

UNDERSTANDING IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY - THE CASE OF IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

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Abstract

This paper examines the complexity of the Iranian foreign policy through the case of Iranian nuclear program and analyzes foreign policy orientations of the last three Iranian presidents, Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani in dealing with the international community in pursuing its nuclear program. This assessment would not be complete without reference to the Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei who is the most powerful political authority. This paper also examines Iranian foreign policy expectations with various theories of international relations as to identify the most dominant or the most consistent policy orientation. Its aim is also to strengthen realist and power-based explanations that have dominated the discourse on the Middle Eastern in general and Iranian foreign policy in particular. In this context, a number of questions will be addressed here. To what extent was Iranian negotiation with the international community over its nuclear program consistent throughout these three presidencies? What has changed, if anything, from Iranian foreign policy perspective and why? Can Iranian foreign policy behavior on this specific topic and in this specific time be explained through any international relations theory? The methods employed in answering these questions are largely structured around ethnographic research methodology and my personal diplomatic experience. In addition, a chronological account and comparative approaches will be used to analyze foreign policy discourse and the assessment of key decision makers.

Keywords: Iranian Foreign Policy; Nuclear Program; Realism; Power and Middle East.

Introduction

The Iranian foreign policy could be analyzed through different perspectives and case studies. In fact, many academic attempts have been made to refer the Iranian foreign policy to existing international relation theories. Iranian nuclear program is one of those cases that could draw additional light into the complexity of Iranian foreign policy behavior and there are several reasons for this assessment. First of all, it has remained as an important diplomatic topic on the international agenda that lasted since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Second, it particularly exposed Iranian foreign policy decision-makers to their western counterparts in the last decade. Third, like no other topic, it draws a light into different, some have stated, conflicting foreign policy perceptions of existing Iranian establishment. Three last Iranian presidents have been involved in this case in different political and regional circumstances and different negotiating frameworks with the international community. These circumstances and their opposing views and actions have also provided

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an important analytical ground to reveal tendencies in Iranian diplomacy. Mohammad Khatami is regarded as the Iran's first reformist president who based his diplomatic efforts on dialogue with the international community. His cabinet has attempted to find a compromising solution with the troika of the European Union at the time of Iraqi crisis with an aim to build confidence with the West and to promote Iranian openness. Additional goal was to prevent bringing Iran's nuclear case to the UN Security Council while strong US military presence was increasing in the neighborhood. While dialogue, compromise and confidence building reflected new foreign policy style, the latter goal reflected rather true national interest of his country. To add some complexity, his policies of openness led to repeated clashes with the conservative Islamists from the Iranian establishment. This may have reflected double track approach of the latter.

At the beginning of his first presidential term Mahmoud Ahmadinejad changed immediately this reformist course and made it sound more populist and nationalistic. In the meantime, political and security considerations in the region have changed to favor Iranian position. As evidence suggested, official Tehran had other national interests to pursue. In a speech to students in Mashhad, Ahmedinejad was quoted as saying that Iran's conditions had changed completely as it had become a nuclear state and could talk to other states from that stand. In the meantime, new multilateral negotiating framework has been designed as the US government decided to step in.

Circumstances and expectations have changed once again at the end of his presidency. The evidence has suggested that economic sanctions were becoming unbearable and political isolation was increasing in Iran in 2011-2013. This might have caused yet another shift in Iranian foreign policy approach. New Iranian president, a relative moderate cleric, has been the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) for 16 years. Hasan Rouhani has been involved as close associate of the supreme leader Khomeini and key nuclear negotiator of his reformist predecessor. In this regard, he looked like trustworthy option for change. Rouhani also promised to promote greater openness of the Islamic Republic. He went as far as talking to president Obama directly over the phone, the diplomatic move that was unbelievable in the past. As time has repeated itself, Rouhani has also run into fierce resistance from hard-liners who were opposing his pragmatic ideas.

