

Iranian Foreign Policy Phases 1979-2017

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Abstract

This paper is entitled “Iranian Foreign Policy Phases 1979-2017”. It discusses five broad periods in the post-revolutionary Iranian foreign policy. The aim is to understand foreign policy orientation and approaches that have been followed by each Iranian elected president in different situations. In addition, it highlights the impact of reformism approach on Iranian political agenda internally and externally. The findings of our paper show that there has not been a constant Iranian foreign policy orientation, but different political approaches have been conducted by Iranian decision makers in accordance with Iran’s national interests. Besides, Iranian foreign policy making has been within the framework and according to principles of Islamic revolution in all periods.

Keywords: Foreign policy, national security, international community, political reform and Islamic revolution.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although Islamic principles has been dominated in the constitution and foreign policy of Iran, but different policies and approaches have been used, according to different situations, by different elected presidents of Iran since Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979. This would mean different fluctuate can be seen in the goals of Iran between interests of Iran and interests of Islamic world; or in other word, between interests of Islam Umma (the nation of Islam) and national interests of Iran. Iran has followed different policies in different periods in order to achieve its national interests. Each president followed different approaches toward domestic and international affairs. Four main approaches of realist, ideological, pragmatist, and reformist have been used in the foreign policy of Iran since Islamic revolution 1970 (Kozhanov, 2018).

Since Iranian revolution of 1979, there have been five political periods that will be explained in this article. First; the period of after Islamic revolution until the death of Ayatollah Khomeini (1979-1989). Second; period of Iranian reconstruction under presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997). Third; the period related to presidency of Muhammad Khatami (1997-2005). Four; period of presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). Five, Presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013-2017). The key trends of Iranian foreign policy after Islamic revolution will be highlighted below (Kozhanov, 2018).

1.1 Objectives

The following are the main objectives of the research:

- To study the main political approaches have been conducted by Iran in different periods.
- To analyze the impact of Iranian Islamic revolution principles in making foreign policy orientations.

1.2 Research Problem

This research was intended to fill the gap through evaluating and analyzing Iranian foreign policy approach in five political periods which have affected Iran's National Security from 1979 to 2017. Following Islamic revolutionary approach at the beginning of Islamic revolution until 1989 by Iranian founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, and later by Mahmud Ahmadinejad during (2005-2013) led to isolation of Iran and showed a negative image of Iran in the international community.

1.3 Research Question

The main question which the paper will try to address is what Iranian dominant approaches in the foreign policy are and how they affected Iran's positions regionally and internationally. This article also investigates a secondary issue why Iranian reformist leaders such as Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and Iranian prime minister Mehdi Bazargan in 1979 have not been successful in making reform in the political system of Iran.

1.4 The importance of Research

The significance of the topic under investigation lies in its focus on hitherto undiscussed aspects of the devastating Iranian foreign policy approaches according to Iran's national security. In addition, to understand the nature of Iranian foreign policy, the role of Islamic revolution principles should be taken into accounts which are clarified in Iranian constitution. Moreover, the research will give academics and investigators to obtain accurate findings associated with their research.

1.5 Methodology

In our research we have used in general a qualitative approach to data gathering. In addition, we have utilized the relevant primary sources in presenting the data while carrying out content analysis. The gathering data in the field would have enriched the paper greatly, this was attainable due to time constraints, security concerns, and access problem. However, our access to the literature in several languages has to a certain extent made up for this shortcoming.

1.6 The Structure of Research

In presenting data, the article has presented revolutionary diplomacy approach by Ayatollah Khomeini. Then the pragmatism approach as the principle of Iranian foreign policy during presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) will be presented. In the third point, reformism approach of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) will be discussed. Fourth point will shed light on nationalism and confrontation approach followed by Ahmadinejad (2005-2013).

Finally, accommodating/constraint-centered approach that conducted by Hassan Rouhani (2013-2017) will be analyzed.

2. Revolutionary Diplomacy of Ayatollah Khomeini: (1979 – 1989)

Iranian foreign policy was associated with revolutionary adventurism in the early years of Islamic revolution. The aim of Ayatollah Khomeini from Islamic revolution was wider than Iran, the model of revolution without border was followed by Iran, the imperialism of the United States was rejected by Iran and the term of "Great Satan" was used for the US. Furthermore, Hezbollah and Hamas were funded and trained

against Israel; which elimination of Israel was clearly called by Tehran. Transfer of Islamic revolution message was followed by Iran during Khomeini's leadership and Iran tried to expand its relations with the Shiite world. Following revolutionary adventure by Iran in the years of after revolution led to isolation of Iran from international community. The eight years of bloody war with Iraq in the early years of revolution was seen as the greater plot by the United States, Israel and Arab world to crush the born Islamic revolution in Iran (Aras, 2001).

