

# IRAN AND THE WORLD AFTER ROUHANI

ロウハーニー政権下のイラン外交と世界

Prof. Dr. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam\*

本稿は今年 8 月に発足したロウハーニー第二期政権のとりわけ外交政策を 1979 年  
以来のイラン・イスラーム共和国政権の政治的展開の帰結として位置づけることを目的  
とするものである。革命後のイランは現在に至るまで西側諸国の新自由主義的な経済  
政策に対して一定の距離を堅持してきた。またパレスチナ問題に対する明確な対パレ  
スチナ支持の姿勢も今後長期にわたりその基本線が変わることはないだろう。だがその  
ニュアンスについて可変的であることは、イスラエルを「シオニスト国家」と呼ぶことを慎  
重に回避し続けるザリーフ外相の発言などからも伺える。

米国における 2017 年の年初のトランプ政権の発足にも拘らず、イランと P5+1 の間の  
JCPOA がトランプ大統領によって破棄されるという可能性は極めて低い。だが革命以  
来のイランの非同盟諸国重視の外交姿勢は現在に至るまで続いており、南米のベネズ  
エラ・ボリビア・ブラジル・キューバといった諸国との緊密な関係もロウハーニー政権にお  
いても維持されることは明白である。

革命後のイラン外交は決してシーア派重視あるいはイスラーム重視に傾斜することな  
く、それはあくまでも国益重視の姿勢に貫かれてきた。政策的な選択についても 2009  
年以降は国際社会との協調の方向に大きく転換しているが、ただそれが西側と共通の  
人権擁護の理念に基づいていないという問題は依然としてある。

いずれにしても 5 月の選挙の結果、ロウハーニー政権は政策的な合理性・優位性につ  
いて国民の信託を受けたものと理解すべきである。ある種の市民社会が育ちつつあ  
るイランの国内政治において、いわゆる「保守派對改革派」の単純な図式はますます意  
味を失いつつある。イランは今後将来的に非イデオロギー的・非革命的な通常の家  
国として、日本を含む国際社会の一員としての道を歩むことが期待される。

(文責・鈴木均)

---

\* Professor in Global Thought and Comparative Philosophies, Chair of the Centre for Iranian Studies, SOAS, University of London.

Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, Iranian foreign policies have oscillated around five strategic preferences which set the general contours of the country's international relations. The current strategy of the Rouhani administration repackages these preferences, but does not radically depart from them. The Iranian state, like any other state in the international system, has its national interests that it pursues. It has been an analytical mistake to assume that these are merely tactical and short-term, that Iran after the revolution acts "irrationally" and ad-hoc. Undoubtedly, there have been serious shifts in the way Iran positions itself in international affairs, Rouhani is not Ahmadinejad (in the same way as Barak Obama is not George W. Bush).<sup>1</sup> But the strategic preferences of any state do not suddenly shift in total with changing governments. Strategic preferences are systemic, cultural, institutionalised. They have depth and longitude that go beyond the politics of the day. Rouhani is the surface effect of gradual changes in Iran's domestic politics after the revolution, a product of a post-revolutionary generation yearning for reforms, but he is still operating within the general contours of the Islamic Republic's strategic preferences as they emerged after the revolution in 1979. In the following paragraphs I will assess the modifications that the Rouhani presidency has brought about with a particular emphasis on the enduring strategic preferences of the Iranian state. Some of this research is based on my current book project, which analyses different forms of nationalism in a global context and with a particular emphasis on the Iranian case.<sup>2</sup> It has also benefited from a lecture tour in Japan, and the fruitful interaction with Japanese colleagues specialising on Iran and the Middle East at the IDE-JETRO, the University of Tokyo and Doshisha University in Kyoto.