It is important to note that the office of the president is not directly responsible for the nuclear negotiation. It is instead set by the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). SNSC includes two representatives appointed by the Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei, military officials, and other executive, judicial, and legislative representatives. In this regard, Ali Khamenei has been playing a critical role in direction of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Several examples of his political moves were very illustrative. Khamenei broke all illusion of the West by stating that Iran is not Soviet Union and that Khatami is not Gorbacov (Hefner, 2005). This has also been evident during the tumultuous 2009 presidential elections, the outcome of which was determined by Khamenei's decisive support of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The third striking example is when Khamenei endorsed Rouhani and allowed his administration to have direct contacts with American administration on the very top.

A Survey of Iranian Nuclear Issue

It has been the Iranian monarch Reza Shah Pahlavi who initiated the national nuclear program in 1960s. Evidence has suggested that governments of the United States supported Iranian nuclear program from the very beginning and Israel from 1977. The Tehran Nuclear Research Center, supplied by the United States, opened in 1967. It was equipped with 5-megawatt nuclear research reactor called the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR), fueled by highly enriched uranium. Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 and the Parliament ratified it in February 1970. The process of Uranium enrichment was allowed under this treaty. Few years later, the president Ford was quoted as expressing his support in principle for the shah's plan to develop a full-fledged nuclear power program to diversify Iran's energy sources.

The Iranian involvement in the nuclear program did not bring any special diplomatic or security consideration in 1960s or 1970s, neither by the United States nor by Israel. The Iranian revolution, however, brought different perceptions of the Program in 1979. Due to the regime change, nuclear dossier of Iran has also changed and became important security issue. Golamreza Jusefi, former Iranian ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, has talked about American shift from fully fledged support to isolation of his country in an interview for the local Bosnian press in February 12, 2012. Germany has also withdrawn from building six nuclear reactors, two of them in Busher in 1979. It signed this agreement with Iranian authorities in 1976.

Imam Khomeini wrote that Iranians must stand on their own feet after war with Iraq (Baquer, 2009.) Iran was particularly vulnerable to chemical weapons used by Iraqi forces. Some foreign dignitaries understood Khomeini's statement as a call to develop non-conventional weapons. Opponents of this argument are often quoting Khomeini's fatwa by which he disapproved building nuclear weapons in his country. Since February 2003, Iran's program for constructing the complete cycle for producing enriched Uranium has been the subject of intense international debates. Authorities from Tehran strongly advocated that it was their international right to pursue civil nuclear energy, not for any kind of the military purposes. The last three Iranian presidents have been involved in this issue during tense negotiation with the international community, particularly the European Union and the US government.

The United States suspected that Iran might divert from civil to military component and produce nuclear weapons. European governments were concerned that Iran's nuclear program could set off a spiral of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and finally kill off the Non-Proliferation Treaty (Leonard, 2005). Israel in particular and other regional countries in general feared that Iranian nuclear case will change existing balance of power in Iranian favor and bring about new nuclear proliferation. In fact, Iran and Western countries have made various diplomatic up-s and down-s over possible deal, from easing the tension and reaching the point of compromise from one side to international isolation, sanction and war games to the other, never crossing the red line on either side. At the latest stage of the negotiations Iran held its first bilateral talks in decades with the United States in a major step towards concluding a comprehensive nuclear deal with the West. Several discussion rounds at the level of foreign ministers took place in Geneva and Wien in 2014, the latest in November this year.

Phase of Iranian Foreign Policy

As reflected through Iranian nuclear dossier in the last 11 years, three different phases could be distinguished in Iranian foreign policy behavior. The first phase was linked with the second mandate of Khatami presidency with particular attention to the period of 2003 - 2005. At that specific time, we have witnessed serious and open dialogue and near compromise with EU troika on the diplomatic surface. The second phase was the period of nuclear populism and nationalism of Ahmedinejad in both of his presidential mandates (2005-2009 and 2009-2013). This also included unsuccessful negotiations with the Security Council (plus Germany) that ended with fourth round of international sanctions and toughest isolation of the Islamic Republic of Iran ever. Finally, the third phase came with the election of reformist president Rouhani in 2013. This phase reset Iranian foreign policy and increased hope in diplomatic solution.

