

Khamenei and Iranian foreign policy

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Abstract

Since the country's turbulent June 2009 presidential elections, Iran's foreign policy has further hardened. At the center of this process has been one man in particular, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The hawkish leader has pursued an uncompromising line toward the United States and in the (as yet) unyielding nuclear negotiations with the West. Moreover, Tehran's regional policies have left behind an array of broken relations, from charges of interference in Bahrain and Azerbaijan to overt support for the brutal crackdown by the Syrian regime of Bashar Al Assad. Khamenei's outlook toward the outside world appears unequivocal: the best path to foreign policy success is to be on the offense against adversaries and to act boldly. Needless to say, this modus operandi has many critics within the Iranian regime, but they are currently powerless to stop Khamenei and his faction from continuing the often adventurist policies in the region and beyond. The key question is whether Khamenei can remain on this path of defiance when the international sanctions are increasingly damaging the Iranian economy and further isolating the Iranian society from the world community. In recent weeks, there have been signs of new debate inside Iran about the need to reduce tensions with the rest of the world. Some leading personalities of the Islamic Republic have expressed sympathy for such lines of argument, but whether that pressure will force Khamenei to change course remains to be seen.

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The controversial June 2009 Iranian presidential elections and the domestic political chaos that ensued resulted in the escalation of a trend that was already in motion: a more forceful Iranian foreign policy across a range of issues and arenas. This trend has been primarily driven by two realities.

First, that Tehran's policies in the region reflect the ideological outlook of the hard-line faction currently in possession of the levers of power in Iran. Second, Iranian foreign policy aims at obtaining the geo-political, security and economic interests that would enable the regime to claim domestic legitimacy while at the same time preserving Iran's economic strength (and thus social stability) by securing its place as a major regional energy actor and exporter.

The pursuit of a more assertive foreign policy along these two tracks is likely to be underpinned by a strong domestic populist-nationalist message propagated by the hard-line regime, which may in turn unsettle Iran's neighbors and particularly the Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. In the short term, more pressure or defiance can be expected from Tehran over such issues as territory (islands dispute with the United Arab Emirates or the demarcation of the Caspian Sea) or natural resources (oil and gas fields, water dispute with Afghanistan, etc.).

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The general regional unease about Iran's rise as the paramount local power can move in two different directions: the containment or increased accommodation of Iran and its interests on a regional level. Meanwhile, the direction of future relations will then depend heavily on developments on two specific fronts: the intensity by which Western powers seek and therefore solicit regional support to contain Iran, and the ability of Tehran to persuade its neighbors not to fear its rising power.

Less consensus: hardening policies

There are at least a handful of organs in Iran that partake in the formal and constitutionally-sanctioned foreign policy decision-making process. Given the lack of institutional transparency and a culture of political ambiguity, it is near impossible to determine the likely weight of each component in the process. However, a few things are clear.

First, the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, continues to be the ultimate arbiter. This is despite the indisputable emergence of senior

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cadre from the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) in the policy-making process. In his capacity, Khamenei retains a strong preference to micro-manage processes dealing with sensitive issues including in the realm of foreign policy. These so-called “red-lines” include management of relations with the U.S. and nuclear negotiations with the IAEA and the West.¹ Khamenei’s domination is also a reflection of his direct or indirect control of the most decisive political organs, demonstrated by the fact that he appoints members of the chief political regulator of the regime, the 12-member Guardian Council, which can veto any policy as proposed either by the president or at the parliamentary level.² Furthermore, Khamenei appoints the members of the Expediency Council, the

1 Ayatollah Khamenei has made it abundantly clear through numerous public statements that he will be the ultimate decision-maker when it comes to the issue of Iran’s future ties with the United States. Clearly, Khamenei sees the issue to be highly sensitive and directly linked to his political future – above all tied to his belief that the ultimate US objective is either regime change in Iran, or a dilution of the powers of the supreme leader’s office. It is also evident that Khamenei, as Iran’s nuclear program has come under more international scrutiny and following the controversial June 2009 elections, has become far more of a central messenger of Tehran’s foreign policy goals, presumably to convey a sign that Iranian objective remain intact despite the domestic political crisis.