## **I. What are Iran's strategic preferences?**

The first strategic preference that has guided the ruling classes in Iran is geared to the idea of maximising economic independence.<sup>3</sup> This preference was inscribed into the Iranian constitution by the Sorbonne educated liberals surrounding Ayatollah Khomeini at the beginning of the revolution, in particular the first Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and the first President Abol-Hassan Bani Sadr.<sup>4</sup> At the heart of it is the conviction — similar to Islamic economic theories authored by Ayatollah Motahhari in Iran and Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq — that a "just" welfare state should be at the centre of the economic system. While Iran has attempted to liberalise the economy in the recent years and while it has tried to accede to the WTO in the past, the country continues to keep a relative distance from multilateral institutions and radical neo-liberal reforms. The ruling classes continue to pursue a form of economic nationalism which manifests itself, among the policies mentioned above, also in the emphasis on mastering the full nuclear fuel cycle on Iranian territory. This emphasis on nuclear sovereignty has fuelled Iranian nationalism in recent years. With the self-perception of a great power in human history, Iranians deem it their natural right to take advantage of nuclear energy without impingement by the United States. Hence, Rouhani is trying to present Iran more vigorously in international economic forums and in his recent speeches he made it clear that Iran is open for business.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the foreign policy under President Ahmadinejad see Anoush Ehteshami (2007) *Iran and the rise of its neoconservatives: The politics of Tehran's silent revolution*

<sup>2</sup> Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (2017) *Psychonationalism: Global Thought, Iranian imaginations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>3</sup> See further Maaïke Warnaar (2013) *Iranian foreign policy during Ahmadinejad: Ideology and actions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

<sup>4</sup> Mehdi Bazargan resigned amidst the US hostage crisis. Abol-Hassan Bani Sadr fled the country into exile in Paris where he continues to live until today.

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

Second, since the revolution Iran has allocated immense ideological and material resources to the Palestinian issue with mixed results both for the Palestinians and Iran's national interest. Yasir Arafat was the first major political leader to visit Iran after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. The revolutionaries greeted him with great fanfare and handed him the keys of the Israeli compound in Tehran, which served as a major centre for Israeli operations during the reign of the shah. Moreover, in an effort to institutionalise the pro-Palestinian sentiments of his Islamic followers and the Iranian left, Ayatollah Khomeini designated the last Friday of Ramadan to the liberation of Jerusalem (so called Qods day).<sup>5</sup> "The road to Jerusalem goes through Baghdad" was a prominent slogan of the millions of volunteers of the newly established Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and their Basij militia during the devastating Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) which drained the material and human resources of both countries for decades to come, exactly because the war was charged with immense ideological venom.<sup>6</sup>

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

You see, that's a sovereign decision that Iran would make but it will have no consequence on the situation on the ground in the Middle-East. If the Palestinians are happy with the solution then nobody, nobody outside Palestine could prevent that from taking place. The problem for the past 60 years is that the Palestinians have not been happy. The Palestinians have not been satisfied and they have every

---

<sup>5</sup> See further Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (2014), *A critical introduction to Khomeini*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>6</sup> See further Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (2006) *The international Politics of the Persian Gulf: A cultural genealogy* (London: Routledge).

right not to be satisfied because their most basic rights continue to be violated and people are not ready to address those rights.<sup>7</sup>

Third, the revolution has buttressed a sense of grandeur in Iran's historical consciousness which was equally apparent in the thinking of the shah. But whereas the shah's dependencies on the west did not allow him to act upon his imperial mentality, the Islamic revolution turned Iran into an antagonist to US (and Israeli) hegemony in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) and the wider Muslim world in a grand effort to position the country as a major power pole in the international system.<sup>8</sup> As such, Iran sees itself as a major competitor to US power in WANA and beyond which is exemplified by the country's stringent opposition to NATO forces and US military bases in the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and elsewhere in Iran's immediate geo-strategic neighbourhood. But in this regard as well, Iran has initiated a gradual shift in its foreign policies. For Rouhani and his administration competition with the United States does not preclude establishing full diplomatic ties between the two countries. In my conversations with Iranians close to the administration the model of China is repeatedly invoked. China and the United States have serious differences in eastern Asia, not at least over the contentious issue of Taiwan. But the two countries have close economic ties and they have managed to liaise diplomatically as well. The future of Iranian-American ties could be similar. On issues of agreement, the territorial integrity of Iraq, opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan and al-Qaeda groups throughout the Muslim world, Iran and the United States have a lot of reason to foster enduring security links. On issues of disagreement, Palestine/Israel, Syria and Hezbollah, the two countries are likely to tip toe around each other and try to pursue their national interests without a zero-sum mentality that would antagonise the other side. Such a mitigated "cold peace" could be a major factor in stabilising the region. After all, the key to many crises in the region lies in Tehran, whether the detractors of the country like it or not.

