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Report

Iran's Foreign Policy Following the Nuclear Agreement and the Advent of Trump: Priorities and Future Directions

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This study analysed the content of more than 1 400 political statements issued by various foreign policymaking institutions in Iran in the period following the implementation of the nuclear agreement and the inauguration of US President Donald Trump, covering the year 2016 and the first quarter of 2017.

The analysis covered 1 032 statements for 2016 and 371 for the first quarter of 2017. This study included all relevant officials involved in the preparation and implementation of foreign policy, as well as influential clerics, notably the leader of the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian president, the foreign minister, leaders of the Revolutionary Guard, the defence minister, the army, senior officials and prominent clerics.

This study went through all the necessary stages for assessing the method of content analysis and testing the stability of the analysis tool, and reached an agreement ratio of 97.8, which is high, indicating the stability of the analysis tool.

The study sought to:

- Identify trends in Iranian foreign policy, especially on a number of issues, primarily Iran's foreign relations, especially relations with the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as well as relations with Arab countries in general.
- Identify Iran's foreign policy priorities and identify a number of issues on its foreign policy agenda, including: the nuclear agreement, the Syrian crisis, Iranian-Russian cooperation, the crisis of relations with Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian issue.

- Understand the nature and extent of the role that Iran sees for itself and seeks to achieve and impose.

In terms of the number of statements made about a country, the United States is ranked first at 22%. Saudi Arabia came second at 13%. Britain and European countries came in the third place at 12%. Eastern Iran's neighbouring region, along with India, China and East Asia, ranked fourth at 6%. Similarly, Russia came in at 6%, and Syria also came in at about 6%. This was followed by the United Nations and international organisations at 5%, Iraq at 5%, Israel at 4% and Turkey at 3%. Regions included in the statements included Iran's north including the Caucasus region at 2%, the Muslim world at 2%, and the Gulf countries at 2%. Statements about the Arab region as a whole also came in at 2%. Bahrain, Africa and Latin America were at the bottom of the list at 1% each. One per cent of the statements did not speak clearly about a particular region or country.

In the first quarter of 2017, the United States led the countries mentioned in Iranian statements at 26%, followed by Saudi Arabia at 9%, Britain at 9%, Israel at 8% and Russia at 7%. The region of Iran's neighbours to the east, as well as India, China and East Asia, all came in at 7%. The Gulf states in general came in at 5%, Syria at 5%, Turkey at 4% and Iraq at 4%. Iran's neighbours in the north, including the Caucasus region, came in at 4%, the world in general came in at 3%, the Arab region came in at 3%, and the United Nations and international organisations came in at 2%. Africa, Bahrain, and the countries of Latin America and the Muslim world came in at 1% each.

In the process of deconstructing the proportion of discourse about the Iranian role according to the official author of a given statement, we find that discourse about Iran's role was present in all statements by leaders of the Revolutionary Guard at 100%. This role was discussed in 94% of the Iranian president's statements. It was present in 90% of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution's statements, in 89% of the statements of the chairman of the Consultative Assembly Council and the MPs, in 85% of the statements of the minister of defence, in 85% of the statements of high-ranking officials, in 78% of the statements of the judiciary and in 76% of the clerics' statements. This clearly shows that Iranian officials are obsessed with developing Iran's role.

The view to establishing a leading role for Iran in the region and the world seemed to be a focus of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution by up to 68%; this view is also held by the Revolutionary Guard by a similar percentage of 68%. As for Iran's influential role in the fight against terrorism, it is certainly, as revealed by these results, a project of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his administration in the state department, coming in at 94% (distributed as follows: in 57% of the Iranian president's remarks, and in 37% of statements by the minister of foreign affairs and senior staff in the ministry of

foreign affairs). Similar weight is given to this view by the chairman of the Consultative Assembly Council and a number of deputies, as indicated in 50% of their statements, and to a lesser extent by the defence minister and the leaders of the army, in approximately 41% of their statements.

Iran's bilateral relations top the list of priorities and issues contained in Iranian statements at 23%. But, in view of the statements' contents, the nuclear file and sanctions accompany the subject of bilateral relations as an essential subject when discussing issues related to bilateral relations. However, it was discussed as a major theme in 20% of Iranian statements. Meanwhile, other main themes were the subject of terrorism at 15%, the Syrian issue at 13% and Yemen at nearly 6%. Subsequently, the main themes were Iranian military capacity at 5%, as well as independence and non-dependence at approximately 5%, conflict in the region at 4%, the Palestinian issue at 4%, the subject of hajj and umrah at 3% and Bahrain at 2%.