Realist approach was followed by the Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan. At that time, priority was for national interests rather than ideology. A great attention was paid to the achievement of national interests by making good relations with the world and respecting world order and international regulations. These policies of Mehdi Bazargan were against ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini, supreme leader of Islamic revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini consists of Islamic principles rather than national interests, because contradiction and differences in attitudes of Bazargan and Ayatollah Khomeini, realist approach of foreign policy failed and could not continue for a long time, by capturing of American embassy in Iran, realist approach ended in Iran's foreign policy (Soltani and Amiri, 2010).

Iran's foreign policy can be categorized into four types: confrontational/ ideal-centered, confrontational/ constraint-centered, accommodating/ ideal centered, and accommodating/ constraint-centered, which we implement on Iranian foreign policy to understand orientations of Iran's foreign policy (Yousefi, 2006).

Table 1. Iranian Foreign Policy Orientation.

N	Foreign Policy Type	Period
1	Confrontational	(1979-1981) (1981-1989)
2	Accommodating	(1989-1997) (1997-2005)
3	Confrontational	(2005-2012)
4	Accommodating	(2013-2017)

From the Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979 to the beginning of the Iraq-Iran war in 1981, the foreign policy orientation of Iran was based on confrontational/ideal-centered. Exporting the Islamic revolution, opposing the existence of Israel, and supporting the Palestinian issue were the main objectives of Iranian foreign policy in this period. Following confrontational method by Iran caused fear and threat by the majority of Middle East countries, particularly Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, which tried to confront Iran and isolate it. Feeling threaten by Middle Eastern countries, especially Arab countries, was because, from the early beginning of the Islamic revolution, Iran followed hard power strategy by exporting the revolution to other countries and its reaction toward Israel and the West, its anti-colonial and anti-authorization policies. If Iran had been dealt with according to soft power and had developed diplomatic relations with the Middle Eastern countries, the situation would favor Iran, and Iraq could not accuse Iran of making a threat to the national interests of neighboring countries (Yousefi, 2006).

During the second period (1981-1989) in which Iraq-Iran war took place, Iran's foreign policy

principles were based on confrontational/ideal-centered. Iraq-Iran war and its outcomes brought that understanding to Iranian decision-makers that the reality of the international environment should be taken into account and foreign policy of Iran should be adapted in accordance with the international system. The governments' survival became the priority for Iran, and the export of revolution was limited (Shoor, 2013). Despite the illegal attack of Iraq on Iran, support of Iraq against Iran was because Middle Eastern countries felt threatened by Iran's revolution and its political thoughts, from 1981 until 1989, ideological approach was dominant. According to this approach, foreign policy of Iran should be made according to principles of Islam and Islamic assumptions, therefore, all decisions should be made according to Islamic values and within a framework of Islamic rules. Followers of ideological method believed in changing international principles into Islamic values and norms. Furthermore, they believed in intervention policy in other countries and transferring the revolution to other countries with the hope that they make a revolution too. This policy of Iran made tension and hostility between Iran and other countries, particularly neighbor countries (Mohammad, 2012).

After 1989, revolutionary adventurism was replaced by pragmatism as the principle of Iranian foreign policy. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani believed that precondition of national reconstruction and economic rehabilitation is normalization of Iran's international relations with the regional neighbors and international community. Although, inside Iran conservatives tried to limit Rafsanjani's actions, he was considerably successful to change the priority of Iranian foreign policy from revolutionary dogma to normalization of Iran's relations with all regional countries, except Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The pragmatism

approach followed by Rafsanjani was a good step toward reconstruction of Iran after heavy war with Iraq (Niakooee and Ejazee, 2014).

