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# HORIZONS

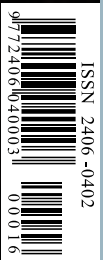
JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
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# IRAN AND THE WEST

## NEITHER DIRECT CONFRONTATION NOR NORMALIZATION

*Mahmood Sariolghalam*

WHILE the January 2018 protests that swept across Iran were a reminder of the country's unpredictable domestic politics, the Islamic Republic's foreign policy and national security priorities have proven remarkably consistent since the 1979 revolution. Even now with the onset of COVID-19 or any other similar pervasive crisis, this level of consistency also demonstrates the high degree of resilience to significant policy changes. Several Iranian leaders, including current President Hassan Rouhani, have sought a different approach, but the Islamic Republic's foreign policy pillars—Pan-Shia, Pan-Islamist, anti-West, and anti-Israel—have remained firmly intact.

To understand this trend requires a careful look at the country's bipolar decisionmaking apparatus and the two distinct playbooks used to conduct state affairs. On one hand, the office of the supreme leader

focuses on preserving the ideological, religious, and philosophical principles of the 1979 revolution, while on the other hand, the administrative institution of the president is expected to manage the country's day-to-day problems and urgencies.

Former presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani (in office from 1989 to 1997) and Mohammad Khatami (in office from 1997 to 2005) both tried and failed to change this paradigm. To mitigate tensions during the first decade of the revolution between Iran and the West, Rafsanjani helped win the release of American hostages in Lebanon. As president, he tried to engage the West with both talk and action. He declared that Iran had become a state and had successfully passed through a revolutionary stage, and he suggested Iran might come to terms with Israel's existence by accepting the Oslo peace accords. Khatami's presidency held even higher hopes, drawing on the concept

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Photo: Guliver Image/Getty Images

*Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (L) is the ultimate authority in foreign and security policy, not President Hassan Rouhani (R)*

of “dialogue among civilizations,” later embraced in various forms by the United Nations, to mitigate years of revolutionary radicalism. Nevertheless, neither Rafsanjani nor Khatami managed to build durable domestic constituencies within Iran to sustain these policies.

What stands out about Iran is that its foreign policy is not a reflection of its national economic interests. Indeed, Iranian leaders proudly boast that their policies are driven by a desire to fight injustice rather than further the economic interests of the state. The long-standing economic policies of Iran's revolutionary class—with

an emphasis on self-sufficiency, indigenization, and resistance—has further entrenched Tehran's isolation.

Iran's static foreign policy and national security principles can be explained by four factors:

- a constitutional mandate that limits presidential power in foreign policy decisionmaking;
- the country's prioritization of national security over other foreign policy (especially economic) interests;
- Iran's ongoing isolation by the West and its need to keep pushing back; and
- the need for Iran's leadership to preserve its domestic order.

Despite his strong reelection in May 2017, Hassan Rouhani—like his predecessors—has so far not meaningfully altered Iranian foreign policy or managed to resolve international disagreements beyond its nuclear program. Even Iran’s recently tabled request to secure \$5 billion loan from the IMF under his presidency could not facilitate the country’s reentry into the international financial system.

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**LIMITED PRESIDENTIAL POWERS**

The inability of Iranian presidents to change Tehran’s outward orientation can be explained by the Islamic Republic’s constitution, which places true decisionmaking power in the hands of the supreme leader.

Two constitutional sections (Articles 110 and 122-126) illustrate the point. Article 110 specifies that the determination of macro national policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the first duty and power of the Supreme Leader. The second is the supervision over proper execution of the macro policies of the state. In contrast, Articles 122-126 of the Constitution stipulate that the president must execute the laws of the state. Nowhere does the Constitution give the president authority for independent policymaking. At least in practice, foreign policy

and national security have remained within the exclusive legal domain of the Supreme Leader. In other words, when the Supreme Leader and the President

disagree on a foreign policy matter, the Supreme Leader supersedes, according to the constitution.

State machinery and the decisionmaking apparatus are constructed in such a manner as to ensure that the ultimate decisionmak-

ing authority in all strategic policies of the state is located in the office of the Supreme Leader. Individuals who share the Supreme Leader’s worldview staff the upper echelon of Iran’s military and security apparatus. As a result, group-think often plagues foreign policy and national security decisionmaking. Iran’s national security doctrines frequently contain fixations—such as indigenization, local authenticity, separation, fortification, exceptionalism, and otherworldly tendencies—that clash with global economic theories of trade, joint ventures, and inquisitiveness.

