrian crisis.

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Iran’s Growing Role in Central Asia?
Geopolitical, Economic and Political Profit and Loss Account

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Abstract
Iran has tried in recent years to impose itself on the Central Asian scene economically and culturally. This paper addresses three key questions: 1. To what extent will Iran’s increased role modify the geopolitical situation in the region? 2. Can Tehran hope to exert more influence on the region in terms of economic trade? 3. Is Iran at risk of politico-religious influence on Central Asia and Afghanistan, as has been regularly claimed by political leaders from the region as well as a number of local and western analysts? It concludes with the contention that any increased Iranian influence on the region will come gradually and will be impacted by the progress of rapprochement efforts with the United States.

Introduction
The recent rapprochement between the United States and Iran raises many questions about the increased role that the latter could play in Afghanistan and in Central Asia.
(Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Hitherto Iran has been the essential “missing link” in the regional integration of the region and the sanctions placed on it by the international community have largely hampered the development of political and economic relations with its neighbours, as well as its possible involvement in rebuilding and stabilizing Afghanistan.

Iran has nevertheless spared no effort in trying to impose itself on the regional scene. After the fall of the Soviet Union, a biased reading of Central Asia “rediscovering” its cultural-Islamic and partly linguistic identity with Iran (and Turkey) dominated frames of reference both in the West and among the actors themselves. However, the prospect for Central Asia’s rapid integration into the Muslim world soon abated. Although Iran has managed to build long-term influence and pragmatic partnerships with their neighbors, its relations with Central Asia seemed to fade with the fear expressed by Central Asian countries of seeing Tehran boost the development of “political Islam” on their territories, with the onset of Russian-American tensions in the Caspian Basin, with the reassertion of Russian great power, not to mention with Beijing’s arrival on the Central Asian radar, and lastly and above all, American pressures to dissuade all large-scale projects involving cooperation with Tehran. In Afghanistan, Iran has tried to gain in influence, but is once again impeded by geopolitical calculations and in particular by pressures from Washington.

The observable rapprochement between Tehran and Washington should not be overestimated and, even if it is successful, will probably be a relatively long process. There are several obstacles to overcome (among others, the opposition or reluctance of some American and Iranian political circles, or states such as Israel, Turkey, Russia, China etc.). However, progress in this direction raises three questions: 1. To what extent will Iran’s increased role modify the geopolitical situation in the region? 2. Can Tehran hope to exert more influence on the region in terms of economic trade? 3. Is Iran at risk of politico-religious influence on Central Asia and Afghanistan, as has been regularly claimed by political leaders from the region as well as a number of local and western analysts?

Towards a regional geopolitical redefinition?
To this day, Iran has never managed to fully claim its role and its geopolitical presence in the region, both for internal and external reasons. For the Islamic Republic of Iran the disappearance of the Soviet Union, as the main counterweight to American influence, drastically modified its geopolitical environment toward regional neighbours. During Soviet times, Iran was thought as a buffer state between the USSR on one side and pro-
Western Turkey and Pakistan on the other side; however, the geopolitical scene was turned upside down in the 1990s, with Ankara and Islamabad then presenting themselves as ramparts against the spread of Iranian revolutionary ideas in Central Asia and the Caucasus. (1)

Moreover, despite many long centuries of proximity, Iranian leaders had no specific ideas about what they might hope to achieve in independent Central Asia, and they did not consider it to be a priority area. Iran’s primary concerns were domestic: After emerging from a decade of war with Iraq, the economic and social situation was tense. It was not until 2001 that the Iranian minister of foreign affairs, Kamal Kharrazi, declared the region is an Iranian foreign policy priority. (2)

For their part, the Central Asian states were trying, through partnership with Tehran, to escape Russian influence, to diversify economically, and to gain access to open seas in the south. But they were also quite wary about forging a relationship with the Islamic regime and feared that Tehran would seek to export Islamic revolution. At the time, local governments also faced rising pressure from Washington, which sought to prevent the transformation of Iran into a regional power.