Towards Dialogue and Double Track Approach

Iranian authorities and the European Union Troika have intensively tried to find common ground over Iranian nuclear program from 2003 – 2005 with each side pursuing its own foreign policy agenda. Former Iranian president Khatami advanced the policy of dialogue and mutual agreement with the international community. According to Thaler, Nader and Chubin (2010) his reformist camp believed that stabilization policy of decreased confrontation would secure achievements of Islamic revolution. Iran is a signer of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which president Khatami said ensures that member nations have the right to develop peaceful nuclear technology. His administration managed to skillfully handle the nuclear dossier by negotiating compromise with European powers.

Under Khatami's presidency, Iran signed the Sa'd Abaad agreement with the European troika in 2003. According to this agreement, "the Iranian authorities reaffirmed that nuclear weapons have no place in Iran's defense doctrine and that its nuclear program

and activities have been exclusively in the peaceful domain.” The Iranian Government has also decided “to engage in full co-operation with the IAEA to address and resolve through full transparency all requirements and outstanding issues.” Following this path, Iran suspended its Uranium enrichment program under the new agreement with the EU troika in November 2004. Negotiating team of president Khatami also agreed to sign the Additional Protocol of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and its safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency. The Additional Protocol granted IAEA inspectors greater authority in their nuclear verification programs.

All these agreements and unilateral acts reflected reformist approach in the Iranian foreign policy. Their main elements included opening and integration of Iran in the international community. Other foreign policy objectives may be more pragmatic from the security point. Local sources have suggested that Iranian establishment did not want to bring nuclear case at the UN Security Council while US troops were stationed in Iraq. Former spokesperson of Iran’s nuclear negotiation team (2003-2005), Seyed Hossein Mousavian argued that this was the major success and skillful diplomatic maneuver missed by Khatami successor. “While Mohammad Khatami was president, Mousavian notes, Iran was not referred to the UN Security Council and did not face the array of draconian sanctions that are dragging down its economy today.”

Khatami phase also reflected double track approach of Iranian foreign policy. While temporary suspension of Uranium enrichment as a confidence-building gesture was formally accepted and practically applied from the end of 2004 through 2005, the Iranian Parliament never ratified the Additional Protocol. President Khatami has indicated in his communication with the EU that Iranian authorities will preserve the enrichment freeze. Similar and reconciliatory diplomatic messages have been stated by his key nuclear negotiator and future president Hassan Rouhani. However, as reported by local media in Tehran, other authorities were sending mixed signals in the election years of 2004 (parliamentary) and 2005 (presidential). This could only be understood as building up an alternative road.

The Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei did not object that president Khatami has open dialogue with the EU troika. He neither stopped him from offering gestures of good will. However, he did not restrain from public criticism of Khatami throughout his mandate and endorsed opposition groups to be more critical of his moderate foreign policy. As Khatami mandate was approaching to an end, this role has been more evident and politically transparent. The Guardian Council disqualified 3533 moderate candidates out of 8145, among whom 80 were existing moderate MP-s, for parliamentary election in 2004. Ali Khamenei who controlled the Guardian Council may have already decided to bring new leadership and produce policy change. Independent scholar Farideh Farhi also examined Iran’s nuclear policy and argued that the foundations for a nationalist nuclear

discourse were carefully laid out during the presidency of reformist Khatami.

It is understood that Iranian establishment and true decision makers calculated that it was not necessary to continue this path of compromise and opening as from 2005. Thus, the policy of dialogue has ended with the end of Khatami presidency. Hassan Rouhani also resigned as key nuclear negotiator. Time was ready for different foreign policy rhetoric. It seems that Ahmedinejad was perfect choice.

