

Iranian Foreign Policy During Rouhani Presidency: Perspective on Change and Continuity

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When Hassan Rouhani as 11th president of Iran was elected, there was a great expectation of changing the Iranian foreign policy. As it was great hope for recovering Iran's economy. Following his election victory in 2013, President Hassan Rouhani spoke of his desire to construct Iran's foreign policy with the objective of enhancing mutual trust between Iran and other countries, avoid extremism, and build trust over Iran's nuclear ambitions. Direct talks with the US soon followed, paving the way for a succession of interim deals and confidence building measures that finally led to the JCPOA. However, despite the euphoria in the Western academic circles on Rouhani who would rapidly change Iran's foreign policy, there remain constraints in his ability to radically alter the foundations of post-1979 Iranian foreign policy. In fact, the Rouhani administration has pursued a very cautious foreign policy and has maintained the general geopolitical objectives underlying Iran's external orientation ever since the 1979 Islamic revolution. National interests and state survival have always triumphed over idealistic revolutionary impulses in Iran's wider foreign policy. This has remained a feature of Rouhani's foreign policy as well.

Keywords: Iran, foreign policy, Rouhani, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), national interests

Introduction

When Hassan Rouhani came to power in 2013, he told the Iranians that he would guarantee a better future for everyone. Many commentators and mass media have portrayed the Rouhani administration amenable in bringing about significant changes in Iran's foreign policy. However, a careful examination of Rouhani administration's foreign policy initiatives reveals that there has been remarkable continuity in Tehran's foreign policy objectives even after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) over Iran's nuclear program and after US withdrawal from the JCPOA. The Rouhani administration's foreign policy goals strive to secure Iran's national sovereignty and protect the Islamic system of government setup after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Regionally, Iran has continued to protect its national interests as it had done during the administration of Rouhani's predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In fact, Tehran's ties with the Western-backed the Persian Gulf Arab states led by Saudi Arabia have deteriorated significantly on account of Saudi Arabia's active support for anti-Iran opposition groups as well. Saudi regime is sponsoring anti-Shi'a

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*Takfiri-Salafist*¹ forces in the region. However, Iran's JCPOA agreed upon with five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany (P5 +1) had facilitated Iran's active engagement with the US on certain specific issue. Yet, when US, under presidency of Donald Trump, decided to withdraw from the JCPOA in May 2015, the situation rapidly changed. A major factor governing the pragmatic approach of the Rouhani administration is the fact that it is linked to Iran's business classes who favour the development of free market economy.

This paper aims to evaluate whether Iran under the Rouhani administration has deviated from the "independent" foreign policy goals as envisaged during the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 or Tehran's current orientation reflects a continuity in its approach towards international relations as has been the norm since the overthrow of the Shah. The paper addresses the changes if any, which have taken place during the Rouhani presidentially in Iranian foreign policy.

The Structure of Iran's Foreign Policy-Making Apparatus

The political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the concept of *Wilayat-e-Faqih* which is a unique structure of governance in the region and let say in the world. The Iranian constitution grants the *Wali Faqih* or the Supreme Jurist power (supreme leader) to lead and monitor the functioning of the entire political system (Amid Zanjani, 2012). The concept is based on the interpretation of Twelve Imams Shiite Islam as developed by the founder of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah (Imam) Khomeini in his Book *Hokumat-e-Islami* (Islamic Government). This book argues that government should be run in accordance with Islamic law (*sharia*), and for this to happen a leading Islamic jurist (*faqih*) must provide political "guardianship" (*wilayat* or *velayat*) over the people and nation (Khomeini, 1970). A modified form of this doctrine was incorporated into the 1979 Constitution with the doctrine's author, Ayatollah (Imam) Khomeini, as the first *faqih* "guardian" or supreme leader of Iran. As successor to Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei is the second supreme leader of Iran since 1989. The Islamic Republic of Iran's Constitution is responsible for the delineation and supervision of "the general policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran", which means that he sets the tone and direction of Iran's domestic and foreign policies (*The Islamic Republic of Iran Constitution*, 1989). Thus, one can assume that President Rouhani's ability to make significant changes in foreign policy is limited by the Islamic Republic Constitutional structure.

