

Przemyslaw Osiewicz



Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Between Ideology and Pragmatism



IRANIAN STUDIES

FOREIGN POLICY OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Providing a well-balanced and impartial perspective on the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, this book contributes to a better understanding of the current foreign policy of Iran, especially its internal and external determinants.

Combining theoretical and practical aspects, it provides readers with a short analysis of Iranian foreign policy. The first part is dedicated to the Pahlavi era between 1925–1979. The second consists of three chapters covering issues relating to ideological and institutional aspects of Iranian foreign policy after 1979. The last part incorporates eight case studies which best present both regional and global dimensions.

This comprehensive study contains a synthesis of views and opinions of commentators and scholars who often represent contradictory perspectives. Serving as a key reference and starting point for further studies, this book will be of interest to students and researchers studying Iranian foreign policy, international relations, and Middle Eastern studies.

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Between Ideology and Pragmatism

Przemyslaw Osiewicz

First published 2021
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-0-367-86305-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-86306-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-01828-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo

by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

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ABBREVIATIONS

American Israel Public Affairs Committee	AIPAC
Anglo-Iranian Oil Company	AIOC
Anglo-Persian Oil Company	APOC
Belt and Road Initiative	BRI
Central Intelligence Agency	CIA
Central Treaty Organization	CENTO
China–Pakistan Economic Corridor	CPEC
Economic Cooperation Organization	ECO
European Neighborhood Policy	ENP
European Union	EU
Gulf Cooperation Council	GCC
International Atomic Energy Agency	IAEA
Iran–Libya Sanctions Act	ILSA
Islamic Revolution Guards Corps	IRGC
Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action	JCPOA
Joint Plan of Action	JPA
Middle East North Africa	MENA
National Council of Resistance of Iran	NCRI
National Defense Forces	NDF
National Security and Intelligence Organization	SAVAK
North Atlantic Treaty Organization	NATO
Palestine Liberation Organization	PLO
People’s Mujahedin Organization of Iran	MKO
People’s Republic of China	PRC
Republic of China	ROC
Shanghai Cooperation Organization	SCO
small and medium-sized enterprises	SMEs

viii Abbreviations

So-called Islamic State; Da'esh	IS
special purpose vehicle	SPV
Supreme National Security Council	SNSC
Union of Soviet Socialist Republics	USSR
United Nations	UN
World Trade Organization	WTO

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was born out of my interest in the Iranian history in general and of Iran's foreign policy in particular. It is also a good way to mark the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The 1979 events affected not only the domestic situation in Iran, but also changed the regional balance of power. In addition, both the United States and the Soviet Union were very interested in political and economic developments in Iran. The situation did not change after the end of the Cold War. Anything that happens in Iran gets attention from Russia, the United States, and China, and from many other countries beyond the Middle East which proves Iran's significance.

This book is the result of the research project *Contentious Politics and Neo-Militant Democracy*. It was financially supported by the National Science Centre, Poland (grant number 2018/31/B/HS5/01410). I would like to thank Professor Joanna Rak for her support and for inviting me to be part of the project.

The support and assistance of a number of individuals have been critical over the years. I wish, in particular, to thank Professor Tadeusz Wallas, Vice-Rector of Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan; Professor Andrzej Stelmach, Dean of the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism at AMU Poznan; as well as my immediate superior and good friend, Professor Radoslaw Fiedler.

Warm recognition goes too to the staff of the Middle East Institute, Washington DC, especially Paul Salem, Gerald M. Feierstein, Antoun Issa, Tamara Kalandiya, Alex Vatanka, Ahmad Majidyar, Lillian Judge, Alistair Taylor, and Marvin G. Weinbaum. Thank you all for your cooperation, professionalism, wonderful atmosphere, and support during my stay at the MEI.

I owe a great deal of thanks to all of those who have provided comments and recommendations. I am very grateful to a number of experts and practitioners dealing with Iranian issues whom I met during a year spent at Georgetown University, Washington DC. I express my gratitude to Matthew Kroenig,

x Acknowledgements

Bruce Hoffman, Barbara Slavin, Bilal Y. Saab, Trita Parsi, Stanley Kobler, and Margaret Rogers. Margaret – thank you for proofreading and your comments! She read big chunks and prevented me from making more errors than I would care to admit.

Special thanks to Iranian diplomats, colleagues, and experts, especially His Excellency Ali Samad Lakizadeh, His Excellency Ramin Mehmanparast, Abbas Aslani, Vali Kaleji, Hadi Ajili, and Behzad Mohammadi.

I also thank the editorial staff at Routledge, especially Titanilla Panczel and Joe Whiting, for their counsel and support.

Last but not least, I will forever be indebted to my relatives, especially my parents – Krystyna Osiewicz and Piotr Osiewicz – and my daughters – Natalia Osiewicz and Pola Osiewicz. A challenge faced by most parents of young children is how to combine the demands of work and family. It is to them that this book is dedicated.

Przemyslaw Osiewicz

February 15, 2020

Poznan, Poland



Map of Iran. Source: D-maps



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INTRODUCTION

Iran is a mystery or, to be more precise, “in Iran, nothing is quite what it seems” (Ricks, 2011). This Middle Eastern actor is either undervalued or overestimated. Even people who have never been there have their opinions and beliefs on Iran. Some of them praise Persia’s long history and its rich cultural heritage. Others focus mainly on potential threats and tend to portray Iran as an unpredictable actor of international relations and/or an aggressive regional player. Those authors highlight the role of the Iranian nuclear programme and Iran’s regional projection of power. Such differing opinions are probably rooted in Iran’s culture and the way the Iranians reveal their real objectives or plans. Nothing is explicitly mentioned, all declarations and official positions are veiled; only those not familiar with Iranian culture may think that someone is just trying to deceive them.

On the one hand, this way Iranians show respect to their interlocutors and attempt to prove their cultural superiority. People who bluntly state their opinions or beliefs are regarded as uneducated and rude. On the other hand, the result of such an attitude is that Iranians are prepared for all possible scenarios. If nothing is explicitly said they therefore can always prove that their real objectives or intentions have been misunderstood. As a consequence, messages are understandable and clear only to Iranians who perfectly read between the lines. However, even foreigners can find answers to their questions or doubts if they only know more about Iran’s politics, history, and culture. This book aims to provide useful tools and information relating to Iranian foreign policy.

That is the first reason for analysing selected aspects of Iranian foreign policy. The second is the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This event affected not only Iranians, but also the whole Middle East. Amin Saikal is quite right that “the revolution was remarkable in many ways. It

2 Introduction

was a mass uprising of unprecedented scale and social breadth in modern history, even as it predated social media” (Saikal, 2019).

Since 1979 the Iranian decision makers have been balancing between ideological determinants and pragmatic choices. Shi’ism and its main beliefs and practices constitute the foundation of the political system of Iran. It is the second largest branch of Islam and a dominant religion in Iran. There are three dominant Shi’a groupings in the world, namely Twelvers, Isma’ilis, and Zaidis. However, Twelvers make up the majority of Muslims in Iran and this is a very significant factor. Twelvers believe in the “Twelve Imams”, who were divinely ordained leaders, and that the last one of them, Muhammad al-Mahdi (“the Mahdi”), still lives in occultation and will reappear in the future. Twelvers claim that worldly power should be submitted to this belief and the main task for rulers is to prepare the ground for the Mahdi’s return. This event will coincide with the second coming of Jesus Christ. His descent is to take place when the Mahdi will face the Antichrist in the final clash between good and evil. All true believers should be prepared for this day and all worldly matters should serve this cause.

As a consequence, religious leaders promote the idea that daily political decisions and actions must be subordinated to this key Shi’a belief. Ayatollah Khomeini based his political views on this fundamental concept and introduced the system of the guardianship of the Islamic jurist – *velayat-e faqih*. The jurist, *rahbar*, is to uphold the divine law. Khomeini claimed that an Islamic government is the only form of government that can ensure the dominance of the laws of God. In his opinion:

the fundamental difference between Islamic government, on the one hand, and constitutional monarchies and republics, on the other, is this: whereas the representatives of the people or the monarchs in such regimes engage in legislation, in Islam the legislative power and competence to establish laws belongs exclusively to God Almighty. The Sacred Legislator of Islam is the sole legislative power. No one has the right to legislate and no law may be executed except the law of the Divine Legislator.

(Khomeini, 1970: 36)

As a result, the Iranian authorities have done their best, at least officially, to comply with these requirements since 1979. However, they have also been very pragmatic on many occasions. In this case, however, pragmatism means “thinking of or dealing with problems in a practical way, rather than using theory or abstract principles” (*Pragmatism*). As a consequence, the definition applied in this book should not be mistaken with a pragmatist turn in the discipline of International Relations (Cochran, 2012; Hellmann, 2009).

Pragmatism in the Iranian foreign policy has been described in some publications, for example, in Rouhollah K. Ramazani’s book (Ramazani, 2013: 184–196). However, there are also authors who use the term “realism” instead

of pragmatism. One of them is Mohammad Reza Dehshiri. According to him, Iranians:

succeeded in reducing the elements of antagonism and cleavage between idealism and realism and establishing a kind of synthesis, integration and coordination between these two approaches in an indigenous model baptized realist idealism, signifying orientation towards ideals while considering realities.

(Dehshiri, 2010: 4)

Yet the term pragmatism seems to be more precise in this case as readers may easily confuse Dehshiri's realism with a school of thought in international relations theory. Shireen T. Hunter has also written extensively on pragmatism in Iranian foreign policy in two of her books (Hunter, 1992; Hunter, 1998). This issue is analysed in further detail in Chapters 3 and 5.

On the one hand, there are many examples of the Iranian authorities displaying such a pragmatic attitude. Some of them have been described in detail in this book. For example, Iran maintains close relations with the People's Republic of China, although the Chinese regime oppresses Muslims in its own territory. In addition, Tehran has cooperated with the Russian Federation since the end of the Cold War. On the other hand, there are some examples of the domination of ideological factors. It is noticeable in such cases like actions taken against Islamophobia and Iranophobia, opposition to the American dominance, the support for oppressed nations especially Palestinians, the promotion of unity among Sunnis and Shi'ites, fight against injustice in international affairs, and anti-Zionism.

The contemporary foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is multidimensional. Undoubtedly, its main aim is to ensure the survival of the theocratic regime as well as a sustainable growth. As far as geographical dimension is concerned, one can distinguish a few regions which are crucial from the Iranian point of view. Iranians are primarily preoccupied with their immediate environment. Iran intends to become the dominant power in the Persian Gulf area and at the same time remain one of the key players in the whole Middle East. Tehran also has ambitions in Central Asia.

There are monographs dedicated to Iranian foreign policy, but the main idea in the case of this book was to provide readers with a well-balanced and impartial perspective. At the same time, the publication can serve as a reference book and a starting point for further studies, because the text refers to hundreds of sources. It is a detailed synthesis of views and opinions of commentators and scholars who often represent contradictory perspectives.

The book consists of three parts which include 13 chapters. The first part is dedicated to the Pahlavi era, namely the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty between 1925–1979. It would be inappropriate to analyse the current foreign policy without any introduction to the period before the 1979 revolution. The Pahlavi

dynasty laid the foundations for the Imperial State of Iran. It was Reza Shah Pahlavi who first asked foreign diplomats to use the name Iran instead of Persia. Although later, his son, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, announced that both names could be used interchangeably, foreign officials or authors rarely use the name Persia. Those symbolic changes, however, were in line with their drive to modernize Iran as quickly as possible instead of caring about long-term social and political consequences (Mirsepassi, 2019: 3–7). As a result, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi gradually alienated himself from society and thus unwillingly set the stage for the revolution. The monarch's dependence on the United States only made the situation worse. Those internal developments, in turn, affected Iranian foreign policy both before and after 1979. Criticism that followed the shah's attitude toward international politics established the basis for the contemporary foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The second part consists of three chapters covering issues relating to ideological and institutional aspects of the Iranian foreign policy after 1979. In Chapter 3, the main ideological determinants, like Shi'ism and Khomeinism, are analysed in detail. Chapter 4 presents the main internal entities involved in the foreign policy decision-making process. The last chapter in this part, Chapter 5, is dedicated to the main objectives of the post-revolutionary foreign policy of Iran.

The final part incorporates case studies. The author has selected eight cases which best present both regional and global dimensions of the contemporary Iranian foreign policy. As a consequence, readers will find chapters relating to the current Iranian posture in the Persian Gulf area; Iran's relations and engagement in Syria; Tehran's attitude toward Central Asia; Iran's policy towards India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; and Iran's relations with the main global powers, namely the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, the United States, and the European Union.

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PART I

Historical background

Iranian foreign policy under the
Pahlavi dynasty



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1

REZA SHAH AND HIS VISION OF PERSIAN DIPLOMACY

From the Qajars to the Pahlavis

Iranian foreign policy is rooted in a rich Persian history. The Persian Empire dominated both Central and South Asia for centuries. Its legacy is still noticeable not only in Iran, but also across the region, for instance, in such countries as Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan. The dynasties of Achaemenids, Parthians, Sasanians, Safavids, Afsharids, and Qajars encouraged respect in the region. The Qajar dynasty ruled Persia between 1794–1925 and preceded the last one – the Pahlavi dynasty. Yet before Reza Khan Pahlavi came to power and founded the new dynasty, Persia had undergone significant changes and had lost its regional influence.

The Qajars failed to provide their subjects with military security, administrative order, and finally with financial stability (Abrahamian, 1982: 37–49). Persia entered the twentieth century under the rule of Mozaffar ad-Din Shah Qajar. When he came to power in 1896, Mozaffar ad-Din was unprepared for the burdens of the Persian throne. Moreover, he had to face a serious financial crisis caused by the policies of his father, Naser ad-Din. However, his actions did not resolve the crisis and only worsened the situation. Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin claim that:

the new shah strained the tight finances by making three trips to Europe at enormous expense. He was able to cover government expenses only by borrowing more and more money, especially from Russia and Britain, leading to increasingly more foreign influence over the government. This contributed to growing anxiety on the part of Iran's nationalists and religious clergy.

(Clawson, Rubin, 2005: 42)

In order to manage the costs of the crisis the shah decided to sign monopolistic agreements with foreign companies. On that basis foreigners received concessions that provided them with almost complete control over various markets and industries. One of them was William Knox d'Arcy who later headed Anglo-Persian Oil Company – APOC.

Persia desperately needed to make changes, especially in relation to political reforms. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Persians attempted to modify their political system and make it more liberal. These initiatives resulted in the Constitutional Revolution between 1905–1911 (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2013: 17). Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar, who was the King of Persia from January 1907 until July 1909, opposed constitutional changes that had been introduced by his father, Mozaffar ad-Din Shah Qajar. Yet the biggest challenge Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar had to face was related to Persia's foreign policy and its geopolitical position. The country was so weak that Russia and Britain took advantage of the situation and divided it on the basis of the 1907 agreement.

The last shah from the Qajar dynasty, Ahmad Shah Qajar, came to power in 1909 following the overthrow of his father. He ascended the throne at the age of 11 and his uncle, Ali Reza Khan Azod al-Molk, became a regent. Ahmad Shah was formally crowned on 16 July 1909. The young shah had to cope with an economic downturn as well as monopolistic practices of foreign companies like APOC. This British giant controlled almost the entire country and had rights to explore and develop Iranian oil resources for 50 years. This agreement increased the Iranian dependency on the United Kingdom and rendered Persia a protectorate, which resulted in popular opposition to these concessions. Iranian authorities received only 16% of net profits and this caused public discontent and anger. Political chaos, financial crisis, and economic exploitation provoked and antagonized the Iranian society. Bahman Nirumand claims that the Qajar kings weakened the Persian state bit by bit and made it more vulnerable to foreign interference. Great powers like the United Kingdom and Tsarist Russia soon began meddling in the internal affairs (Nirumand, 1969: 19–20).

By 1912 the Russian army took advantage of Iran's military weakness, economic problems, and constitutional turmoil. Its commanders decided to occupy northern provinces of the country from western Azerbaijan to northeastern Khorasan. Abbas Amanat underlines the fact that “the following five years through terror and violence, the occupying Russian army kept a tenuous hold on the northern half of the country. Small wonder that Iranians welcomed the news of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution” (Amanat, 2017: 372). At the time the main motivation of the British was to secure colonial holdings in South Asia. Their troops occupied the southern part of Iran including three main cities, namely Bushehr, Shiraz, and Isfahan.

Reza Khan Pahlavi began his political career with the help of the British commanders. According to Gerard de Villiers, he:

instinctively knew he must choose Britain. Also, the British shared his fear of a Russian invasion, and therefore needed a strong government in

control. The Qajars were incapable of providing it, hence the British must look elsewhere. (...) The choice was easy. Reza Khan was their man.

(de Villiers, 1976: 27–28)

The British intention was primarily to guarantee that Bolsheviks stop penetrating Persia. Its geopolitical location was still crucial from a British point of view, especially in the case of the British territories in India. For this reason, London preferred to support Reza Khan and counted on his gratitude as well as political acquiescence in the future.

Despite this, in February 1921 Reza Khan carried out the coup d'état and became the commander of the Cossack Brigade. This elite military unit was formed after the Caucasian regiments in 1879. Until 1920 it was commanded by Russians and therefore was often seen as a tool of Russian political influence in Iran. In the opinion of Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan:

Reza Shah's coup fundamentally set back the progress of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, which had sought a more accountable and representative government. While allowing elections for the Majles, the Persian parliament, he also manipulated these parliamentary elections from 1925 to 1940 in order to ensure that he had malleable lawmakers with whom to work.

(Rieffer-Flanagan, 2013: 19–20)

As a result of the 1921 coup, Sayyed Zia was appointed the prime minister by the shah. One of Zia's main foreign policy goals was to declare the treaty with the British of 1919 null and void. Although the Cossack units in Persia had lost the support of Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, this formation still played a very important role in the political and social life of Iran. Zia made a large mistake by underestimating Colonel Reza Khan of Mazandaran. In Zia's opinion, Reza Khan lacked both the prestige and military education. History showed, however, how wrong he was. Said Amir Arjomand noticed that:

late in May 1921, after less than a hundred days in office, Sayyed Zia was ousted by Reza Khan, to whom he had initially denied the war ministry but who had nevertheless emerged as his chief rival. Once appointed minister of war, over the prime minister's head, on 25 April 1921, Reza Khan's ascent was apparent to all and met with little effective opposition.

(Arjomand, 1988: 60)

The fourth Majles convened in 1921. Reza Khan managed to ally with conservatives and got their support. Two years later he appointed himself prime minister and the shah went on what was to prove an extended holiday in Europe (Axworthy, 2008: 223). Soon after that Reza Khan went on a pilgrimage to Najaf where he took the name Pahlavi. His intention with this name was to

12 Historical background

please nationalists since the name refers to the Middle Persian language from pre-Islamic times.

In the opinion of Homa Katouzian:

it took only two years and a few months, from June 1921 to November 1923, for Reza Khan to become prime minister in addition to minister of war and chief of the army. What happened in between was typical of the politics of chaos.

(Katouzian, 2004: 19)

The shah went to undergo a lengthy cure and did not intend to come back to Iran. That was the moment when Reza Khan considered proclaiming a republic. The opposition to his plan was, however, very strong. Fascinated with Mustafa Kemal's Turkification of Turkey, Reza Khan Pahlavi intended to carry out a policy of Persianization. Yet, support in Iran differed from Turkey (where the majority of society accepted reforms and the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923). The situation in Persia was much more complex and complicated. When Sultan Ahmad Shah was deposed in 1925, Reza Khan was a natural successor. He was already strong enough to control the army as well as key departments. Robert Graham emphasizes the fact that Reza Khan's purpose "was relatively simple: the regeneration of Persia and an end to foreign interference. He changed the name of the country from Persia to Iran in 1934 – Iran being by origin the same word as Aryan" (Graham, 1979: 55). The name Iran was the historical name of the country which had been used by its indigenous people.

Once Reza Khan became the shah of Iran in 1925, the new Pahlavi dynasty replaced the Qajars. Said Amir Arjomand specifies the main reasons for the Qajar dynasty's failure. In his opinion:

clientelism, intrigue, and insecurity of office also go along a long way toward explaining the inability of Qajar government to pursue consistent policy and the tremendous influence of the British and Russian missions among the notables, many of whom sought to put themselves under the protection of Britain and Russia.

(Arjomand, 1988: 26)

Ramin Jahanbegloo adds that Reza Shah managed to combine nationalism with state centralization. He often referred to Iran's classical past in the form of ideological and political manifestations of Iranian nationalism. Such actions were to support the formation of a modern nation-state through loyalty to traditional monarchy (Jahanbegloo, 2013: 13). At the very beginning of Reza Shah's reign this strategy appeared to be very efficient and persuasive. Iranians looked forward to social stability and political independence. For that reason, they were ready to accept the new authoritarian ruler who at least was more convincing and firmer when compared to the Qajars.

Reza Shah and his foreign policy in the 1920s and 1930s

The main element of Reza Shah's foreign policy strategy was to play the Soviet Union against the United Kingdom. The shah attempted to keep both these enemies at bay. Yet history proved that such attempts were neither realistic nor rational. Both powers had essential interests in Iran. Additionally, the Russians and British still treated this Middle Eastern state as their sphere of influence. The Soviet Union was concerned with the British oil concession in the south, but Iran was not willing to offer the Russians a similar deal in the north. For this reason, the Soviet authorities welcomed Reza Shah's decision of 1932, according to which Iran cancelled the agreement with the British. As a consequence, the United Kingdom applied to the League of Nations in order to block the Iranian decision (Ansari, 2014: 69).

According to James A. Bill, the United States carefully and successfully avoided any confrontation with Russia and Britain in Persia in the inter-war period. The US administration respected their spheres of influence and did not enter this field of European confrontation" (Bill, 1988: 16–17). Yet the problem was that the Americans did not modify their position and did not even try to take advantage of the situation once Reza Khan became the shah of Iran. Richard W. Cottam notes: "US policy in the 1920s and 1930s did nothing to support a generation-old view in Iran that the United States, alone among Western nations, cared for the enlightenment values of self-determination" (Cottam, 1988: 50–51). Although Iranian reformists claimed that the United States was the third force which could help Iran to break free of Soviet and British dominance, consecutive US administrations did their best not to interfere in Iran's internal affairs. The assumption from the US was that Iran was a part of the British sphere of influence. What's more, the Americans did not have significant interests in Iran at that time and this situation changed only at the beginning of the 1950s. The first exchange of ambassadors between the two countries took place in 1944 and was a very meaningful moment of progression. Nevertheless, the bilateral relations generally remained very cordial. The only exception was connected to the 1936 incident when Reza Shah was criticized in *The New York Daily Herald*. In response to the publication Iran decided to withdraw its ambassador from the United States. The diplomatic crisis lasted for almost a year.

Lack of support from the United States did not prevent the shah from looking for a potential ally who could counterbalance the Soviet-British domination. It was one of the reasons for which Iran, under the rule of Reza Shah, maintained very close relations with the Third Reich. Yann Richard and other historians describe the Germans as "a third force" in Iran (Richard, 2019: 199). Undoubtedly, the Iranian ruler perceived close relations and cooperation with Germany as a tool to limit both Soviet and British influence in his country. In addition, the shah admired German Chancellor Adolf Hitler and his use of Aryan race propaganda – Hitler's signed picture is still on

display at Sadabaad Palace in Tehran. Most importantly, however, Germans were offered an almost unlimited access to the Iranian territory and had a significant influence on trade and investments as well as modernization of the army. The Nazi military intelligence, the *Abwehr*, could run off-the-books operations on Iranian territory – much to the irritation of the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. All of these factors resulted in a very complex relationship with the Third Reich which was later used by the British and Soviets as an excuse to invade Iran and topple Reza Shah in 1941. According to Sandra Mackey:

as the Qajars juggled Turkey, Britain, and Russia, using one as a third party against the others, Reza Shah checked Britain and Stalin's Soviet Union by calling in Germany as that third force. Because of Nazi ideology and the military force Adolph Hitler released on Europe in 1939, it proved to be the wrong country at the wrong time.