2 Khamenei directly appoints the six clerical members of the Guardian Council. The six constitutional legal experts are appointed by the head of the judiciary, who in turn is directly appointed by supreme leader, Khamenei.

35-member organ that is ostensibly charged with the task of steering the regime forward where there are institutional deadlocks, specifically when there is disagreement between the Guardian Council and the parliament or president.

However, upon closer examination, it is apparent that Khamenei’s appointments to these two bodies since he was elected in 1989 have shared one general characteristic: the inclusion of a relatively diverse set of voices from the broader ranks of the regime. It has in the main been a case of the “broad-umbrella” approach to maintain stability within the *nezaam* (Islamic Republic).

Khamenei’s appointments of the same personalities to multiple offices and the “broad-umbrella” approach appear to be rooted in two realities. One is that Khamenei, despite his impressive constitutional powers, has since 1989 generally opted to emphasize his role as the supreme religious leader even though he is in reality a political micro manager. His track record shows that he will act on the smallest political decisions made within the regime if he feels his interests are at stake.

However, his appointments to office of opposing political personalities is also a reflection of the fact that Khamenei began his tenure as supreme leader as someone who faced considerable questions about his

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religious credentials. He therefore sought to reduce internal regime opposition through political inclusiveness where possible.

Such an approach would have also been justified from the viewpoint of prevention of conflict. From its early days, the Islamic Republic has experienced a shrinking of its political base, fall-out and defections at the top-tier regime level. In order to mitigate future walkouts, Khamenei's appointments kept the regime tent big but the alternative would have been dissenting voices that could have caused the regime to fold altogether. The best example of this is the fate of Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani barely disguises his criticism of many of the Khamenei-backed policies of the regime, and yet remains chairman of the Expediency Council, also despite the fact that two of his children have been charged with political sedition and aiding the Green opposition movement.

However, Khamenei's post-2009 political modus operandi has either come close to an end or is at least experiencing unprecedented strain. In the realm of foreign policy-making, the fact that reformist or centrist figures were part of the process (i.e. through the Guardian Council or the Expediency Council) would presumably have meant a degree of consensus and moderation of policy. The question is whether this can continue with so many of the reformist figures under pressure and threat of expulsion from the regime.

If that happens, as hard-line officials continuously threaten, the world-views and policy preferences of Khamenei and the and the IRGC factions are likely to become more vivid in Iranian foreign policy.

The Khamenei-Ahmadinejad-IRGC axis

Given the reduction of this consensus-enabling aspect in the governance of the Islamic Republic, three specific interests emerge as the likely driving forces of foreign policy in the near term.

The first relates to Khamenei. His distinguishing foreign policy trait remains an overriding suspicion of the West, particularly the U.S. In his view, the bottom-line objective of Washington is regime change in Iran, a notion that has only hardened since the June 2009 elections, with Khame-

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nei's assertions that the election crisis was engineered from abroad. This factor remains significant regardless of whether or not he genuinely believes that such foreign interference took place.

Not only is Khamenei's now-less-challenged anti-Americanism at home a major hurdle in enabling diplomatic contact between Tehran and Washington, it is now shaping up to become a proclivity for stronger challenges to the U.S. and its interests across the Middle East. The slogan that the "extra-regional powers [the U.S.] should leave the Middle East" has always been part of Khamenei's diplomatic message to the region, but now its intensity is increasing.

Apart from his guiding principle of anti-Westernism, which also includes a defiant posture in relation to Iran's nuclear program, Khamenei remains anti-Israeli and by extension supportive of Arab rejectionist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. This can also be seen in the context of his speeches, which often touch on the need to bridge the gap between Shia and Sunnis of the Middle East, and warnings of outsiders "sowing discord" among Mus-

lims. These issues represent Khamenei's the focus in the realm of foreign affairs, and he appears content not to be a key communicator about the regime's foreign policy in relation to other issues.