In addition to the Foreign Ministry, foreign policy in Iran is conceived through inputs from some other organs of the Iranian state. The foremost personality in outlining the general outline of the country's foreign policy remains the supreme leader. The supreme leader influences the main foreign policy-making organ, Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) (Moghaddasi & Akbari, 2018). The SNSC presence makes the Foreign Ministry and the president as one of the influences on foreign policy formulation, but not the main

¹ Takfiri brand of extreme Sunni Islam is an off-shoot of the so-called Wahhabi Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. The Takfir's Islam's main supporters in the Arab world are now grouped in the entity known as the so-called Islamic State based in northern Iraq and Western Syria. The IS type of Islam also has adherent in Al Qaeda as well as many other smaller groups operating in Syria, Iraq and the wider south-western Asian region. A Takfiri is a Sunni Muslim who accuses another Muslim (or an adherent of another Abrahamic faith) of apostasy. The accusation itself is called Takfiri, derived from the word *kafir* (unbeliever), and is described as when one who is, or claims to be, a Muslim is declared impure. Takfirism is, in fact, a perversion of the Sunni Islamic doctrine. However, it has been used in the modern era for sanctioning violence against leaders of Islamic states who are deemed insufficiently religious. It has become a central ideology of militant groups such as those in Egypt, which reflect the ideas of Seyed Qutb, Mawdudi, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Ibn Kathir. Mainstream Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and Islamist groups reject the concept as a doctrinal deviation from true Islam.

formulators of the country's external orientation.

Concerning the role of the supreme leader in Iran's foreign policy means that despite the change of government attitude under Rouhani administration, there has been a considerable degree of continuity in Tehran foreign policy. Indeed, ever since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the primary objective of Iran's foreign policy has been to secure its national sovereignty and independence, while at the same time, safeguarding the security of the post-1979 Islamic political order. Thus, the following have been the main objectives of Iran's foreign policy:

- Safeguarding the country's national sovereignty and independence;
- Security of Iran's borders;
- Protecting the political establishment and system of governance of the country;
- Maintain Iran's national interests;
- Safe guarding the Islamic World interests (Khanei & Sirat, 2018).

The above goals have remained a consistent objective of the country's foreign policy. Often these goals have overridden the ideological objectives of the government based on revolutionary Islam and anti-imperialism attitude. It should be remembered that Ayatollah Khamenei himself called for "heroic flexibility" in the nuclear negotiations with West prior to the JCPOA, while maintaining certain "red lines" that should not be crossed in the process.²

The Nuclear Issue and Rouhani Policy

The Rouhani administration's concessions to the West on the nuclear program were, to some extent, questioned by the supreme leader and some other officials. Even the JCPOA with the West agreed upon by the Rouhani administration on Iranian nuclear program in July 2015 was implemented in order to protect the Iran's government and economy from the debilitating influence of the sanctions (Khabiri & Mohammad, 2017). The pre JCPOA sanctions imposed by the US-led Western bloc on Iran were severely undermining the country's economy.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreed upon with five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany (P5 +1) had facilitated Iran's active engagement with the US on certain specific issues. Similarly, the Rouhani administration's ties with European Union and Britain had also been partially normalised. Hence, after US withdrawal from the JCPOA, the trend that totally changed the situation and Iran's relations with the West particularly America became from bad to much, much worse. To a certain extent, internal economic factors dictated the Rouhani administration's eagerness sign the JCPOA despite many terms of the agreement being detrimental to Iran's sovereignty particularly the inspection regime established by this agreement which, according to the US president, is one of the most intrusive nuclear inspection's regime ever imposed on a country. The US president had noted that:

international inspectors are on the ground, and Iran is being subjected to the most comprehensive, intrusive inspection regime ever negotiated to monitor a nuclear program. Inspectors will monitor Iran's key nuclear facilities 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. For decades to come, inspectors will have access to Iran's entire nuclear supply chain. In other words, if Iran tries to cheat—if they try to build a bomb covertly—we will catch them. (White House, 2016)

² "Heroic flexibility" was repeated in many Ayatollah Khamenei speeches in different times including: 1375, 1392, and 1393 in Tehran.