(Mackey, 1996: 185)

Reza Shah, willingly or unwillingly, took a strict side in the coming world war. He did not seem to have the faintest idea that he would lose his throne as a result of this close cooperation with the Nazi regime.

Yet the most significant source of threat was from inside Iran. The shah's authoritarian rule limited opportunities for development and political reforms. Matthew Elliot points out that:

Reza Shah Pahlavi continued to acquire power and to strip it away from other institutions and individuals, relaying increasingly on methods of coercion and arbitrary action. One important facet of this policy can be seen in his treatment of Parliament and of Iran's politicians.

(Elliot, 2004: 67)

Homa Katouzian added that “Reza Khan had beaten all opposition on the way to becoming Shah. He was in direct control of the army that had been largely his own creation, and enjoyed its complete loyalty” (Katouzian, 2004: 27). This arbitrary style of governing blocked any meaningful military reforms and modernisation of the Iranian armed forces. Another important pillar was “the overwhelming state bureaucracy” (Kamrava, 1990: 23).

The Middle Eastern dimension

Reza Khan was named as king a few years after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. New Arab states started forming simultaneously and the Balfour Declaration became a source of the main regional challenge for years to come – namely the Palestinian question. Nevertheless, although the deep geopolitical changes in the Middle

East affected Persian/Iranian foreign policy and created new opportunities under the rule of Reza Shah in the 1920s and 1930s, the British dominance in the Persian Gulf still constituted the main limiting factor. In practice, Iran's relations with the United Kingdom and Turkey shaped the Iranian foreign policy toward the Middle East region.

No doubt Reza Shah was enchanted by Mustafa Kemal's reforms in Turkey. The shah admired the pace and complexity of unprecedented social and political changes in this neighbouring country. Both leaders were in favour of radical modernization and did their best to limit the influence of faith-based organizations. Yet, contrary to the Turkish leader, he did not decide to establish a republic in Iran. Arjomand claims that "in 1924, after some flirtation with republicanism, Reza Khan decided in favour of monarchy in response to the anxiety of his clerical supporters caused by Atatürk's abolition of the Caliphate of Turkey" (Arjomand, 1988: 62). Nevertheless, Reza Khan truly admired the Turkish leader and his radical political as well as social reforms for the subsequent period.

The main difference between these two statesmen was that Atatürk allowed the Turkish parliament and his political party to develop a solid identity. As a result, the regime was institutionalized to such an extent that it survived after Mustafa Kemal's death. Reza Khan's approach differed from Atatürk's performance in Turkey. His arbitrary rule gradually alienated him from the Iranian society (Atabaki, Zürcher, 2004: 10).

In one of his books, Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, recalled the official visit of his father to Turkey of 1934:

It is interesting to compare our situation in those days with that of neighbouring Turkey, which my father visited in 1934 to observe the remarkable progress made and to strengthen the political and cultural ties between the two countries. (...) In contrast with our own feudalistic system in the days before my father took over, the Turks had a strong central government that actually controlled the country. They possessed railways, ports, factories, and other appurtenances of modern civilization, whereas we had almost no such facilities. Clearly we had much farther to go.

(Pahlavi, 1960: 40)

The forced abdication and occupation

According to Amin Saikal, Reza Shah managed to establish a dictatorial reformist regime which strengthened the internal policies against the British and Soviet influence during the first period of his reign. Yet his redundant choices could not save him politically in 1941. The allied occupation, which began that year, resulted in the failure of Reza Shah's main goals. Although the shah intended to reduce Iran's dependence on Britain and the USSR, his decisions and actions appeared to be counterproductive (Saikal, 1980: 20). In addition, Iran's alliance

with Nazi Germany was probably the main source of Reza Khan's fall. Homa Katouzian underlines the fact that:

throughout July and August 1941, there was mounting Anglo-Soviet pressure on Iran to expel the Germans and allow the Allies to use the railways. But Reza Shah refused all the Allies' demands, totally failing to understand the gravity of the situation.

(Katouzian, 2010: 229)

He was soon to pay the highest price for his political mistakes.

Richard W. Cottam noticed that Reza Shah attempted to seek support in the United States. He sent an urgent note to Franklin D. Roosevelt asking for an immediate political intervention. The Iranian monarch still believed that he was able to prevent the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran and stay in power. This time, however, the shah failed to accurately read the new international situation. Americans were not ready to put their cooperation with the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union at risk to support Iranians. That's why Secretary of State Cordell Hull responded emphatically in the negative (Cottam, 1988: 62).

Soon after this the British forced Reza Shah to abdicate in favour of his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. On 16 September 1941, the Iranian parliament announced the resignation of Reza Shah. The next day Mohammad Reza took the oath of office. Undoubtedly, London intended to make sure that the new monarch would not allow German agents to operate in Iran and would support the Allies against the Third Reich (Williams, 2008: 29).

Notwithstanding the growing criticism of Reza Shah, Mohammad Reza remained loyal and grateful to his father even after his abdication. In his autobiography, the last king from the Pahlavi dynasty recalled the 1941 events in the following way:

My father had struggled to the bitter end for the independence and unity of Iran. I received a touching recorded message from him. 'My son,' he said to me, 'fear nothing'. I was never to see him again. When I learnt of his death in Johannesburg in 1944, my grief was immense. I owed it to his memory to continue to the very end the task which he had undertaken.

(Pahlavi, 1980: 43)

Conclusion

In the opinion of Shireen T. Hunter: "Reza Shah tried to free Iran from the many shackles imposed on it by foreign powers. As a first step, he cancelled the nineteenth century regime of capitulation" (Hunter, 2014: 47). The Iranian monarch's strategy was undoubtedly bold and efficient. Reza Shah modified the Iranian political system and initiated a modernization process which resembled Mustafa Kemal's reforms in neighbouring Turkey. These changes and

developments affected both the domestic political scene and Iran's foreign policy. The Iranian monarch had liberated his country from the Russian and British dominance, but the later alliance with Germany undermined these diplomatic achievements. This resulted in the forced abdication of Reza Shah in 1941 which put Iran's independent foreign policy in jeopardy.

However, the main question at that time was if his son's position would be stronger or if the young king was to just become a puppet for the Allies. Iranians had high hopes for Mohammad Reza, but it was clear from the beginning that he lacked his father's authority and decisiveness. At the end of World War II, Iran's future was unpredictable and precarious. It became clear that Iran would have to pay the price for Reza Shah's political mistakes and miscalculations.

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2

SHAH MOHAMMAD REZA PAHLAVI

The unfinished Iranian empire

New monarch, new hopes, old foreign policy?

Reza Shah's policies were not acceptable for either the United Kingdom or for the Soviet Union. In mid-1941 both the British and Soviets decided to force the abdication of the Iranian king. Their joint invasion and occupation of Iran resulted in an offer according to which Reza Khan was to abdicate in favour of his eldest son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Moreover, the shah was to spend the rest of his life in exile. With the help of the British administration he was taken first to Mauritius and then finally settled in South Africa. Yet, Reza Khan's life in exile was short and he died in Johannesburg in 1944 of a heart ailment.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi came to power on 16 September 1941. At the time he was only 21 years old. The young shah changed Iran's attitude toward the allied powers and severed diplomatic ties with the Axis. Two years after Mohammad Reza Pahlavi became the shah, Iran declared war on Germany. In addition, a new supply route for the Soviet Union, known as the Persian corridor, was established soon after. This enabled other allied states to provide the Soviets with material support in their fight against the Third Reich. Iran also became a signatory of the United Nations Declaration of 1942. Last but not least, the political change secured deposits of Iranian oil. Such a move was necessary to guarantee that Germany would not take control over them if they managed to conquer the Soviet Caucasus. In the last phase of World War II, it became apparent that a lack of oil was one of the most decisive factors in Nazi Germany's ultimate defeat.

Another noteworthy example of the change within Iran's foreign policy was the shah's decision to accept more than 120,000 Polish refugees who had been released from the Soviet camps in Siberia in 1942. Many of them had been Polish soldiers under the command of General Anders, who later joined the

allied units in Africa and liberated Italy. At the same time, the Iranian authorities took care of their families as well as thousands of Polish orphans whose parents had lost their lives during their captivity in the Soviet Union (Kunert, 2014: 19–21).

Although Mohammad Reza Pahlavi tried to strengthen his position during the Tehran Conference, which was held in November 1943, the leaders of the allied powers (except for Joseph Stalin) refused to call on him at his palace for security reasons. Finally:

the shah found himself in a curious situation because he had to go to the Soviet Embassy to meet Roosevelt while Stalin duly came to the Royal Palace to call on the monarch. Prime Minister Ali Soheili and the shah also had a brief meeting with Churchill and the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Anthony Eden.

(Taheri, 1991: 81)

The leaders of world powers seemed to disrespect the young monarch. At the same time, both the UK and the Soviet Union attempted to exploit the situation in Iran to their own advantage. Fereydoun Hoveyda points out that:

the Allies indirectly interfered in Iranian internal affairs not only for achieving their war goals, but also their own national interests. In the north, the Russians favoured leftist movements while in the south the British manipulated the clergy because it was a good shield against Soviet expansionism.

(Hoveyda, 2003: 16)

No doubt it was just a prelude to the Cold War rivalry in Asia.

The young shah had to face many internal as well as external challenges from the very beginning of his rule. According to Shireen T. Hunter, these challenges:

included the occupation of its northwestern province of Azerbaijan by Soviet forces and the emergence of separatist and socialist republics in Azerbaijan and in Kurdistan, with Soviet instigation and support. Although the Soviets withdrew from Iranian territories in 1946, Iran became a major arena of East-West competition in the context of the Cold War, as it had been an arena of Russo-British rivalry before.

(Hunter, 2014: 49)

In this context, the shah hoped that the United States could counterbalance the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. Besides, as Amir Taheri put it:

one of the shah's principal aims at the time was to revive the Iranian armed forces and help them achieve the level of strength they enjoyed under his

father. With Germany no longer a potential source of weapons, the shah had little choice but to turn to the United States.

(Taheri, 1991: 106–107)

This choice determined not only the period of his reign, but also political and economic developments in Iran in the following decades.

Mossadegh, CIA, lost hopes, and dependency

The main political change took place when Mohammad Mosaddegh became the Iranian prime minister in 1951. His government presented a set of very progressive reforms. Moreover, Mosaddegh's plans posed a real threat to British and American interests in Iran. His strategy of Negative Equilibrium was based on three main assumptions: first, Iran should remain a non-aligned state; second, it must stay out of the Cold War rivalry; and third, Iran should not be controlled by any major power. It goes without saying that the prime minister's ideas and visions were not in line with the shah's policy. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi advocated for a more active role in the international system as well as for closer relations and alliances with major powers in order to enhance its global role (Mansour, 2016: 192).

Yet the most spectacular and controversial reform proposed by Mosaddegh was the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry. The leader of the National Front openly criticized the former shah, as well as his successor, for their acquiescence towards the British. Mossadegh's advisors presented official data according to which the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) profits amounted to \$81 million in 1947, but the Iranian authorities received just marginally more than seven million USD (Macciocchi, 1954: 78). Undoubtedly, due to the nationalization the AIOC could have lost the most and therefore the United Kingdom imposed economic sanctions on Iran. In his autobiography, Abdolreza Ansari underlines the fact that "having seen the assets of the AIOC nationalized in 1951, the British mounted an international embargo on the purchase of Iranian oil which dramatically reduced Iran's foreign exchange reserves, inevitably leading to huge shortages" (Ansari, 2017: 33).

It was not a big surprise that the prime minister could not count on any political support in the West. What's more, the Central Intelligence Agency and the British Secret Intelligence Service began analysing how to weaken and bring down the Iranian government. Although Americans did not have any significant economic interests in Iran at that time, Peyman Jafari underlines the fact that they intended to take advantage of the British weakness in the region and simply replace the British dominance with American (Jafari, 2009: 64). Yet the key decisions were made when a Republican, Dwight Eisenhower, took office as the US president in January 1953. His electoral victory not only upended the Democratic Party's dominance, but also signalled an important change in the framework of US foreign policy. The new American president was not ready to tolerate Mosaddegh's

actions like his predecessor. In addition, Eisenhower was ready to undertake all necessary actions in order to secure the shah's rule and take Iran under control.

Eisenhower understood that Iran could play a key role during the Cold War due to its geopolitical and geostrategic location as well as its proximity to the Soviet Union. The Iranian territory could be used by Americans to gather important intelligence data and to undertake various covert operations on the Soviet territory. At the beginning of 1953 it became clear to the US administration that Iranian authorities would not submit to the American strategy as long as Mohammed Mosaddegh was in office. For this reason, the new US administration decided to remove the Iranian prime minister from office once he openly challenged Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The American mass media connected to the Republican Party began accusing Mosaddegh of being aligned with Moscow or even being a Soviet spy, although it was a public knowledge that the Iranian prime minister had no love for Russians.

The CIA-orchestrated *coup d'état* in Iran was to have been conducted after the shah had left Iran. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had initially opposed the coup plans, but later realized that there was no other way to win the political rivalry with Mosaddegh and his National Front. The first attempt was made with the shah's approval on 15 August 1953. The king signed a royal decree dismissing Mosaddegh and appointing Fazlollah Zahedi as the new prime minister. Yet the National Front's leader had been warned before Colonel Nassiri delivered the decree. In addition, the government managed to mobilize millions of its supporters who went out to streets in order to defend Mosaddegh and the political status quo in Iran. At the same time the shah and his wife, Soraya Esfandiary-Bakhtiari, decided to leave the country and flew to Iraq for security purposes. Later the royal couple flew to Italy.

In order to support the shah, the CIA began preparing a covert operation nicknamed "Operation Ajax". One of its officers, Kermit Roosevelt Jr., a grandson of US President Theodore Roosevelt, played the most important role in the whole operation and enabled Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to return to Iran and reclaim power. The British intelligence also participated in the coup with its own "Operation Boot". This joint operation was very successful and seriously weakened the opposition. On 19 August it was all over for Mosaddegh and his party. Allen Dulles, then CIA director, accompanied the shah on his flight from Rome to Tehran. At that moment Zahedi officially replaced Mosaddegh and that was the end of independent Iranian foreign policy as well as of the oil nationalization. The success of Operation Ajax opened a new chapter in Iran's history – the one of American dominance. Between 1953 and 1979 Iran was, to a great extent, dependant on American perspectives and views of international order – although Mohammad Reza Pahlavi liked to assert that Iran was an independent regional power and achieved such status thanks to its wealth and hard work of its people.

Opinions were divided about if the overthrow of the National Front's government was positive for Iran or not. The longer time elapsed after the 1953 coup,

the more people were convinced that Iran had lost its big chance for independence and national development. Before the nationalization of 1951, poverty and famine were so common, and hygienic conditions so bad that malaria and trachoma were spreading across Iran. Additionally, more than 80% of the population suffered from malnutrition, making them particularly susceptible to such diseases (Nirumand, 1969: 43). In the opinion of Ali Rahnema:

Mosaddegh had many defects, but during his tenure he had become that unique politician with whom more Iranians than usual had entered into a part affective and part rational relationship based on love and respect. This almost unprecedented political and emotional bond between the majority of Iranians and Mosaddegh provided him with spectacular popularity, which continued even after his overthrow.

(Rahnema, 2015: 289)

After the coup the opposition forces were seriously weakened, and they could only hope for external pressure to be exerted on the shah. Yet the international community soon forgot about Mosaddegh and his achievements. In the years that followed, namely between 1963 and 1977:

power became concentrated at an accelerating rate because all opposition had been beaten, the oil revenues were accruing to the state at a rapidly increasing rate, and foreign powers, Western as well as Soviet and East European, became increasingly uncritical toward the regime.

(Jahanbegloo, 2013: 54)

Maria Macciocchi also underlined the fact that Iran became an American client state after the 1953 coup. In her opinion, Iranians became dependant on the US regional strategy as well as the Cold War rivalry. Iran's geostrategic location made it essential for Americans who could use the Iranian territory for political or even military actions directed against the Soviet Union (Macciocchi, 1954: 68–69).

Despite relatively good political and economic relations, some serious tensions in US–Iran relations especially during the John F. Kennedy presidency could be observed. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi did not trust President Kennedy and accused him of a failure to understand Iranian politics and interfering in internal affairs. The shah was so disappointed with Kennedy's actions that he intended to send a letter to President Lyndon Johnson hours after Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas on 22 November 1963. The main aim would be to inform the newly sworn US president that the Iranian authorities expected significant changes to be made in the framework of bilateral relations, namely more partnership instead of clientelism. The harsh letter was never sent but, as Abbas Milani points out, “even the long, meandering letter that was finally sent to Johnson offered both condolences for the assassination and confidence

and hope that US–Iranian relations would thrive in the coming years, free from any misunderstanding” (Milani, 2011: 305). In this period, the shah was gradually becoming more and more isolated and dictatorial (Kinzer, 2008: 196).

Iran’s foreign policy after the 1953 *coup d’état*

Between 1953 and 1963 social unrest was rare and did not pose any serious threat to the shah. Sandra Mackey described the situation as: “no man, group, or ideology took Mosaddegh place until 1963, when nationalism and opposition to Mohammad Reza Shah revived under the flag of Islam” (Mackey, 1996: 209). The intensive process of modernization harmed primarily the clergy’s interests. For this reason, more and more ayatollahs called on their followers to disobey the shah and his decisions. One of these prominent clerics was Ruhollah Khomeini who continued his denunciation of the shah’s reforms conducted in the name of the so-called “White Revolution”. The 1963 protests began with Khomeini’s arrest, but this time Mohammad Reza Pahlavi won the political rivalry and Khomeini had to leave the country.

From 1963 onwards the shah paid more attention to foreign policy, especially processes of formulation and implementation of its objectives. There were three main directions, namely relations with the United States and the United Kingdom, with the socialist states, and with Arab and other Islamic states (Katouzian, 2010: 277). The Iranian monarch believed that Iran’s international position was strong and independent enough to maintain good relations with both sides of the Cold War rivalry.

In his book entitled *The White Revolution*, published in 1967, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi presented the main assumptions and goals of the so-called white revolution which was to change the socio-economic situation in Iran. The last chapter was dedicated to Iranian foreign policy. The shah mentioned the following principles:

- To seek peace, co-existence, and better understanding with other nations, whatever their ideologies may be;
- To support any endeavours for the establishment and furtherance of social justice;
- To assist efforts in bridging the gap between the rich and poor nations of the world;
- Support for any plans for international cooperation, campaigns against illiteracy, poverty, disease, and other contemporary social ills.

(Pahlavi, 1967: 165)

The shah was also in favour of world disarmament, although until the realization of that goal all states were obliged to defend themselves. He also advocated for countries’ independence in international relations, true justice, a reconciliation

between the West and the East, as well as the elimination of any forms of discrimination (Pahlavi, 1967: 164–177). His objectives sounded very idealistic – even too idealistic. In fact, Iran and its monarch were dependant on the United States, and there was not much Mohammad Reza Pahlavi could do to change this disadvantageous situation.

According to Mark J. Gasiorowski, after the successful 1953 *coup d'état*, the US administration:

began to implement measures designed to enhance Iran's long-term political stability and integrate Iran into the U.S. global strategy for containing the Soviet Union. By the early 1960s, these measures had turned Iran into one of the major U.S. clients in the region. They had also considerable impact on Iran's domestic politics, enhancing the state's repressive and co-optative capabilities and therefore greatly increasing its autonomy.

(Gasiorowski, 1991: 85)

From the Iranian perspective, the United States' main advantage was that it was sufficiently distant and, at least theoretically, it could not endanger Iran's independence. Thanks to the alliance with Americans, Iranians safeguarded their independence and could contain the USSR. (Mansour, 2016: 195). Or, to put it bluntly, the Iranian authorities thought it this way.

Undoubtedly, the shah felt strengthened and was sure of American support. For this reason, as Dan Smith put it, the Iranian monarch “centralized power and built up the state's repressive apparatus. As well as using coercion, he sought to win support through economic development and reforms, but his efforts were hampered by corruption, inefficiency and his own unpopularity” (Smith, 2016: 94). It became apparent that he was gradually losing contact with reality.

During this period the Soviet-Iranian relations were very complex. The shah decided to normalize relations with its northern neighbour in 1962. According to the monarch, Iran's close relations with the United States and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) membership were not obstacles to the development of Soviet-Iranian relations. In 1960, he wrote openly:

Our obligations under CENTO and under our agreement with America in no way prevent us from establishing friendly, neighbourly relations with Russians if and when they desire them. Indeed, Russians have manifested a desire to be friendly with the other members of CENTO, who have also signed bilateral agreements with the United States.

(Pahlavi, 1960: 294)

Leonid Brezhnev had visited Tehran in November 1963 and the shah reciprocated his visit in 1965. Both sides signed a series of technical and economic agreements. According to the most important deal, Iran was to provide the Soviet Union with natural gas in return for Soviet steel and machine tool factories. In the opinion

of Gholam Reza Afkhami, “having its own steel mills had been a fundamental Iranian desire, a signature of the nation’s independence, since the Constitutional Revolution and the first Majlis” (Afkhami, 2009: 337). Yet the Soviet-Iranian trade turnover was not always beneficial for Iran. For instance, Afkhami underlines the fact that “by 1970, most of Iran’s imports from the Soviet Union were primary goods, and most of its exports were finished goods, from razors and washing powders to shoes and refrigerators” (Afkhami, 2009: 340).

There was another significant obstacle to Soviet-Iranian cooperation – a mutual lack of trust. In the opinion of Amin Saikal:

the Shah was always distrustful of Moscow’s intentions toward his country. This was partly because of his anti-communist convictions and his belief that his type of monarchy was the right form of regime for Iran, but was largely based on historical reasons.

(Saikal, 1980: 138)

The elder generation of his aides and advisors remembered the Russian domination and what it meant for Persia. This factor had some influence on the Iranian monarch and his decisions.

The West, oil crisis, and the rise of Iranian power in the 1970s

The last decade of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi’s reign was marked by the further consolidation of power. During the 1970s, the shah was gradually centralizing the political system. At the same time the Iranian authorities attempted to eliminate all opposition movements and accelerate the modernization process. The beginning of the decade resulted in a few events which helped the shah to implement his ideas and find money to cover their cost, for instance, the oil shock of 1973. Under such circumstances no one could have predicted the fall of the Imperial State of Iran, because before the social unrests of 1978 nothing had indicated that. In the opinion of Ali Ansari:

the reasons for the Shah’s fall, while varied, reflected the increasing centralisation of power in his hands. The economic and social problems that resulted from the White Revolution were compounded by a series of politically inept decisions administered by the Shah.

(Ansari, 2014b: 213)

One could conclude that the revolution did not start in 1978; it began much earlier. According to the official policy of the Imperial State of Iran of 1974:

the principles of mutual respect, non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries, the desire for peaceful and purposeful coexistence and

cooperation and a firm belief in the effectiveness of peaceful means in the settlement of international disputes constitute the basic principles of Iranian foreign policy on the basis of mutual respect and territorial integrity.

(Basic facts, 1974: 58)

This neutral approach was characteristic for Iran in the 1970s as the shah intended to cooperate with all states regardless of their political systems. In fact, Iran was still dependant on the US security strategy in the Middle East and its room for manoeuvre was limited.