Both Rouhani and Obama campaigned on the basis that they will talk to the other side and indeed they delivered that campaign promise. The outcome was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which resolved the stand-off over Iran's nuclear energy programme. The administration of Donald Trump, however, seems to pursue an incoherent policy of harassment, which is threatening the hard-won JCPOA and Iran's efforts to stabilise its relations with the United States. I don't deem the Trump presidency in the position to derail the JCPOA, given that it was signed off by the five United Nations Security Council members plus Germany. In its efforts to undermine the JCPOA, the Trump Presidency seems isolated. Trump can't lead on this issue. However, the erratic approach to the region in general that has characterised Trump's foreign policy may trigger an adverse reaction from Iran. Persian pride may rear its head at some stage, and lead to detrimental reactions in the war zones of Syria, Yemen and elsewhere.

Fourth, since the revolution of 1979 Iranian foreign policy elites have called for the empowerment of the "third world". To that end the Islamic Republic immediately ceased its membership of the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and became a strong advocate of the Non-Aligned-Movement. This policy has transmuted into a discourse accentuating the need for a multi-polar world order that is not dominated by one superpower. Naturally, Iran perceives itself as one of the poles in such an international system together with Brazil, India, China, Russia, the European Union

---

<sup>7</sup> *Fars News Agency* (FNA) (2014), 5 February, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13921116001667> (accessed 12 February 2014).

<sup>8</sup> In my writings I have stopped using the term "Middle East" due to its Eurocentric legacies. For instance, from the perspective of Japan countries such as Iran, Iraq and Egypt are not in the "Middle East" from a geographic perspective. West Asia and North Africa is a rather more accurate geographic designation.

and the United States. The non-aligned policy encapsulated in slogans such as *na sharghi, na gharbi, jomhuri-ye eslami* (neither eastern nor western, only the Islamic Republic) has manifested itself in Iran's close relations with likeminded governments in Latin America, in particular the "Bolivarian" vanguard in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador and Nicaragua. Iran has fostered close political and economic relations with these countries in the past decades. The former President of Brazil, Lula, even took the audacious step, together with Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan, to propose a solution to the nuclear impasse during the Ahmadinejad presidency which was rejected by the White House. While it is a priority of the Rouhani administration to mend ties with the United States, Rouhani has indicated that he will deepen Iran's existing relations with Latin America.<sup>9</sup> Given that these have attained strategic dimensions, his administration has plenty of opportunity to that end.

And finally, since the Islamic revolution of 1979 the discourse of Iran's ruling elites has focused on the ideal of Islamic communitarianism which the Iranian state pursues primarily through the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the network of bonyads (foundations) that operate in the country's clerical "Vatican", Qom. While the symbols and imagery of the revolution were steeped in Iranian-nationalist and Shia traditions, Ayatollah Khomeini was adamant to portray the revolution as pan-Islamic, indeed as a revolt of all the oppressed against their oppressors, not at least in order to extend the claim for leadership beyond the confines of the Shia minority within Islam. To that end, the revolutionaries instituted "unity week", a culturally driven policy to institutionalise ecumenical unity between Sunni and Shia. At the same time, Iran has never really sacrificed the country's national interest to the pan-Islamic utopia. The ruling classes of the country have been very careful not to criticise Russia and China for their brutal policies against their Muslim minorities in Chechnya and Xinjiang province respectively, in order not to jeopardise Iran's cordial relations with the two countries. Similarly, Iran tends to support Christian-orthodox Armenia in their territorial dispute with Shia-majority Azerbaijan. There is no automatic pan-Islamic solidarity that the Iranian state can afford to pursue on every occasion. While closer cooperation between Muslim-majority countries is pursued through various institutions, the pan-Islamic ambitions of the revolution have been conscribed by the outfit of the Iranian nation-state which demands *raison d'état*, a state centric rationality that does not lend itself to caliphatic adventures.