In the first quarter of 2017, the subject of bilateral relations increased to 32%, followed by the nuclear file and sanctions at 16%. Iranian politicians are clearly paying close attention to bilateral relations, and they view them as the most important entry point to implement the nuclear agreement and preserve what has been achieved in terms of lifting the sanctions and building on what has been achieved as a result. The statements referred to the Syrian crisis and the Palestinian issue at 10% each, followed by conflict in the region at 9%, terrorism at 8% and Iranian military capabilities at 6%. Independence and non-dependence appeared in 5% of the statements, Yemen in 2%, and Bahrain remained in 1%. We noted a high proportion of statements dealing with the Palestinian issue as a major topic because Iran hosted the Sixth International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada during this period. We also note the decline of the subject of hajj, due to the easing witnessed in this regard.

In order to clarify the view of Iranian officials on the future of these issues, we found that statements describing a future based on political solutions and compromise on the nuclear file came in at 65%, while discourse about the future of this issue based on tension and conflict came in at 29%. A small percentage of around 2% of the statements spoke of armed confrontation in this regard. This indicates that Iran still hopes for a peaceful settlement of issues related to the sanctions and hopes to implement the nuclear agreement.

On bilateral relations, Iranian statements showed optimism in this regard. Statements discussing the strengthening and development of bilateral relations comprised 83% of the total statements, compared to 14% that discussed tension and conflict in Iran's bilateral relations with the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel.

With regard to Yemen, according to up to 67% of the statements, the future will likely be based on tension and conflict, while 28% discussed a political solution.

On Bahrain, 87% of the statements spoke about a future based on conflict and tension, compared to 13% that discussed a future based on a political solution.

Remarkably, 62% of the statements of Iranian officials spoke about a future based on a political solution in Syria, while 25% spoke about a future based on tension and conflict, and 10% focused on a future based on armed confrontation. However, Iran's approach to a political solution in Syria is based on the exclusion of most of the armed Syrian opposition, which is fighting the Asad regime, and includes terrorist groups that call for armed confrontation with it. So, despite Iranian discussions about a political solution in Syria, the form of the solution that Iran wants does not imply its success.

Within this view, 63% of the statements of Iranian officials discussed armed confrontation with regard to terrorism, while 21% discussed continuation of tension and conflict on the issue, and 14% discussed political solutions.

Sixty-nine per cent spoke about the future of conflict in the region, with the likelihood that tension and conflict would continue in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere. Thirteen per cent spoke about armed confrontation leading to conflict in the future, while 18% said they would find political solutions to end conflict in the region.

Regarding the Palestinian issue, up to 54% of the statements discussed a future based on the continuation of conflict and tension in the context of this issue, while 39% discussed armed confrontation with Israel. No more than 5% spoke about the future of the Palestinian issue based on a political solution and settlement.

Regarding the future of Iranian military capabilities, 62% of Iranian officials spoke about a future that includes strengthening and developing these capabilities, while 34% said that conflict will continue in the future, and about 2% discussed armed confrontation on this issue.

In the first quarter of 2017, we find a major focus on a political solution to the nuclear file in 72% of the statements, compared to a focus on the continuation of conflict and tension on this issue in 26% of the statements. We note a confirmation of the focus on strengthening and development of bilateral relations in up to 82% of the statements. On the issue of Yemen we saw a recent focus on a future based on tension and conflict in 50% of the statements, compared to 38% that discussed a political solution. Meanwhile, discourse about a political solution in Bahrain was fully absent; discussions were about the perpetuation of tension and conflict. On Syria, we find a high rate of discussion about

a political solution at 70%. A significant majority of Iranian officials are talking about armed confrontation with regard to terrorism, and the continuation of tension and conflict in the region in the future, in 82% of the statements. This is also the case on the Palestinian issue, at 76%, and on the Iranian military's capabilities, at 74%, while an emphasis on strengthening and developing this capacity came in at 26%. The subject of hajj was notably absent from discussions about the future of these issues due to the easing that took place in this regard.