At the end of the 1990s, Iran tried to strengthen its position in international structures, such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), but relations with Israel quickly constituted a point of contention with the Central Asian governments. Pressures from Iran, which then sought to adopt resolutions against Israel during its 1997-2000 presidency of the OIC, led the Central Asian states to keep their distance from the organization to preserve their good relations with Tel Aviv. Iran also sought a leading role in the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the only major regional organization to which it belongs. (3) Again, the Central Asian states rejected Tehran’s attempts at politicization of the organization, which would have put them at odds with the United States. The organization has certainly failed to take off and today plays only a marginal role in the development of exchanges between Iran and Central Asia. (4)

Today, Tehran’s place in regional geopolitical reconfigurations is not settled, although it has not spared any efforts in recent years in trying to join new organizations. In 2003, and then again in 2008, Tehran strongly supported prospects for an Asian Union, inviting Russia, India, China and other states of Asia to join. The aim was to gather together the main world resources in oil and gas, but also in people, and to constitute a counterweight to the United States. (5) It obtained SCO observer status in 2005. Tehran also attempted to foster a new Persian-speaking regional configuration, and Mahmud
Ahmadinejad promoted the Conference of Persian Countries that brought together the presidents of Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan in April 2010. (6)

Warmer Iran-American relations would enable Tehran to strengthen its role in regional organizations. This scenario would be a way for the United States to limit China’s growing role in Afghanistan and in Central Asia. Iran would indeed have less need to rely on China in order to impose itself, while the new context could inflame tensions between both countries. The influence of ECO or of the OIC remains weak in Central Asia and to this day no other regional organization has proved itself in terms of economic development and the maintenance of regional security. On the other hand, some regional actors (China, Turkey) could turn out to be reluctant to let this country gain in influence and impose itself as a sizeable economic and political rival on the regional scene. Lastly, the republics of Central Asia will most likely continue to entertain friendly relations with Tel-Aviv, and any anti-Israeli politics pursued by Iran will cause an outcry from Central Asian governments.

With the 2014 NATO drawdown from Afghanistan, the international community increasingly looks towards the impact that a stable or unstable Afghanistan might have on the broader region, including Central Asia. Emphasis is often placed on the threat of radical Islamism and Afghan extremists that could destabilize Central Asia. The possibility of a rapprochement between Washington and Tehran could impact Iranian configurations towards Afghanistan, Iran being a key player for Afghanistan’s future. Domestic evolutions in Afghanistan have a direct bearing on Iran. Unlike Pakistan, Iran’s interests in Afghanistan are similar to those of the international community: it will gain nothing by seeing a Taliban regime in power in Kabul. Iran could be more involved in the country’s rebuilding, something that the states of Central Asia, and other of Afghanistan’s neighbours such as India, would very much hope to see. The United States could even look at Iran as a possible way to Afghanistan, rather than the very risky route through Pakistan, or the very costly northern path via Central Asia. The completion of the gas pipeline between Iran and Pakistan would give Iran greater influence over Pakistan and therefore reduce the latter’s negative influence on Afghanistan.

The relations between Iran and Afghanistan, which are often very intense, could improve. Afghanistan has accused the Iranians on many occasions of interfering in its domestic (political, economic, and cultural) affairs. Both countries have had recurrent disagreements over the distribution of water, and Afghanistan claims to be hindered by Iran in realizing its construction projects for hydroelectric dams. Iran instrumentalised the issue of having Afghan refugees on its territory (about 1 million persons) to discourage all cooperation with the United States, claiming it would be prepared to expel
large numbers of refugees if Kabul refused to comply. Afghanistan remains open to cooperation with Iran for the purposes of development and stabilization, a cooperation that could be further developed within this new context.

**Potential and limits of reorientation of economic exchanges**

Thus far geography has not won out in its combat against geopolitics, and the international community’s ostracisation of Tehran has cost the Central Asian economies dearly, as it has prevented them from taking full advantage of Iranian proximity. The question arises whether or not the end of the nuclear dispute could give rise to the development of economic, regional and bilateral exchanges. If Iran can hope to play a greater economic role in the region, its presence will remain secondary since the context has considerably altered in Central Asian since the 1990s. (7) Despite its geographical contiguity with Central Asia via Turkmenistan, economic exchanges are still limited and sometimes in decline. At the end of the 2000s, Tehran represented less than three per cent of the whole of Central Asian foreign trade. The Iranian products that entered Central Asian markets at the beginning of the 1990s were unable to stave off Chinese competition and were destined to disappear. However, in the opposite case, if Iran were really reintegrated into the international scene the partnership with Central Asia would likely increase in scope: new sectors of cooperation are developing in which Iranian expertise would be appreciated: hydroelectricity, minerals, the industrial treatment of agriculture and textiles, and automobile production. Iran’s geographical position gives it real value in the eyes of the Central Asian states, which are always interested in finding ways to expand and to gain access to the southern seas, and to the Mediterranean Basin. Projects to connect Central Asian road and railway networks to Iran’s, as well as to Turkey’s and Afghanistan’s are numerous, but they have been quite unrealistic given the current geopolitical context, and the flows that circulate on the completed sections are very modest. Nevertheless, Iran’s strategic role as a transit zone from the Eurasian continent, on both the east-west and north-south axes, plays in its favour in the long-term.