Consensual Nature of Rouhani Foreign Policy

Owing to the unique nature of Iran's foreign policy-making structure, President Rouhani's external policies have largely emerged from a consensus on key issue within Iran's power elites. These policies are not made in isolation. Since Rouhani came to power, Iran's chief strategic concern is to secure its order in increasingly anarchic region with the exponential rise in Sunni *Takfiri* inspired militancy. The rise of so-called Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria as well continued hostility of the Saudi regime to the Iranian government has led Iran to pursue a defensive strategy of securing its Western flank bordering Iraq. The general principle behind Iran's current foreign policy was quite clearly outlined by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in a paper in the US Council on Foreign Relations journal *Foreign Affairs* in June 2014. Zarif (2014) had noted that:

The post-revolutionary foreign policy of Iran has been based on a number of cherished ideals and objectives embedded in the country's constitution. These include the preservation of Iran's independence, territorial integrity, and national security and the achievement of long-term, sustainable national development. Beyond its borders, Iran seeks to enhance its regional and global stature; to promote its ideals, including Islamic democracy; to expand its bilateral and multilateral relations, particularly with neighboring Muslim-majority countries and nonaligned states; to reduce tensions and manage disagreements with other states; to foster peace and security at both the regional and the international levels through positive engagement; and to promote international understanding through dialogue and cultural interaction. (p. 16)

Under President Rouhani, one can say that Iran has more or less intensified in indirect cooperation with the US in some issue affecting the Middle East. Even this cooperation was not new, Rouhani had simply continued in the steps of his predecessors. The previous governments led by the "reformist" Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) had continued to some extent to support certain Anglo-American policies in Iraq and to Afghanistan as well. Under both these administrations, Tehran supported the post-Saddam regime of Baghdad and post-Taliban regime of Kabul. Such a stance was not so much a signal to back the US policy in the region, but was based on geostrategic objectives and Iran's desire to secure its borders in the West and as well as in the east. By cooperating with regimes in Kabul and Baghdad, Tehran perceived that it may be in a more suitable position to secure its political and security objective and national interests as well (Sohrabi, 2017; Shafie, Attaie, & Pahlavani, 2013). This was particularly true in the case of Iraq. The key members of the Iraqi government had in the past been members of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). SCIRI was founded in Iran in 1982 during the Iraq imposed war against Iran after the leading Islamist insurgent group, Islamic *Dawa* Party, was severely weakened by an Iraqi government crackdown following *Dawa's* unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the then Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Even the Iraq Prime Minister Haider al Abadi was a former member of *Dawa*. Thus, in Iraq, Rouhani like his predecessor Ahmadinejad, has persisted to back Shi'a dominated regime in Baghdad for ideological as well as strategic imperatives.

Iran's Regional Policy: An Overview

The Rouhani administration has been seeking to fashion an image of Iran adhering to an "independent" foreign policy but giving Iran a moderate image. This is being done without changing the general parameters of Iran's over external orientation (Bittner, 2013). Rouhani is most likely to retain the overall foreign policy orientation but with subtle changes so as to improve Iran's international image particularly in the West. Indeed, instead of exporting the Islamic revolution, now Iran portrays itself as responsible state confronting extremism and terrorism which can be regarded as part of its general responsibility in the Islamic World. To this, Iran has

well contributed to combating ISIS and other terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria as well (Qasemi, 2016).

As stated earlier Rouhani administration's goal as has been of his predecessors to maximise Tehran's influence in the region—a core foreign policy goal of the Islamic Republic's since its inception (Shanahan, 2015). However, Rouhani and Zarif are not the sole formulators of Iran's foreign policy they have seek consensus from other key actors in Iran's complex foreign policy-making structures. Rouhani's activities in Iran's foreign relations, according the Iranian Constitution, are circumscribed by the supreme leader's authority, as well as the significant influence wielded by some other Iranian organizations (Shanahan, 2015).