When looking at the results related to the language used in statements towards the United States, we found: 54% of the statements criticised and condemned US political behaviour and decisions, 37% expressed hostility (14% including threats and 23% without threats). Eight per cent used neutral language. These figures reflect Iranian indignation towards the United States, which escalated in the first quarter of 2017, in concurrence with an escalation in the language used by Trump and his administration towards Iran and the nuclear agreement. The results indicate that in this quarter, 72% of statements by Iranian officials used language that criticised and condemned, compared to 21% that used hostile language (14% including threats and 7% without threats). However, Iranian officials are clearly keen to continue the predominant approach of criticism and condemnation, while maintaining a margin of threat and responding to threats.

When examining the type of relations, we find an increase in Iranian statements referring to tense relations based mostly on conflict, present in up to 87% of the statements, comprising: tense relations at 67% and conflicting relations at 20%; meanwhile 6% of the statements discussed cooperative relations.

In the first quarter of 2017, discourse about tense relations was overwhelming, appearing in 90% of the statements. Discussion of conflict declined to 2%, with 2% of the statements focused on cooperation. Meanwhile, 6% of the statements did not specify the relationship type. This indicates that, despite tension, there is an Iranian desire not to push things into collision.

In Iranian statements towards the United States, the nuclear file and sanctions are the most prominent issues at 41%, followed by Iran's military capabilities at 17%, terrorism at 13%, the Syrian issue at 9%, the issue of independence and non-dependence at 7%, bilateral relations at about 5%, the case of Yemen at approximately 3% and finally the Palestinian cause at 1%.

These percentages clearly indicate that relations between Iran and the United States are so far not an end in itself for Iranian officials, but depend on developments and intricacies of these major topics:

- The nuclear file
- Iranian military capabilities
- Terrorism

Despite growing talk of bilateral relations in the first quarter of 2017, 32% of the statements discussed issues of the nuclear file and the sanctions, followed by Iranian military capabilities at 21%. Both topics were at the forefront of the main issues in the relationship. Bilateral relations and conflict in the region followed at 14% each. Discourses about independence and non-dependence increased to 7%, followed by discussions about the Palestinian issue at 5%, and the decline of the Syrian issue to 2%.

Forty-nine per cent of Iran's statements about a future with the United States of America are based on tension and conflict, while 34% of the statements indicate that compromises and political solutions are likely. Ten per cent of the discourse was about a future based on armed confrontation, and 5% of the statements did not talk about the future.

The results of the first quarter of 2017 indicate that statements by Iranian officials regarding the relationship with Washington as a primary subject remained overwhelmingly on a future based on tension and conflict at 64%, while talks of an armed confrontation decreased to 3%. Meanwhile, talk about a political solution and settlement decreased to 26%, compared to 2016, while in 4% of the statements talks about a future settlement were absent.

Notably, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ali Khamenei, was the person to most often use 'false and un-trustworthy' in his description of the USA, while Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his administration used the description 'does not meet its obligations'. This reflects the difference in how they characterise their position on the United States, which for the Guide of the Revolution appears to be of a radical nature, and for Rouhani and his administration appears to be a pragmatic one.

Examining the results of trends in Iran's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia, 80% of statements about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia used critical and condemnatory language, while up to 17% used hostile language (13% without threats and 4% with a threat). Four per cent of statements used neutral language, and 1% used supportive language. In the first quarter of 2017, Iranian officials refrained from using aggressive language against Saudi Arabia. This was accompanied by statements by the Iranian president that were understood as an attempt to improve the relationship with Saudi Arabia. However, this did not indicate a real breakthrough, as critical language of Saudi Arabia's positions and decisions remained the dominant language in Iranian discourse at 85%, while 15% of the statements used neutral language.

The results show that relations between the two countries are at a high level of tension, as in 2016, as revealed by in 95% of the statements. Meanwhile, 2% of the statements refer to relations based on conflict, and only 1% of the statements refer to cooperative relations.

In the statements of Iranian officials in the first quarter of 2017, talk about tense relations increased to 88%, while about 12% of the statements spoke of different types of relations, with talks about confrontation and collision notably absent. In comments by Iranian officials, this may reflect an Iranian desire to ease the crisis that has ruled Iranian–Saudi relations for years, so that Iran can focus on managing its relationship with Washington, especially as the US government’s hostile rhetoric towards Iran escalates.

The results of the main topics dealt with in Iranian statements point out the problems underlying the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In comparison with the 2016 results, the Yemeni issue led the issues at 23%, followed by bilateral relations at 21% and the subject of hajj and umrah at up to 19%, followed by Syria at 10% and conflict in the region at 8%. The issue of terrorism came in at 7%, the Iranian nuclear file at 6% and the Bahraini issue at about 2%. Independence and non-dependence and Israeli military capabilities came in at 1% each. These results indicate that the relations between the two countries are inherently problematic, and are heavily affected by the problem in Yemen and the subject of hajj.