Were there to be confirmation of the warming of relations between the United States and Iran, a development of trade relations between Iran and Europe could be predicted, in particular in the sector of hydrocarbons. Such a development could have consequences on the oil countries of the region, since it would weigh further, in terms of competition, on Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. It is highly unlikely that the latter has any concerns about finding client countries for its exportations, as China remains a main buyer. This would nonetheless put Astana in a situation of greater independence with respect to the Chinese neighbour, at a time when the influence of Beijing is increasingly contested.
within the country. (8) If Iranian oil is better inserted into global distribution circuits, this may lead to world prices of black gold falling and thus, for Kazakhstan, to a reduction of dividends from the oil manna on which the Kazakh authorities count in terms of economic and social development, as well as stability. This scenario is however scarcely in the short term since it requires the organization of transport infrastructures, and, as a result, considerable investments and notable extension periods.

Beyond the regional political game, there are equally some bilateral relations that might come to be reconsidered. Kazakhstan dominates the exchanges, followed closely by Turkmenistan. Iran ranks as Turkmenistan’s sixth-largest trade partner and Tajikistan’s seventh-largest, but it is much less important for the other countries. Here again the figures should cause no illusion: with the exception of Turkmen and Tajik exports, Iran represents only between 0.3 and 6.7 per cent of the region’s imports or exports. (9) Iran considered Turkmenistan, with which it shares a 900-kilometer long border, as its main ally in Central Asia. Their relations quickly turned their focus onto trade exchanges. Iran would probably be less disposed to yielding to demands with its partner of the north, and with which negotiations are known to be difficult: Turkmenistan regularly changed its export tariffs on gas to Iran, pursued a policy of repression against the Shiite minority, and supported the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. (10) However, Iran will not be able to ignore Ashgabat, which is a gas partner and an essential entry door into Central Asia.

As for Kazakhstan, despite its will to develop relations with Iran, it had to demonstrate moderation in order not to offend its American partner. A new context would enable Kazakhstan to relaunch, or give greater vigour to, several projects, in particular in the sector of commodity transit and in oil swaps, which are numerous but were impeded by Iran’s marginalization. Moreover, Kazakhstan has become one of the major exporters of cereals to Iran and hopes to increase its presence via maritime transportation and the building of cereal terminals in Aktau and the Iranian ports. (11) However, such a redirection of trade exchanges is not without risk for the region. Kazakhstan, which today cuts the figure of Central Asia’s bread basket, is at the origin of more than 90 per cent of wheat imports from the Central Asian republics. Astana has not concealed that it is looking for more solvable clients than the poor republics of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This development thus raises questions over the problem of food security in the region, which today remains particularly fragile. Lastly, for Astana, a growing civil nuclear power, Iran would be a select partner. The former has not hidden its interest, in theory, in helping the Iranian nuclear power program through the sale of uranium fuel, and in
2009, it even offered to host on its territory a fuel bank that Iran could use for civilian purposes. (12)

Uzbekistan continues to be the country most reluctant to develop its relations with Iran, and this is for multiple reasons: the Uzbek regime is suspicious of any rival regional power, was founded on the fear of Islamic insurgency and, until 2005, promoted itself as the foremost ally of the United States in the region. (13) A potential change might therefore tend to convince Tashkent to further develop relations with Tehran, probably in a very moderate manner. Trade relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan bear low importance, even if the latter has long stood as a gateway for Iranian influence in Central Asia. (14)

Is there are risk of spreading Shiite political Islam in the region?
Beyond some geopolitical and economic consequences, this situation could give impetus to Iran’s insertion in the global trade flows, and above all to the risks of spreading political Islam, an issue of concern to the Central Asian authorities. Since the mid-1990s, fear of political Islam has helped to curb Iranian Central Asians emerging relations. The denunciation of a political Islamic threat that emanates from Arab countries (Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia or Iran’s Shiite revolutionary Islam) has become one of the themes of Central Asian states, which are adamant about retaining their secular character. Suspicions linked to Iran’s religious orientation are still numerous.