During this period (1989-1997), in which Hashemi Rafsanjani was president of Iran, the orientation of Iranian foreign policy was based on an accommodating/ideal-centered method. Outcomes of the Iran-Iraq war and Iran's internal situation in terms of economic issues required new strategy and adaptation toward the international environment. For rebuilding and reconstruction, Iran needed to reform its foreign policy toward neighboring countries and the international arena to facilitate the country's reconstruction (Rakel, 2007). It can be said that although Iran's foreign policy was changed from confrontation to accommodating in this period, still neighboring countries felt threat from Iranian ideology and exportation of revolution. President Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) used pragmatic approach. The economic and political conditions of Iran required reform in the foreign policy of Iran. In that period Iran tried to adapt itself with international system and international regulations and organizations were respected by Iran (Ehteshami, 2002). This would mean that Iran's foreign policy was more based on geo-political needs and pragmatic method rather than ideological values. On one hand Rafsanjani tried to rebuild and reconstruct Iran in terms of economy after eight years of war with Iraq. On the other hand, he tried to improve Iran's relations with other countries. Although Rafsanjani tried to establish good relations with European countries and attract their attention to make investment in Iran, but the case of Salman Rushdie changed the relation of Iran toward European countries, in particular England. After publishing of "Satanic Verses" (1988) by Salman Rushdie, Ayatollah Khomeini made a Fatwa that he should be killed because of insulting the Islam and prophet Muhammed. European countries rejected the fatwa and they said it's against freedom of speech. This reaction of European countries cut diplomatic relations of Iran with some European countries such as Sweden, Italy and England (Kara, 2017).

2.1. Mohammad Khatami and following reformism approach (1997 – 2005)

Victory of Mohammad Khatami in the presidential elections of 1997 is accounted as a new era in Iranian foreign policy. Following revolutionary approach by Iran after 1979, created a negative image from Iran in such way that Iran was looked at as a rogue state in the international community. Therefore, the aim of

Khatami was to change that tarnished image into a positive one by showing respect to international community on one hand and expanding freedom and human rights inside Iran on the other hand. According to Khatami's famous doctrine, "dialogue of civilization's" dialogue among nations was emphasized on and Iran's relations with the Western world and neighbor countries were normalized. Khatami tried to distinguish between Europe and United States to improve Iran's relations with European countries. To do so, the fatwa of Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie was rescinded by Khatami to make sure that Iran is not against freedom of speech and expressed

opinion. Although Khatami had limited power but he aimed to improve Iran's relations with the United States. For instance, in the interview with CNN in 1998, terrorism by its all forms was denounced by Khatami, even regarding the 1979 hostage crisis, he showed his regret about that case. Furthermore, the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 9/11 in 2001 was condemned by Khatami. In fact September 9/11 was an opportunity for Iran to enhance its relations with the US and moderate Iran's attitude toward this country to not be called, Great Satan, anymore (Alam, 2000).

In order to normalize relation with the neighbors, a "good neighbor" policy was conducted by Khatami to show Iran's positive intention toward regional countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, that Khatami was the first Iranian president after Islamic revolution to visit Riyadh in order to improve relations and decrease tensions with this country. Following reformism approach by Khatami led to considerable Iran's achievement in the foreign policy. Chosen of Khatami as president brought a considerable shift not only inside of Iran, but also in international level. During the eight years of presidency of Muhammad Khatami, on one hand more freedom was given to the people of Iran. On the other hand, a better prestige and recognition was given to Iran internationally (Haynes, 2008). Khatami created a discourse in the name of, dialogue of civilization, which was a challenge to theory of Clash of Civilization and the End of History of Samuel Huntington (1927-2008), a famous American political scientist. Instead of clash of civilization, Khatami presented peace, dialogue, and self-identity on the international stage. He tried to invite countries for peace, negotiation and dialogue instead of war, hate and conflict to build a world with peace and justice (Petito, 2004). Khatami's discourse was for attracting the attention of International community and to make Iran's position strong once again. This is due to the fact that because of Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), Iran went through a heavy step of reconstruction. Therefore, economic and political development was necessary for Iran (Aldosari, 2015).

The principle of Iranian foreign policy was based on accommodating/constraint-centered during Mohammad Khatami's presidency. Khatami's administration tried to make reform internally and externally (Yousefi, 2010).

In domestic level, some new concepts such as freedom of speech, rule of law, civil society and pluralism were focused on. In international level, Iran's foreign policy was based on making a better relation with international community and improvement of its prestige. Iran emphasized on dialogue and peaceful relations with other countries, these policies of Iran were turning point toward the world and strengthened the position of Iran internationally. Instead of ideological assumptions, Khatami tried to stress more on democracy and reform. European countries opened new relations with Iran and tried to convince the U.S. to amend its policy toward Iran (Soltani and Amiri, 2010).

Although policies of Khatami were turning point in the foreign policy of Iran and improved the position of Iran in domestic and international level, but Khatami had a limited power and was not able to change the constitution of Iran which is based on Islamic law. All political decisions should be made according to Islamic law in Iran. European countries were aware from the fact that Iran's real goal is not what Khatami declared and followed during his presidency, they knew that Iran wants to achieve the nuclear weapon which is a real threat to the national security of European countries (Mehran, 2003).