These topics saw some changes, as the results for the first quarter of 2017 point to a resolution of some issues, such as the subject of hajj and umrah, with discussion of this issue declining to 3%. However, the relationship was still governed by tension regarding a number of subjects, namely:

- Bilateral relations (35%)
- Conflict in the region
- Yemen (15%)
- Syria (9%)
- Terrorism (6%)

Iranian officials do not express an optimistic outlook for the relationship with Saudi Arabia in view of these issues. The results for 2016 indicate a future of tension and conflict in up to 68% of the statements, compared with 10% of the statements that said relations would strengthen and develop on some issues. Nine per cent saw a future based on a political solution and settlement, and 7% of the statements discussed a future based on armed confrontation.

Expectations of a future based on tension and conflict with Saudi Arabia remained overwhelming in all Iranian statements in the first quarter of 2017, reaching 65%, compared to a future based on strengthening and developing the relationship at 21%. The percentage mentioning armed confrontation as well as compromises and political solutions declined to 3%. The solution to the hajj issue seems to have encouraged an expectation of cooperation on some issues in the future.

In the end, Iranian political trends indicate that the tension in its relationship with Saudi Arabia will not see a breakthrough soon, and that the dispute is clearly focused on political issues, as well as issues about role and influence.

The content analysis of Iran's statements towards Russia reveals the importance that Iranian officials attach to this relationship. In 2016, 87% of statements discussed cooperative relations, while 13% said they have a strategic alliance with Russia, although the predominant category of Iranian foreign policymakers places these relations in the field of cooperation without giving it a strategic status. However, there is a trend in the political arena to see the relationship with Moscow as having the potential to become a strategic relationship in the future. In this context, the proposal of the former foreign minister, and the president of the Centre for Strategic Research of the Council for the Expediency of the System, Ali Velayati, fits within the category that describes the relationship with Russia as strategic.

In the first quarter of 2017, 80% of the statements classified relations as cooperative and 16% as a strategic alliance, while a up to 4% of the statements classified the relationship as tense, reflecting the view of a group that appears concerned about Russia imposing a political solution on Syria at the expense of Iranian interests.

The results reveal that Syria topped the main issues in the relationship between the two countries during 2016, increasing to 48%, followed by bilateral relations at 21%, terrorism at 13%, the nuclear file and sanctions at 10% and Yemen at 5%. These results indicate that relations between the two countries are largely determined by their position on Syria.

The centrality of the Syrian issue to relations is confirmed by the fact that it remained in the list of topics during the first quarter of 2017, at 44%. One fundamental change noted in the 2017 results, namely, an increasing emphasis on bilateral relations, which came in at an equal rate to the Syrian issue at 44%, while the subject of terrorism came in at 8%, ahead of the nuclear file at 4%. The analysed Iranian statements clearly show that Iran considers the nuclear issue as the primary subject of bilateral relations, and that strengthening these relations would safeguard Russia's position in support of Iran's nuclear deal.

As revealed by Iranian statements in 2016, 52% of the statements consider the future of Iran's relationship with Russia to be represented by political settlements and solutions. Considering the significant extent of the Syrian issue in relations between the two countries, this means that Iran plans to partner with Russia, even while imposing a political solution in Syria. The remaining proportion of statements is devoted to the nuclear agreement and the problems it may face. Up to 26% of the statements say bilateral relations will be strengthened; up to 18% say that the two countries will cooperate in armed confrontation with terrorism; and up to 5% note the potential for tension and conflict between the two countries in the future.

Iranian statements in the first quarter of 2017 recorded a two-dimensional direction in future. Forty-eight per cent of the statements mention the contribution of the two countries to political settlements and solutions with regard to the main issues in the relationship, which were mentioned previously, and 44% mention the development and strengthening of relations between the two countries. Four per cent mention cooperation in armed confrontation with terrorism, and 4% discuss a tense relationship in the future.

On the main topics that formed the primary issues in the Iranian statements towards the European countries in 2016, the results indicate that 32% of the statements discussed bilateral relations, followed by the nuclear file and sanctions at 28%, terrorism at 13%, Syria at 10% and Yemen at 6%. In addition, 6% of the statements discussed Iran's military capabilities, and at the bottom of the list, barely 4% discussed the Palestinian issue. In examining these statements, we find that Iranian officials believe that strengthening the country's relationship with European countries would significantly benefit both sides and boost the gains of the nuclear deal.