Towards Diplomatic Tension

The victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad brought new political elite in the Iranian government. It also brought new political discourse and new diplomatic agenda of confidence breaking. New president inaugurated nationalistic and populist rhetoric from the very beginning of his mandate. Ehteshami and Zweiri (2007) from the Institute of Middle East and Islamic Studies made detailed analysis of this political transformation by marking Ahmedinejad and his political cycle as neoconservative, principal, ideologically Islamic, revolution in character and non clerical.

Even though Ahmadinejad reaffirmed his intention to put forward new proposals during his speech at the UN General Assembly in 2005, he recommended restarting Uranium enrichment process at home. Actually, his first major policy was to reject the EU's offer from 2005. Ahmedinejad also sacked 40 Iranian diplomats in a massive cleaning of the reformist oriented Foreign Service including those involved in the country's nuclear negotiations with the European troika. Hassan Rouhani, the pragmatic chief negotiator, was replaced with Ali Larijani, who said that exchanging Iran's nuclear program for trade concessions would be like trading "a pearl for a candy." Leonard (2005) has marked new president's initial phase as aggressive and toxic. Ahmedinejad's diplomatic approach has been followed by specific action plan at home. Officials from Tehran broke open internationally monitored seals on the Natanz enrichment facility in the central Iran and at two related storage and testing locations. These activities cleared the way for Iranians to resume Uranium enrichment and nuclear fuel research what the US and EU countries objected and feared the most.

There were several possible reasons why this foreign policy change happened. It has been argued that the EU troika reacted slow and late to Khatami's unilateral favor. They agreed to deliver a set of political, economic and nuclear offers only after presidential elections in 2005. It also remains a question how much Iranian leadership was willing to make a deal with the EU without the United States. Seyed Hossein Mousavian argued that the supreme leader had lost confidence in the ability of the Europeans to deliver on their promises by early 2005. Farideh Farhi argued that the failure of negotiations between the reformist government and European representatives and subsequent increased pressure on Ahmadinejad government contributed to the increasingly loud tone Iranian

negotiators took after 2006.

Iran felt more secured after constitutional changes and elections in Iraq favored their pro Iranian constituency. Peter Galbraith shared these views in his book from the same year “Iraq: Bush Islamic Republic.” To support this argument further, I will also quote Iranian ambassador to Bagdad as saying that it was big day for them as elected Iraqi people were our people that we supported. American casualties have been on increase at that time. Woodward (2008) suggested that Iran gave his contribution to this. By publishing National Intelligence Estimate in 2007, the US administration gave up the military solution against Iran completely. Ahmedinejad celebrated this news by proclaiming the largest Iranian victory in last 100 years (David E. Thaler, Alireza Nader, Shahram Chubin, Jarrod D. Greem, Charlotte Lynch, F. Wehrey, 2010).

In the meantime, the US government got involved in this case along China and Russia. Iranian nuclear dossier has been moved into the new multilateral negotiating framework of five plus one (5 members of UN Security Council plus Germany). Throughout Ahmedinedjad mandate, Iran and Western countries, however, remained far apart in these negotiations. As they continued without any compromise at reach, Bush administration lobbied for three rounds of sanctions by UNSC. President Obama offered dialogue but soon realized that diplomatic breakthrough with Ahmedinejad was not possible. He also lobbied for the UN Security Council Resolution 1929 imposing fourth round of multilateral sanctions in 2011. On every move in this regard, Ahmedinejad radicalized his rhetoric and announced further unilateral moves. He called these resolutions a piece of torn paper. Challenging expected fourth round of UN sanctions, he announced that Iran would increase Uranium enrichment process from 3% to 20% level for the first time. This move marked a major increase in Iranian nuclear capabilities in 2010 narrowing the space between civil and military level.