The pragmatic approach of the Rouhani administration is associated with the social base of his government. From the economic point of view, Rouhani administration more or less is based on market economy. The Rouhani administration has close links with Iranian business elites and merchants and as a consequence, one can say he has more powerful financial backers than the previous administration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Indeed, much of the improvement in Iran's economic situation, such as currency stabilisation, a reduction in inflation, and a partial restoration of business confidence during the Rouhani presidency years before US withdrawal of JCPOA in May 2018 had been due to the merchant elite's support for his government.

According to some Iranian economic commentators

President Rouhani's economic policy package is devoid of specific development plans or industrialization projects because the president and most of his economic advisors subscribe to an economic doctrine that frowns upon government intervention in economic affairs—unless such interventions help “pave the way” for unfettered market operations. (Bittner, 2013)

Due to this reason, there is a belief that Rouhani may be able to change the autarkic nature of post-1979 Iranian economy and enable foreign corporations to invest in Iran's economy. Indeed, in this context, Rouhani administration had been more open to allow European Companies access to Iran's hitherto nationalised oil and gas and industrial sectors, yet since May 2018 such policy faced a major challenge (Market Pulse, 2016). Thus, this is one of the reasons that Rouhani and his cabinet's support for market economic system. The former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has described Rouhani as a “warm and engaging” person but a “strong Iranian patriot” (Black & Dehghan, 2013)

Rouhani Foreign Policy and the United States

The nuclear negotiations and the subsequent JCPOA represented an important improvement in Washington-Tehran relations in that the two sides have been in deep and prolonged negotiations for the first time since 1979. Yet, even after the negotiations succeeded, there is still little prospect of relations between the two countries normalising quickly given the deep historical mistrust (Shanahan, 2015). Despite the nuclear deal, the United States continues to see many Iranian policies in the Middle East as undermining its interests, thereby rendering cooperation, let alone rapprochement, problematic. Although from Iranian side Tehran policy towards the Middle East is totally different from US policy in the region, this has been declared by Ayatollah Khamenei as he emphasized: “America's goals (policies) in the region [the Middle East] differ 180 degrees from the goals (policies) of the Islamic Republic”.³ One can assume that it was expected that the nuclear deal would remove a major source of tension in US-Iran relations. As Iran did its duties regarding its nuclear

³ Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, Speech, *IRNA*, (Iran, Tehran), 1 November 2015.

projects in Arak, Qom, and Natanz, but the United States avoided to do its duties, and accordingly, Tehran was accusing the US of not fulfilling its part of the bargain as Washington had been hesitant to lift all the economic and financial sanctions imposed on Iran since the 1990s. Nevertheless, US withdrawal from JCPOA and more importantly major differences on contemporary regional affairs, such as Syria, Yemen, Hezbollah, and Israel tend to make an US-Iran normalisation more difficult endeavour. Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew declared on 11 April 2016 that the US would keep its part of the bargain of providing sanctions relief to Iran in return for curbs on its nuclear program—but that the Obama administration would not allow even limited access to the US financial system (Jenkins & Osborne, 2016). This failure, together with a failure to devise some form of immunity from fines for European banks, threatens the deal. Moreover, the US Congress recently even blocked the sale of civilian Boeing aircraft to Iran on 12 July 2016 (AFP, 2016). In fact, American sanctions against Iran have undermined the development of European countries trade ties with Tehran. In addition, the US Congress is making it impossible for Iran to access its overseas oil revenues worth tens of billions of dollars. Iranian foreign currency deposits total at least \$50 billion. Iranians were hoping for the rapid retrieval of these funds to improve an internal economy that underwent four years of enforced austerity as a result of the United States and EU nuclear-related sanctions (Jenkins & Osborne, 2016).

However, Iran seems to have been more amenable in fulfilling its obligations under the JCPOA. Since then Iran has cut back its nuclear program as required, notably by reducing its capacity to enrich uranium and by redesigning its nuclear reactor at Arak. Iran is also cooperating well with International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, to whom it has granted unprecedented access, and is honouring its Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty commitment to refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons.