President Ahmadinejad, due to ideological affinity but likely also as a result of sheer necessity, shares much of Khamenei's worldview. However, there is clear evidence that the two personalities often clash in terms of foreign policy priorities. For example, Ahmadinejad appears more far inclined to explore ways to reduce tension with the U.S., which has tended to prompt Khamenei to publicly respond by reminding everyone that he charges the course in relations with the U.S. After his September 2012 visit to the UN in New York, Ahmadinejad came under intense criticism by Khamenei loyalists for having even raised the idea of renewal of diplomatic ties between Tehran and Washington. Khamenei did not allow reformist Mohammad Khatami to set the agenda in U.S.-Iran relations during 1997-2005, and does not appear to want to act any differently with Ahmadinejad.

Ahmadinejad seems to consider the reestablishing of ties with the U.S. on his watch – under acceptable circumstances – to represent a major political victory for his administration that will be well received in the broader Iranian society and thus secure him popular praise. Furthermore, in the

Iranian institutional-political setup, the one policy area where the presidency has most authority and independence to pursue its agenda is in economic decision-making. In this context, given Ahmadinejad's populist platform and need to cater to the needs of the poorer segment of society, he is under greater pressure to take into account the economic costs of a policy of anti-Americanism, on both international and regional levels. This is particularly true now that the international sanctions are beginning to wreak havoc on the Iranian economy and are hurting living standards for Iranians.

Finally, while the top cadre of the IRGC is presently allied with Ayatollah Khamenei, it is an entity that nonetheless has its own distinct attributes and interests. Not only is the IRGC expected to fight attempts by the domestic opposition and others in the regime to push it back into the military garrisons, but it is also likely to position itself as the only viable defender of Iranian and regime interests at home and in the region.

Meanwhile, the IRGC's operational control of the nuclear and missile programs of Iran combined with its region-wide activities (Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, etc.) will also make it a primary target for external pressure. If it becomes necessary, in order for the IRGC to maintain its political centrality, the force can be even expected to engineer the regime's shift

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to more radical positions – at home and abroad - as a means of protecting its vested interests.

Iran and its immediate neighbors

The prospect of Iran's regional relations is heavily dependent on the evolution of the Iranian nuclear program and the nature of international counter-measures should negotiations on the diplomatic track fail to yield desired results.

Two immediate but different scenarios are possible at the moment. First, diplomacy at the IAEA and other UN levels fails to result in the minimum-needed concessions from Tehran, paving the way for more stringent and multilateral sanctions and thus further isolation of Iran. The alternative is that Tehran provides the necessary concessions to prevent multilateral sanctions, but for the most part continues its nuclear activities.

The former still seems improbable given Russian and Chinese positions at the UN Security Council. The latter is more likely at the moment and effectively represents the prolonging of the already decade-long nuclear stalemate. Meanwhile, the ongoing

intra-regime political crisis is likely to sustain the second option as hardliners have firmly linked a defiant nuclear stance to their legitimacy on a domestic level. The reformist opposition publicly echoes this defiant nuclear stance in fear of being otherwise cast and prosecuted as collaborators.

In the absence of a workable containment strategy that is backed at the UN level, current official statements from the West suggest that attempts will be made to establish a U.S.-led regional alliance aimed at countering Iranian influence across the Middle East but specifically among the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

The first challenge for the West in this regard is the extent of the divergent threat assessment that exists among Iran's neighbors regarding the challenges posed to them by Tehran. Even within the Sunni-Arab GCC bloc, there is considerable disunity about relations with Iran as witnessed by Omani and Qatari pursuit of cordial ties versus Saudi Arabia's unmistakable hostility and blatant regional rivalry with Tehran.

Much of the GCC disunity over Iran is a reflection of intra-GCC dynamics and broader friction in the grouping. As a rule, member states with less inclination to follow Riyadh's leadership have better ties with Iran. However, these internal divisions within the GCC can be mitigated to a degree if the West is able to convince more

of the regional leaders that its intentions to isolate Iran are determined and long-term. This would require intense and persistent pressure from the West. There remains a strong underlying fear among the GCC states that both the U.S. and the EU states are effectively still in the midst of deliberating a sustainable approach toward Tehran, but despite strong signs that the West is leaning toward punishment and containment of Iran due to its nuclear activities, the Gulf Arab states have yet to be convinced.

Elsewhere, despite occasional interruptions, Tehran's relations with its other immediate neighbors are cordial but from its perspective far from fully developed, specifically in trade and economic cooperation.