There was one important observation during this phase. According to IAEA report from August, 2012, Iran enriched 6876 kg of Uranium up to level of 3 % and 189 kg up to level of 20%. As noticed from all other IAEA reports, enriched uranium of 20% never crossed 200 kg. As soon as Iranian authorities would reach close to 200 kg, they would convert it into nonreturnable fuel recycle for civil purpose. This represented small but important sign of Iranian rationality not to provoke international intervention. The problem would have appeared if 20% enriched Uranium had piled up more than 200kg and eventually enriched to 90%. The latter enrichment level is considered by experts as the military level sufficient for one nuclear bomb. It seems that 200 kg was self-declared Iranian red line. It was also publicly declared red line by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu who stated this at different multilateral forums.

At the peak of this diplomatic crisis, the US and EU member states imposed multi-

lateral and bilateral sanctions preventing Iran from trading its oil to the EU in 2012. President Ahmadinejad said the sanctions were a “used hand tissue that should be thrown in the dustbin,” and that they were “not capable of harming Iranians.” Iran threatened to close Hormuz passage and entered war games with US war ships. Both sides were approaching the point of entering the real conflict. As evidence suggested in the past, as soon as Iran was close to crossing this red line it diverted toward reconciliation. Economic authorities from Tehran also admitted that international sanctions were bringing serious economic consequences. Iranian oil sale has fallen from almost 4 million to less than 2 million barrels a day.

During his presidential mandates, Ahmedinejad tried to play visible diplomatic role by attending every annual session of the UN General Assembly and addressing different multilateral forums with tough messages. His team negotiated within framework of 5+1 without closing increasing gap between Iran and the international community. In the course of his second presidential mandate, he tried to reach some diplomatic breakthrough bypassing negotiating framework of 5+1 by using bilateral or trilateral links with Japan, Turkey or Brazil. Ahmedinejad signed Teheran declaration with Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2010 as a compromise offer that was not acceptable to the US.

At the end of his mission, Ahmedinejad was increasingly marginalized by the supreme leader Ali Khamenei. In his double road approach, Khamenei slowly opened an opportunity for yet another foreign policy shift. Ahmedinejad was left alone and he slightly changed his rhetoric and offered reconciliatory messages. In his speech at the Summit of the Nonaligned Movement in Tehran in 2012, he sounded more like a pacifist than a conservative politician. Iranian more aggressive foreign policy actually ended before he completed his second term.

Towards Dialogue II

President Hassan Rouhani’s new cabinet brought back some reformist faces from the Khatami administrations from 1997 to 2005. The new foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, was Iran’s UN ambassador in the later years of Khatami’s presidency. Massoumeh Ebtekar, one of Khatami’s vice presidents and the first woman to hold such office in Iran, returns as vice president responsible for the environment. With new faces, Rouhani brought back the old reformist foreign policy. As stated, Rouhani wanted to promote Iranian openness, build new confidence and decrease sanctions. Actually, he wanted quick diplomatic results. In this regard, he went much further or he was allowed to go further than ex reformist president Khatami by having direct phone discussion with president Obama, the first such dialogue after Islamic revolution. His foreign minister Zarifi has been in regular bilateral meetings with the US State Secretary Kerry in a very relaxed diplomatic atmosphere.

These diplomatic moves were not allowed to Khatami's cabinet members, at least not that fast or that often. Rouhani was politically appropriate, trustworthy and most knowledgeable presidential candidate from within Khamenei circles (Ex SNSC Secretary). There are arguments that seeds for new moderate presidency in 2013 were also planted during Khatami presidency. Rouhani's reconciliatory messages as nuclear negotiator from 2003-2005 were not forgotten by the international community and key negotiating countries. This presidency to come was additionally cultivated during intellectual and surprisingly open debate for Iranian standards on the character of Iranian foreign policy in 2006 and 2008. In his article in *Iranian Foreign Policy Journal*, Rouhani asked either we wanted Iran to scare the region and the world or we need to build friendly relations. He concluded that between Islamic Republic and Islamic Revolution he chose Islamic Republic (Rouhani, 2006 and 2008).