After escalating the Islamic State terrorist attacks in Iraq the potential for Tehran and Washington to work together in order to secure Iraq might have increased. However, both sides approach to the crisis in Syria still remains diametrically opposed. The US wants the ouster of the current Syrian government, while Iran supports the Assad's government in Damascus.

The possibility of overt cooperation with the United States even in Iraq has been rejected by the supreme leader's public statement that Iran did not "support any foreign interference in Iraq and (was) strongly opposed to US interference there" (Rezaian, 2014). There is a belief that it is still possible that Washington might have negotiation over Afghanistan crisis with Tehran. In both countries, Iran has permanent interests based on geographical realities and deep historical and religious links of long standing. Its interest in the stability of these countries is immense. However, the Rouhani administration's approach towards both Iraq and Afghanistan has shown remarkable clarity as well as continuity. Even during the administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Iran tried to bolster the regimes in Kabul and Baghdad. Iran is one of the largest non-NATO aid providers to Afghanistan. Therefore, Iranian influence in Afghanistan following the drawdown of international forces need not necessarily be a cause of concern for the United States. Iran wants to see a stable Afghanistan with a government free of Taliban control, and Tehran seeks to stem the tide of Sunni extremism backed by pro-Saudi Pakistan in the Afghan theatre. Pakistan remains a key US-backed external player in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan with its backing of the Afghan Taliban group led by Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzadeh. Pakistan is known to have strong ties to the Pashtuns, while Iran favours the Tajik and Hazara (Nader, Scotten, Rahmani, Stewart, & Mahnad, 2014). For sure, Iran does have interests in ensuring that both Afghanistan and Iraq become stable and functioning nations.

Rouhani Policy After US Withdrawal From JCPOA

On May 8, 2018, following a brief talk on the Iran nuclear deal in the White House, Donald Trump signed a presidential memorandum, declaring US withdrawal from JCPOA. President Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and openly violate the provisions of the agreement. In a reaction to Trump announcement, Rouhani said Iran would stick by the terms of the agreement if the other signatories—the UK, France, Germany, China, Russia, and the EU—could prove they would meet their commitments. Later he stated that his government (Cunningham & Sabbagh, 2018) is ready to resume uranium enrichment should the accord no longer offer benefits. Indeed, President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA jeopardized the Obama administration's and five more countries' landmark nuclear deal with Iran. In the time of announcing the decision, Trump labelled Iran's regime as "the leading state sponsor of terror" and argued that Tehran "exports dangerous missiles, fuels conflicts across the Middle East, and supports terrorist proxies and militias such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, and al Qaeda" (Trump, May 8, 2018). He also called the JCPOA as "defective at its core" since to him, it would have allowed Iran to eventually acquire nuclear weapon (an issue which has been repeatedly denied by the Iranian officials particularly the Supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei) capability even if Tehran were to fully comply with its provisions. However, developments since the US withdrawal from JCPOA have created serious doubts about its sustainability and have escalated tensions between the two nations. In addition, by US exit let say "Amexit" from the JCPOA, a clear violation of UNSC resolution 2231, which the US had sponsored, Trump administration isolated itself. He failed to convince the other signatories to abandon the nuclear deal and rejected international consensus that endorsed the JCPOA, leading to US isolation.

In Iran, Trump decision damaged several years of Rouhani administration policy. In fact, to some extent, this movement divided America from its European allies, all of whom have been more or less deeply opposed to this move. As a result, it created an opening for Rouhani government to collaborate more closely with Europe, and particularly, Russia, and China in arrangements that would exclude the United States.

In the post-JCPOA Rouhani administration has faced another problem in the region which pushed by Saudi Arabia and Israel, that led to more pressure on Iran by the US government. In fact, that was a creation of a new line—"US-Israel-Saudi Arabia" in the region. Following encouragement by Israel and Saudi Arabia, the United States resorted to illegal, unilateral pressures: barring Iranian civilian's access to humanitarian goods including food, life-saving medicine, and civil aviation equipment. Sanctions were also re-imposed on Iranian carpets, pistachios, handicrafts, and other goods (Abdollahi, 2019).