Armenia and Turkmenistan continue to look to Iran as a geo-political counter-weight to Turkey and Russia, as an important transit route for trade to the outside world and with an indigenous economic potential that can be important in shaping their futures.

Relations with Azerbaijan are more complicated due to shared history, common Shia roots and the presence of some 20-25 million ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran. There is a fluctuating degree of suspicion in Baku and Tehran, but assessed in the context of bilateral relations dating back to 1991, Azerbaijani irredentism or Iranian chauvinism are presently marginal factors in deciding relations.

Turkey poses different challenges and opportunities but relations are overall still cordial, despite the massive complications created by disagreement over the Syrian crisis. Since AKP came to power in Turkey in 2002, Tehran and Ankara have been able to put in place a fairly effective working mechanism that for example has resulted in joint operations against militant Kurds in the tri-border area, Turkish investment in Iran's energy sector and, increasingly, signs of support for Tehran's nuclear posture and possibly a role for Ankara as a facilitator in solving the Iran-IAEA dispute.

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Pakistan is seen above all as a threat to Iranian security, for a variety of reasons. Besides Islamabad's nuclear arsenal and historical Iranian-Pakistani rivalry in Afghanistan, Pakistan is perceived as a source of economic migration and a lasting base for anti-Shia Sunni extremist groups. Still, Tehran's policy appears to aim firstly to maintain a stable and productive relationship rooted in security cooperation, and then secondly to ensure that Islamabad does not oppose Tehran's trans-regional commercial objectives such as the much touted energy and infrastructure projects.

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In the cases of both Iraq and Afghanistan, the basic interest of Tehran is that neither state becomes a security threat, existential or otherwise. In Iraq, Tehran is undoubtedly highly influential and has its preferences regarding the political future of Iraq. However, Iran's sway in Iraq is at times exaggerated and the post-Saddam Hussein environment poses a number of challenges. A key political objective for Tehran is likely to be that the senior Shia clergy in Najaf do not once again become the primary religious voices of the Shia in the Middle East. The issue of religious interpretation and the role of political Islam in Iraq have a direct correlation to the level of domestic legitimacy enjoyed by the Iranian Islamist regime.

In Afghanistan, as with Iraq, Tehran's key objective is to prevent the emergence of a radical Sunni government as experienced under the Taliban. At a lower security level, two issues dominate: the flow of drugs and refugees into Iran. While Tehran has said that it will not interfere in Afghani-

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stan's internal affairs, it has sought to extend its influence, for example by sponsoring Dari and Pashtun radio stations and forging patronage relationships, especially among the Persian-speaking Tajik and the Shia Hazara populations.

There is little doubt that in an era of political transition in the Middle East, the regime in Tehran faces opportunities – such as the fall of its nemesis Hosni Mubarak in Cairo and hopes for amity with the rising Muslim Brotherhood – but also many challenges, such as the potential loss of its Syrian ally Bashar Al Assad. There is no denying the fact that the Arab Spring has fully challenged Tehran's self-promotion as the vanguard of Muslim peoples. In Iran's case, the gap between rhetoric and reality of actions is simply too blatant to be ignored.

What is also true is that for the first time in the last decade, ordinary Iranians are now feeling the pain of the international sanctions due to Iran's disputed nuclear program. This in turn could become a key driver behind momentum already in place in Tehran, that would call for an overhaul of past policies and aim to lessen

the internal and external political and economic pressures.

This current wave is currently headed by Ayatollah Rafsanjani and a circle of bureaucrats associated with him. They do not challenge Khamenei directly but their criticism of existing policies is tantamount to questioning the supreme leader's stewardship. They publicly call for a government of "national unity" that is devoid of any remnants from the Ahmadinejad administration, and by avoiding a direct challenge to Khamenei they are hopeful that the supreme leader might see a reason and an opportunity now to change course by throwing his weight behind the idea of a "national unity" government. Despite the focus on Ahmadinejad, it is Ayatollah Khamenei who has after all been the chief architect behind the hardening of Iranian foreign policy since 2009, and he is politically best placed to engineer a new approach to Iran's neighbors and beyond.