Manucher and Roxane Farmanfarmaian underline the fact that the shah felt more and more exceptional and was gradually losing contact with Iranian society. He also spent more and more time describing historical connections between modern Iran and ancient Persia. The Iranian authorities were proud of the long tradition of independence, forgetting about the Anglo-Russian dominance. This fact was not in line with the official stance especially since Mohammad Reza Pahlavi wanted to be perceived as the modern Cyrus the Great (Farmanfarmaian, Farmanfarmaian, 2005: 326). The high point of nationalistic feelings was to take place in 1971.

In October 1971, the shah and his wife organized a huge festival to commemorate the 2,500th anniversary of the foundation of the Persian Empire and to present Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as the heir and continuator of Cyrus. The event took place at the ruins of the ancient city of Persepolis near Shiraz. The shah intended to highlight Iran's long civilization and underline the importance of his own political, economic, and social achievements. The celebrations were attended by many royals, presidents, and prime ministers. His goal was to be respected by the international community and to impress his guests with wealth, rich culture, and advancements. Yet the main problem was that Iranians were prevented from entering the event. The celebrations were extraordinarily expensive resulting in extensive criticism of the shah, especially by Muslim clerics. At that time, Iranian society was facing serious economic and social challenges. Royal glamour and extravagance were heavily criticized and affected Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's image until the end of his rule (Foltz, 2016: 103–104).

The British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf constituted another significant moment during Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule. The shah counted on unconditional support of the US administration. For this reason, he decided to take advantage of the new regional situation and fill a kind of political vacuum in the region. As Ben Offiler points out:

Britain's withdrawal of forces in 1971 created another opportunity for the shah to assert his authority in the Persian Gulf. Iran claimed sovereignty over the strategically vital islands of the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa in the Strait of Hormuz, which controlled access to the Persian Gulf and were occupied by the British.

(Offiler, 2015: 148)

Undoubtedly, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's decisions and actions were supported by the United States, because its ally took control of these crucial islands.

Michael Axworthy emphasized the fact that Mohammad Reza Pahlavi:

took a greater interest in foreign policy in the 1970s than he had earlier, and Iran became a more assertive regional actor. The Shah faced down Iraq and secured a favourable settlement of the dispute over the Shatt-al-Arab waterway in the Algiers Accords of 1975...He was also lauded by Western leaders and by U.S. presidents in particular as a bulwark against Soviet encroachment in the region.

(Axworthy, 2013: 85)

At the time the shah's political position in the Middle East was relatively strong, and no regional leader challenged him in the 1970s. For instance, Saddam Hussein did not decide to abolish the Algiers Treaty after the Iranian revolution as long as Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was alive. When the shah died in July 1980, the Iraqi president initiated the war with Iran and attempted to change the main provisions of the treaty.

The shah's position on the Middle East peace process in the 1970s was unique. Thanks to him, Iran maintained very close relations with Israel and was even its main oil supplier. At the same time, the president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, was the shah's personal friend. For this reason, the Iranian authorities supported negotiations between Israel and Egypt on a framework of peace. For the same reason Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was so important to the United States as he was the only regional leader who truly supported the Egyptian-Israeli rapprochement (Cooper, 2016: 285).

After 1972 the policy of Iran covered not only the regional neighbourhood, but it also extended to the Indian Ocean. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi intended to invest much more money in the Iranian navy to enable it to protect oil tankers as well as to guarantee Iran's national security. Yet the shah's ambitions were not limited to military or security aspects. He suggested the establishment of a regional economic organization encompassing all states from Iran to Singapore. In his opinion, such an initiative could protect the Indian Ocean from the Cold War rivalry and dominance of superpowers. At that time, this strategy was perceived as clear proof that Iran was trying to free its foreign policy from dependence on the United States. The shah travelled across the region and promoted the idea in 1974. He said that in order to keep both American and Soviet troops out of the Indian Ocean, all littoral states should be able to defend themselves and this would show that US or Soviet military presence was no longer necessary (Kalabinski, 1977: 63–64). In 1980, in his book written while in exile, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi recalled his idea of regional order in the Indian Ocean. He concluded:

I deeply felt that the creation of a zone of peace and stability around the Indian Ocean would serve the cause of world peace. It could have

succeeded. However, would it have been tolerated? It would have precluded both Russian and American intervention. Could the Soviet Union and the U.S. admit that their armed presence in the Indian Ocean was not necessary?

(Pahlavi, 1980a: 135)

One example of the new Iranian attitude toward Asia was the establishment of diplomatic ties with China in August 1971. The Iranians and the Chinese had maintained close relations for more than 1,000 years before the communist forces took control of China in 1949. After two decades, during which Cold War considerations had dominated contacts between Tehran and Beijing, both states decided to re-establish bilateral relations (Azad, 2017: 4). Such developments were mutually beneficial. At the beginning of the 1970s:

a remarkably broad convergence of Chinese and Iranian policies developed swiftly: supporting Pakistan against further Soviet-supported Indian encroachment, countering Soviet-supported rebellion in Oman's southern province and Soviet/Cuban moves in the Horn of Africa, and supporting Egypt's shift away from the Soviet Union under Anwar Sadat.

(Garver, 2016: 181)

A few international factors supported the establishment of diplomatic and trade relations between Iran and China at the very beginning of the 1970s. First, the era of *détente* during the Cold War. Second, US plans to establish diplomatic relations and recognize the People's Republic of China made it easier for Iranian negotiators to contact their Chinese counterparts. Third, in the opinion of James W. Garver:

Iran's role in challenging Western oil companies in the early 1970s was one factor winning Iran a prominent role in Mao's Third World united front against superpower hegemony. Beijing saw the increasing assertiveness of the oil-producing countries as a major manifestation of the Third World's united antihegemony struggle.

(Garver, 2006: 36)

Fourth, China was becoming increasingly interested in importing Iranian oil in order to meet its rapidly growing internal consumption. Fifth, common opposition to India was another important factor, and at the same time both countries had convergent interests in supporting Pakistan.

One of the first steps was the visit of Empress Farah Pahlavi and Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda to China in 1972. In 1973, Iran officially opened its embassy in Beijing. The shah remained relatively sympathetic both to China and to the consecutive American administrations throughout the 1970s. Garver points out that "China, however, remained profoundly hostile to the West and

Western society in the 1970s. From Mao's and the Chinese Communist Party's perspective, the United States was a predatory imperialist power, and Western society was exploitative and decadent" (Garver, 2006: 47). Probably the best proof of quality of Sino-Iranian relations was gratitude expressed by the shah in the book he wrote in exile. While referring to the last meeting with President Hua Kuo-Feng in Tehran in August 1978, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi wrote: "The Iranian crisis was reaching its peak. I was impressed by the Chinese leader's integrity and very sound knowledge of international politics. After talking to him, I realized China was among few nations interested in a strong Iran" (Pahlavi, 1980a: 134). These closer relations with China could have strengthened Iran's international position if the shah had not been so dependent on American support.

Iran, under the rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, also paid attention to political developments in Africa. The shah was very concerned to see communism penetrating the continent, especially the so-called three axes:

We had given economic aid to Sudan, Somalia, and even to Senegal and other countries in West Africa and in the interior of Black Africa. I had intervened with the South African leaders in an attempt to find an acceptable solution to the Namibian affair. (...) I had dreamed of contributing financially to a powerful railway line linking the east coast to the west coast.

(Pahlavi, 1980b: 136)

This is an example of the shah's idealism or even naivety.

In practice, Iranian foreign policy was seriously limited by the interests and views of the United States. The Iranian monarch did his best to secure Iran's interests in the region and weaken Arab neighbours with the help of American friends. The US administration, in turn, tried to avoid such a scenario and did not intend to take sides in the Arab-Iranian rivalry. The main aim of Washington DC was to continue the British strategy in the Persian Gulf region, namely maintain close cooperation with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. This policy was noticeable, in particular during the Johnson presidency. Alvandi points out that at that time:

the shah had tried repeatedly to convince Johnson to tilt toward Iran in the Persian Gulf, using the Soviet threat as his argument for a policy of Iranian primacy...The shah firmly believed that radical Arab states like Egypt and Iraq, supported by Moscow, endangered both stability in the Gulf and Iranian national security.

(Alvandi, 2014: 36)

The Nixon doctrine, presented for the first time in July 1969, played a very significant role in the case of Iran. The doctrine was dedicated mainly to Asian

allies who should be able to defend themselves using conventional forces but could also count on the American nuclear umbrella if needed. On this basis Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was trying to convince the US president that Iran should be allowed to buy modern military equipment and be responsible for its own defence.

In 1976 the shah antagonized the United States. When Americans were suffering from persistent inflation and increasing oil prices, the Iranian monarch pushed for further increases in oil prices. He desperately needed money to cover all expenses connected with his ambitious infrastructure and military programmes (Guerrero, 2016: 23). The other superpower, the Soviet Union, also remained very concerned with political, social, and economic developments in Iran. Although the shah did not trust Soviets, he knew he could gain a lot from a closer economic relationship with Moscow. Once he felt strong enough to pursue his own policy towards the Soviet Union, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi developed political and economic relations with the Soviet Bloc. As Ben Offiler put it, once “Iran’s relationship with the Soviet Union was on a firmer footing since the rapprochement that began in the early 1960s, the Shah was increasingly willing to make use of his northern neighbour’s vast resources for his own ends” (Offiler, 2015: 147). In addition, the Iranian monarch had very good relations with the then Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. The shah’s administration also developed closer relationships with other socialist states like Poland, which he visited in 1977. During his trip across Poland, the Iranian king paid visits to such cities as Poznan, Warsaw, and Gdansk. Some Polish companies signed lucrative contracts with Iran as the communist regime counted on Iranian money. The visit was an example of Pahlavi’s openness and pragmatism. In the end of the 1970s he tried to take advantage of the global détente during the Cold War.

Iran was also very active politically and economically in the Middle East region. According to Andrew Scott Cooper, the 1973 Yom Kippur conflict made a significant impression on the shah. That war convinced him of two things:

The first was that the oil market was about to spike. The second was that Iran needed to take urgent steps to prepare for a blitzkrieg invasion of the sort that had almost overwhelmed the Israelis. Moscow’s new rapid mobility force influenced the Shah’s calculations.

(Cooper, 2013: 141)

As a result, after a few months Mohammad Reza Pahlavi came to a conclusion that in order to guarantee the security of Iran, his government should modernize the army. He aimed at keeping the Soviets at bay. At the same time the shah intended to dominate the region, especially in the Persian Gulf area, and this way “checkmate” the Saudis. The best and only way to achieve that goal was to buy modern high-tech Western military equipment, especially from the United States. Expected profits from oil sales seemed to be the best source of money. During the so-called “oil shock” crude oil prices rose from \$3 to \$12 per barrel.

The Arab embargo imposed on Israel's allies such as the United States provided Iran with an excellent opportunity to improve its public finance efficiency. Cooper claims that US officials paid attention to the shah's actions and criticized him in classified studies. A conclusion mentioned in one of them was extremely critical, given the level of cooperation and friendship between the United States and Iran: "The Shah intended to overspend on American weapons and military equipment by a whopping \$5 billion – and he meant for American oil consumers to foot the bill" (Cooper, 2013: 141).

The shah intended to create a big and powerful army that would let Iran dominate in the Middle East and limit superpowers' interference in regional affairs. Although in reality the Iraqi army was still much stronger and better equipped than Iran's, the American support let him believe in Iran's supremacy and uniqueness. This attitude was evident, for example, in the case of Pakistan. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi observed the partitioning of this neighbouring state and was not sure if the process was over at that time. That's why he warned India that any military effort to further partition the Pakistani territory would cause Iran to take action in support of Islamabad's side (Helms, 1981: 150). The shah believed in a strong Iran even without firm foundations. Yet the problem was the shah's days were numbered.

Decline and fall of the imperial State of Iran

Abbas Amanat quite rightly points out that:

between August 1978 and February 1979, a period of less than seven months, Iran witnessed a revolution that brought down the Pahlavi regime and abolished the institution of monarchy, wiped out the privileges of the Pahlavi regime, and significantly weakened its secularized middle classes.

(Amanat, 2017: 703)

In the opinion of Ali M. Ansari:

the real departure from the ideals of the Constitutional Revolution came long before 1979 as Mohammad Reza Shah's identification with Cyrus the Great and his development of the notion of sacral monarchy witnessed the development of a highly personalized and mystical monarchy that sought in time-honoured fashion to mediate between the spiritual and material world.

(Ansari, 2014: 100)

Moreover, his modernization policy posed a real threat to the clergy and its interests. Said Amir Arjomand underlines the fact that, already in the 1960s and 1970s, the shah took some repressive measures against the clergy – for instance,

destroying some theological seminaries in Mashhad in 1975 (Arjomand, 1988: 86).

This period of internal turmoil in Iran was also extremely significant as far as regional order was concerned. Moreover, the two world's superpowers were concerned with the political developments in the country. While the United States aimed to secure the status quo and tried to protect the shah, the Soviet Union perceived the mass social protests as a chance for a regime change and an opportunity to change the balance of power in the Middle East.

Undoubtedly, Iran (under the rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi) became one of the two most important US allies in this part of the world. This became very clear especially in the 1970s. In the framework of twin pillars policy, the United States promoted both Saudi Arabia and Iran as guardians of its interests. As Roham Alvandi put it:

although President Johnson has seen regional stability as resting on a balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia as the twin pillars of the Gulf, between 1969 and 1972 the shah convinced Nixon and Kissinger to abandon this policy and tilt in favour of Iran.

(Alvandi, 2014: 29)

Such a modification very soon appeared to be a serious mistake, namely during the Iranian revolution. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the shah respected Saudi Arabia and underlined the significance of peace and solidarity among the Persian Gulf states on many occasions. Referring to Saudi Arabia, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi wrote in 1980:

I had travelled on several occasions to Saudi Arabia, a country whose integrity and independence are sacred for all Muslims. Twice I had the great joy of making the supreme pilgrimage. As a faithful Muslim and Defender of the Faith, I hope that Saudi Arabia will always remain the guardian of these holy places, Mecca and Medina, where millions of pilgrims travel every year on the path to God.

(Pahlavi, 1980a: 134)

In the mid-1970s nothing indicated any potential collapse of this strategy and Americans continued to encourage the Iranian authorities to acquire billions of dollars' worth of the most advanced arms. Needless to say, the sale of modern military equipment was reserved for the closest and most trusted allies. American military enterprises did not even have to encourage the shah to spend as much as he could on new military equipment. According to Nikki R. Keddie:

the shah's virtual mania for buying large amounts of up-to-date and sophisticated military equipment from abroad had free rein from 1972, when the

Nixon administration underwrote the shah as the policemen of the Gulf and agreed to sell him whatever nonnuclear arms he wished.

(Keddie, 2006: 163)

The situation became more complex in 1976 during the Ford presidency, when the US Congress criticized the administration for almost unlimited export of military equipment to Iran. In response to such criticism, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi warned his American counterparts that if the US tried to impose any embargo on sales of military equipment, it would have serious implications. The shah even tried to blackmail American enterprises. In case of any problems with deliveries, Iran would cancel the already signed deals and place orders in other countries (Paczkowska, 1977: 92). In the end, however, such tactics proved to be efficient and the contracts worth fulfilling. Although the Democrat administration of the time was very critical of the shah's internal policies, especially of human rights violations and persecution of the opposition, the Iranian monarch remained a key US ally in the region.

Despite this, Fereydoon Hoveyda claims that around the year 1977 the shah was ready to make some political concessions under pressure from the Carter administration. In his opinion: "Mohammad Reza Shah, already deeply impressed by Juan Carlos' example in Spain, wanted to liberalize his regime. He envisioned installing a real constitutional monarchy, authorizing all political parties, and organizing free elections, under international scrutiny, in June 1979" (Hoveyda, 2003: 46).

The question is, however, why the United States administration did not try to save its most trusted ally during the revolution. According to Barry Rubin, "coming to power in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Carter and his advisors were reluctant to commit the United States to helping repress overseas political unrest, particularly in conflicts and in situations where military involvement might become necessary" (Rubin, 1980: 192). The truth is, however, that had the US administration tried to support the shah, it would only have made the situation worse. Fred Halliday went even one step further and claimed that Mohammad Reza Pahlavi knew that the US supported him not out of any special loyalty to the Pahlavi monarchy, but because he was safeguarding American interests in the region. What's more, Halliday suggested the shah had "no doubt studied the fate of South Vietnamese dictator Ngo Dinh Diem and Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista" and knew that "if the U.S. government favoured another candidate, he could be abandoned as they were" (Halliday, 1979: 253–254).

James A. Bill points out that Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had dominated the Iranian political system for 38 years. By the 1970s he had become one of the most influential and recognizable world leaders (Bill, 1988: 192). The shah was the face of Iran. Almost until the end of his rule the monarch was convinced that Iranians admired him. What's more, he believed that during his reign the country had become a regional power, a significant change for a state that was

partitioned and marginalized a few decades earlier. Mohammad Reza's self-confidence must have been boosted when US President Jimmy Carter, during his official visit to Tehran on 31 December 1977, said in his presence:

Iran, because of the great leadership of the Shah, is an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world. This is a great tribute to you, Your Majesty, and to your leadership and to the respect and the admiration and love which your people give to you. We have no other nation on Earth who is closer to us in planning for our mutual military security...We have no other nation with whom we have closer consultation on regional problems that concern us both. And there is no leader with whom I have a deeper sense of personal gratitude and personal friendship.

(Carter, 1977)

The events of 1978 showed how wrong Carter had been. The outbreak of the revolution showed the weakness of the Iranian monarchy's foundations. In addition, the shah was undecided, unsure of himself, and detached from reality.

Clawson and Rubin underline the fact that under the rule of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Iran became a regional power. Its army enjoyed a kind of supremacy in the Middle East. Yet, paradoxically, many Iranians were not proud of that. They understood that Iran would have been that powerful and important even if the West had not supported Iran and had not had strategic interests in the region (Clawson, Rubin, 2005: 69). Or, to put it bluntly, if the shah had not been as dependant on the West – especially on the United States. Any change of status quo would have been perceived as a threat to American interests in the region. Whatever was happening in Iran, it was clear that the US administration preferred to control the situation in the way it had done previously in 1953, but the situation had changed since then. The Soviets were increasingly active. Leonid Brezhnev warned the United States in November 1978 that any military intervention in Iran would provoke the Soviet Union to react. The US administration responded to his words by declaring that it had no intention of interfering in the internal affairs of Iran (Rubin, 1980: 229).

In the opinion of Mark J. Gasiorowski, the Iranian revolution posed a real threat to US national security, as well as to American interests in the Middle East. The United States had lost an important ally and a buffer zone between the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf. Moreover, Americans were losing access to "listening posts" located in Iran. These installations were crucial during the Cold War (Gasiorowski, 1991: 226). Yet the main problem was that there had been no realistic evaluations of the situation in Iran. Analysts had not noticed any serious threat to the shah and his regime. That was the main reason why the US administration failed to react in a timely manner; other powers made the same mistake. The Soviet Union and other states also waited until the end of the power struggle in order to see whether the shah would be able to hold

on to power or not. Such cautious approaches left the shah without any external support (Hoveyda, 1980: 17). According to Javier Gil Guerrero, some key American diplomats dealing with the 1978 political developments, including US Ambassador to Iran William H. Sullivan:

blamed Iranian Ambassador Zahedi for poisoning Washington's communications with the embassy. He stated that Zahedi lured Brzezinski into thinking that it was possible to reenact the coup that saved the Pahlavi monarchy in 1953. Zahedi's view clouded Brzezinski's analytical approach to the Iranian Revolution and misled Carter on the possibility of overcoming the crisis.

(Guerrero, 2016: 140)

The return of Khomeini to Iran in February 1979 opened a completely new chapter in its modern history. Surprisingly to some analysts and observers, Khomeini modified his attitude toward the main provisions of the future political and social system once he came back from exile. Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr claims that Khomeini broke his promises at the very beginning. Bani-Sadr cited the ayatollah who had once said: "In Paris, I found it expedient to say certain things. In Iran, I find it expedient to refute what I said, and I do so unreservedly" (Bani-Sadr, 1991: 2).

Shaul Bakhash underlines the fact that the success of the Iranian revolution shocked the international community. It appeared that the shah was unable to defend his rule although he controlled a huge army, a large police force, and the secret police – *Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar* (SAVAK) (Bakhash, 1984: 9). After the massacre on 8 September 1978, which is often referred to as "Black Friday", there was no turning back. That day soldiers opened fire on people protesting the shah's rule. More than 80 people were killed and 205 injured. Even moderate Iranians were absolutely appalled by this incident and openly criticized the authorities. More and more citizens demanded that Mohammad Reza Pahlavi go (Axworthy, 2008: 262). Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan adds that "Mohammad Reza Pahlavi planted the seeds that would lead to his destruction. His weakness and indecisiveness as a leader only worsened the policies that were enacted. The shah would vacillate between frustration and paralysis" (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2013: 37). The shah's imperial order, *nezam shahanshahi*, was over (Bayandor, 2019).

Conclusion

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi lost the throne and could not complete his reforms. Americans and other allies understood the gravity of the situation when the last Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs of the shah era, Ahmad Mirfendereski, withdrew Iran from the Central Treaty Organization on 6 February 1979. This decision changed the balance of power in the region. Moreover, it vastly deepened

the crisis in US–Iran relations and, this way, the failing monarchy became an element of the so-called “Arc of Crisis” as regional developments were described by members of the Carter administration. Yet history shows that at that time Iran had been entering the most complex phase of political and social change in its modern history, and triumphant Ayatollah Khomeini was on his way back to Tehran. Iran was soon to be changed beyond recognition.

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PART II

The Islamic Republic of Iran

The framework of foreign policy
after 1979



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3

THE 1979 REVOLUTION AND IDEOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS OF THE IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

The 1979 revolution and its consequences

Mass protests resulted in the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty and the end of the Imperial State of Iran; the political situation got completely out of control and the state fell into chaos. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Empress Farah left Iran for Egypt on 16 January 1979. The royal couple was never to come back and the shah spent the last months of his life wandering around the world. One of the most influential Middle Eastern leaders suddenly became an international pariah. Even US President Jimmy Carter wrote off one of his closest allies (Whooley, 2018: 117), and he was not alone. Most Republicans who had supported the Iranian monarch during the Nixon and Ford presidencies did not intend to help him in exile. Andrew Scott Cooper cites Richard Helms, a former US Ambassador to Iran, who was asked about his and Henry Kissinger's true assessments of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the 1970s. Helms was to reply: "We never took him seriously" (Cooper 2013, p. 393).

Khomeini was the biggest political winner in 1979. He cleverly took advantage of social discontent and an economic downturn in Iran. The ayatollah also became the leader of one of the biggest revolutionary movements in world history (Moin, 2000: 199). The more the shah tried to hold on to power, the worst the situation became. Rieffer-Flanagan claims that "Shia Islamic themes and ideas were repeatedly invoked throughout the last years of the 1970s. Khomeini reminded his followers of the unjust nature of the regime, which he tied to the martyrdom of Hossain" (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2013: 49). Such comparison was very meaningful, significant, and symbolic.

In a referendum in March 1979, 99% of Iranians voted in favour of the abolishment of monarchy and supported the idea of a theocratic republic. Although some influential groups, like the National Democratic Front, boycotted the election,

the voter turnout was around 89%. The Assembly of Experts for Constitution could begin working on a new constitution. Yet according to some sources, a draft had already been written during Khomeini's stay in Paris in the second half of 1978. Mehdi Bazargan, one of the grand ayatollah's most trusted aides and future prime minister, was engaged in the whole process. His idea was to combine Islamic values with democratic provisions. Surprisingly, the draft of the future Iranian constitution greatly resembled the French constitution of 1958.

The new Iranian constitution was adopted in a referendum in December 1979. According to official results, more than 99% of voters approved the proposed document and on this basis it came into force. As a result, the 1906 constitution was declared invalid. This constitutional change marked the formal end of the Imperial State of Iran. At the same time, it initiated the establishment of the Islamic Republic's institutions (Foltz, 2016: 111).