Rouhani Foreign Policy in the West Asian Region

The stated basis for the Rouhani's foreign policy has been the strengthening of bilateral relations with all countries—especially Iran's neighbours—as he stated at his first post-election news conference: "We have to enhance mutual trust between Iran and other countries", adding, "We have to build trust" (QUDS Online, 2013). In addition, couched in terms of peaceful co-existence; support of the United Nations and world peace; and stress on national integrity and inviolability of the principle of non-intervention in the affairs of other countries.

Rouhani's foreign policy approach in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula and vis-a-vis Iran's Arab neighbours in general would remain cautious and continue to strive to improve ties in the Arab world, and possibly elsewhere. Iran, despite its selective support for Shi'a groups in the region, still maintains a cardinal

foreign policy guideline of supporting state sovereignty. It would continue to reject the Western-crafted ideologies of “humanitarian intervention” and “democracy promotion”. Iran has generally supported the regional *status quo* and rejected the perceived Western attempts to change the geopolitical map of West Asia. In this context, Iran has consistently opposed US-led effort to create Kurdistan and in this endeavour it has been backed by Turkey (Fereidoon & Ghavam, 2018). Thus, Rouhani administration has persisted in emphasising the sanctity of the state system in the region created after First World War. In this sense Iran has become, as in the pre-revolutionary era, a *status quo* power.

Iran’s backing for Shi’a groups in the region have been based on ideological basis and enhancing its security as well. Although, Tehran’s backing for the Syrian Government, which is not Shi’a, deals with resistance-axe for supporting Palestinians at the same time is carefully calibrated to enhance its regional influence, and retaining the state structures in Syria from collapsing as a result of civil war. Moreover, Iran and Syria have been strategic allies for over three decades. Iran has tried to assist the Damascus government to resist the various Sunni, Wahhabi-Salafist groups backed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the US. In Yemen, Iran’s support for the Zaydi Shi’a *Ansarullah* movement fighting the deposed Hadi Mansour regime backed by (the Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council ([P]GCC) has been limited. Nonetheless, Iran has persisted in giving moral support to the Shi’a of Yemen who constitute nearly half of the population of that country and are dominant in the north. Similarly, in Iraq, Iran has consistently backed regime in Baghdad in order to bolster the new Iraqi state created after the Anglo-American invasion of that country in 2003.

President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, to some extent have been, able to direct Iran international relations and buttressed their domestic support. Ultimately, however, any further rapprochement has to gain the support of the Supreme Leader. Ayatollah Khamenei priority is, and always will be, the survival of the Islamic revolutionary system of governance (Shanahan, 2015). Nonetheless, lack of progress regarding lifting of sanctions may weaken the Rouhani administration’s smaller financial institutions, and the Western banks remain prohibited from doing business with Iran, mainly, because of unilateral US reimposing sanctions in the post-JCPOA era.

Rouhani Policy Towards the Arab World

Iran has not shown any signs of changing its fundamental policy objectives in the Persian Gulf sub-region. Iran continues to support the Assad regime, it continues to rely on Hezbollah as an important proxy force, and it has not changed and would not change its rhetoric in opposition to Israel regime. Perceptions of, and relations with, Iran vary amongst the Persian Gulf States. Oman for instance has good relations with Iran and has acted as an intermediary between Washington and Tehran in the past. It played in key role is site for the US-Iran covert negotiations before the official Iranian interaction with the US on the nuclear program.

However, under the Rouhani administration, Iran’s ties with Saudi Arabia have rapidly deteriorated. The Saudis have been staunch opponents of the US-Iran understanding on the nuclear issue probably even more so than Israel. It is unlikely that Saudi Arabia will ever trust Iranian intentions in the region. The relationship between Wahhabi-ruled Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran has always been characterized by tension and mistrust. Despite the Rouhani administration’s proactive policy of improving ties with Saudis, Riyadh has not been receptive to this. The Saudis resent the US-Iran nuclear deal as in their perception this may reduce the Kingdom’s importance as the key US client in the region.