2.2. Return of nationalism and confrontation during Ahmadinejad (2005-2013).

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in election of 2005 has changed Iranian foreign policy from dialogue and engagement to confrontation and radical Islamist ideology. Ahmadinejad did not emphasize on transfer of revolution as the beginning of 1979, but he believed that it's the right of Iran to emerge as a powerful state in the region (Yousefi, 2018). Therefore, he showed less compromise over nuclear program and regional influence compared to the previous presidents. He followed confrontation policy against the U.S, Israel and other enemy states such as Saudi Arabia; because he believed that enemies are always plotting to overthrow the Islamic republic of Iran. Since the Islamic revolution, none of the Iranian presidents had such hostility towards the United States such as Ahmadinejad to reject every negotiation and dialogue with Washington. Following the confrontation policy by Ahmadinejad, once again led to emerge of negative image of Iranian foreign policy in the international community (Colleau, 2015).

During Mahmood Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013) orientation of Iranian foreign policy once again was based on principles of the early Islamic revolution such as opposing the Western world, Israel, and exporting revolution to the world. These policies caused destroying the positive image and diplomatic improvements that Mohammad Khatami built in his period. Once again, Iran's relations with Middle Eastern countries and the international community changed to tension and instability (Arghavani, 2013). Concentration on confrontation strategies by Ahmadinejad administration caused political and economic instability inside Iran, particularly the reelection of Ahmadinejad in the second round of the Iranian presidency led to internal demonstrations in which hundreds of people were killed. Ahmadinejad followed different approach from the ex-presidents (Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammed Khatami). During his presidency, the ideological approach was focused on and the same concepts of the early Islamic revolution in 1979 were raised once again. He clearly criticized the great powers and above all the United States from their intervention in domestic issues of other countries. Furthermore, he claimed that the aims of great powers are to achieve their national interests rather than establishment of democracy and defense from human rights. Therefore, he claimed that the international system should be changed and built on

justice. Great powers have no right to decide instead of Iran and prevent Iran from achieving nuclear weapon once it's for peace purpose. Moreover, Ahmadinejad claimed that Israel should be demolished from the map of the earth (Milani, 2010). Despite ex-presidents who tried to make a balance between Islamic ideology and pragmatic approach or combination between them, Ahmadinejad strongly believed in Islamic ideology and refused any compromise for the US and the West. By these policies, tension and conflict appeared between Iran and other countries, particularly the US, European countries and Israel (Rosulek, 2015).

2.3. Hassan Rouhani's Policy of Accommodating/constraint-centered

After the coarseness of the Ahmadinejad years, during Hassan Rouhani, Iran has been able to achieve a good deal by softening the tone of its foreign policy. Consequently, contrast to his predecessor, Ahmadinejad, Hassan Rouhani has the potential to shift Iranian policy in a direction that is more likely to cooperate with the international community and present positive image from Iran to the world so that Iran is able to occur less isolated and more influential, particularly in the Middle Eastern region. However, there are some domestic and regional obstacles in front of implementation of Rouhani's policies. Inside Iran conservative opponents and Supreme Leader and at the regional level, regional opponents such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey want to limit Iran's hegemony in the region (Shanahan, 2015).

In the period of Hassan Rouhani's presidency (2013-2021) orientation of Iranian foreign policy was accommodating/constraint-centered. In this period, Iran tried to develop its relations with neighboring countries and play an active role in regional issues of Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Although in the first

round of Rouhani's presidency, Iranian officials made good dialogue and negotiation regarding nuclear energy; during the presidency of Donald Trump (2016-2020), Iran faced heavy economic sanctions from the USA, which led to internal instability (Juneau, 2014).

Conclusion

From the comparison of Iranian foreign policy in different periods, it can be said that Iran's foreign policy approach has been different from one government to another. Each government had its own strategies and tactics but the general framework is constant for all governments. Although different presidents of Iran have followed different political approaches in their foreign policy, but they have been successful in their policies only within a limited framework. This is due to the fact that constitution of Islamic republic of Iran is based on Islamic law. This means every elected president should behave within this framework and cannot make a change in the political system. As the supreme leader of Iran clarified, the constant elements of all governments should be based on dignity, Hikmat and interest and based on the principles of Iranian constitution. For instance, despite the fact that Muhammad

Khatami tried to provide more democracy and freedom to the people inside of Iran and improve relations of Iran with the West, but he faced many obstacles and could not apply his policies completely (Takeyh, 2000). Furthermore, despite different strategies and methods in foreign policy during Muhammad Khatami and Ahmadinejad, these differences are only in policy making process, not out of the main framework of the Islamic republic of Iran.

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