It is not by surprise that on the opposite line was the Iranian president Ahmedinejad himself. The latter argued that reformists were traitors. As reported by Hemayat web site on March 10, 2008, Ahmedinejad was quoted as saying that those people were asking the approval from the US government for Iranian progress. All foreign embassies and observers noted strong rhetoric difference in the Iranian political culture and foreign policy discourse.

American policy and advisors were also sending positive signals in this regard. If he wants any progress in the Middle East, president Obama needs to open dialogue with Iran, suggested Gary Sick, prominent university professor and adviser of three US presidents, Ford, Carter and Regan on CNN on November 16, 2012. Best seller author Stephen Kinzer (2010) argued in his book *Reset* that America had interest to open dialog with Iran prior to this negotiation round. Iran that does not feel any threat may reach compromise on its nuclear program, open up energy market to US companies, stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan, and improve fight against terrorism, particularly Al-Qaida. Then, Limbert (2008) gave 15 recommendations to Obama administration to succeed in dialogue with Iran. His conclusion was that negotiation between two sides, no matter how hard and difficult, was probably better than continues violent relations.

In his first press conference as president in August 2013, Rouhani stated: "we seek a win-win game and this is possible... We are prepared to enter serious and meaningful negotiations with determination and without wasting time, and if our opposing party is equally ready, I am confident that the concerns of both sides will be allayed through dialogue." This rhetoric has been followed by fresh round of multilateral negotiations within the group of P 5+1. In November 2013, two sides already signed Technical agreement and agreed to continue negotiation to reach comprehensive deal in 2014. Under this Technical agreement, Iranian side agreed to stop 20% enrichment of Uranium started by Ahmedinejad in 2010 and close its Plutonium facility in Arak. From the other side, 5

billion of frozen Iranian financial recourses have been released and other minor sanctions were removed. In the meantime, several new rounds of talks have been held in Vienna, including bilateral talks between Iranian Foreign Minister Zarifi and US Secretary Kerry. Negotiators aimed to find an exceedingly complex and lasting deal limiting Iran's atomic activities in exchange for a lifting of sanctions.

The latest foreign policy shift might help the supreme leader Khamenei to improve his standing with increasing and disappointed Iranian population that belongs to reformist or pragmatic constituency by bringing Reformist back on the main course after political turmoil in 2009. However, some recent events indicated that Khamenei's support may be waning as reflected through increased criticism from the right wing individuals. Iranian Parliament also rejected Rouhani's nominations for vacant ministry positions on several occasion. These controlled attacks against Rouhani may be explained by several reasons. As suggested by analysts, Ali Khamenei will not appear to betray his base of support from Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Then, he may attempt to increase bargaining power of Rouhani abroad by criticizing him at home. Third, most probable and most consistent, Khamenei may be building an alternative foreign policy option as he did on two other occasions with Khatami and Ahmedinejad already.

According to the latest negotiation round between Iranian and 5+1 delegations on November 22-24, 2014, new deadline has been extended to March 1, 2015 for new technical agreement and July 1, 2015 for final agreement. Iran's supreme leader gave his indirect approval for a continuation of talks over its disputed nuclear program on November 25, 2014. He has been quoted as saying: "on the nuclear issue, the United States and European colonialist countries gathered and applied their entire efforts to bring the Islamic Republic to its knees but they could not and they will not." Vice chairman of parliament, Mohammad Hassan Aboutorabifard, said the U.S. is not trustworthy since Washington "sacrifices" its national interests for Israel, but he still voiced support for further nuclear talks. In an address to the nation, the President Rouhani said that the extension was a victory, adding negotiations will lead to a deal, "sooner or later." In this regard, we have yet to see what final approach would be taken by Ali Khamenei. Will this latest diplomatic breakthrough of partial nuclear compromise from November 2013 go all the way forward? As always, Iranian supreme leader has kept all options available by taking into consideration Iranian national interest. Political experience and evidence from the past also suggested that as soon as Iran arrives close to any big deal, cordial relations or opening of the country, it will divert in the opposite direction.