The Saudis have been proactive in countering Iran influence in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere in the wider Islamic World. The factors impelling the Saudis to oppose Iran revolve around the following: (1) Historical sectarian divisions between the Wahhabi rulers of Saudi Arabia and the Shi'ite dominated Iran; (2) economic factors specifically with regard to oil and divergent policies in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC); and (3) aspirations for the Persian Gulf power and esteem. The overthrow of the Shah in early 1979 led to an about-face in Saudi-Iranian relations. The success of the Islamic revolution represented everything that the al-Saud family and the former Iranian Shah had been united *against*. For over 10 years following the 1979 Islamic revolution, the Saudi-Iranian relationship continued to disintegrate. Saudi Arabia viewed Iran as a destabilizing force in the region due to its "repeated attempts to export its revolution" to other Persian Gulf States. Conversely, Iran viewed Saudi Arabia as unfit to protect the holy places of Islam.⁴ In addition, Iran's ideology and its vehemently anti-monarchical orientation was an anathema for Saudi Kingdom.

In the post "Islamic Awakening" or "Arab Spring" era, Saudi-Iranian ties deteriorated rapidly due to the almost opposite and contrasting policies pursued by the two powers. Iran backed anti-Saudi governments in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, while Saudis and their allies in the Saudi-dominated (P)GCC had spent considerable finances to overthrow these regimes.

As noted earlier, the US-Iran JCPOA made Saudi Arabian ruling elites even more nervous about US role in the region and possibility of downgrading of their country's importance. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's killing of a pro-Iran Shi'a cleric, Sheikh Nemer Baqher-elnemer, and killings of a large number of Iranians during Hajj in 2015 further exacerbated the ties between the Saudis and Iran. This was despite the fact that Iranian foreign minister M. J. Zarif repeatedly conveyed to Riyadh, the Rouhani administration's desire to reach a *modus vivendi* on regional issues. The Saudis failed to respond to Zarif's overtures.

In the beginning Rouhani government had made, more or less, efforts to reduce differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia over some of the regional issues. For example, Iran's former Deputy Foreign Minister Hussein Amir-Abdollahian visited the Kingdom in August 2014, and Foreign Minister Zarif personally offered his condolences in Riyadh following the death of King Abdullah in January 2015. The appointment of Ali Shamkhani as Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council also sent a message. Shamkhani is a former Iranian Defence Minister who was awarded Saudi Arabia's highest decoration, the Order of Abdulaziz al-Saud, by King Fahd in 2000 for fostering Saudi-Iranian ties. However, Saudi concerns over possible Iranian support for Zaydi Houthi rebels in Yemen, the Syrian government and Iraq have made any Saudi-Iranian understanding very difficult (Shanahan, 2015).

In January 2016, the Saudis executed a prominent Shiite dissident for allegedly supporting terrorism. A number of Iranians attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran and then the Saudis broke diplomatic relations. Since then, Riyadh has encouraged its allies to follow suit. Iranian pilgrims will not attend this year's Hajj. Saudi concerns about real or imagined Iranian conspiracies are reaching new heights and Riyadh is actively trying to undermine the Iranian government. In July 2016, former Saudi intelligence chief and Ambassador to the United States Prince Turki al Faysal attended a large demonstration in France sponsored by the anti-Iranian Government Mujahideen e Khalq (MeK) (*Monafeqeen*) group based in Paris and called for the regime to be

⁴ "Saudi Arabia and Iran-international Affairs Review", accessed 12 June 2019 [www.iarwu.org/sites/default/file/articlepdfs/Saudi%20Arabia %20and%Iran.pdf](http://www.iarwu.org/sites/default/file/articlepdfs/Saudi%20Arabia%20and%20Iran.pdf).

overthrown. Turki's backing for the MeK and his open call for regime change escalates the rivalry even further (Riedel, 2016). This is in spite of the efforts of the Rouhani team to improve ties with Riyadh even after these acts by the Saudis. The Iranian government even pressured the Iranian judiciary to try the individuals arrested in burning the Saudi embassy in Tehran in January 2016. This is a message to Riyadh that Iranian government or at least the Rouhani regime is open to a dialogue (Iran Press TV, 2016a), it has even tried to distance itself from the Shi'a led opposition confronting the rather brutal Saudi-backed regime in Bahrain despite criticising the Bahraini regime.