Many episodes have served to make the Iranian state suspicious in the eyes of the Central Asian governments. It is likely that Iran funded, at least initially, the Party of Islamic Revival of Tajikistan, and indirectly participated in the overthrow of the government of Rakhmon Nabiyev in 1992 which was followed by a civil war. (15) However, Tehran has always denied a direct role in the Tajik armed conflict, claiming to have perceived it as a civil war between regional clans, not a holy war on behalf of Islam. Iran has however pursued a flexible policy in Central Asia that has created for it a range of opportunities for expanding its influence in the future. The Islamic Republic’s intelligence services are purportedly active throughout the region, Iranian universities host Central Asian students every year, small Sunni religious groups receive funding from Tehran and new Shiite movements with connections to Iran have formed in Tajikistan. Under the supervision of embassies, Tehran funded the opening of several cultural centres, as well as chairs of Iranian studies at several universities in Central Asia.
Iran plays the card of religious solidarity with Shiites in Afghanistan more than in Central Asia. The rapprochement could ease Iran policy which so far has had contradictory interests in this country. First, the religious and civilian parts of the Iranian government have no interest in seeing the Pakistani and Saudi-backed Taliban return to power. Iran has privileged relations with the Hazara ethnic minority which dominates the Shiite scene in Afghanistan (16) and constitutes the third largest religious group in the country (less than 10 per cent of the population). However, the Revolutionary Guard have supported them as an anti-American agenda. In this new context, Iran could support the Shiites living in Afghanistan more; on the other hand, this could raise more tensions with Pashtuns. Iran will certainly keep its actors involved in Afghanistan and dispose of many possible allies in the country. The assistance offered by Tehran and particularly by its mosques’ charitable foundations—the reconstruction of places of worship, religious guidance, theology texts—often is a condition of unwavering support for the Khomeini ideology.

Even if Iran has failed to influence regional geopolitical orientations, Tehran perceives the region as a crossroad for a conflict with the Sunni fundamentalist currents from the Indian subcontinent and the Persian Gulf, which are multiplying in Central Asia. Tehran does not want to interfere with the traditional Sunnism of the Afghan and Central Asian peoples, but is concerned by the spreading of Salafi theories, which it regards as an ideological Arabisation harmful to the Middle Eastern balance. (17) This situation has led Iran to conduct a paradoxical strategy in Central Asia. Since the era between 2001-2003, the Iranian state has been, for instance, seeking to expand contacts with Central Asian secret services. It supports local Islamic groups that call on Central Asians to become good Muslims in their daily practice as well as in foreign policy by being more critical of the Western (American, Russian, European) presence, while at the same time seeking to halt Sunni radicalism, but these two trends are contradictory because the former groups are most often inspired by Salafism.

Greater relations with Iran could provoke further tensions and control over potential Iranian political activities on Central Asian territories. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan regularly accuse the Iranian secret services, or various religious groups, of wanting to destabilize the secular regimes. (18) Twelver Shiism, which is practiced by the Azeri minorities of Central Asia as well as by the Ironis in the Bukhara-Samarkand region, is subject to repression on a regular basis. Shiism is associated with national minorities, equated with Islamism, and therefore comes with a risk of terrorism or rebellion, and is seen as an agent of Iranian influence. (19)
Yet almost no Iranian group actively seeks to promote the conversion of Sunni Central Asians to Shia. Only Tajikistan is experiencing a small trend of conversion to Shiism, but it is limited specifically to some regions (Khatlon and Kulyab), where the influence of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan is significant. But it is the only country in Central Asia where pan-Iranian sentiments can be expressed, where Iran is seen by some as a model. (20) The religious and political influence of Iran in Central Asia has often been overestimated, and concerns related to the expansion of political Islam inspired by the Shiite Iranian model have largely been exaggerated. Tehran has not tried to play the card of religious one-upmanship in Central Asia as it has done in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, nor has it sought to mobilize the small minority of Shiites in the region.