Conclusion

It is evident that Iran is preoccupied with its security and continuation of their state's leadership existence. In order to ensure its survival, it will seek to maximize its negotiation power relative to others. As evidence suggested, international law and international

institutions did not constrain or influence Iranian behavior to the extent that they blindly follow. In this regard, there is no difference with the Iranian foreign policy which is extension of its internal policy.

Iran has been using its energy wealth and leverage to strengthen his regional influence with more vulnerable neighbors. It has also used the stature to complicate U.S. interests (Carlos Pascual and Evie Zambetakis, 2010). In this regard, it clearly reflects the realist point of view. However, Iranian decision makers seem to be pragmatic as well in terms of not crossing self declared red lines. As presented in the paper, they never decided to accumulate enriched Uranium of 20% to 200kg, thus avoiding breaking the trust completely or giving strong evidence of nuclear military program.

This historical attitude of last 11 years has been fluid between two red lines reflecting Iranian double track approach. As presented in the paper, Iranian establishment moved between two opposing lines all the time. As soon as Iran reached one (dialogue, compromise, cordial relations with the West), it diverted towards animosity and instability almost as a rule.

This has been the transitional phase from Khatami to Ahmedinejad presidency. On the other side, as soon as it reached the other red line (instability, isolation and possible war with the United States), it diverted again, this time towards dialogue, compromise or cordial relations. This has been the transitional phase from Ahmedinejad to Rouhani presidency. As Iran followed its national interest at the time, it also reflected the realist point rather than any other understanding of international relations behavior. Thus, Donette (2010) spoke about generational struggle in her book *US Foreign Policy and Iran*.

It has been evident that all negotiating positions and all shifts in Iranian foreign relations have been supervised by the supreme leader. And this has been consistent policy throughout three phases that have been examined. Although the decision to end the suspension of Uranium enrichment in 2005 was probably taken before Ahmadinejad, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei made clear before the election that the nuclear issue was a national, not a presidential matter (Leonard, 2005). After the latest negotiating round in November this year, the *New York Times* reported that Iranian current foreign minister “often warned that the final decision would be in the hands of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.”

Is comprehensive nuclear deal between Iran and the West possible? The supreme leader was initially restraining public criticism of Rouhani through his public support for the nuclear negotiations at the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014. Khamenei gave him a chance, tested his loyalty and checked US / EU approach and readiness for compromise. To some extent, he is still checking deal options as negotiating deadline has been extended

to mid of 2015. Other options have been kept alive as controlled attacks from the conservative cycles continued. American analysts believe that any serious attempt to renew Iranian American relations would be political earthquake in Iran, would create political fractions of losers and winners where losers would refuse to accept change of existing status quo (David E. Thaler, Alireza Nader, Shahram Chubin, Jarrold D. Greem, Charlotte Lynch, F. Wehrey, 2010).

Therefore, for any nuclear deal to be agreed on Iranian side, it is not sufficient that the negotiating delegation only consent. More importantly, it is conservative cycles in general and supreme leader in particular that has the final say. Rouhani has complex position in this regard. He has to reach as better deal as possible. At the same time, he is supposed to convince extreme circles, including supreme leader, that there is no alternative to Iranian course of opening. Failure to deal with the international community is failure to his reformist policy. Similar stand could be expected from the US side. As reported by US media, "Kerry's position was complicated by the Republican midterm election victory and the fear of feeding the narrative that Mr. Obama was a weakened president." This brings us to the final conclusion that reaching final deal between Iran and the West next year depends on so many centers of power and so many opposing views.

Success in ongoing negotiations could resolve one of the most intractable geopolitical problems in the region. From the other side, the failure could divert Iran from dialog to tension yet again. If there is no deal between Iran and the international community next year, the United States will face a clear choice. On one side, US will be in position of tolerating the Iranian nuclear ambition. On the other, it may reapply continued diplomatic and economic pressure. On the extreme side, as suggested by US authorities, military means have not been excluded.

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