Most of Saudi and Iranian animosity is more or less related to their respective perceptions of themselves as the leaders of the Islamic world. Tehran regards itself as a more independent country and a more advanced society than Saudi Arabia. It is also at times dismissive of what it perceives to be Saudi relatively unsophisticated view of regional dynamics (Shanahan, 2015). Yet, the Rouhani administration has gone some way to improving relations between Iran and a number of the Persian Gulf countries. Kuwait's Emir visited Tehran for the first time in June 2014 and met with Ayatollah Khamenei.

While there are some concerns among the Persian Gulf States that the United States is pulling back from the region, all of the Persian Gulf States still look to the United States as their ultimate security guarantor. The US has also tried to assure its (P)GCC allies that their stability and importance is vital to US national interests and Washington will defend them in the event of any attack (Dawn [Karachi], 2015). Hence, as long as there is a strong US military presence in the region, the (P)GCC leaders calculate that they will not have to deal with Iran.

The Rouhani Administration Approach Towards Turkey and Israel

In Iran's regional policy, Turkey and Israel have place, too, yet, in a different way. As for Israel, an anti-Israeli foundation of Iran's foreign policy behaviour has remained solid and very consistent at the regional and international levels (Golmohammadi, 2019). Such notion would never be ignored in any administration including Rouhani administration. Since this notion is rooted in religious and political nature of the Islamic revolution, Tehran's foreign policy in regards with Israel will be continued as in the past. By and large, the Rouhani administration has continued Iran's long-held policy of not recognizing Israel.

Turkey, on the other hand, has increasingly good relations with Iran although it is very much a pragmatic relationship. Ankara is diametrically opposed to Tehran on the issue of Syria and they are also commercial rivals in Central Asia, but this has not stopped the two countries from finding common cause with each other on a range of issues (Shanahan, 2015). The right-wing, Islamist regime of Turkish President R. T. Erdogan has been a prime supporter of *Wahhabi* and Sunni groups fighting the Syrian government. Iran has been happy to overlook disagreements over Syria and to concentrate on areas of common interest, such as economic ties. Despite having differences with the Erdogan regime over it backing for *Wahhabi* Islamists opposed to the Syrian government, Iran was one of the first states in the region to denounce an attempted coup against the Erdogan regime on 15-16 July 2016. SNSC Secretary stated "We support Turkey's legal government and oppose any type of coup—either [initiated] domestically or supported by foreign sides" (Iran Press TV, 2016b), Iran looks to Turkey as a potential partner given its problematic relations with many of its Arab neighbours. Turkey, meanwhile, sees Iran as a potentially lucrative export market for its goods and services. Both of these reasons can form the basis for pragmatic cooperative relationships in the future as well.

Conclusion

Although it was expected that Rouhani would provide a great degree of changes in Iranian foreign policy, as this paper had tried to show, he has pursued a very cautious foreign policy and has retained the general geopolitical objectives underlying Iran's foreign policy ever since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. There has been no radical departure from Iran's past foreign policy stances which have indicated remarkable pragmatism within the facade of an Islamic revolutionary foreign policy agenda. All in all, national interests and state survival have always been real objective of Iran's wider foreign policy. This remains a feature of Rouhani's foreign policy as well as the external policy orientations of his predecessors.

The successful conclusion of a nuclear deal, albeit at cost to the progress of Iran's nuclear program. However, to date, the JCPOA has not delivered the benefits as expected by the Iranian government and people. In this context, the US establishment remains opposed to lifting many aspects of the financial sanctions imposed on Iran and this factor has more or less the capacity to undermine the Rouhani administration's popularity domestically. However, it would be too much to expect that Iran would completely realign its policies towards the West in pursuance of economic benefits alone.

Therefore, under Rouhani administration, there has been no radical departure from Iran's past foreign policy trends which have been based on remarkable pragmatism within the parameters of an Iran's revolutionary foreign policy agenda. In other words, despite the change of president and administration in Iran, there has been a considerable degree of continuity in Tehran's foreign policy.

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