Economic growth has been empirically associated with a country’s openness and exposure to the international system, a point made by the scholarship of Stanford University political scientist Stephen Krasner and many

others. However, Iran’s senior leadership has frequently expressed concerns about greater openness and exposure to the international system, going so far as to call Western cultural imports a form of “soft war” that threatens the stability of the Islamic Republic. As a result, Iranian foreign policy and national security are fixated on concepts such as independence and self-sufficiency: distance from the West is perceived to be essential for the regime’s survival.

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**NATIONAL SECURITY FIRST**

Unlike most countries, Iran’s foreign policy is not tethered to the nation’s economic interests. Instead, Tehran prioritizes national security over the economy and values self-defense over cooperation. According to its doctrine of indigenization, or resistance economics, Iran seeks to supply all of the citizenry’s basic goods itself rather than to rely on foreign trade. Iran’s leaders believe economic independence allows the country to more effectively combat both capitalism and imperialism.

Security issues form the dominant lens through which Iran conducts its foreign policy. Having de-prioritized economics, Iran has not been able

to nurture meaningful bilateral and multilateral commercial relations with Muslim countries that fall within Tehran’s sphere of religious influence. In-

stead, Iran feels most at ease with groups in the Muslim world (including Sunni organizations like Hamas) that share its security goals.

While Iran’s foreign ministry struggles to draw on soft power, it is often thwarted by the projec-

tion of Iranian hard power. Overcoming security concerns is a prerequisite for prosperous interstate relations. Iran has not passed this stage in its regional behavior and continues to be perceived as a risky and uncertain market for investment.

In this context, as inaccurately alleged in the Arab media, Iran is not an expansionist state since such a state would reinvigorate its soft politics abroad and engage the world, multiply its sources of income, diversify its arms procurement, and industrialize. Iran has been disconnected from the global banking, commercial, and political networks for a long time. Economic sanctions, although now slightly relieved, have deepened its international inaccessibility. Switzerland and the EU, with American approval, are now multiplying their

efforts to provide Iran with food imports and, more importantly, with desperately needed medical equipment to address the effects of COVID-19, drawing on Tehran's funds in European banks.

**UNDERSTANDING ROOT CAUSES**

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Republic of Iran. Iran's existential fear is exacerbated both by historical precedent (specifically, America's role in Iran's 1953 coup d'état) and periodic calls among DC policymakers for regime change.

Iran's negative historical experiences with the great powers have fortified both a narrative and strategy that the Islamic Republic's security is best served by projecting a strong front. In other words, the defense of the Islamic Republic and safeguarding its revolutionary ideology requires a sustained struggle with the United States. To discourage direct attacks, Iran has often acted offensively, dramatically tapping into its national resources to maintain foreign conflicts.

Since the mid-1990s, Iran has increased its regional involvement in ways that have brought it near direct conflict with the United States and Israel. But

Tehran believes that increased tension actually reduces the prospect of a direct confrontation with the United States, due to Washington's fear of sustaining collateral damage across different battlefields. In recent years, the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have also offered leverage vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia. While the United

States has not attacked Iran directly, Iran's economic prospects have suffered because of this combative foreign policy.

As President of the United States, Barack Obama understood Iran's fear of regime change and sought to couch a nuclear compromise in guarantees that America was not intent on toppling Iran's government. This crucial assurance served as the theoretical cornerstone for talks with Iran that culminated in the 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In his 2016 interview with the reporter Jeffrey Goldberg, Obama pointed out that "we have history in Iran. [...] So we have to be mindful of our history when we start talking

about intervening, and understand the source of other people's suspicions."

Another reason that the Obama Administration achieved a nuclear agreement with Tehran was that it lowered its bar for success. According to Obama's National Security Adviser Susan Rice, quoted in the same article, the aim of nuclear negotiations "was very simply to make a dangerous country substantially less dangerous. No one had any expectation that Iran would be a more benign actor." By compartmentalizing the nuclear issue, Obama allowed Iran an avenue to continue pushing back regionally against what it perceived to be American attempts at containment. Iran has maintained its anti-West and anti-U.S. ideological stance.

**SELF-PRESERVATION**

Anti-Americanism continues to serve as the *raison d'être* of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This has less to do with the nature of the American system and more to do with the fact that Iran has turned anti-Americanism into an identity.

Positioning the country in opposition to America is an epistemological construct linked to political Islam; it helps Iranian individuals situate themselves politically. Iran's foreign policy has deep roots in the teachings of fundamentalist Islam with origins in Egypt. The 'they/us' dichotomy is a basic tenant of this

ideology. So, in essence, the country's foreign policy is embedded in distancing itself from the West. Over time, this direction in foreign policy has also cultivated in a national security doctrine to defend the homeland by maintaining a strategic distance from the United States, with occasional engagements for tactical adjustments.