## II. The domestic determinants of Iran's international affairs

As indicated the five strategic preferences of the Iranian state continue to be salient during the Rouhani presidency, despite the apparent shifts in Iran's international disposition. The bargaining position of the Iranian President is particularly strong because he has repeatedly received the backing of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who made it unmistakably clear that the president has a green light to pursue his policies of constructive engagement which made it possible to seek direct diplomatic negotiations over the nuclear issue with the Obama administration. Of course, the re-election in this year, which was foreseeable, has strengthened the hand of President Rouhani even further. Hence, and in many ways for the first time in Iran's post-revolutionary history, the two most powerful institutions of the Iranian state emphasise detente and diplomacy in international affairs as a means to maximise Iran's national interest, even if Iran continues to extend its strategic depth from

---

<sup>9</sup> *IRIB World Service* (2014) 'Iran firm to boost ties with Latin America: President Rouhani' 10 February, <http://english.irib.ir/news/iran1/item/178359-iran-firm-to-boost-ties-with-latin-america-president-rouhani> (accessed 12 February 2014).



Afghanistan, Yemen and Iraq to Lebanon and Syria. This shift is exemplified in the cultural imagery of the Islamic Republic. In the current discourse, and discernible from Ayatollah Khamenei's central policy speech accentuating "heroic flexibility" in Iran's dealings with international adversaries, the Islamic Republic accentuates the pragmatism of Imam Hassan, the grandson of the prophet Mohammad and the third Imam of the Shia.<sup>10</sup> Addressing senior veterans of the Revolutionary Guards Khamenei maintained that a 'technical wrestler also shows flexibility for technical reasons sometimes, but he would never forget who his rival is and what his main goal is.'<sup>11</sup> Hence, whereas the revolutionaries of yesterday emphasised the romantic "heroism" and sacrifice of Hassan's younger brother, Imam Hossein, who together with his family was killed by the armies of Yazid in the seventh century CE, today the ruling classes in Iran repeatedly refer to his older brother Imam Hassan who is known for his pragmatism, level-headedness and politically accommodating strategies. Hence, whereas the Hussein paradigm emphasises revolutionary change manifesting itself in Hossein's self-sacrifice during the battle of Karbala, the "Hassan paradigm" symbolises pragmatism, exemplified in the peace treaty that Hassan signed with Muawiya when he voluntarily handed over to him the leadership of the umma in the seventh century CE.

But there are also concrete institutional changes in the foreign policy decision making process of the Islamic Republic, for instance the nuclear dossier has been firmly in the hands of the foreign ministry with no tangible interference by the conservative National Security Council. The foreign ministry itself has been staffed with the best and the brightest of Iran's post-revolutionary diplomatic cadres. And in another sign for the consensual policies between the President and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has repeatedly signalled to the influential Revolutionary Guards, that they should not interfere in the current diplomatic process. Although, Rouhani is not a radical reformist in domestic politics, there are incremental shifts away from the highly securitised atmosphere that was characteristic for the Ahmadinejad presidency, in particular after the mass demonstrations against his re-election in 2009. The censorship regime has been slightly relaxed and Iranian civil society has started to function with fewer restrictions again. Of course, Iran is still far away from institutionalising a proper code of conduct that would secure the human rights of its citizens. This lack of attention to the demands of Iranians within the country and outside continues to be one of the major shortcomings of successive Iranian governments.

Here, it is analytically central to point out that Rouhani (and all the Presidents before him for that matter) are products and not drivers of those changes which are determined by the preference settings of Iranian society. I have theorised this as a "pluralistic momentum" that continuously impinges on the realm of the state through a bottom-up-process, from Iranian society to the ruling classes and Dr. Ghoncheh Tazmini has called this "modernisation from below" in her excellent work on Iranian reformism.<sup>12</sup> The central characteristic of this bottom-up process in Iran, is that the clerical establishment can no longer take for granted the allegiance of their client social strata. Pluralism engenders competition, state policies have to be "sold" to an audience that is no longer obliged to "buy" from one source. In this "market situation" the monopoly on political power is dissected. As a result,

<sup>10</sup> Amir Dabiri Mehr ‘

<http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/09/2854/khameneis-heroic-flexibility/>

<sup>11</sup> *Iranian Diplomacy* (2013) 'Supreme Leader underlines belief in insightful "heroic flexibility"', 17 September,

<http://www.iridiplomacy.ir/en/page/1921549/Supreme+Leader+Underlines+Belief+in+Insightful+quot%3BHeroic+Flexibilityquot%3B.html> (accessed 12 February 2014).