The ideological determinants of Iranian foreign policy: Shi'ism

Some analysts claim that political Shi'ism is advantageous for society, while others say that it blocks social and political development. For instance, Hamid Dabashi characterizes Shi'ism as a religion of protest and:

a charismatic community thriving through an enabling paradox, whereby the religion of protest remains legitimate only so far as it is combatant and assumes a warring posture against actual, perceived, or manufactured injustice, and the instance that it is victorious, it loses its moral grounds.

(Dabashi, 2016: 124)

There is no doubt, however, that Shi'ism forms the ideological base of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the opinion of Farid Mirbaghari, "to talk of Shiism and its impact upon Iran's foreign policy is, in a sense, to define the role of the Shiite clerical establishment in the socio-political developments of the country" (Mirbaghari, 2004: 555). At least officially, all foreign policy-related decisions and actions should be in line with Islamic values in their Shi'ite interpretation. Yet in practice, the Iranian authorities are often very pragmatic. They, for instance, maintain very good and close relations with the Republic of Armenia, which is predominantly Christian, and with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which is mainly a Sunni entity. The same observation can be made in the case of China. Iran has nothing in common with the People's Republic of China from an ideological point of view, yet both states cooperate closely with each other.

There is also the unwritten constitutional law which is related to Shi'ism in general and to the idea of the 12th imam who is also called *Mahdi* or the hidden imam. Shia Muslims believe that *Mahdi* will reappear before the Day of Judgement and will rule over all Muslims. The importance of this belief in the process of political changes in Iran was noticeable at the very beginning of 1979.

In this case, some Iranians perceived Ruhollah Khomeini as a representative of the imam and the shah as a usurper.

Since 1979, consecutive Iranian governments have tried to promote their own concept of a state, namely an Islamic democracy based on Shi'ite principles which derive mainly from "Twelver" – the biggest branch of Shi'a Islam. These principles determine both the structure and functioning of the Iranian political system. The line between religion and politics is very fine. For this reason, there are many mystical, symbolic, or even supernatural elements both in internal and external affairs. This phenomenon has been analysed by many scholars, for instance, Ali Rahnema. Some statements of the last shah or the former president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, could serve as the best examples. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was convinced that his decisions were affected by supernatural forces. Moreover, he believed that the same forces had saved his life during the assassination attempt of 1949. In his 1960 book, entitled *Mission to My Country*, the shah wrote:

I spoke earlier of my conviction that God is guiding me and that I can rely upon God's support. I think my assurance of His direction in no way makes me arrogant or fanatical; instead it gives me the confidence of somehow being in tune with the universe.

(Pahlavi, 1960: 326)

In the case of President Ahmadinejad, the supernatural factor was even more noticeable. In 2005, during the annual session of the UN General Assembly, the president called for a return of the Hidden Imam – *Mahdi*. What is more, the Iranian leader and his associates were convinced that this event was supernatural. Ahmadinejad reportedly told ayatollah Javad Amoli that the Iranian delegation had been in the spotlight from the very beginning of their stay in New York. He also said that there must have been something special in him, because he had drawn so much attention. Last but not least, President Ahmadinejad saw a mysterious light and felt the aura surrounding him during his speech at the UN. Some members of the Iranian delegation claimed that the speech had affected other participants and, as a result, they had changed their negative attitude which had been noticeable at the very beginning (Rahnema, 2011: 35–38).

Another important factor related to Iranian politics is martyrdom, which also derives from the Shi'a ideology. Most Iranians believe that in order to be true believers they should have an unsurpassed capacity for suffering and endurance. Such an attitude toward life can be applied to politics. For instance, Shi'ites should oppose any tyrant and be ready to defend the core values of their faith. This principle was used by Ruhollah Khomeini during the 1979 revolution. This concept also proved useful during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Young Iranians were ready to fight and sacrifice their lives in the name of faith as well as in order to defend their motherland. They were highly motivated and devoted, even when it was clear that they were facing certain death. Such interpretation of martyrdom

is still present, for instance, in the ideology of the Lebanese Hezbollah and in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Tarock, 1999: 13–14).

The official Iranian terminology applied in the case of political changes in the Arab world after 2010 also reflects the dominance of religious factors. The most common term is the “Islamic Awakening” which is directly related to the Iranian revolution. The Iranian authorities claim that the process of political changes in the Arab states, commonly referred to as the Arab Spring, proves that Arab societies finally recognized the political role played by Islam – but such interpretation is not supported by facts. One should underline the lack of religious demands during the protests in these states. Even the Syrian conflict was not caused by any faith-related matters. The situation in Syria changed only after regional powers, including Iran, had begun supporting selected militias according to sectarian rules. In any case, all Arab states affected by the Arab Spring (except for Bahrain) are Sunni dominated. As Sunnis do not accept the clergy’s influence on politics and political entities, it was very unlikely that they would adopt the Iranian model. According to Thomas Juneau, Persian and Shi’a roots of Iran make it virtually impossible to promote this model in the Middle East (Juneau, 2013: 34).

Christian C. Sahner paid attention to the fact that during the Syrian war Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah formed the Shi’a alliance. Its main purpose is to counterbalance the Sunni coalition and the domination of secular groups (Sahner, 2014: 132). Yet the Iran-Syria cooperation does not seem to be based on any religious platform. It derives from convergent strategic interests. For this reason, the alliance is rather pragmatic and determined by the current political needs of both sides. Even if residents of Damascus can see portraits of Bashar al-Assad, the Iranian president, and the leader of Hezbollah in public spaces, this fact does not reflect ideology. Both Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah support the Syrian regime in order to maintain the strategic depth (Spencer, 2016: 85). The only exception related to the recruitment of Shia volunteers, mainly in Iraq and Afghanistan, who fought in Syria for sectarian reasons. Nevertheless, it does not change the fact that the Shi’a alliance is often used by Iran’s rivals when trying to prove the dominance of religious factors in Iranian regional policy (Terrill, 2011: 14–55).

Khomeinism and Iranian foreign policy

Khomeinism is a doctrine within the Shi’a ideology. The main sources of Khomeinism are political thought and legacy of Grand Ayatollah and first Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini. Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan underlines the fact that:

the idea of a supreme leader developed by Khomeini was influenced by the Platonic notion of the philosopher-king who ensures justice within the Republic. For Khomeini, a virtuous individual could lead the community if he had the proper knowledge of religious truth and justice.

(Rieffer-Flanagan, 2013: 46)

In the case of the Islamic Republic, the grand ayatollah believed that a person having the highest Islamic credentials could successfully lead not only the Shi'a community, but the whole supranational Muslim community – *Ummah*. The wielding of power by a grand ayatollah was to safeguard integrity as well as dominance of religious law. Ultimately, his rule should pave the way for the Hidden Imam (Hoveyda, 2003: 75–76).

For this reason, one of the key elements of Khomeini's vision of a socio-political system was guardianship of the jurist – *velayat-e faqih*. This idea found its exemplification in the Iranian institution of the supreme leader. The main task of the leading Islamic jurist is to provide the people with political guardianship. In general, the supreme leader is to oversee all processes and decisions relating to both internal and external policies, and it is clear that he has the final say on foreign policy matters even if the international community associates such decisions with presidents rather than with the supreme leader. The process of accumulation of executive powers in the hands of the supreme leader is noticeable especially under the current leadership of Ali Khamenei. Geneive Abdo points out that "Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei over the years has tried to reduce the presidential footprint on foreign affairs even further. In fact, he was considering revising the constitution to formally dissolve the presidency" (Abdo, 2013).

Khomeini's concept of the supreme leader, *velayat-e faqih*, is based on Shi'a principles especially "immamism". Shi'a Muslims believe that the Hidden Imam will reveal himself and take control of the world. Until then, society should be ruled by a leading Islamic jurist, namely *faqih*. The supreme leader, *rahbar*, needs the confidence of the citizens and shall be of good repute. In this case Khomeini underlined the importance of his social orientation as well as selflessness. These factors were to distinguish the supreme leader from monarchs or presidents. *Rahbar* represents and guarantees the rule of law and supremacy of Islamic values. If he began to persecute citizens, he would automatically lose his legitimacy. In keeping with the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, Ayatollah Khomeini wrote:

In Islam it is the law which rules. The noble Prophet, too, abided by the law, the divine law. He could not act otherwise....No dictatorship is there. We want to stop dictatorship. *Velayat-e faqih* means the guardianship over the affairs. It supervises over the parliament, over the President lest he should take an erroneous step, over the Prime Minister lest he should commit a mistake, over all organizations, over the army lest it should disregard the law.

(*Fundamentals*, 2000: 195–196)

He also defined this new political position in the following way:

If some efficient person, who is endowed with the two characteristics of leadership, rises and establishes a government, he will possess the same

guardianship which the noble Prophet had in directing the society, and the people will have to obey him.

(Fundamentals, 2000: 196–197)

As far as creating foreign policy, Khomeini advocated an uncompromising stance against both superpowers, and placed importance on the safety of lives and property of all Muslims, unity among all Muslims, and opposition to Israel. Furthermore, he suggested the need for good relations with all nations, which he separated from states and their governments. This rule was not to be applied in the case of those nations whose governments openly interfere in Iran's internal affairs (*Fundamentals*, 2000: 477).

In the opinion of Kenneth Katzman, one can distinguish the main ideological assumptions on the basis of Khomeini's thoughts. First, he was convinced that Iran should export ideas of the revolution to other Middle Eastern states. Afshon Ostovar referred to this process as revolutionary internationalism (Ostovar, 2016: 104–107). Second, Khomeini intended to eliminate both American and Israeli domination, as well as their interference in regional and internal affairs. In the case of exporting revolutionary ideas, soon after the death of Khomeini Iranians abandoned this concept, because it had been counterproductive and had resulted in regional isolation (Katzman, 2016: 3; Ehteshami, 2014: 267–269). Nevertheless, Ayatollah Khomeini's ideas and views still determine purposes and means of the Iranian foreign policy.

Although Tehran's soft power is limited, the Iranian authorities claim that they represent the whole Muslim community. There are two factors which determine that. First, Iran is ethnically distinct as it is dominated by Persians. Second, Iranian citizens represent a religious minority in the Islamic world. On this basis, rival powers like Saudi Arabia tried to delegitimize the Iranian regime. For instance, Saudis were funding preachers who were ready to underline the importance of the sectarian divide and in this way weakened the revolution's religious credentials (Byman, 2018).

Neither East nor West

Ayatollah Khomeini formulated one of the main concepts related to the Iranian foreign policy, namely "neither East nor West policy". This idea had its roots in Iran's history, especially the domination of world powers, and militant "Third-Worldism". It was also based on anti-imperialist and anti-colonial tendencies. As a consequence, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran was very radical from the beginning. Undoubtedly, the hostage crisis as well as the Iran-Iraq war were key elements which led to further radicalization (Kaya, Sartepe, 2015: 4). Most Iranian revolutionaries rejected both materialistic ideologies, namely capitalism and socialism. On this basis, Khomeini and his followers openly criticized the United States (often referred to as the Great Satan), and the Soviet Union

(the Lesser Satan). The revolutionary authorities had different reasons to distrust Soviets and Americans.

From the point of view of the Iranian ayatollahs, Americans were not to be trusted. The clergy underlined the role of US support during the *coup d'état* of 1953, as well as its intensive cooperation with the shah regime. Moreover, the Iran hostage crisis, when 52 American diplomats were held hostage for 444 days between November 1979 and January 1981, resulted in the biggest tensions in the framework of bilateral relations. On 7 April 1980 President Jimmy Carter decided to sever diplomatic relations with Iran. As a consequence, the US administration selected Switzerland as a protecting power in Iran. Iran, in turn, had chosen Algeria which was later replaced by Pakistan in 1992.

In the case of the Soviet-Iranian relations after the 1979 revolution, there were more divergent than convergent aspects. First, Iran criticized the Soviet aggression and military presence in neighbouring Afghanistan. Second, the Soviet Union supported and sold weapons to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Third, Moscow supported some leftist opposition groups in Iran, first and foremost the Tudeh Party of Iran – an Iranian communist party which still exists, although it was formally banned in 1982. And, last but not least, there were some economic issues, for instance, export of natural gas from Iran to the Caucasian republics. All of the above elements resulted in occasional tensions between Tehran and Moscow.

Khomeinism and the Iranian diplomacy today

Iranian politicians in general and diplomats in particular still have to obey the political and religious ideas of Khomeini. According to Ahmad Sadeghi, ideology and universalism of the mainstream in the Iranian foreign policy prevailed over national and state aspects that appeared during the revolution. The export of the revolutionary ideas, however, was not motivated by any expansionist tendencies. This policy was driven by national interests, especially national security. From the Iranian point of view, the region would have been much safer if all neighbouring states had accepted the Iranian interpretation of international phenomena and processes (Sadeghi, 2008: 30). In the opinion of Rouhollah K. Ramazani, in turn, the Iranian foreign policy could be described as “spiritually pragmatic”. Leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran concern themselves with the conundrum of moral imperatives and pragmatic necessity. Ramazani claims that:

all Iranian leaders, from Ayatollah Khomeini to Ahmadinejad, have aspired to create a hybrid of the two, but they have given different weight to practical and spiritual considerations. Rafsanjani did not hesitate to forego Islamic doctrines if it were practically necessary, Khatami struck relative balance between the two, and although Ahmadinejad has produced an image of recalcitrance, he has not been able to disregard the imperative of practical necessity, or, in other words, to ignore the institutional

imperatives of complex domestic politics or the demands of the international constituency.

(Ramazani, 2010: 85)

Abbas Maleki points out that after Ahmadinejad came to power, Iran ended up with its strategy of deterrence and the idea of Dialogue Among Civilizations. He redefined the main objectives of foreign policy and underlined the importance of Iran's Asian identity (Maleki, 2008: 168). His successor Hassan Rouhani, in turn, did his best to change the way Iranians presented these objectives and avoided any radical modifications. Rouhani's vision of Iranian diplomacy was best outlined in an article written by his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Javad Zarif. The text had been first presented in Majles and later it was published in *Foreign Affairs*. Just a cursory analysis indicates that Rouhani's administration intended to keep the balance between the legacy of Khomeini and a new diplomatic approach. Zarif declared among others:

- Promotion of multilateralism in foreign policy;
- Opposition to the American dominance;
- The restoration of regional peace, security, and stability;
- Combating extremism and violence;
- Opposition to any processes destabilizing the region;
- Actions against islamophobia and iranophobia, which are promoted in the West;
- "Wise critique" and depart from President Ahmadinejad's policy;
- Expansion and deepening of bilateral and multilateral relations;
- The defense of the individual and collective rights of Iranian nationals;
- Promotion of Iranian culture, Persian language, Islamic democracy, and Islamic values;
- Support for oppressed people, especially in Palestine;
- Active participation in the negotiations with the P5+1 group;
- The lifting of international sanctions imposed on Iran (Zarif, 2014).

On the one hand, the abovementioned assumptions prove that thoughts of imam Khomeini are still present in the current foreign policy of Iran. His ideological influences are noticeable in multilateralism, opposition to the American dominance, the emphasis on external threats like islamophobia and iranophobia, as well as support for the oppressed people. On the other hand, additional objectives like the will to cooperate with Western powers or engagement in regional changes prove the importance of a pragmatic approach in Rouhani's foreign policy.

Although Khomeinism is still present in Iran's foreign policy, its role is decreasing over time. Ahmad Sadeghi quite rightly points out that "both the ideological and non-ideological elements as well as a concoction of culture, religion, nationalism, geopolitics and economic factors are involved in the origins of

Iranian foreign policy discourses and configuration of Iranian national interest” (Sadeghi, 2008: 3).

Waves of realism vs. waves of idealism?

Iranian scholar Mohammad Reza Dehshiri analysed Iranian foreign policy after 1979. He divided this period into phases of dominance of idealism and realism. According to Dehshiri and Majidi “while the realist approach is based on state security and extending its national interest through pragmatic and rational means and can be security-oriented, the idealist approach is based on values and norms, and tends to be collaborative in nature” (Dehshiri, Majidi, 2008/2009: 104). He claims that Islamic values and provisions prevail over national interests during the phases of dominance of idealism. Similarly, phases of realism are characterized by a more pragmatic approach toward international relations especially toward neighbouring states. In his text, Dehshiri referred to these phases as waves.

Specifically, he divided the period between 1979–2009 into the following waves:

- 1979–1984: idealism – Khomeini;
- 1984–1986: realism – Khomeini;
- 1986–1987: idealism – Khomeini;
- 1987–1989: realism – Khomeini;
- 1989–1996: realism – Rafsanjani;
- 1996–1997: idealism – Rafsanjani;
- 1997–2000: realism – Khatami;
- 2000–2001: idealism – Khatami;
- 2001–2005: realism – Khatami;
- 2005–2009: idealism – Ahmadinejad (Dehshiri, 2010).

Dehshiri finished his analysis in 2009 which is the reason why he mentioned neither the second presidential term of Ahmadinejad nor the first term of Hassan Rouhani. As there were almost no changes during President Ahmadinejad’s second term, it could be classified as idealistic. He often used foreign policy as a mean of domestic policy. His harsh rhetoric did not undergo any modification and remained the hallmark of the whole presidency. What’s more, Ahmadinejad seemed to be ready to sacrifice national interests for ideology or religious principles (Ottolenghi, 2010; Javedanfar, Melman, 2008; Naji, 2008). Some analysts even accused him of irrationality and unpredictability especially in the case of the national nuclear program (Alexander, Hoenig, 2008; Jafarzadeh, 2007; Khan, 2010). Yet one should underline the fact that Ahmadinejad also appreciated the merits of political pragmatism from time to time. It became obvious during his rivalry with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The other example is connected with the process of political changes in the Arab world after 2010. It

forced Iranians to adopt a very pragmatic position in order to benefit from the regional turmoil.

When it comes to Rouhani's presidency, the current foreign policy is characterized by both significant reorientation and pragmatism. President Rouhani made goodwill gestures towards neighbouring Arab states, as well as the West – especially the United States. The success of the nuclear talks and the signature of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015 can serve as the best examples of this new pragmatic approach. During the election campaign Rouhani promised Iranians that he would negotiate with the P5+1 group and do everything possible to get economic sanctions lifted. However, expectations that the new president would contest the ideological fundamentals of the Iranian political system were, to put it mildly, very naïve. It is necessary to emphasize the fact that Rouhani was very active and supported Khomeini when the ayatollah was in exile in France. Later, he also held a few influential state positions, for instance, he was a member of the Supreme National Security Council and the Assembly of Experts. Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit claim that Hassan Rouhani has been a loyal supporter of the theocratic regime since the establishment of the Islamic Republic (Akbarzadeh, Conduit, 2016: 1). Last but not least, Rouhani would not have been qualified as a presidential candidate in 2013 if the supreme leader and the Guardian Council of the Constitution had had any second thoughts about his loyalty or political correctness.

In this context it is worth paying attention to a neorealist analysis of the contemporary foreign policy of Iran by Thomas Juneau. In Juneau's opinion, changes on the Iranian political stage have only little influence on Iran's foreign policy. Juneau claims that they "account for tilts in foreign policy; changes in the international balance of power can cause major shifts" (Juneau, 2015: 3). According to Juneau, it proves that the regime is stable, and its ideological fundamentals are persistent. Presidencies of Hassan Rouhani and Mohammad Khatami are probably the best examples. Although both presidents opted for a more pragmatic approach toward foreign policy-making, two ideal interests remained unchanged, namely:

- The survival of the regime and protection of country's territorial integrity;
- Obtaining the status of the dominant power in the Persian Gulf and an indispensable player in the Middle East (Juneau, 2015: 180).

Another example of Rouhani's pragmatism is the Iranian engagement in the ongoing Syrian conflict. Like his predecessor, President Rouhani decided to continue support for Bashar al-Assad. What's more, his administration increased the scale of aid. The only difference is that Rouhani cooled his rhetoric, while the primary objective – the strategic alliance with Syria – remained the same.

Conclusion

Mehran Kamrava openly claims that ideology does not play as decisive a role in Iranian foreign policy as it is generally supposed. In his opinion, Iranian elites seek to maintain the balance of power. At the regional level, Iranians intend to

keep this balance in the Persian Gulf area. At the global level, in turn, Iran tries to secure such balance in its rivalry with the United States. As a result, the idea of the export of revolutionary principles is of secondary importance (Kamrava, 2011: 184). Paul M. Shaper adds that the Iranian foreign policy has been more pragmatic and less ideational since the end of Iran-Iraq war and the death of ayatollah Khomeini. Iranians have tried to maintain as good relations with its neighbouring states as possible. For instance, Iran has supported neither Azeris nor Chechens despite religious bonds. This way Iran did not lose two main ally states, namely Armenia and the Russian Federation (Shaper, 2010: 61).

There are, however, other voices. Kenneth Katzman suggests that the Iranian foreign policy is an area of constant rivalry between decision-making centres. Various interest groups exert pressure on Iranian authorities, forcing them to keep the balance between ideological correctness and national interests (Katzman, 2016). He also claims that “Iranian leaders appear to constantly weigh the relative imperatives of their revolutionary and religious ideology against the demands of Iran’s national interests” (Katzman, 2017: 1). This is the way they make choices between ideology and pragmatism.

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4

THE MAIN ACTORS AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The Iranian political system, introduced in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, is very complex and extensive. According to Said Amir Arjomand, “foreign policy of revolutionary regimes is closely linked to their domestic politics, or more precisely to the stage of the revolution. It is closely tied to the struggle of the pragmatic against the radical elements in the revolutionary elite” (Arjomand, 2009: 133). The above observation is true in the case of Iran. Pragmatists compete with hardliners for political supremacy in order to achieve particular objectives related to both domestic and external policies. Shah Alam refers to them as two streams which attempt to pursue their own agendas of foreign policy. Although “they have unanimous views over survival of the Islamic regime, they pursue different foreign policy approaches” (Alam, 2016: 55–56). Hossein Bashiriyeh applied cleavage theory to the case of Iranian politics after 1979. He distinguished the dominant cleavage between Islamic democratic reformism and conservative theocratic Islamism (Bashiriyeh, 2015: 50).

This chapter is dedicated to the Iranian state institutions involved in the foreign policy decision-making, their areas of competence, and interdependencies. In the opinion of Jalil Roshandel, the following elements play key roles in foreign policy formulation:

- The constitution which forms the framework for the whole process;
- The leadership, especially the supreme leader and, to a less extent, the Expediency Council and the Assembly of Experts;
- The executive, namely the president and the Supreme Council for National Security;
- The legislative – Majlis and the Guardian Council;
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs “with its dual function of making and implementing policy” (Roshandel, 2000: 106).

The core of the Iranian foreign policy had originally been created on the basis of Khomeini's concepts and was later modified in 1989. The Iranian politicians often refer to it as "the Islamic democracy". Well, it is true that citizens participate in popular elections and in this way, they vote for presidents, members of the parliament (Majlis), members of city councils, and the Assembly of Experts. Nonetheless, Arang Keshavarzian points out that "these democratic practices and institutions are limited by a whole host of mechanisms that mute contestation and meaningful participation. Republican institutions are straitjacketed by antidemocratic parameters" (Keshavarzian, 2013: 261). The principle of *velayat-e faqih* is probably the best example of such an antidemocratic mechanism as the supreme leader wields extensive supervisory powers. And such a finding is crucial in the case of making foreign policy, because, as Mark Gasiorowski put it, "Iran's foreign policy has been closely intertwined with its domestic politics" since 1979 (Gasiorowski, 2017: 299).