**Conclusion**

The Iranian state presents itself as a pragmatic partner, willing to put aside the ideological differences it has with Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbours—for example on Israel or the secular nature of the regimes—in order to promote regional cooperation. It is likely that Iran will not miss any opportunity to impose itself further on the regional stage. It is nevertheless hardly probable that the situation will alter quickly. Tehran and the region’s states remain fully aware of the fragility of any such development. However, were this scenario to play out, the region and the international community would certainly have much to gain from greater Iranian involvement in the rebuilding of Afghanistan, in the regional integration (political and economic) of Central Asia and a better equilibrium between regional actors in the face of the weight of specific actors such as China and Russia, which is of course legitimate but dominant.

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Analyses and forecasts on Iran-US rapprochement and on the future of Iran’s role vary. Some believe that rapprochement will influence the course of political events in the region and re-shape its map. Others are more cautious, pointing to challenges and obstacles that will reduce the possibility of its success. This concluding chapter of the Centre’s Iran project provides a list of key findings from the components of the project.

This research project outlined and discussed the future of Iran-US rapprochement and Iran’s expanding international role. Its chapters were written by Iranian affairs and international relations researchers and experts. The project included the following chapters:

1. **Introduction.**

2. **Iran in World Politics After Rouhani** – Dr. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, head of Centre for Iranian Studies at the University of London.
3. **Future of Iran-US Relations** – Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian, member of Iran’s former nuclear issue negotiating team and visiting researcher at Princeton University.

4. **Domestic Voices: Actors in Iran’s Political Arena** – Farah Al-Zaman Abu Shuair, Tehran-based researcher and media activist.

5. **Mechanisms of Iran-US Rapprochement**: Lessons from the Past – Dr. Mark Katz, professor of international relations at George Mason University’s US campus.

6. **Iran-US Rapprochement: Where Does the Path to Jerusalem Cross?** – Dr. Fatima Al-Smadi, researcher at Al Jazeera Centre for Studies.

7. **Iran-Russia Relations in Light of Iran-US Rapprochement** – Karina Fayzullina, Russian researcher specialising in international relations.

8. **Iran-US Rapprochement and Iran-Turkey Relations**: Potential Opportunities and Threats – Dr. Mohammad Jaber Thalji, researcher specialising in Turkish affairs.

9. **Iran’s Growing Role in Central Asia? Geopolitical, Economic and Political Profit and Loss Account** – Dr. Sebastien Peyrouse, research professor of international affairs at George Washington University.

10. **Summary and Results.**

**Findings:**

1. The strategic preferences of any state, including Iran, do not suddenly change when the government changes. They are embedded in institutions and formed systemically, carrying deep and broad dimensions beyond day-to-day politics.

2. Rouhani’s rise to power should be seen as one of the more obvious manifestations of the gradual changes that have been taking place in the domestic politics of post-revolutionary Iran. He is a product of the post-revolutionary generation that longed for reforms but is compelled to continue to work within the general strategic framework of the Islamic Republic.
3. Iran has significantly changed under Rouhani’s rule, especially with regards to international affairs and reconciliation with the United States; however, these changes are hampered by the state’s long-term strategic preferences which will continue directing the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy.

4. These strategic preferences do not preclude closer relations with the United States and even an implicit change in policies towards Israel, but they make it impossible for Iran to be seen as a follower.

5. Trends in the political arena with regards to Iran’s relationship with Washington are linked to three schools of ideological thought:

   - The first school, to which Ayatollah Ali Khamenei belongs, believes that the United States cannot abandon its hegemonic policies. The advocates of this school look at any reconciliation efforts with utmost suspicion. However, adherents do not categorically reject easing tensions between the two countries.

   - The second school, to which the radicals belong, emphasises the existence of inherent hostility between the Islamic regime of Iran and the West. They say that the only way is through resistance, and their point of view is that negotiations imply accepting defeat and are a red line.

   - The third school, representing the moderate camp, includes symbolically prominent former Iranian President Rafsanjani and current president Hassan Rouhani. This school believes there are many common interests between Iran and the United States adversely affected by hostile relations between the two countries.

6. Within the religious establishment in Iran, there are both moderate and fundamentalist clerics. According to statements from the Seminary, their scholars’ views on rapprochement support that of the Supreme Leader.