<sup>12</sup> See further Ghoncheh Tazmini (2012) *Revolution and reform in Russia and Iran: Modernisation and politics in revolutionary states* (London: IB Tauris).

institutions and elites operating within the domain of the state have to organise themselves in such a way as to mobilise their respective constituencies. They enter into a competitive situation with other groups who follow the same political rationale. Comparing electoral campaigns in Tehran, Shiraz, Ahwaz, Tabriz, Isfahan, and other cities in my field research, I considered it one of the rather more remarkable aspects, that the presidential candidates, including conservative ones such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or more recently the presidential candidate Ebrahim Raisi, scarcely employed Islamic imagery or reference to the political will of Ayatollah Khomeini to further their agenda. The campaign of Rouhani was very similar, geared to specific issues, mostly economic ones, rather than abstract slogans. In short: Iranian leaders understand that it is *public* opinion that matters – it is Iran's strong civil society that affects the way politics are made.

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

There are sociological factors for the capacity of Iranian society to drive this pluralistic momentum: In 1980, at the beginning of the revolution, there were merely 175,000 students and 15,000 lecturers spread around 20 cities in Iran. In 2012, there were four million higher education students and over 110,000 lecturers in 120 cities. In 2010, Iran ranked higher in the United Nation's Human Development index than Brazil and Turkey.<sup>13</sup> According to the British Royal Society, the number of scientific publications in Iran increased from 736 in 1996 to 13,238 in 2008, the fastest such growth in the world.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the number of internet users rose dramatically by 13,000%.<sup>15</sup> In 2012, Iran announced that it will establish a nanotechnology centre and allocate 4% of GDP to research and development as a part of a comprehensive plan for science. This is one of the highest allocations of

<sup>13</sup> See further Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (2013) *On the Arab Revolts and the Iranian revolution: Power and resistance today* (London: Bloomsbury), p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> See further 'Iran and Global Scientific Collaboration in the 21st Century' (2011) *Association of Professors and Scholars of Iranian Heritage*, 3 September, <http://www.apsih.org/index.php/news/english-news/275-iran-and-global-scientific-collaboration-in-the-21st-century> (accessed 12 January 2012). On the growth of the science sectors see also The Royal Society (2011) *Knowledge, Networks and Nations: Global Scientific Collaboration in the 21st Century*, London, March, [http://royalsociety.org/uploadedFiles/Royal\\_Society\\_Content/policy/publications/2011/4294976134.pdf](http://royalsociety.org/uploadedFiles/Royal_Society_Content/policy/publications/2011/4294976134.pdf) (accessed 12 June 2011), p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> The Royal Society, *Knowledge, Networks and Nations*, p. 65.

research in the world. In effect then, the Islamic revolution has seriously expanded the geography of knowledge in Iran which has had an effect on the preference setting of Iranian civil society.

### **III. Conclusions**

Iran under Rouhani has changed, in particular with regard to the country's international affairs and attitudes towards reconciliation with the United States. But these nuanced changes are tempered by the enduring strategic preferences of the state which will continue to guide the international affairs of the Islamic Republic. These preferences of the Iranian state do not preclude closer relations with the United States and even a tacit accommodation of the issue of Israel. But they make it impossible that Iran emerges as a subservient pawn. Ultimately, for the world, the Iran of the future will not be the Iran of the shah. Every Iranian president after the revolution of 1979 has been voted into office to deliver Iran's national interest and to move the state towards more democracy and accountability. These preference settings of Iranian civil society have been boosted by the Arab revolts which have demonstrated that the new yardstick of politics in the region is not ideology anymore, but democracy, respect for human rights and social equality. President Rouhani is merely the latest manifestation of these realities of contemporary Iranian society and the regional context that Iran is embedded in. For the world, including Japan of course, this non-revolutionary Iran should mean more engagement with the country in all fields, including culture, economics and security. The mistakes of the past should be prevented.