Yet these doctrinal solutions and choices do not change the fact that there are many state bodies that are directly or indirectly involved in foreign policy decision-making. Moreover, there are also a few important parastatal actors, including the most influential one – the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and *bonyads*, namely charitable funds which play key roles in Iran's non-petroleum economy (Dorraj, 2016). They are organized in vast networks which are active not only in Iran, but also abroad (Adib-Moghaddam, 2018: 48). Ali Akbar Rezaei underlines the fact that some scholars attempt to explain "Iran's contradictory foreign policy by pointing to the complexity and apparent chaos of the Iranian policy-making system" (Rezaei, 2011: 28).

The main problem is that sometimes it is virtually impossible to determine which institution is responsible and eligible to make the final decision in a given situation. In this context, Michael Axworthy claims that the system is often criticized for being "a chaotic confusion of power centers competing for influence and taking action independently" (Axworthy, 2017: 156). This political duality is often confusing, yet it also enables Iranian authorities to hide their real objectives and interests.

The constitution

The whole chapter X of the Iranian Constitution of 1979 is dedicated to foreign policy. According to article 152:

the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the rejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of it and submission to it, the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects and its territorial integrity, the defense of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with respect to the hegemonic superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent States.

(Constitution, 1979)

This article determines the main objectives of the Iranian foreign policy in practice. On this basis, for instance, Iran avoided developing any close relations with either superpower during the last phase of the Cold War. Nowadays, it offers support to Palestinians in their struggle against the Israeli state.

Article 153 is very precise and states that “any form of agreement resulting in foreign control over the natural resources, economy, army, or culture of the country, as well as other aspects of the national life, is forbidden” (Constitution, 1979). Undoubtedly, this article originates from Iran’s historical experience especially the Russo-British occupation and the American dominance during Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s rule. The Iranian society is very sensitive with regard to any form of either political or economic exploitation.

Article 154 is probably the most ideological of the four articles directly related to foreign policy matters. According to it:

the Islamic Republic of Iran has as its ideal human felicity throughout human society, and considers the attainment of independence, freedom, and rule of justice and truth to be the right of all people of the world. Accordingly, while scrupulously refraining from all forms of interference in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the just struggles of the *Mustad’afun* (oppressed) against the *Mustakbirun* (oppressors) in every corner of the globe.

(Constitution, 1979)

On this basis, Iran justifies its political engagement and actions undertaken in such states as Lebanon, Palestine, Bahrain, and Yemen.

Last but not least, article 155 makes it clear that “the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran may grant political asylum to those who seek it unless they are regarded as traitors and saboteurs according to the laws of Iran” (Constitution, 1979). Some political dissidents have already sought refuge in Iran since 1979.

The supreme leader

Undoubtedly, the supreme leader (*rahbar*) plays the most important role in the political system of Iran. As a consequence, he has a final say on all significant matters including issues related to foreign policy. Shireen Hunter claims that *rahbar* makes “the final decisions on the basic direction of Iran’s foreign policy and on key foreign policy issues such as relations with the United States, Iran’s position on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the nuclear issue” (Hunter, 2010: 29). Hossein Salimi goes even further. In his opinion the supreme leader “is not only the main decision-maker of the political arena but also the final arbiter of disputes between political trends and contending institutions that step forward in the policymaking process of foreign affairs” (Salimi, 2012: 144). Furthermore, Vali Nasr’s opinion, too, is similar: “The supreme leader views himself as the last representative, manifestation, embodiment, and the ultimate defender of the

Islamic republic and the Iranian revolution” (Nasr, 2008: 43). The decisions and actions of current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, prove such a claim.

The leader controls both the president and the Guardian Council. As a consequence, there is no possibility that any state institution makes a decision related to foreign affairs without his prior authorization. In the case that anybody even tried to leave the *rahbar* out, he would be able to block such a decision. Besides, his representatives take part in meetings of most of decision-making bodies (Byman, Chubin, Ehteshami, Green, 2001: 24). All above elements assist the *rahbar* in being a true supreme leader.

On the basis of article 110 of the constitution, the supreme leader delineates the general policies of Iran. Ali Khamenei describes the Iranian foreign policy as based on the constitutional provisions as well as fundamental Islamic principles (Hovsepian-Bearce, 2016: 81).

The supreme leader is also the supreme commander of the armed forces and is able to declare war or peace. He further appoints the chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps. This way, Ali Khamenei controls the IRGC’s special forces unit – the Quds Force. These elite troops are used in extraterritorial operations and are tools that mean Iran can project power in the Middle East. In recent years, the Quds Force has taken part in military operations in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. According to some sources, the force is divided into eight directorates which cover more than half of the world (Wright, 2008: 332). The directorates are responsible for:

- The whole of Europe, Canada, and the United States;
- Post-Soviet states;
- Iraq;
- Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India;
- Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel;
- Arabian Peninsula;
- Turkey;
- and North Africa (Assaf, 2011: 87).

Rahbar also supervises most of the state-controlled economy including *bonyads*. This money can be used both for domestic and external actions. Moreover, Ali Khamenei has the final say on how Iran’s oil revenue is spent (Sadjadpour, 2010: 12).

Such dominance can be observed even if other state institutions seem to have autonomous positions or make independent decisions. In the opinion of Farhad Rezaei, “depending on the area, it is either the state or the parastatals that dominate the policy-making process. The highly secretive Rahbar Office operates behind the scene to monitor the discourse and side the state normalizers or the hardline parastatals” (Rezaei, 2018: 243). The main task of *rahbar* is to guarantee the balance of power between state institutions and parastatal bodies. For instance, the supreme leader tries to find common ground between

the president and members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Yet, at the same time, Rezaei quite rightly underlines the fact that the supreme leader's power is not absolute. This "secretive, complex, and intense maneuvering, intimidation, brinkmanship, and even violence" often result in contradictory actions and declarations (Rezaei, 2018: 18). Such observation is especially true in case of Ali Khamenei whose position is not as strong as former leader Khomeini's. Rezaei's opinion is shared by Michael Axworthy who underlines the fact that the Iranian system is far from being a dictatorship (Axworthy, 2017: 155).

The Guardian Council

The Guardian Council is the second most powerful body in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Six clerics are appointed by the supreme leader and the other six are nominated by Majlis from the list provided by the judiciary. In this case it should be emphasized that the supreme leader appoints the head of the judiciary, so in practice all 12 members of the Guardian Council are dependent on *rahbar*. Even if the Council is not directly engaged in any foreign policy-making, its 12 members decide who is eligible to participate in both presidential and parliamentary elections. Shireen Hunter emphasizes the fact that "since the criteria for candidacy are vague, such as sincere commitment to the Islamic system, the Guardian Council is free to decide whom to accept" (Hunter, 2010: 23). This way the Guardian Council shapes the system and decides upon the main directions in internal and external policies.

The Guardian Council not only selects candidates for presidents and members of the parliament but can also veto decisions undertaken by Majlis including those related to foreign affairs. Six clerical jurists protect the ideological constitution in order to nullify any proposed or existing laws if they are inconsistent with the Sharia (Arjomand, 2009b: 248).

The president

The presidency is the highest popularly elected office in Iran. The president is subordinate only to *rahbar*. The president has some influence over foreign policy, for instance, he presides the Supreme National Security Council and appoints ministers including the Minister of Foreign Affairs. However, his powers are quite limited in comparison with the supreme leader and the SNSC. The president also signs international treaties ratified by Majlis and administers the national budget including funds for external actions (Mishal, Goldberg, 2014: 86–87).

Some authors, like Anoushiravan Ehteshami, highlight the fact that "Iran's foreign policy processes have changed little over the years, with the president responsible for implementing the country's national policies through the executive branch of the government, which includes the foreign ministry and its

agencies” (Ehteshami, 2014: 270). In this case, all final decisions are up to the supreme leader while the president shall be responsible for putting them into practice.

According to article 125 of the Iranian constitution, the president is authorized to sign treaties with representatives of other governments. Moreover, he approves candidates for ambassadors selected by the minister of foreign affairs (article 128). For the list of Iranian presidents, see Table 4.1.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The minister of foreign affairs is nominated by the president. His candidature has to be accepted by Majlis. In general, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs deals with the conduct of the Iranian foreign policy as well as implements decisions of higher state bodies. The problem is, however, that the ministry does not play any key role in formulating official policies and strategies (Hunter, 2010: 30). Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that the minister recommends candidates for ambassadors. This way he can contribute to the creation of Iran’s international image.

A significant change took place in 2013 when the ministry of foreign affairs became responsible for the conduct of negotiations concerning the comprehensive agreement on Iranian nuclear programme. The decision was crucial, because previously the Supreme National Security Council had been responsible for the talks. This shift strengthened the presidential camp and President Hassan Rouhani together with Minister of Foreign Affairs, Javad Zarif, could take control of the diplomatic process.

The Islamic Consultative Assembly – Majlis

Although the position of parliament is relatively weak in the Iranian political system, article 76 of the constitution gives it “the right to investigate and examine all the affairs of the country” (Constitution, 1979). Such a provision enables parliamentarians to control the foreign affairs of Iran – especially the

TABLE 4.1 Presidents of the Islamic Republic of Iran

<i>President</i>	<i>In office</i>
Abolhassan Baniśadr	4 February 1980–22 June 1981
Mohammad Ali Rajai	2 August 1981–30 August 1981
Ali Khamenei	13 October 1981–3 August 1989
Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani	3 August 1981–3 August 1997
Mohammad Khatami	3 August 1997–3 August 2005
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	3 August 2005–3 August 2013
Hassan Rouhani	3 August 2013–

Source: Bakhash, 2010: 15–19.

decisions and actions undertaken by the executive branch. In practice, like in all democratic systems, the Iranian parliament ratifies international treaties and agreements.

The Foreign Relations Committee in the Majlis is the most important parliamentary body dealing with foreign policy-making. At the end of 1990s, the Committee was led by the current president Hassan Rouhani.

The Supreme National Security Council

The Supreme National Security Council – SNSC is a division which is responsible for coordinating the foreign policy making processes. The body is presided by the Iranian President. Among its other members are the chief of the Armed Forces, two representatives of *rahbar*, the minister of the interior, the minister of information and communications technology, the minister of foreign affairs, and the IRGC's commanders. In the opinion of Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, the SNSC became the main constitutional body where issues related to foreign policy are debated (Ehteshami, Hinnebusch, 1997: 33).

The SNSC was established during the 1989 revision of the constitution. According to article 176, the Council:

- Determines policies related to defense and national security;
- Coordinates security and defense policies;
- Exploits national resources in order to prepare the state for internal and external threats (Constitution, 1979).

Yet the most important factor is that all SNSC's decisions have to be approved by the supreme leader in order to become effective. As a consequence, one can say that both the supreme leader and the SNSC are at the top of the foreign policy decision making, however, in practice the president has still much to say.

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5

IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN ACTION

The main objectives

The main purpose of this chapter is to present an outline of the main foreign policy objectives of Iran in the aftermath of the revolution. It can be divided into specific periods, namely under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, and then the presidencies of Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Rouhani. Imad Salamey and Zanoobia Othman claim that Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy "has evolved from being Islamic, revolutionary and expansionist in nature to being centred on the revival of Shiism" (Salamey, Othman 2011: 202). The question is, however, if such a claim is justified and true in case of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

As Arshin Adib-Moghaddam put it, the making of a foreign policy is "a specific manifestation of culture, attempting to address the relationship of one specific agent like Iran with its external environment, namely the international community" (Adib-Moghaddam, 2010: 43). Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan emphasizes the complex and unique nature of Iranian foreign policy as well as the high risk of misunderstandings and misjudgements. One always has to analyse two dimensions simultaneously, namely the levels of domestic politics and of international politics (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2013: 146–147). In this context Maryam Panah points out that even when the Iranian authorities pursue various reformist policies, they never question the revolutionary identity of the state. As a consequence, Khomeinism prevails as an ideological pivot (Panah, 2007: 148). In other words, Iranian leaders may intend to seek a rapprochement with the West, but at the same time they do not abandon harsh rhetoric and often criticize the oppression of the Muslim community.

According to Rouhollah Eslami, "during the contemporary period the geographic location of Iran as well as subjective constructs gave Iranians great opportunities to play a role in global affairs and enabled them to be more than a dependent variable in the international system" (Eslami, 2014: 151). Has Iran

taken this opportunity since the revolution? Which concepts and objectives were dominant during this period?

Kenneth Katzman quite rightly emphasizes the fact that Iran's foreign policy includes many factors such as ideological background, the leadership's perception of external threats, national interests, and the internal competition between political factions (Katzman, 2015: 2). Some authors underline the importance of political Islam and how it has affected political changes since 1979, including those related to foreign policy. One of them is Ali Mirsepassi who also analysed the compatibility of Islam and democracy in the case of Iran (Mirsepassi, 2010).

Thomas Juneau adds three essential variables which shape the post-revolutionary foreign policy of Iran. These are Iran's status, regime identity, and factional politics (Juneau, 2015: 8). Three main political factions in Iran are radicals, conservatives, and the moderate faction. Yet there are also other typologies. Payam Mohseni, for instance, divided Iranian politicians into four groups, namely theocratic left, republican left, republican right, and theocratic right (Mohseni, 2016: 43–45).

Khomeini and his vision of Iranian diplomacy

The Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy was shaped in the first years after the revolution. It was a very turbulent period with factional rivalries, political chaos, and terrorist attacks. Additionally, major world powers and their reactions to political changes in Iran helped determine the main objectives of its foreign policy between 1979–1982. According to Mahmood Shoor, “the new foreign policy was not created to be inherently aggressive, but a series of interactive communications, in the outlined time period, have influenced the contours of this new identity” (Shoor, 2013: 33). Khomeini was convinced that imperialism posed the biggest threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran. He believed the United States and Israel were the main enemies of the Muslim world and the Third World (Salamey, Othman, 2011: 201).

Among the main foreign policy principles, the first supreme leader outlined the following:

- Fight against injustice;
- Support for the oppressed;
- Opposition to the superpowers;
- Defence of all Muslims;
- The unity among Sunnis and Shi'ites (Khomeini, 2000: 454–465).

And among the most important objectives Khomeini further pointed to:

- Support for Palestinians;
- Opposition to Israel;
- Actions against the United States;

- Settlement of all disputes between Muslim communities;
- The export of the revolution principles and values;
- Protection of Iran's defensive nature in the war imposed by Iraq;
- Self-sufficiency in economy (Khomeini, 2000: 474–548).

The first changes after 1979 were noticeable almost immediately. At the end of the Cold War, Iran became a non-aligned state without relations with the United States and limited relations with the Soviet Union. The new Iranian regime also rejected the superpowers' domination in the international system (Dehshiri, Majidi, 2008–2009: 107). Ruhollah K. Ramazani wrote that:

in Khomeini's theory of international relations, all other world views, especially the capitalist and socialist ones, were defunct. For example, when writing to the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, he castigated the bankrupt ideological vacuum of the East and the West, advocated Islamic values and suggested that Gorbachev study Muslim philosophers and religious thinkers.

(Ramazani, 2011: 8)

In this way Khomeini's concept of "Neither East nor West" was implemented. Yet Maziar Behrooz underlined the fact that this slogan did not have the same meaning for all political factions in Iran. In his opinion, "rather, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran since the 1979 revolution has embodied a series of inconsistent goals" (Behrooz, 1990: 13).

Undoubtedly, in the 1980s it was the Iran–Iraq war that posed the biggest challenge and an existential threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini's strategy was simple and clear. Iran was to devote all its resources and efforts to end the conflict and restore peace. At the same time, he was very critical of any factional tensions. All Iranians were to unite and fight for this national cause (Behrooz, 1990: 25). In 1984 Khomeini also attempted to reshape Iran's foreign policy and make it more pragmatic. His proposals are often referred to as the "open window" policy. The conservative faction criticized sending Rafsanjani abroad during the conflict where he tried to secure more arms sales and support for Iran during the war with Iraq. In response to their criticism, the supreme leader claimed that "the Prophet had sent emissaries to all parts of the world, and that for Iran not to do so meant courting defeat and annihilation" (Bakhash, 2006: 251). On this basis, Iran normalized relations with West Germany and Turkey. Moreover, Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan founded the Economic Cooperation Organization. Simultaneously, Tehran began sending positive signals to some Arab and European states in order to gain more support during the conflict with Iraq (Czulda, 2014: 140). Nevertheless, the supreme leader himself and other high-ranking officials later began doing a lot to undercut this new policy.

Iranian foreign policy in the 1990s: the Rafsanjani era

At the end of the Iran–Iraq war Hashemi Rafsanjani was convinced that foreign policy should be insulated from domestic ideology. Said Amir Arjomand claims

that the future Iranian president was in opposition to Ayatollah Khomeini and declared “that the export of the Islamic revolution could be achieved not by violence but only by setting up a suitable model of development, progress, evolution, and correct Islamic morals for the world” (Arjomand, 2009: 136). Rafsanjani preferred to focus on practical needs of Iranians, especially in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war. He pressed for economic reforms and downplayed ideological doctrines saying “We cannot build dams with slogans” (Ramazani, 2010: 59). For this reason, as Mark Gasiorowski put it, Iranian foreign policy was contradictory in the first half of the 1990s. Although it maintained close relations with some parastatal actors like, the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran simultaneously continued making overtures toward the United States (Gasiorowski, 2017: 301).

According to Mohsen M. Milani, President Rafsanjani had ambitions to move Iran “further away from adventurism toward pragmatism” (Milani, 1994: 232). His concept of the Iranian foreign policy was based on three pillars, namely:

- The acceptance of Iran’s limited power;
- A rapprochement with Western states;
- And an improvement in relations with neighbouring states (Milani 1994, p. 232).

The question is whether Rafsanjani was successful. The answer can be seen as positive only to some extent. While he accepted Iran’s limited international power and improved relations with some neighbouring states, at the same time he failed to implement the rapprochement with the West. The Mykonos restaurant assassinations of Iranian-Kurdish opposition leaders in Berlin in 1992 overshadowed Iran’s relations with Western states. During the trial in Germany the former President of Iran, Abol Hassan Bani Sadr, testified that the attack had been ordered by President Rafsanjani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Rafsanjani also had to cope with factional tensions and focus more on internal affairs, especially those of an economic and social nature. The president did his best to please both reformists and conservatives, although such political strategy must have been doomed to fail from the very beginning. Besides, in the 1990s the financial situation of Iran was very complex and seriously limited its foreign activities. The Iranian authorities still faced the consequences of the Iran-Iraq war and had to cope with the US sanctions. As a result, Iran had far fewer financial resources for external actions.

Jalil Roshandel underlines the fact that President Rafsanjani left a clear message of reconciliation after his second presidential term ended in 1997. According to his vision, Iran’s foreign policy should be based on:

- The restoration of stability in the Persian Gulf region;
- Reintegration with the world especially in the case of global economy;
- Pro-activism in regional as well as global international organizations (Roshandel, 2000: 110).

It seems that before the 1997 presidential elections there had been only one candidate who had complied with the above criteria. His name was Mohammad Khatami.

Mohammad Khatami: a new approach to foreign policy

In 1997 the Speaker of the Parliament of Iran, Ali-Akbar Nateq-Nouri, lost the presidential elections to Mohammed Khatami who represented various reformist political groups. Khatami's presidency began with a very symbolic decision. Soon after the elections the president declared an opening in Iran's relations with the West, but at the same time he urged Western powers to respect Iran's sovereignty and dignity. The first sign of the rapprochement with the United States took place in 1998 when the US wrestling team was invited to Iran. For the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic American athletes were able to compete with their Iranian counterparts in Iran. What's more, the American flag was raised, and the national anthem was played (Alexander, Hoenig, 2008: 8).

The change was also noticeable in other cases. For instance, President Khatami opted for a two-state solution of the Middle Eastern conflict. According to Kasra Naji, "moderate President Khatami attempted to steer the nation into calmer political waters and declared that Iran would accept the two-state solution, ensuring the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, providing that Palestinians accepted the formula" (Naji, 2008: 143). Yet in this case he was opposed by the most influential figure, namely Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Nevertheless, at the end of 1990s one could say that reformists provided Iran a better position on the international stage. Iran's image improved, especially when Minister of Foreign Affairs Kamal Kharazi declared that Iranian authorities would no longer enforce Khomeini's *fatwa* against author Salman Rushdie (Verleuw, 2016: 135). Another hallmark of Khatami's presidency was his concept of the "dialogue of civilisations" which was contrasted with Huntington's concept of "the clash of civilizations" (Esposito, Voll, 2000: 625). Despite this, some scholars are very sceptical that this concept was successful. For instance, Ghoncheh Tazmini commented on the dialogue of civilisations as follows:

In order to bring Iran out of isolation and to attempt to normalize relations, Khatami needed a framework that consisted of multiple steps, processes, levels of involvement, stakeholders and issues. The dialogue did not go far beyond an exercise in rhetoric and conventional diplomacy.

(Tazmini, 2013: 96)

Suzanne Maloney summed up Khatami's presidency saying that his concept of foreign policy ended up in a failure due to resistance from the conservatives (Maloney, 2008: 9). Although the president intended to transform Iran into a friendlier and more open state, his efforts were doomed to fail. Undoubtedly,

due to growing international pressure, and the nuclear programme made Iran's position even more difficult.

President Ahmadinejad's foreign policy

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president for the first time in 2005. Shireen T. Hunter claims that Khomeini's legacy made a comeback during Ahmadinejad's presidency, after being marginalized during the Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies (Hunter, 2010: 28).

From the very beginning of his tenure, the Iranian foreign policy was often described as "the principlist period". Ahmadinejad's diplomacy differed from Ayatollah Hashemi's government reconstruction period, as well as from Khatami's government reform era. In the opinion of Vahid Noori, the main changes were:

best manifested by the excessive emphasis on the preservation and advancement of nuclear technology, turning away from the West and looking to the East, Muslim countries, Latin America and Africa; an intensified hostile attitude toward Israel, and innumerable international meetings.

(Noori, 2012: 128)

In addition to that, Mark Gasiorowski defined Ahmadinejad's foreign policy as aggressive in many ways (Gasiorowski, 2017: 303).

One can distinguish the main features of the Iranian foreign policy at the beginning of Ahmadinejad's presidency, namely:

- A confrontational approach toward the West in general and the United States in particular;
- Anti-Zionism;
- Closer relations with the Russian Federation;
- Tensions with other Middle Eastern states especially those with Shia minorities;
- Extensive support for militant groups such as the Lebanese Hezbollah;
- A closer cooperation with Afghanistan and Pakistan;
- Strategic penetration of Latin America.

Undoubtedly, regional developments at the very beginning of the 21st century were beneficial to Iran. The "war on terror" after the 9/11 attacks, the invasion of Iraq, and the war in Lebanon of 2006 served Iranian interests. These events led to regional resistance to the United States and Israel. In this case Iranian authorities were eager to seize the opportunity, especially to fill the political vacuum in neighbouring Iraq and Afghanistan (Juneau, 2013: 33). In the case of Iraq, the Iranian authorities increased their political and material support for the Shi'a majority in this country. Such actions led extremist Sunni groups to grow

suspicious about Tehran's true intentions and only deepened sectarian tensions in the region.

According to Sermin Przeczek, "President Ahmedinejad's foreign policy sat on two pillars. One of them was accommodating policy while the other can be named alliance policy" (Przeczek, 2013: 69). In her opinion, the accommodating policy was characterized by attempts to extend cooperation with the Arab world after the fall of Saddam Hussein and to limit the influence of external powers in the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. As for the alliance policy, Ahmadinejad sought close alliances with some powers and regional actors in order to avert a potential American attack.

There are also other approaches. According to Amir Haji Yousefi, Ahmadinejad's foreign policy could be summarized as follows:

- A confrontational and assertive nuclear policy;
- A new regional foreign policy;
- A new policy toward Asian states;
- Third-worldism (Haji Yousefi, 2010: 19).