7. If current Iranian foreign policy proves to be merely an interim tactic, Iran-US rapprochement will be short lived even if agreement is reached on the nuclear issue.

8. Rapprochement efforts between Russia and America, and between China and America at the beginning of the 1970s suggest the following: If Iran is looking for a solution to the nuclear issue but continues what some consider to be hostile policies, rapprochement efforts with the United States will probably not succeed.
However, if Iran is looking at improving its relations with America's allies in the region, the ongoing rapprochement efforts may succeed.

9. Rapprochement with the US will probably involve a political exchange of interests rather than honesty at all levels. Iranian policy-makers realise that openness toward the United States and full normalisation of relations would effectively reveal the domestic fragility and discord that exists between the regime and its citizens.

10. Iranian officials are aware the concrete process of change required and expected of them, especially on the Palestinian issue, would not be tactical in the context of Iran-US rapprochement, so they continue to manoeuvre and dodge this issue.

11. Today, Rouhani and his team adopt a philosophy based on the assumption that Iran's ability to "transform threats into opportunities" depends on a change in discourse and foreign policy and opening up dialogue with the United States and the West, including Israel.

12. The strength and influence of those opposing rapprochement with the United States and of those opposing concessions on the Palestinian issue cannot be underestimated, especially because they hold high security and Revolutionary Guard positions. Thus, the expectation is they will maintain their hostility to Israel. If the Geneva Accord fails and economic sanctions on Iran are not lifted, the opposition may take the opportunity to force its hand, making it impossible for Rouhani to progress with negotiations. In this situation, it will not be inconsistent with "Iranian flexibility" if Iran makes a significant effort to repair and significantly strengthen their relationship with Hamas.

13. Continuity of Iran-US rapprochement could give Iran greater opportunity to increase its influence in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, forcing Western powers to give it more attention than even Turkey enjoys. This would also limit Turkey’s role in the region.

14. Turkey, which adopts a practical and flexible foreign policy, is unlikely to stand by and watch as Iran extends its influence, and will try to participate in any political project related to the core issues of the region, especially the Syrian crisis.

15. The recent slow rapprochement of relations between Iran and the United States has caused speculation that Iran could barter friendship with Moscow for preferential treatment from Washington regarding Middle East policies. This possibility is far-fetched for the following reasons:
Unstable and unpredictable environments complicate policy-making processes. Alliances that were established in the twentieth century no longer exist, making known methods of crisis management unworkable. This is evident in the consequences of the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia.

The past and current superpowers and leaderships, with all their experience in manoeuvring, persuasion and intimidation, have failed to contain the flow and liquidity of events.

In these circumstances, Iran, as a regional power in its own right, is not likely to be reformed by the Kremlin or the White House after decades of confrontation. Iran’s sense of self-respect and national pride prevent it from becoming subdued by US influence.

Internal contradictions do not allow America to adopt a long-term strategy based on comprehensive reconciliation with Iran.

Iran’s rich history and ambition are clear: it is a centre of Shia culture and politics with experience as an empire and state both before and after the arrival of Islam, as well as complex history with Russia, all of which plays a role in counterbalancing regional Sunni cooperation.

Some over-estimate Iran’s religious and political influence in Central Asia. In general, the expansion of political Islam inspired by Shiite Iran's model is exaggerated: Iran has not tried to use its religious influence in Central Asia as it did in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine and has not supported the mobilisation of the Shiite minority in the region.

The effective integration of Iran on the international scene will lead to an expanded partnership between the West and Central Asia. New cooperation sectors are emerging, including hydropower, minerals, industrial processing and auto-production. Iran’s experience in these sectors may be utilised. In addition, Iran’s geographical position gives it real value in the eyes of the Central Asian states, which are often keen to secure access to the South Seas and the Mediterranean basin.

The Iranian state offers itself as a pragmatic partner which is willing to put aside ideological differences with Afghanistan and its neighbours in Central Asia in order to promote regional cooperation. For example, in order to promote regional
cooperation, Iran would be willing to overlook potential partners’ positions on Israel or the fact that they are secular states. In exchange, Iran is unlikely to waste any opportunity to assert itself in the regional arena.

These key findings are a broad overview and offer testable theories for future research on Iran-US rapprochement as well as Iran’s regional role and relations with other nations.