During the first quarter of 2017, we find a major focus on bilateral relations in 42% of the statements, followed by the nuclear file and sanctions in 24% of the statements, and discourse about the Palestinian issue in 9% of the statements. Iranian military capabilities, conflict in the region, independence and non-dependence came in at 6% each. The cases of Syria and Yemen fell to 3% each, and terrorism disappeared from the list, but it was discussed under the headline of bilateral relations.

Iranian officials outlined the future of the relationship with Britain and the European Union, which according to 39% of the statements is based mainly on compromises and political solutions, while 31% mention strengthening and developing the relationship. A margin of 21% see a future based on tension and conflict, and up to 6% mention direct confrontation.

In the first quarter of 2017, the future of the relationship between Britain and EU countries was discussed in the light of the main topics in 100% of the statements. According to 42% of statements, those responsible for this future perceive it as one of strengthening and developing Iran's relations with European countries, while 27% of the statements mention a relationship based on political solutions, 27% see it as based on tension and conflict, and 3% mention a possible confrontation; this is mainly related to the British policy in the Gulf.

Noticeably, Iran does not use aggressive language towards Turkey. Such language is completely absent from the statements of Iranian officials. In the context of these statements, a discourse of good relations came through in 2016 and 2017, with statements of support during the period of the failed coup attempt and terrorist attacks on Turkey. Criticism and condemnation were present on two issues: Turkish politics in Syria and Turkish military intervention in northern Iraq.

The statements of Iranian officials show that 71% of statements favour relations of cooperation, while 17% note tense relations. In the first quarter of 2017, we find an increase in statements discussing tension in the relationship, reaching 20%, but statements on cooperate relations remained the highest percentage at 67%.

The themes of bilateral relations, at 37%, and Syria, at 31%, were the highest in terms of the topics discussed in Iranian statements concerning Turkey in 2016 (Table 117), followed by terrorism at 17%, conflict in the region at 6%, independence and non-dependence at 6% and Yemen at 3%.

The first quarter of 2017 was divided on three topics only: bilateral relations at 54%, Syria at 40%, and the Palestinian issue at 7%.

The results indicate that officials perceive the future of Iran and Turkey's relationship in 2016 to be based on the main topics that were enumerated, as follows:

- Strengthening the development of bilateral relations (40%)
- Resolutions and political solutions to a number of issues (27%)
- Tension and conflict between the two countries (17%)
- Cooperation in armed confrontation with terrorism (14%)

Perceptions regarding the future of the relationship with Turkey in the first quarter of 2017 were based on:

- Strengthening and development of relations (47%)
- Resolutions and political settlements (33%)
- Tension and conflict (13%)

As noted in these results, Iranians are keen to strengthen and develop the country's relationship with Turkey and to reach compromises and political solutions on the thorny issues between them, despite the existence of a margin of tension and conflict.

The language used in Iranian statements towards Israel during the year 2016 was hostile in 86% of statements, (73% without threats and 13% with a threat), while 11% of the statements critical and condemnatory, and up to 2% reflected normal relations.

In the first quarter of 2017 (Table 124), although seeing intensive Iranian activity on the Palestinian issue, the language of hostility towards Israel declined to 46%, and the language of criticism and condemnation reached 55%. However, an important observation is that the language of hostility accompanied with a threat came in at 36%, ahead of hostility without a threat at 10%; this corresponds with potential threats made during the first quarter following the Trump election.

The results indicate that the statements in 2016, of which 91% had political content and 10% had military content, discussed the relations according to the following types: 78% of the statements discussed the relationship as based mainly on conflict, and 20% discussed the relationship as one of tension. The first quarter of 2017 saw conflict-based relationships reaching 61% and strained relations at 39%.

Israel may be the only 'state' of which Iranian statements in 2016 discussed a future relationship largely based on armed confrontation at 47%, and tension and conflict at 40%. Discussions of settlements and political solutions came in at 9%.

In the first quarter of 2017, tension and conflict came to the forefront at 58%, while discourse about armed confrontation declined to 29%. Discourse about a future based on political settlements came in at 10%. All in all, discussion of the future between Iran and Israel speaks of tension, conflict and military confrontation.

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