Ahmadinejad intended to protect the regime from any external threats and deter Iran's enemies from any interference in internal affairs. His harsh and radical rhetoric was a useful tool in the process of the foreign policy implementation. President Ahmadinejad also realized that Western powers did not intend to share Iran's views on regional developments and was convinced that the Iranian state was a victim of a great powers' conspiracy. For this reason, Ahmadinejad wanted Iran to be self-sufficient and not vulnerable to any kind of external pressure. Although such an approach was utopian and devastating for the Iranian economy, Ahmadinejad highly ideologized Iran's foreign policy.

In the framework of Iran's relations with the West, it was noticeable that neo-principlists perceived the United States and European states as sources of threat rather than potential partners. They were convinced that Western powers intended to exert further pressure on the Iranian authorities and finally to overthrow the Islamic republic. According to Amin Saikal, "unlike Khatami and Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad adopted an assertive and frequently confrontationist policy attitude toward the West. In general, he pursued a policy of uncompromising isolation that led him to shun all foreign investment in favour of national self-sufficiency" (Saikal, 2016: 66). Such a negative attitude could have led to nothing but confrontation and disputes.

Instead, in the opinion of Maaike Warnaar, Ahmadinejad's foreign policy enabled Iran to take advantage of the political changes in the region, most notably in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as of the rise of leftist forces in Latin America. Closer relations with these countries were desirable and provided Iranians with more room for diplomatic manoeuvres (Warnaar, 2013: 177). Some analysts even began talking about the so-called Shi'a revival (Nasr 2016). This concept was based on three pillars, namely, the Shi'a dominance in Iraq, the rise

of Iran as a regional power, and the cooperation with Shi'a minorities in other Middle Eastern countries (Monshipouri, 2013: 63). Undoubtedly, President Ahmadinejad had high hopes for such regional developments, but he never saw the fruition of a Shi'a revival accomplished as his second presidential term ended in 2013.

On the one hand, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency ended up with a serious budget crisis, economic problems as well as international isolation. In addition, Iran had to cope with the consequences of the regional turmoil, especially in Syria. On the other hand, he managed to improve Iran's relations with Asian states and underlined the importance of national sovereignty and self-sufficiency.

Hassan Rouhani: a new opening

During the election campaign of 2013, Hassan Rouhani opted for a moderate agenda in foreign policy. He chose the "third way" which differed from Ahmadinejad's populism and Khatami's pragmatism. Rouhani advocated a new approach to Iran's diplomacy which was to be based on the following assumptions:

- Engagement in a new round of talks with the P5+1 group in order to reduce tensions with the international community, especially with the West, would strengthen Iran;
- Reduction of regional conflicts would increase the security of Iranians;
- Priority would be given to economic recovery at the cost of the national nuclear programme (Alam, 2016: 81).

Before the election Rouhani had promised to reduce expenditure on operations abroad, for instance, those related to the military engagement in Syria. Yet his administration did not decrease Iran's regional influence; on the contrary, it expanded Iran's influence in a very significant way in comparison with Ahmadinejad's attitude. Kenneth Katzman points out that after 2015 "Iran's armed support to Shiite-dominated allied governments, such as those of Syria and Iraq, and factions such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Houthi rebels in Yemen, and Bahrain militant groups, has fuelled Sunni popular resentment" (Katzman, 2017: 1). One should also mention the formation of Shi'a militias in Syria, for instance, Liwa Fatemiyoun consisting of Shi'a volunteers from Afghanistan. Obviously, such actions are in contradiction with Rouhani's declared objectives of 2013.

A bit of a different interpretation is represented by Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit. In their opinion, Rouhani's vision of foreign policy was based on three themes, namely "rebuilding the economy, resolving the nuclear issue, and ending Iran's international isolation" (Akbarzadeh, Conduit, 2016: 4). The three themes were directly linked. No sanctions could have been lifted in 2015 and 2016 if there had been no progress in the negotiations dedicated to its national nuclear programme. And with the sanctions system still in place, Iranians could not have counted on any improvement of the economic situation. These were

the main reasons behind Tehran's decision to continue negotiations with representatives of the P5+1 group to achieve a successful conclusion. Rouhani's administration, supported by the supreme leader, decided to act firmly from the very beginning. Its first diplomatic success came with the signing of the Geneva Agreement.

The Geneva interim agreement, namely the Joint Plan of Action of 2013, was a milestone for President Rouhani. Undoubtedly, this diplomatic breakthrough was a victory of diplomacy, a triumph of multilateralism and a multi-polar international system over unilateralism and military interventionism. The interim agreement had opened the way to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which was signed later in 2015. Yet its signatories had to face opposition in the United States as well as in some regional states, especially in Saudi Arabia and Israel (Saghafi-Ameri, Izadi, 2014: 5–30). In addition, President Rouhani and Minister Javad Zarif were criticized by the conservative faction. Although the majority of Iranians were pleased with the deal and perceived it as a chance for the economic sanctions to be lifted in the future, conservatives were ready to block any further talks.

Yet what had seemed to be a huge success in 2015 turned out to be a diplomatic failure in 2018. Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the JCPOA and reimpose sanctions on Iran seriously weakened Iranian reformists in general and President Rouhani in particular. The US sanctions affect not only Iranian-American trade relations, but above all damage Iran's economic cooperation with European partners like France and Italy. At the same time, regional conflicts intensified, and Yemen became the new frontline in 2015. Add to that diplomatic tensions with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates which complicate Iran's position in the region even further. The above elements undermined the 2013 vision of foreign policy and forced the Iranian authorities to change the course of their diplomacy. Undoubtedly, the conservative wing benefits the most from the current developments and may soon regain its position in the Iranian political system.

According to Sanam Vakil, the 2018 wave of protests throughout Iran was "the sign of Tehran's crisis of leadership. It is a crisis that has indicted all echelons of the state and all the factions that compete for power within it" (Vakil, 2018). Yet everything indicates that these protests were of an economic nature and do not signal a real will for a regime change on the part of the Iranian society. Moreover, the ruling elites are much better prepared for any social unrest than they were, for instance, in 2009. The violent government crackdown during the 2019–20 protests only proved that the regime is still ready to use excessive force in order to secure power – even if that means killing hundreds of citizens.

The current objectives are determined, to a large extent, by historical experience and ideological provisions. As Abbas Maleki and Kaveh L. Afrasiabi put it, the Iranian system "has evolved through two Gulf wars, the seismic effects of the Soviet Union's collapse, diplomatic alienation, and the United States subjecting it to the strains of comprehensive sanctions" (Maleki, Afrasiabi, 2008: 1).

Furthermore, Kayhan Barzegar is quite right in saying that the current foreign policy of Iran is based on defensive, pragmatic, and state-oriented issues (Barzegar, 2008).

One can distinguish a few key elements that are still noticeable in Tehran's actions. Manshour Varasteh identified five main security strategies which determine the current Iranian foreign policy. These are:

- Promotion of Islamic values;
- Islamic leadership based on the *velaya-te faqih* principle;
- Promotion of Khomeinism as a tool for protection of all oppressed Muslims;
- Support for various fundamentalist groups in Islamic states;
- Criticism of the West, especially of the United States (Varasteh, 2013: 10).

Conclusion

Whoever is or will be in power in Iran, will most probably pursue the above strategies. They secure the core interests as well as enable Iran to project power in the Middle East. If international leaders, including US President Donald Trump, intended to improve relations with Iran, they need to face the fact that Tehran will not change its regional strategy for a few short-term benefits. At the same time, it is obvious that the Iranian approach is unacceptable to Saudi Arabia and Israel. Any attempt to balance these two mutually exclusive issues may end up in a failure. The 1979 revolution created the Iranian *raison d'état* and for the time being nothing indicates that it may change in the coming years.

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PART III

Iranian foreign policy in practice

Selected case studies



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6

IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE PERSIAN GULF REGION

The Persian Gulf region has been the most important area for the Iranian diplomacy since the revolution. Yet it is nothing new in Iran's history. The Persian Gulf's location, as well as its political and economic potential, determine Iran's regional position. According to Kayhan Barzegar and Mohammad Reza Agharebparast:

since the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971, maintaining the security of this vital body of water has been of primary concern, both for its littoral states and for the western countries that acquire their energy from there. The Persian Gulf has witnessed a revolution, two major wars, and regime changes since the British withdrawal...Meanwhile, internal instability and increasing dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regimes are rendering the hitherto accepted tenets of security obsolete.

(Barzegar, Agharebparast, 2012: 8)

In addition to that, Lawrence G. Potter claims that "the Gulf has always been a key international trade route connecting the Middle East to India, East Africa, Southeast Asia, and China. Its orientation was outward, toward the Indian Ocean, and its society reflected this" (Potter, 2009: 1). The abovementioned opinions are just two of many which prove the importance of the Persian Gulf region.

One of the major issues is related to the official name of this water area. While Iranians insist on using the term "Persian Gulf", the Arab states refer to it as "the Arab Gulf" or simply "the Gulf". Although this dispute may not seem very significant to westerners, it is taken very seriously by state authorities in the Middle East. Hamid Dabashi may be right when he suggests with a wink that this area should be called by its real name, namely "the American Gulf" (Dabashi, 2016: 20).

At the same time there are some features which distinguish Iran from other states in the region. These differences have a substantial influence on its relations with neighbouring states. First, it is the only non-Arab state in the Persian Gulf. Second, Iran is dominated by Shi'a Islam. The Iranian state is often depicted as a guardian of Shi'a doctrine and a protector of Shi'ites outside Iran, for example, in Bahrain. Third, Iran is the only theocratical state not only in the Persian Gulf, but also in the whole world except for the Holy See. Fourth, all states in the region, excluding Iran, are member states of the League of Arab States (Potter, 2009: 15–16). Fifth, Iran is the only regional actor which officially uses the term Persian Gulf. All Arab states refer to the Persian Gulf simply as the Gulf or the Arab Gulf in order to underline the Arab dominance over the region and debase Persians (*The Gulf*, 2005: 9–22). Last but not least, it is likely that only Iran has undertaken experiments and research related to nuclear weapons. Although Iranian politicians deny the allegations and insist that all enrichment activities are intended solely for peaceful purposes, most of the international community, especially the West, does not share the Iranian point of view.

Iran and the Persian Gulf in the aftermath of the revolution

Iran's relations with the Arab states in the Persian Gulf region became strained and complex soon after the 1979 revolution. Paul Salem claims that the tensions began when Iran “declared Islamic revolutionary ambitions against the Western-aligned monarchies of the Arab world and in support of the dethroned. This immediately created an Iranian–Saudi conflict axis that persists to this day” (Salem, 2019: 12). Dilip Hiro refers to it as “the Cold War in the Islamic world” (Hiro, 2018).

Iran's neighbours were concerned with the new foreign policy of Tehran, especially the concept relating to export of revolutionary ideas. Although Arab monarchs did not have close personal relations with Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the idea of popular revolution and the overthrow of the king posed a serious threat to their rule. The first warning came with the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November 1979. The incident was motivated by the perceived oppression of the Shi'a minority in Saudi Arabia (Ulrichsen, 2011b: 67).

From the Arab states' perspective, the Iraqi invasion of 1980 was probably the best way to eliminate a revolutionary threat, because the Iranian authorities were fully involved in defensive actions. The conflict was also the most divisive element in Arab–Iranian relations in the 1980s. As Shireen T. Hunter described it, “Iraq's invasion of Iran and all-out Arab support for Iraq adversely affected Iranian–Gulf Arab relations and, indeed, Iranian–Arab relations across the board” (Hunter, 2010: 193). The conflict also led to a serious division in the United Arab Emirates because four of the seven emirates supported Iraq and three – including Dubai – adopted a more pro-Iranian stance (Ulrichsen, 2011a: 27). During the war, Iran lost thousands of citizens, mainly young men defending their country. Moreover, the eight-year conflict cost Iran around 645 billion

USD (Razoux, 2015: 574). This figure includes loss of oil revenue, damage to infrastructure, loss of industrial revenue, purchase of war equipment, and expenses related to war effort etc. All of the above elements resulted in a lack of mutual trust on both sides in the 1990s.

The Saudi perspective dominated the Arab-Iranian dialogue during this decade. According to Mohammad El-Sayed Selim, “one stable indicator of Saudi policy in Gulf security was the establishment of an Iranian-Iraqi balance in such a way as to prevent either country from dominating the Gulf area” (El-Sayed Selim, 2015: 496). But the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait forced Riyadh to modify its attitude toward Iran. Saddam Hussein turned out to be an unpredictable and dangerous ally. As a consequence, Saudi Arabia focused on the improvement of bilateral relations with Iran. The first steps were made during the Rafsanjani presidency.

Arab states in the region welcomed the election of Hashemi Rafsanjani with a sigh of relief. Saudi King Fahd even described him as a pragmatist. The new Iranian president wanted to cooperate with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states on many issues and gave up on the harsh rhetoric that had been characteristic of Khomeini. However, despite this improvement, “a latent threat still existed. Iran’s foreign policies were much less confrontational as it reoriented them to reintegrate itself into the international order” (Rubin, 2014: 101). But the bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996 and the alleged Iranian involvement in this terrorist attack put a question mark over Rafsanjani’s good will. However, some analysts blamed conservative circles rather than the president. In the opinion of Maximillian Terhalle, “the bombing indicated how the revolutionary zeal of the radical conservative faction could be applied against the thrust of the moderate president’s policy” (Terhalle, 2009: 573). Or, to put it more bluntly, the attack proved that Rafsanjani was unable to control actions taken by radical factions and parastatal bodies in Iran.

Nonetheless, Hashemi Rafsanjani was a respected figure in the GCC countries. The reactions of their officials after Rafsanjani’s death in 2017 are probably the best examples of such a phenomenon. Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar expressed condolences “signaling appreciation for a pragmatist who sought regional détente” (*Some Gulf Arabs*, 2017).

A real breakthrough for both sides, however, took place under the Khatami presidency. His conciliatory approach was very welcome in Saudi Arabia, which is the main reason why both states signed an industrial agreement in May 1998. They did not intend only to move toward a normalization of bilateral relations, Saudis offered Iranians their support in contact with the United States, some investments, and cooperation on oil pricing and engineering projects. Iran, in turn, was to help Saudi Arabia access new Central Asian states (Mason, 2015: 97).

The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, however, was not welcomed by the United Arab Emirates. The Emiratis feared that the Saudis would abandon them and “soften their overall position on the issue of the three islands [Abu Musa, Greater

Tunb, Lesser Tunb] occupied by Iran but claimed by the UAE” (Guzansky, 2015: 43). They remained very suspicious of Iranian activities in the region especially of Tehran’s support for Shi’ite groups. Some analysts claimed that although Khatami distanced himself from confrontational policies, he could not neglect Iran’s strategic objectives (Adib-Moghaddam, 2010: 70). Iran’s interference in the internal affairs of Lebanon was another divisive matter.

Khatami’s administration was not connected with the Iranian projection of power in the region, but with Tehran’s nuclear ambitions. The revelations concerning the Iranian nuclear programme, revealed in 2003, seriously undermined any perspectives for a constructive regional dialogue. President Khatami’s declarations that Iran had an inalienable right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes were not helpful. The Arab Gulf states were suspicious and accused Iran of a covert military programme. If Iranians acquired nuclear weapons, the regional balance of power would change dramatically. Iran denied all such allegations, but at the same time officially promoted the theory “that the northern countries have chosen to develop nuclear technology to maintain their domination over the south” (Delpech, 2007: 18).

Iran’s foreign policy in the Persian Gulf region under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Undoubtedly, the negotiation process related to the Iranian nuclear programme has become one of the most important issues, if not the most important one, in the Persian Gulf region since the beginning of the 21st century (Dobbins, Nader, Kaye, Wehrey, 2011; Fiedler, 2013; Gold, 2009; Patrikarakos, 2012; Davis, Pfaltzgraff, 2013; *Iran: the Nuclear*, 2012; Melman, Javedanfar, 2008). The lack of progress during negotiations between Iran and Western powers negatively affected the Iranian position in the Persian Gulf. Most of the Arab states were afraid of Iran’s programme and were concerned that it posed a serious threat to regional security. Despite the various Iranian cooperation initiatives that were undertaken during the rule of Ahmadinejad, this factor undermined Arab-Iranian relations between 2005–2013. Moreover, there was a risk of a new arms race in the region, although not all scholars agree on this. For instance, Michael Axworthy writes that “the supposed and often mentioned threat of an arms race in the Middle East was something of a chimera – Israel’s possession of a nuclear weapon had not prompted Saudi Arabia to acquire one” (Axworthy, 2013: 422). Nevertheless, the Iranian nuclear programme became the biggest obstacle to an Arab-Iranian rapprochement during the Ahmadinejad presidency from 2005 to 2013. These relations were characterized by a lack of mutual trust.

However, in the opinion of Shireen T. Hunter:

despite a much less congenial atmosphere, Ahmadinejad’s government demonstrated great eagerness to expand relations with Gulf Arab states.

For example, Iran offered a number of proposals for the creation of a security system in the Persian Gulf, including an agency to deal with regional security issues, and an economic cooperation council. Iran also urged expanded bilateral economic and other ties with the Gulf states.

(Hunter, 2010: 199)

This way the president combined his idealistic views with a very pragmatic approach towards the Arab states. Unfortunately, the international context was not advantageous for Iran. Its strained relations with the West made it impossible to improve relations with US allies in the region— for example, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, the Iranian authorities did their best to achieve this aim.

The most significant event in the framework of Saudi-Iranian relations was King Abdullah's invitation to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to visit the kingdom. The Iranian president accepted the invitation and visited Riyadh in March 2007. This gesture was analysed in detail by the world press, because Saudi kings only invite leaders of ally states. Thus, the event was interpreted as a demonstration of independence from the United States. At the same time, Ahmadinejad's visit was seen as a gesture of the good will of the Iranian authorities. Alidad Mafinezam and Aria Mehrabi claim that the progress would not have been possible without significant changes within the Iranian doctrine. In their opinion, Iranians had been distancing themselves from the military and revolutionary zeal since the 1990s, and this factor enabled them to improve relations with Saudi Arabia. Tehran even stopped questioning the Islamic legitimacy of the Saudi kingdom (Mafinezam, Mehrabi, 2008: 70). However, this new approach failed during the Ahmadinejad presidency and there were a few different reasons for that.

First, Saudi Arabia was – and still is – dependent on its close relations with the West in general and with the United States in particular, so the hostile relations between the United States and Iran negatively affected the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. Second, Saudi Arabia feared the Iranian nuclear programme and perceived it as a dire threat to peace and security in the Persian Gulf region in general and to its national security in particular. Although there was no evidence that the Iranian nuclear programme had any military component, authorities of most of Arab states in the region were convinced that Iran's real intention was to acquire nuclear weapons and dominate the Persian Gulf. Third, both actors took different positions on the so-called Arab Spring, which was an effort by some citizens to seek political and social changes in the Arab states after 2010. Iran and Saudi Arabia represented two different approaches, which was noticeable especially in the case of Bahrain and the case of Syria (Hokayem, 2013: 110–128), an issue which is still topical. For instance, while Iran backs Bashar Assad's regime in Syria, Saudi Arabia supports some opposition groups (Pierret, 2013: 248–249).

A similar opinion was represented by Simon Mabon who claimed that there were five conditions that had to be fulfilled in order to improve the nature of Saudi-Iranian relations, namely:

- The resolution of domestic problems both in Saudi Arabia and Iran;
- Religious tolerance for doctrinal differences;
- Restrained behaviour within the Middle East;
- Reconsideration of the US role in the region;
- A resolution of the Iranian nuclear programme (Mabon, 2013: 219–221).

Political opponents and critics of President Ahmadinejad, especially abroad, also pointed to his spiritual fascinations and religious idealism. Despite the fact that he always emphasized the importance of Shi'a Islam in politics and social life in Iran, some of his decisions related to the Iranian foreign policy were very pragmatic. In the opinion of Rouhollah K. Ramazani, the real question of concern was whether Ahmadinejad's ultra-conservative interpretation of spirituality and his reputation as an ideologue demonstrated that he was not pragmatic in foreign policymaking. Ramazani claims that the best way to verify whether he was pragmatic is to "examine his nuclear policy in detail which, contrary to conventional wisdom, showed that he was pragmatic to some extent" (Ramazani, 2010: 65). For example, Iran cooperated with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and continued the talks with the P5+1 group.

Arab states were concerned with Iran's military expenditures, which increased under the rule of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The increase was significant, growing from \$8.5 billion in 2005 to \$10.1 billion in 2010. Anoushiravan Ehteshami points out that:

Iran more than doubled its defense spending in the second half of the decade, in response to the rising hostility toward it, growing talk of a coordinated attack on its vital nuclear facilities and defense infrastructure, and of course the entrenched American forces on its two longest borders.

(Ehteshami, 2013: 231)

It should be underlined that if any coordinated attack took place, Americans would use their military bases and aircraft carriers located in the Middle East as well as the bases of their Arab allies in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. At the same time, they would be able to move their troops from Iraq to Iran; however, it is very likely that Iraqi Shi'ites would have attempted to block such military maneuvers.

Due to objective political limitations, Iran searched for economic cooperation. Under Ahmadinejad's presidency, Iran began trying to develop economic

relations with a few Arab states in the region especially Iraq and the United Arab Emirates. According to Abbas Maleki, Iran had been trying:

to design networking of oil and gas production and consumption in the Persian Gulf which is vital for all of the regional states. Initiatives like Iran–Iraq pipelines for both oil and products between Basra refinery in Iraq and Abadan refinery in Iran is one of them.

(Maleki, 2008: 99)

Yet Mahjoob Zweiri claims that at that time there were two main obstacles to the rapprochement. Iranians were very concerned with the US military presence in the region, especially in Iraq, and additionally a new political elite emerged in this Arab state (Zweiri, 2011: 117).

Iran's attitude towards the political changes in the Arab world, namely the so-called Arab Spring, is another important factor which has to be taken into consideration while analysing its regional policy in the Persian Gulf. The Iranian involvement in social protests in Bahrain seems to be the most representative case. The other issue is Iran's stance during the unrest in Saudi Arabi and Kuwait which appeared during the Arab Spring in 2011:

Characterizing the Arab upheavals as an 'Islamic Awakening', Iranian policymakers started to support indigenous and genuine democracy-seeking revolutionary movements and at the same time tried to keep it away from extra-regional influences. In both cases both inside and outside of the Persian Gulf region, Iran kept insisting on its traditional position against any intervention of intrusive forces.

(Soltaninejad, 2012: 131)

Although the Bahraini population is dominated by Shi'a Muslims, the ruling elites are Sunni. In the past, Iranian authorities often claimed that Shi'ites in Bahrain were oppressed by Sunnis and, on this basis, they interfered indirectly in the Bahraini internal policy (Alhasan, 2011; Marshall, 2003: 25–27). Any action directed against Bahraini Shi'ites was deplored by the Islamic Republic of Iran. The same phenomenon was observed during the social unrest in Bahrain of 2011. In this case both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia accused Iran of interference in the internal politics of Bahrain (Kamrava, 2018: 62). Under such circumstances, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad could count on a lack of any significant progress either in bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia or with Bahrain. Later it appeared that his successor, Hassan Rouhani, had to face the same problem.

Yet there was an internal political dispute in Iran in relation to the so-called Arab Spring. There was a difference of opinion between Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as to the sources of the political

change in the Arab states after 2010. Amid Mohammad Haji-Yousefi claimed in 2012 that:

While the Supreme Leader believes that the Middle East developments are inspired by the Islamic Revolution of Iran and are of an Islamic nature, the executive, particularly, the President withholds the opinion that the so stated developments derived from a U.S.-Israeli conspiracy aiming at dividing and undermining the Islamic world.