As former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Tip O'Neill once prophetically articulated: "all politics is local." Foreign policy begins at home, and local anti-Americanism within Iran is projected outward onto the international stage. Anti-Americanism serves to perpetuate Iran's revolutionary domestic political order constructed in opposition to the capitalist, imperialist United States.

While Iranians often bemoan their country's economic malaise, the truth is that Iran's economic potential cannot be fulfilled absent a change in its foreign policy. But because Iran's economic integration into the global economy would upset its domestic political order, power centers work to prevent economic reintegration from occurring.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

Despite the country's isolation, large portions of Iran's population aspire to engage with the global community. Before they can do so, their leaders must answer the question posed

to it by former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger: “Is Iran a nation, or a cause?”

As of now, the answer is that it is disconcertingly both; and Iran will remain so until the country’s decisionmakers realize that a country that ignores its economic needs is doomed to decline. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, one can assume that relations with China will be even more reinvigorated to compensate for the lacking support from the West.

Iran retains great economic potential. Were it to adequately tap into its vast human and natural resources, it could emerge as a regional economic giant? A happy and thriving Iranian population engaged with the world would—contrary to the beliefs of Iran’s leaders—increase the country’s national security.

**H**ow might Iran enact such a vision? Prior to his presidency—when he directed the country’s Center for Strategic Research—Rouhani arrived at the conclusion that Iran needed to concentrate on economic expansion by cooperating with industrialized states and promoting its private sector to entice technological transfer, joint ventures, and foreign direct investment.

In his first inauguration speech, in August 2013, Rouhani outlined an economic strategy and new foreign

policy orientation designed to achieve the aforementioned goals. As president, Rouhani worked hard to secure the JCPOA, believing that settling the nuclear issue with the United States was vital to reinvigorating Iran’s economy. However, the deal’s economic benefits have been limited with almost zero foreign direct investment and negligible release of Iran’s assets in foreign banks. Iran’s investment in infrastructure has reached its lowest in its entire history of economic development.

More significantly, Rouhani has been unable to change the paradigm of U.S.-Iranian relations more broadly. As mentioned above, the Iranian constitution limits his influence over foreign policy, as do stronger actors that oppose rapprochement. Rouhani and his predecessors have failed to open up the country’s foreign policy to the West, since constitutionally they all had to secure the consent of many other political as well as religious institutions.

**P**owerful actors within the United States also oppose improved relations with Iran. In contrast to the Obama Administration, the Trump Administration views the Islamic Republic of Iran as a hostile adversary that must be countered. A year and a half into his presidency, Donald Trump withdrew American support for the JCPOA and launched a maximum pressure campaign to coerce Iran into a new round

of negotiations on Iran’s nuclear as well as regional policies.

Its strategy of containment not only aims to limit Iran’s offensive capabilities but also intends to keep Iran politically and economically isolated. While the JCPOA was an important accord, the real issue between the two countries is Tehran’s regional ambitions and attitude toward American allies, namely Israel. Before the United States is ready to

facilitate Iran’s reentry into the international system, it has demands beyond the rollback of Tehran’s nuclear capacity. While the Obama Administration solely concentrated on the nuclear issue in the U.S.-Iranian matrix of problems, the Trump Administration has made it fully transparent that Iran’s regional activities and missile program are also on the agenda in any potential renegotiations between the two countries.

**T**ehran has made it clear that it has no intention to normalize relations with Washington, a consistent policy since the beginning of the revolution. The septuagenarians who rule Iran will not change their minds. While Rouhani seeks larger shifts in policy, his eight years as a constitutionally weak president can only marginally impact the overall direction of Iran’s foreign

policy. Rouhani is skilled in crossing swords with the traditionalists, but he lacks a task force to diffuse his message politically and is unlikely to foster a unified body politic that can achieve his goals.

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More likely, Iran’s foreign policy will focus on continued confrontation with the Western world. In the future, tempers (on both sides) will continue to flare as leaders serve their respective core inter-

ests. These political theatrics will keep many politicians busy but will not serve their people well on issues demanding pragmatism. Advances in technology—especially social media—will make the Iranian polity’s propagation of falsehoods more difficult. COVID-19 will certainly exacerbate Iran’s compounded economic and foreign policy complications; on the other hand, its new openings to Russia and China will in turn secure some minimal level of economic opportunities and national security.

Divisions between the United States, Russia, and China have afforded Iran with renewed survival strategies. However, unless unexpected events occur and a paradigm shift emerges, Iran’s national security policy—neither direct confrontation nor normalization with the West—will remain the same. ●