(Haji-Yousefi, 2012: 23)

Also, both politicians used different terms in order to define the process of change in the Arab world. Ayatollah Khamenei often referred to this process as the “Islamic Awakening”, while President Ahmadinejad used the term “Human Awakening” (Haji-Yousefi, 2012: 26).

In the opinion of Mehran Kamrava:

the discrepancy between the appearances of Iranian policy and its substance is primarily a function of the populist rhetoric through which most Iranian political leaders, particularly President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, enunciate Tehran’s positions on various international and regional issues. However, Iranian foreign and national security policies, both in relation to Iran’s immediate neighborhood and in the larger global arena, are influenced far more by pragmatic, balance of power considerations than by ideological or supposedly revolutionary pursuits.

(Kamrava, 2013: 104)

The question is whether such a claim is true in case of President Hassan Rouhani, who came to power in 2013. What’s more, had Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy been pragmatic in comparison with the new policy introduced by Rouhani?

The Persian Gulf under the presidency of Hassan Rouhani

In the opinion of Mahmood Monshipouri:

Rouhani’s victory in Iran’s 2013 presidential election is a clear protest vote against his predecessor’s management of the country’s relations with the Western world. Although Rouhani’s support for broader social freedoms, as well as his advocacy for women’s rights rendered him a favorite candidate for change, undoubtedly economic insecurity – caused by the imposition of sanctions by the Western world in reaction to Iran’s nuclear program – was a key factor in his victory.

(Monshipouri, 2013: 51)

As a matter of fact, Rouhani's administration did a lot in order to improve relations with the West. The best example of such rapprochement is the Joint Plan of Action signed by the P5+1 members and Iran on 24 November 2013 (*Joint*, 2013). The question is if the same *détente* can be observed as far as Iran's relations where the Arab states in the Persian Gulf are concerned.

Since the victory of Hassan Rouhani, Iranian foreign policy in the region has undergone significant changes and there is growing evidence to support this claim. Iran's recent rapprochement with Qatar could serve as one of the best examples of the reorientation in its foreign policy. On 15 March 2014, the Iran-Qatar first ever joint political committee convened in Tehran. The meeting was dedicated to further development of bilateral ties to bring both states closer and to support political dialogue. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, discussed with his Qatari counterpart, Mohammad Ibn Abdullah al-Ramihi, issues related to regional security as well as the humanitarian crisis in Syria (*Iran-Qatar*, 2014). For the first time since the beginning of the internal conflict in Syria in the spring of 2011, both Iran and Qatar agreed to cooperate on this matter. Such a declaration was meant to represent a major breakthrough in their official positions on the Syrian crisis. Iran still supports the Syrian regime, while Qatar backs some anti-Assad movement. For this reason, their will to cooperate on this matter could have been essential and could have resulted in a significant progress within the framework of Syrian negotiations between Bashar al-Assad and the main opposition groups. Yet the conflict seems to be very complex and even such Iran-Qatar cooperation is not enough to change the ever-deteriorating situation in Syria. Good relations with other important actors in the region are also essential and the Iranian president seems to share such point of view.

Although in the past Oman was the only GCC member state to enjoy good diplomatic relations with Iran, especially under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, these relations have recently been upgraded on Rouhani's initiative. Sultan Qaboos from Oman was the first official guest of President Hassan Rouhani following his inauguration on 3 August 2013. Another example of a *détente* in the Persian Gulf region was President Rouhani's meeting with King Sultan Qaboos in Oman on 12 March 2014. During their bilateral talks, the Iranian President "stressed development of relations between the two countries in all fields including energy, shipping, customs affairs, financial issues, environment, and tourism and maintaining Hormuz Strait security" (*President*, 2014). While leaving Muscat President Rouhani added that Iran "attaches great importance to ties with the Islamic countries, particularly the littoral states of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman due to significance of the strategic Hormuz Straight" (*Iran*, 2014). Iran-Oman cooperation is therefore crucial not only for both states, but also for the whole Persian Gulf, because of Iran's and Oman's joint control over the Strait of Hormuz as well as the Gulf of Oman. Any serious tension between these two states might result in a blockade of maritime transport

in the Strait of Hormuz and lead to a world oil crisis as it is the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean.

Rouhani also tried to improve relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, but his initiatives, at least so far, have been unsuccessful. Iran's relations with the most powerful Arab state in the Persian Gulf region have been strained for a long time for many reasons, most of which are political and religious. Saudi Arabia is commonly perceived as a defender of Sunnis while Iran is dominated by a Shi'a community. For instance, both Bahrain and Syria have been theatres of Saudi-Iranian rivalry since 2011. Yet in March 2014, President Rouhani attempted to improve relations with Iran's biggest regional rival. During the bilateral meeting with the new Saudi ambassador to Iran, Abdolrahma Bin Gharman al-Shahri, Hassan Rouhani declared:

Expansion of relations with neighboring Muslim countries particularly Saudi Arabia is a priority in Iran's foreign policy. Boost of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran can help halt unrests in some regional countries and prevent spread of sectarian violence in the region.

(Boost, 2014)

Undoubtedly, he is correct as far as internal tensions in Bahrain and the conflict in Syria are concerned; a lack of cooperation between the main regional powers will hinder any peace initiatives. The problem is, however, that there are some serious differences between Saudis and Iranians, especially in the case of regional instability post-2011. While Saudi Arabia perceived the so-called Arab Spring as a disturbing trend and a real threat to its survival, the Iranian authorities were convinced that these regional changes were partly modelled after the 1979 revolution (Keynough, 2016: 227). In addition, Iran is trying to take advantage of the Qatar-Saudi Arabia rivalry in the Persian Gulf. Its rapprochement with Qatar is the best example of such a new attitude (Lehmann, 2014).

Since 2016 the diplomatic crisis in Saudi-Iranian relations has further complicated the regional situation, such as when Iranians took to the streets after Saudi Arabia executed a prominent Shi'a cleric, Nimr an-Nimr. During the protests in Tehran, demonstrators attacked the Saudi embassy building. Soon after this incident Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations with Iran. After two years nothing indicates that the situation may change in the coming years. On the contrary, they have increasingly divergent interests in the Middle East. Both states do their best to project power in the region and to exploit local conflicts in Yemen and Syria to wage proxy wars.

The declared re-orientation in Iran's foreign policy was also vindicated by activities of the new minister of foreign affairs. After his nomination in 2013, Javad Zarif decided to visit all Arab states in the Persian Gulf region with the exception of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Undoubtedly, it was a clear sign that he attached great importance to reconciliation in the region, but with some reservations. In December 2013, the Iranian minister of foreign affairs visited Kuwait,

Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman (*Iran FM*, 2013; *FM wraps*, 2013). He also met Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Tehran on 5 December 2013. During meeting with al-Maliki, Zarif said that “both sides should do their best mainly in economic arena to meet the two nations interests” and at the same time he also “expressed regret over devastating terrorist moves in Iraq and Syria and said terrorism has turned into a rampant phenomenon which should be controlled” (*Iranian*, 2013). Terrorism appeared to be the main obstacle for the further development of Iraqi-Iranian relations, and the biggest challenge was connected to Iraq-based Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MKO) activities that posed a serious threat to internal security of Iran and its citizens.

A breakthrough took place in 2014. On 26 February, Mohammad Javad Zarif met with his Iraqi counterpart, Hoshiyar Zebar, and highlighted a growing need for further development of bilateral ties – especially political and economic (*Iran, Iraq*, 2014). The first step was taken when Iraq managed to force MKO to shut its base in Iraqi territory. Iran thanked Iraq for this decision, because MKO members had been held responsible for many terrorist attacks against Iran and its citizens (*Iran Thanks*, 2013). It should be noted that earlier, in 2003, MKO had signed an agreement with US forces in Iraq in which they agreed not to attack MKO members and vehicles (Varasteh, 2013: 89). Such action was clearly aimed at weakening the Iranian regime. As a result, MKO fighters were able to carry out attacks against Iran from Iraqi territory between 2003–2013. Thus, the 2013 decision of Iraqi authorities seriously limited their activities.

The situation changed significantly when the so-called Islamic State took over some Iraqi territory. This terrorist organisation also captured the city of Mosul in June 2014. In response to these alarming developments, Iran not only supported local Shi'a militias, but also sent some troops to neighbouring Iraq. There is no doubt that Iraqi citizens appreciated the Iranian help, but at the same time this military presence deepened the internal sectarian division. Additionally, the Iraqi government's relations with the United States became more complex. According to Brian H. Fishman, those Shi'a militias “were a double-edged sword; they offered key ground forces when the Iraqi army was in chaos, but complicated the United States' ability to confront the Islamic State directly” (Fishman, 2016: 213–214). That's the reason Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was replaced with Haider al-Abadi who was more pro-American and much less vulnerable to pressure from Tehran. What was good for the United States was certainly much less beneficial to Iran.

Conclusion

In sum, Iranian foreign policy in the Persian Gulf region has undergone significant modifications since Hassan Rouhani came to power in 2013. The better relations between Iran and the West, the greater the chance for Arab-Iranian cooperation in the Persian Gulf. Yet Rouhani still has to face the same problems and challenges as his predecessor, for example, in the framework of bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

Although Iran under the rule of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad maintained harmonious relations with Iraq and Oman, its relations with other Arab states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain remained strained. Ahmadinejad had intended to improve relations with the GCC states and had undertaken a few major initiatives but he did not succeed, ultimately due to the difference of opinions on the Arab/Islamic Awakening, especially in relation to the Syrian crisis, and the Persian Gulf states' fears of the Iranian nuclear programme. So far, Rouhani has managed to improve relations with Qatar. However, Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have been broken off. For now, nothing indicates that the situation may soon improve.

Is Rouhani's foreign policy in the region idealistic or pragmatic? Although President Rouhani seems to be more pragmatic in comparison to his predecessor, it has to be emphasized that it is still the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who has the final word on essential decisions relating to Iranian foreign policy. Elements of both idealism and pragmatism are noticeable in this case. As Rouhollah K. Ramazani points out:

the salience of the spiritual pragmatic paradigm over the past three decades since the Revolution has deep roots in Iran's diplomatic culture, defined as those values, norms, mores, modes of thinking and ways of acting which have developed over centuries as a result of Iran's diplomatic interaction with other nations. These attributes have survived change and have influenced generations of Iran's foreign policymakers and diplomats and their negotiating style.

(Ramazani, 2010: 75)

Yet it should be noted that the official rhetoric of Rouhani sounds more pragmatic and friendly than the radical rhetoric of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Last but not least, there will be no Arab-Iranian rapprochement in the Persian Gulf without a prior normalization of political relations between Iran and the West, especially with the United States. The Trump administration's policy fuels regional tensions as it sides with Saudi Arabia, and criticizes Iran in all international fora. The JCPOA could have become a real breakthrough, but after the withdrawal of the United States this project seems to be dead and buried.

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7

IRAN–SYRIA RELATIONS

The Syria–Iran relations in the 1980s and 1990s

Iran and Syria have been labelled as rogue states by the United States since the beginning of the 21st century. It is widely understood that both states have cooperated since the 1979 revolution. The reasons for this cooperation are of great interest to scholars. Their relations are of strategic, political, and economic nature (von Maltzahn, 2015). Some analysts point to the fact that their alliance began in the 1980s, namely after the Iranian revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. According to Jubin M. Goodarzi, it has been purely defensive since the very beginning. In this way, Syria and Iran responded to aggressive actions undertaken by Iraq in 1980 and Israel in 1982 (Goodarzi, 2006: 3). Anoushiravan Ehtesahmi and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, in turn, point to “the shared threat from contiguous Iraq and Turkey” (Anoushiravan, Hinnebusch, 1997: 87). Iran decided to cooperate with the Syrian regime, which at the same time was violently crushing an Islamist uprising. The Iranian authorities refused to offer members of the Muslim Brotherhood any shelter in Iran and stressed explicitly that they would not back Islamist groups in Syria. The reason for that was obvious; both sides had much more to gain cooperating than fighting each other.

Shireen T. Hunter highlighted the most important convergent interests in the framework of the Syrian–Iranian relations in the 1980s. Among the most significant elements were:

- The Syrian support for Iran during the Iran–Iraq war;
- Similar attitudes toward both superpowers;
- Similar positions on the Arab–Israeli rivalry in the region;
- Sectarian similarities related to Iran’s Shi’as and Syria’s Alawites;

- Iran's non-interference policy in Syria especially in case of Islamist movements (Hunter, 2010: 202).

During this period, both states cooperated on a number of issues. Hafez al-Assad allowed Iranians to send arms shipments for the Lebanese Hezbollah through the Syrian territory and permitted the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps to build a training facility in Zabadani. The Syrian authorities also criticized Arab states for supporting Saddam Hussein during the Iran–Iraq war. This led to the international community imposing an arms embargo on Iran and, to complicate matters even further, blocking the Iraqi–Syrian oil pipeline. According to the IRGC's commanders, Syria was to become "a stepping stone" in the process of revolutionary export to the Sunni Arab states. Some of them began calling Syria "Iran's 35th province" (Rezaei, 2019: 142). In return, Iran supported Syria – especially in its confrontations with Israel.

The case of the Lebanese Hezbollah was particularly interesting. While Iranian authorities used this group mainly to promote ideas of the Islamic revolution, Syria perceived it as a useful instrument to preserve its interests in Lebanon and at the same time exert more pressure on Israel. As a result, Hafez al-Assad could attack indirectly both Israel and members of various anti-Syrian organizations in Lebanon (Rabil, 2006: 78; Zaman, 2019: 277). According to Rafal Ozarowski, Hezbollah was dependent on Syrian–Iranian deals from the 1980s until the end of the 1990s. On this basis Syria accepted the organization's fundamentalist agenda while Iran recognized Syria's dominance in Lebanon (Ozarowski, 2011: 150).

All of these factors resulted in a very close political alliance between two internationally isolated states. There were, however, occasional tensions between Damascus and Tehran. Some of them were related to Iran's cooperation with the Palestine Liberation Organization – PLO. During the Syrian–PLO clashes in Lebanon, Iran had to prioritize its relations with the Syrian authorities. Iran's support for Hamas became of chief importance at a later stage, and complemented Iran–Hezbollah relations (Mansour, 2016: 213). The 1991 Gulf War became another divisive factor. Tensions arose when Syria tried to restructure the regional security framework after the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait. Syrians and Egyptians invited the Gulf Cooperation Council to negotiate and sign a document on security issues in order to decrease American military engagement in the Middle East. The Damascus Declaration, signed on 6 March 1991, was the first step toward the establishment of a common security system. On the basis of its provisions, Arab forces were to replace US forces in Saudi Arabia. Yet the problem was the agreement did not include Iran. Tehran perceived this initiative as offensive and aimed to contain its regional influence. President Assad tried to convince his partners that Iran should join the new security system, but without success. Such developments resulted in significant tensions between Damascus and Tehran. The problem was solved when it appeared that the GCC member states had no intention to discontinue US military presence in the Persian

Gulf region. In response to that, Syrian and Egyptian troops left the region in mid-1991 and the military dimension of the Damascus Declaration ceased to function. These new circumstances seriously affected Syria's regional position and undermined its security strategy. In the opinion of Bente Scheller, "in the absence of other options, withdrawing from the alliance with Iran would have exposed Syria to additional insecurity and was thus not an option for Assad" (Scheller, 2013: 157). He had to trust the Iranian authorities and develop their bilateral relations.

Iran and Bashar al-Assad: continuity or a new opening?

President Bashar al-Assad continues the policy of his father, Hafez, and tries to secure the dominance of the Alawi minority in Syria. No doubt this is one of the reasons why Tehran perceives him as the closest ally, not only in the Arab world, but across the whole region. As a consequence, any threat to his rule in Syria is interpreted by Iran as a direct threat to its national security. Even the incompatibility of their political systems does not constitute an obstacle to their close cooperation. In the opinion of Rafal Ozarowski, the supreme leader believes "that the alliance with Syria is of such importance that ideological and political differences should be of lesser concern" (Ozarowski, 2018: 189). The Iranian authorities' actions prove that.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad advocated for unconditional support of the Syrian regime. One of the reasons for that was connected to Syria's geopolitical location. The Iranian president intended to continue the help for oppressed nations, especially for Palestinians. Thanks to Syria's location, Tehran could exert more pressure on Israel and destabilize the situation in the Levant. The Syrian–Iranian alliance appeared to be decisive during the 2006 war in Lebanon. If Syria had not supported Iran, the Lebanese Hezbollah would not have received such big arm shipments, for example, anti-tank missiles bought by Syrians from Russia with Iranian financing (Harel, Issacharoff, 2008: 47). Maaïke Warnaar points out that President Ahmadinejad exploited his trips to Syria in order to meet leaders of Palestinian organizations like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as well as to hold consultations with the leadership of Lebanese Hezbollah. The Iranian president also offered his support for the Syrian regime after the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri. This Iranian assistance was absolutely vital and significant after Saudi Arabia and Egypt had withdrawn their support for Damascus in response to Hariri's death (Warnaar, 2013: 119).

When it comes to bilateral relations, Iran's support appeared to be particularly important after the assassination of Hariri. Soon after that, the United States imposed sanctions on Syria. President Ahmadinejad decided to visit Damascus under these circumstances. The main objectives of the 2006 visit were to ensure the survival of Assad's regime and to show the world Iran's unconditional support for Syria. Both Syrians and Iranians faced increasing international pressure and found themselves in hugely difficult situations. For this reason, in the same year

Syrian Defense Minister Hassan Turkmani and General Mostafa Mohammad Najar signed a defense pact. The signatories established a joint Supreme Defense Commission. But interestingly, “neither of the two countries pledged to protect the other in the event of an attack” (Saab, 2006). The lack of such a commitment was the best proof that Syrians and Iranians threw their weight around and the pact was not substantial.

The deteriorating economic situation resulted in social unrest both in Syria and Iran. Yet President Assad did not overcome the difficult situation in 2011 whilst the Iranian authorities had managed to crush the protests of 2009. The Syrian rebellion posed a serious threat to Iran’s national security and undermined its regional strategy. That’s the reason why Tehran has decided to engage in the conflict and has offered its support to the Assad regime since the very beginning of the Syrian civil war.

The Iranian position on the conflict in Syria

Iran, like other states in the region, was caught by surprise when the process of radical political changes spread across the Arab world in 2011. At the very beginning the Iranian authorities perceived the Arab Spring as an opportunity for an enlargement of their sphere of influence. That’s the reason why they supported social unrest and protesters in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia (Akbarzadeh, Conduit, 2016: 135). As a result of this, they hoped to replace unfriendly leaders in these states with politicians who are more sympathetic towards Iran and, in this way, change the regional balance of power. Yet nobody in Iran expected Syria to be affected with by wave of anti-governmental protests. Thus, the events of April 2011 forced Iranians to modify their perception of the Arab uprisings and adapt their regional strategy to the new circumstances.

In mid-2011, many facts indicated that President Assad could have lost power in Syria. Such a scenario would have been of a grave concern for Iran. In the opinion of Marc Lynch:

Syria was Iran’s only Arab state ally and the core of the Resistance Bloc. A serious challenge to Assad would tilt the regional balance of power against Iran more than almost any other conceivable development. Assad’s and Iran’s adversaries would use every instrument at their disposal to intensify and accelerate the Syrian uprising.

(Lynch, 2016: 105)

Without Syria, Iran would lose its geostrategic depth and the Resistance Bloc (often referred to as the Axis of Resistance) would be weakened. In this case Hezbollah and Hamas would remain the only allies of Tehran in the Levant. Some analysts claim, however, that since the 2003 war Iraq has become the greatest strategic priority. In this case, Syria remains a crucial ally, but at the same time it is only one of a few pillars of Iran’s regional policy (Phillips, 2016: 31).

However, there are many misconceptions and misunderstandings relating to the Syrian–Iranian political alliance – especially in the light of Tehran’s support for Bashar al-Assad. In 2016, Iran’s motivation still stemmed from strategic and pragmatic assumptions rather than sectarian or ideological reasoning. Iran intended to prevent any Western military intervention in Syria in an attempt to avoid a repeat of the Libyan scenario (Ostovar, 2016: 194–195). The main aim of the Iranian grand strategy is to lead the whole Muslim community in the world, not only Shi’ites. Kathleen H. Hicks and Melissa G. Dalton emphasize the fact that although Iran’s intervention in Syria was not motivated by sectarianism, the Iranian elites were sure that their state was seen primarily as a sectarian actor. Such perception has seriously limited Iran’s gains. There were also doubts concerning the brutality of the Syrian regime. There is no doubt that the ayatollahs did not want to be associated with any kind of brutality (Hicks, Dalton, 2017: 14). Tom Cooper also underlines the fact that, although Syria and Iran are not natural allies, Iran’s support for the Assad regime is motivated by the regional rivalry with the Sunni Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, as well as the need to guarantee support for Iranian proxies like Hezbollah.

The IRGC’s deployment to Syria resembled a commercial action rather than a military intervention (Cooper, 2015: 48). As long as Assad is in power, Hezbollah will have access to the Eastern Mediterranean. As far as the level of the Iranian military support is concerned, in 2016 the total number of regular forces (the IRGC’s soldiers and non-Iranian forces deployed or financed by Iran) was estimated at around 70,000 (Rafizadeh, 2016). According to such estimates, they outnumbered Assad’s forces in Syria. Additionally, it has to be noted that the death toll among Iran’s forces in Syria passed 1,000 in November of the same year (Sharafedin, 2016). Yet it appeared that the military intervention in Syria was much more complex and challenging for the IRGC’s forces and Shi’a fighters than expected. In the opinion of Farhad Rezaei, at the beginning the Iranian commanders were convinced that the Basij would be able to put down the Syrian rebellion as they had done earlier in Iran in 2009. But the circumstances changed dramatically after the civil war turned into a sectarian conflict. Even worse for the Assad regime and Iran, the Syrian Sunnis received substantial support from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and some other GCC member states (Rezaei, 2019: 145).

While President Ahmadinejad had been ready to support the Syrian regime, his successor preferred to reintegrate Iran into the international community and soften Iran’s position on the Syrian conflict. However, Hassan Rouhani soon realized how important Syria was for Iran’s national security. At the same time, however, the Iranian president changed the bellicose and incendiary rhetoric of Ahmadinejad and highlighted the importance of a political solution. Rouhani declared that such a peace agreement should be negotiated by all interested parties, including representatives of opposition groups (Akbarzadeh, Conduit, 2016: 140).

Although Iran did not intervene in Syria for sectarian reasons, its military engagement was perceived as such by the rest of the Arab world. It was a

desirable scenario for Sunni militants, especially members of al-Qaeda in Iraq. As a result, they found a pretext to establish a foothold in Syria (Zaman, 2019: 277). When the situation complicated even further with the proclamation of the so-called Islamic State in 2014, the Russian Federation came to the aid of Assad. Moscow had its own political and strategic interests in Syria, however, its military engagement benefitting both the Syrian regime and Iranian forces. According to Kenneth Katzman, the Russian military intervention in Syria has convinced Iranians that they can achieve their objectives. For this reason, Tehran tries to pursue these goals in the framework of negotiations involving Turkey and brokered by the Russian Federation (Katzman, 2017: 39). The invitation to the Astana process allowed Iran upgrade its regional position as well as prove that Tehran can play a constructive role in international relations. In this way, a country widely associated with its nuclear programme and power projection in the Middle East appeared to be one of the most influential peace-brokers. It is very unlikely that Iran will withdraw its support for Assad as long as he personally guarantees the protection of Iran's geostrategic interests. There were, however, some doubts about it when Iran signed the JCPOA agreement in 2015. Yet it soon appeared that although Iran changed its position on the nuclear programme, the deal did not affect Tehran's close relations and cooperation with Damascus. There were even fears in Israel and Saudi Arabia that Iran could "use the end of its economic isolation to extend its regional role. Iranians were expected to get around 100 billion USD of their frozen oil revenues returned" (Solomon, 2016: 295).

Due to the aforementioned reasons, Iran is very interested in the current political and military developments in Syria. In the opinion of Sam Razavi, most of Iranian policymakers believe that the Syrian conflict is a direct consequence of Western interference in the Syria's internal affairs. Such action is believed to be a part of a bigger plan to weaken the Syria–Iran alliance. Yet it should be emphasized that during the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad presidency there was a significant dissent on how to react to the war in Syria. While Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was advocating an unconditioned support for Bashar al-Assad, the president suggested a kind of compromise with the Syrian opposition which would enable Iran to maintain its influence in Syria in the case of any political solution (Razavi, 2013: 133). Ahmadinejad's tactics was simple, and its main aim was clear; whoever wins the Syrian conflict will need to cooperate with Iran and thanks to that Tehran will be able to secure *status quo* in the Middle East.

The Syrian conflict has also become a kind of proxy war between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in general and between Iran and Saudi Arabia in particular. For this reason, various sides in Syria have received support either from Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah, or from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf and Turkey (Micallef, 2015: 47).

Officially, Iran supports peace initiatives concerning Syria, like many other states, including Turkey. Yet Iran and Turkey have divergent and exclusive interests there (Bleek, Stein, 2012). Iran not only opposes any political change inspired

by Western powers or their allies, but also backs Bashar al-Assad and his allies in a very quantifiable way. According to Jean Pierre Filiu, the Iranian authorities do that without any clear conditions or requirements (Filiu, 2015: 202). At the same time, it is noticeable that this support is of political and military nature. Moreover, Iran provides the Syrian regime with intelligence information.

In 2012, Chief Commander of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, Ali Jafari, confirmed that al-Quds troops were engaged in various operations on the Syrian territory. This support proved to be crucial during the 2013 counter-offensive during which the regime forces managed to regain some territory, thanks to Shi'a fighters from Iraq and Lebanon (all of whom were recruited, paid, armed, and trained by Iran).

Al-Quds officers helped Syria to create the National Defense Forces (NDF) in 2012. This military group is organized in a similar way to the Basij formations in Iran and contains of over 50,000 volunteers (Djalili, Kellner, 2015: 386–387). Although Iranian authorities were denying any interference in Syria's internal situation except for political support for Assad, unofficially they were not hiding the fact that the Western and Turkish engagement in the conflict forced Iran to react. Moreover, a new threat appeared in the Syrian political vacuum. The establishment of Da'esh, a radical Sunni organization, was dangerous to all Shi'a Muslims in general and to Iran in particular (Atwan, 2015: 66–71). The so-called Islamic State has posed a deadly threat to Iran, especially since its successful military campaign in Iraq of 2014. The seizure of Mosul, the second biggest Iraqi city, was a clear warning for Iran. For this reason, Iranian authorities had no choice but to deter and fight against the *jihadists* of the so-called Islamic State. If there had been no military support for Iraqi forces from Iran and Shi'a paramilitary groups, the radical Sunnis might have seized Baghdad (McCants, 2015: 134). Last but not least, the Da'esh existence was the main reason for Iran to lose its land connection with Syria. As long as the so-called Islamic State controlled areas nearby Iraqi-Syrian borders, Iran was not able to take part in any large-scale military operations in Syria. Additionally, Iran was one of the reasons behind a split between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The Da'esh leader disavowed Zawahiri and accused him of being compliant to Iran (Byman, 2015: 121). It is a fact that Shi'a militias cooperated once with Sunni radicals in Iraq and fought against US forces, however, this cooperation was very pragmatic and short-lived (Bennis, 2015: 191–193). Later, Iran fought against Sunni organizations with all its means (Weiss, Hassan, 2015: 88–117).

It is undoubtable that as long as Bashar al-Assad is the head of the Syrian state, Iranian strategic interests are more or less secured. Syria plays an important role in a political formation which Mahjoob Zweiri calls "the Shia dimension" (Zweiri, 2011: 116). This dimension is formed by Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the Hezbollah-controlled part of Lebanon. The number of Iran's regional allies is very limited, so if Syria changed its political orientation and began cooperating with, for instance, some Arab states from the Persian Gulf, such decision would

undermine Iran's policy in the Middle East. For this reason, Iran accepted the growth of Russia's military presence in Syria. The stronger Bashar al-Assad, the better for Iran. Yet Russian–Iranian relations are not as good as could be assumed. Quite the opposite: they can be distinguished by the relatively high level of mistrust. What's more, while Russian air force attacks position various opposition groups, Iran assists the governmental army in ground attacks.

From a geopolitical point of view, the worst scenario for Iran was connected with a potential success of the so-called Islamic State in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Although this threat has been already neutralized and Da'esh has been almost entirely defeated, Tehran treats the phenomenon of the IS as a warning. As Olivier Hanne and Thomas Flichy de La Neuville point out, Iranians believe that the IS was created by takfiris and armed by the United States through Saudi Arabia in order to destabilize the Assad regime, divide Iraq, and take control over its oil (Hanne, Flichy de La Neuville, 2015: 145). Morgane Colleau adds that it is supreme leader's narrative believes that Da'esh was created by Western powers in order to create divisions among Muslims (Colleau, 2017: 97). Even if such accusations are not true, they are in line with hard-liners' expectations.

Conclusion

The current developments in Syria and Iran indicate that both states will continue to cooperate in the coming years. They are becoming increasingly isolated and the situation is beginning to resemble that of 2006. The Assad regime lost its legitimacy, as well as international recognition, soon after the outbreak of the civil war. Iran's status deteriorated when President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA and reinstated economic sanctions. This move forced European allies to follow the US administration and freeze trade agreements signed after 2015. Iranian society may be adversely affected by Trump's decisions very soon, and such circumstances can only result in a reactivation of "the Resistance Bloc".

Meanwhile, both Syria and Iran can destabilize the situation in the Middle East in order to defend their regional interests. No doubt Tehran and Damascus will do whatever they can to seriously limit Saudi, Israeli, and American influence in the region. The signing of the JCPOA in 2015 affected Iran's attitude toward its national nuclear programme but, contrary to expectations, did not result in any steady progress in Syria. Although the deal did not cover non-nuclear issues, some analysts expected Iran to change its regional policy and encourage Assad to end the Syrian conflict. Yet, contrary to popular belief, the Iranian authorities have not exerted any significant pressure on the Assad regime and have done a lot to preserve the status quo. According to Joseph Daher, Tehran has spent between \$16–48 billion on military and economic intervention in Syria (Daher, 2019: 197). The total cost is difficult to estimate precisely, but even this lower value is worth noting for now.

Bente Scheller is quite right in claiming that:

Damascus and Tehran have occasionally been at odds in their objectives, and the alliance remains unpopular with the public of both countries. However, it is the Syrian regime's only consistently cooperative relationship with a regional power...For Iran, the alliance with Syria is a core element in its regional strategy. It is therefore determined to avoid a toppling of the regime.

(Scheller, 2013: 151)

It seems that the situation can only change when President Assad dies or is removed from power. Such a power vacuum may jeopardize the Syria–Iran alliance, and any regime change in Iran and the resulting reorientation of the Iranian foreign policy are much less likely.

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8

IRAN–CHINA RELATIONS

Although China is a world power and its international position is much stronger than that of Iran, its leadership attaches great importance to cooperation with Tehran. Iran's geopolitical location, as well as very rich mineral deposits, make it essential for the implementation of China's grand strategy. The two states vary considerably at first glance, in particular, in their political and value systems. Nevertheless, the Iranian theocracy cooperates with China closely on a number of issues, and both states support each other at the international level. It seems that the most important issue Iran and China share, in the post-revolutionary period, is their anti-American attitude. According to analysts working for the International Crisis Group, "Chinese leaders see Iran's expanding regional role as useful to offset Washington's influence. China's support for Iran's government is also linked with its worries about color revolutions" (*The Iran Nuclear*, 2010: 9). The situation will probably further improved in the future, as both economies are becoming increasingly interdependent. In this context, it's important to pay attention to the latest Chinese project, namely the Belt and Road Initiative.

Bilateral relations in the 1980s and 1990s

Persia established diplomatic relations with the Republic of China in 1922. They were later cut off when Chiang Kai-shek's forces lost the civil war and evacuated to Taiwan in 1949. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi did not intend to recognize the newly established People's Republic of China. Iran, like the US and its Western European allies, still maintained diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan. It took almost 20 years to normalize bilateral relations between the PRC and Iran. The crisis in Sino-Soviet relations, which began in the 1960s, played a crucial role in this process. As Bates Gill put it, "Beijing increasingly saw Iran as a bulwark against Soviet expansionist aims toward the

Persian Gulf, and favorably viewed the Shah's efforts to become, with U.S. assistance, the most powerful military force in Southwest Asia" (Gill, 1998: 56).

Iran-China relations have generally been positive since the official recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by the Imperial State of Iran in 1967. The two states established diplomatic relations on 16 August 1971. In addition, Iran recognized the PRC as the sole legal government of China. In the 1970s there were a few high-level visits between the PRC and Iran. Soon after the establishment of diplomatic relations, Empress Farah Pahlavi and Prime Minister Amir-Abbas Hoveyda paid an official state visit to China. The last high-level visit before the fall of the shah took place in 1978 when Chinese leader Hua Guofeng came with his delegation to Tehran. Later, after the revolution, he was said to have apologized to new Iranian authorities in person for his ill-timed visit (Takeyh, 2009: 155).

The 1979 revolution also affected Sino-Iranian relations. Khomeini and his followers were very suspicious of states that had close ties to Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and although the success of the revolutionary forces dealt a blow to Iran's relations with China, the situation changed with the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. While both global superpowers supported the Saddam Hussein regime, the Chinese leadership provided Iran with substantial assistance. China supported Iran mainly to disrupt its relations with the West and the Soviet Union. According to some sources, Iran was receiving up to 70% of arms supplies from North Korea and the PRC around 1984 (Takeyh, 2009: 156). Iranians did not forget that after the war. For example, in 1989, during Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Tian Jiyun's visit to Tehran, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei expressed his gratitude to Chinese partners in the following way: "In cooperating with other countries, we prefer to deal with countries for which our nation does not harbor bitter memories" (Calabrese, 2006: 5). Although China had been neutral in the first phase of the conflict, later the Chinese leadership decided to provide arms to both sides. Between 1984-88, the Chinese sold Iraq weapons worth \$2.8 billion (Sassoon, 2018: 152). It became clear, however, that such action did not have a negative impact on China-Iran relations. The Chinese leadership went a step further. As described by Bates Gill, "during the year prior to the Iran-Iraq ceasefire in 1988, China acted as a go-between, hosting high-level delegations from Iran and Iraq in an effort to resolve differences between the two combatants" (Gill, 1998: 57). In addition, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan convinced the Chinese to strengthen ties with Iran.

Some analysts claim that since the Iranian revolution China has done its best to please both Iran and the US. In the opinion of John W. Garver:

prior to early 2013, Beijing sought to keep both sides minimally happy, and took the initiative only when China's commercial interests with Iran were threatened by Western-driven sanctions. In essence, Beijing sought to balance the relationship between Washington and Tehran.

(Garver, 2018: 124)

Due to economic sanctions and an arms embargo, Iranians were forced to purchase military equipment made in the Russian Federation and China. Iran ordered from China, for instance, anti-ship cruise missiles C-801/802 and fast missile boats (Juneau, 2015: 63). It also acquired missile technology which has enabled Iranian engineers to develop their own projects since the end of 1980s.

Iran and China in the 21st century

Some analysts claim that China was never seriously concerned about the Iranian nuclear programme. Such an attitude in the pre-JCPOA period had arisen from China being more occupied with issues in Asia, for instance, the North Korean nuclear programme. Iran was never considered to be among the top three targets of diplomacy (Mu Chunshan, 2013).

When the European Union imposed economic sanctions on Iran in 2012, President Ahmadinejad counted even more on Iran's partners in Asia. China and India played the most important roles. Even when Chinese investments in Iran dropped, Beijing began purchasing more oil (Warnaar, 2013: 79). Yet China–Iran agreements on nuclear cooperation were cancelled, because China did not intend to antagonize the United States (Takeyh, 2009: 157).

The positive official relations could not change the fact that not all Iranians supported the Sino–Iranian cooperation and China's regional strategy. The best example is the 2009 protests in Iran. Demonstrators accused Beijing of supporting Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and providing the regime with anti-riot gear and tracking technology in violation of international sanctions. Moreover, the Green Movement's protests coincided with the unrest in Xinjiang. The protesters were shouting "Death to China" instead of "Death to America". Some Iranian clergy backed the protesters and criticized China for the crackdown on Muslims in Xinjiang (Dorsey, 2019: 220).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious foreign policy plan announced by Xi Jinping in 2013, includes a central role for Iran. The Middle East, including Iran, constitutes a core part of this new Chinese \$1-trillion project, which is to link China with global markets. Andrew Scobell quite rightly points out that the region:

has become of greater importance to China than ever before. Indeed, Beijing now seems to perceive the Middle East as an extension of China's periphery as well as a zone of fragility. Moreover, China has become concerned about the stability of regimes in the region after being largely agnostic for many decades.

(Scobell, 2018: 9)

The more China is engaged in Middle Eastern disputes and conflicts, the higher the risk that it may be sucked into them. If that happens, the Chinese will have

to adopt a more proactive attitude toward regional problems. The question is whether China and Iran will have more convergent or more divergent interests. There is a high risk that Beijing's views may not be in line with Iran's regional strategy. It should be emphasized that Iran is already a regional power and it is very unlikely that it would reduce its influence in the Middle East to please China. It is worth recalling, by the way, that the same risks may appear in case of Central Asia (Fiedler, 2016).

Since 2010, political and social changes and turmoil in the Arab world (the Arab Spring) have changed the Middle East region in a very significant way. Iran has played a leading role in the ongoing regional changes and projects power in the Middle East. Iran has significantly strengthened its influence in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and, since the split within the Gulf Cooperation Council in June 2017, even in Qatar. From an Iranian point of view, the active participation and engagement in the BRI can only enhance its regional role. On the other hand, the BRI may help to solve some problems and eliminate some divisions in the Middle East. It goes without saying that cooperation and mutual interests are the best tools to improve political, economic, and security relations among any conflicted parties. According to Oded Eran, the BRI can become:

a catalyst and be of significant added value towards solutions when peoples and states have the will to solve their conflicts. For that, China as the leading and convening power, has to make the initiative concrete and it has to broaden the political coalition behind this colossal project.

(Eran, 2017)

In January 2016, during President Xi's visit to Tehran, the Chinese leader stressed the fact that China and Iran were natural partners to implement the Belt and Road Initiative. He also called on both countries to boost cooperation in infrastructure, interconnectivity, production capacity, and energy in the framework of the BRI (*Chinese President*, 2016). Ali Khamenei said in response that Iran would push bilateral cooperation to a new high. Soon after that Xi met President Rouhani and signed 17 multi-billion-dollar agreements.

Surprisingly, Iran was not represented at a high level during the BRI Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in May 2017. Although 29 heads of state and government arrived in China to meet and talk to President Xi, Iran was represented only at the ministerial level. Ali Tayebnia, the minister of economy and finance, headed the Iranian delegation. It should be noted that even Kenya, the Czech Republic, Argentina, and Chile sent their presidents to the meeting. The absence of President Rouhani was noticeable, especially as the president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the Pakistani prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, were present. It did not mean, however, that Iran was not interested in the project or that it would not participate in it.

Nevertheless, on the sidelines of the forum China's Finance Minister Xiao Jie openly declared:

Iran not only could participate in carrying out the plan within their borders, but they could also be a force to execute the New Silk Road vision in other countries. With Iran's combined effort, we will try to eliminate a number of burdensome international regulations that might disturb our financial relations.

(Iran's Role, 2017)

Minister Ali Tayebnia responded: "Iran's position in Xi Jinping's innovative plan to revive the New Silk Road is spectacular and ideal, therefore we intend to play an effective role in its implementation" (*Iran's Role*, 2017). The long-awaited details soon followed. The Iranian representative announced that his delegation signed agreements with more than 20 states participating in the forum to provide assistance in the implementation of various initiatives, including projects in such fields as energy, trade, and infrastructure.

The above declarations were both meaningful and very constructive. In September 2017, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, President Rouhani said:

About the Silk Road and the new plans that China has in this regard, we have talked about this issue several times with president Xi Jinping and Iran is willing to have its share and cooperation in this plan. The new Silk Road can be beneficial for economic interests of all countries that were a part of this road. We welcome this plan and we have discussed with Chinese authorities in this regard and we have plans about it.

(Gao, 2018)

This declaration dispelled initial doubts and confirmed Iran's commitment to the Belt and Road Initiative.

Iran's current relations with the PRC can be described as positive and constructive. Yet their political cooperation is seriously limited by a lack of common ideological values and objectives. A long lasting and true alliance between a communist state and a theocratic republic sounds very unrealistic. Nevertheless, they still cooperate. PRC-Iran relations are becoming increasingly complex and dynamic. Such a pragmatic alliance is a result of the political pressure from the West as well as economic necessity. Both the Chinese and Iranians perceive the American presence in Asia as an existential threat to their national security. For this reason, the PRC and Iran undertake activities which aim to limit the US sphere of influence in the Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia, and South-East Asia. That's also the main reason their policies are also attractive to the Russian Federation. This powerful political trio has an almost unlimited

political potential to block any American or any other Western initiatives in Asia. Moreover, China sells military equipment to Iran and they cooperate on a number of security issues. For instance, the 17th Escort Fleet of the Chinese navy visited Iran in 2014 (*China's Foreign*, 2015: 205).

The sources of cooperation: economic aspects

Trade between China and Iran in 1978 was 20 times greater than in 1971 (Huwaitdin, 2002: 159). The revolution in Iran, as well as the Iran–Iraq war, slowed trade in the 1980s. In 2016 both sides traded commodities worth over \$50 billion (*Iran–China Trade*, 2017). It is beyond belief that the current Iranian government intends to increase trade with China to \$600 billion by 2026 (Hsu, 2016). By doing this, President Rouhani aims to boost trade with the Chinese by about 1,000% compared to 2016 (Mollman, 2016). Yet such a high increase in bilateral trade turnover seems unrealistic, at least for the time being, and there are many obstacles that must be removed in order to achieve such an ambitious economic goal.

John W. Garver claims that “Iran, along with Pakistan, plays an increasingly important role in providing western China access to the oceanic highway of the global economy. Economic and strategic factors converge here” (Garver, 2006: 288). For this reason, it is hard to imagine any success of the BRI project without active Iranian participation, especially from the geopolitical perspective. Given the very volatile situation in Afghanistan, China would lose the only land route for the so-called Southern Corridor of the BRI as well as the connection between Central Asian states and the Middle East in general and, in particular, with the Persian Gulf region, if Iran did not participate in the project.

As far as economic sanctions and their implications are concerned, John W. Garver claims that although US–China relations are the core element of China’s foreign policy, “the evidence does not suggest that China’s support for the Islamic Republic of Iran between 2003 and 2011 has seriously injured Sino–American cooperation” (Garver, 2016: 202). What’s more, international sanctions imposed on Iran helped China to strengthen its position in this Middle Eastern state. For instance, in 2011 Iran’s crude oil export to China constituted 21% of Iran’s oil exports. The People’s Republic of China was then Iran’s second most important trading partner. In 2014, after the EU had imposed its sanctions, China became the biggest importer of the Iranian crude oil and its share of Iran’s oil exports rose to 45% (*Iran’s Key*, 2018). Moreover, Thomas J. Christensen underlined the fact that although China did its best to comply with the UN sanctions, the Chinese did not propose any unilateral measures against Iran. To the contrary, the Chinese diplomats tried to ensure that the sanctions would not harm the Iranian banking system or enterprises heavily involved in the energy sector (Christensen, 2015: 133). Although China did not play any leading role in the P5+1 talks on the Iranian nuclear programme, it possessed a clear economic advantage over its competitors, especially the Western enterprises (Fiedler, 2013). Over time, some

analysts even began to praise China for its constructive approach during the negotiations. In this context, Shirzad Azad claims that:

in addition to applauding China's minimal, rather insignificant role during nuclear negotiations, many in the international media and policy circles ran reports and news stories about an imminent Chinese surge in Iran in the aftermath of the deal. They discussed why Western companies could now have a really tough time returning to Iran and successfully rivaling their Chinese and other Asian counterparts in the lucrative Iranian market.

(Azad, 2017: 78–79)

The explanation of this phenomenon seems to be quite obvious. The PRC did a lot to support Iran when the international community-imposed sanctions on the country. The opinion of John Calabrese adds another dimension to the above reasoning. He argues that:

the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions against Iran has removed a major obstacle to the broadening and deepening of China–Iran relations while supplying fresh impetus to Beijing's aim of integrating the Middle East into its ambitious BRI initiative. Iran could serve as a critical nodal point in this evolving transport network.

(Calabrese, 2018: 174–175)

China was already the most important trade partner of Iran; now its position can only become stronger.

The first noticeable event in the framework of the BRI took place in February 2016 when the first direct train from China arrived in Iran. This cargo train completed the whole route from Zhejiang to Tehran. It took around 14 days, which is 30 days less than the maritime voyage would have taken.

Iran, for its part, is intent on becoming a regional rail hub, seeing Chinese trains continue on to Europe via its territory. Tehran also has the potential to link up with the trans-Caspian transit route being touted by Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine as another way to Europe.

(Putz, 2016)

There are still, however, some significant obstacles. One is related to border controls. Iran should start a custom harmonization process with its neighbours to ease the passage of goods through borders. Moreover, Central Asian states and Iran should find solutions to some technical issues, especially differing train gauges. While the Chinese and Iranian systems are based on standard-gauge railway, namely 1435 mm, Central Asian states have broad-gauge railways – 1520 mm. For this reason, bogies have to be changed twice during a single journey from Shanghai to Tehran.

There are also some competing projects. The most striking one deals with new ports in the Indian Ocean. Iran favours the further development of one of its main ports, namely Chabahar. It is the only oceanic port in Iran. Opened in 1983, Chabahar serves as the gateway to the markets and the energy routes of Central Asia and the Middle East. One of its main functions is to connect the Indian Ocean with transportation hubs in Afghanistan, as well as in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, for instance, Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan.

One of the main supporters of the development of Chabahar is India. Thanks to its existence, Indian enterprises have access to Afghanistan and post-Soviet republics of Central Asia, bypassing its archrival – Pakistan. If there were no port investments in Iran, India would not have any access to Central Asia due to the ongoing border disputes and tensions with Pakistan.

At the same time, the Chinese government has been increasingly investing in its flagship project in Pakistan – Gwadar Port, which constitutes a significant element of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). For the moment, it is very unlikely that China or Iran will stop promoting and building up their ports and such divergent attitudes may lead to future economic competition or even disputes. It is worth reiterating here that Gwadar Port is located nearby the Iran-Pakistan border.

Meanwhile, one should emphasize the fact that by 2015 China had become Iran's biggest trading partner, its number one foreign investor, and the main importer of Iranian oil (Kamrava, 2018: 63).

Conclusion

What's the future for the Iran–China political relations? Manochehr Dorraj writes that:

future Sino–Iranian relations will likely be influenced by two predominant factors. The first one is linked to China's grand global strategy and its implications for the Middle East. The second is linked to Iran's prerogatives in a post-sanctions world and the possibility of détente with the United States.

(Dorraj, 2016: 212–213)

Undoubtedly, China will not abandon its flagship BRI project, in which the Middle East plays a key role (Alterman, 2017: 15). A rapprochement between Iran and the United States seems highly unlikely.

Undoubtedly, the Belt and Road Initiative creates new opportunities for the PRC and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and both partners have complementary political, as well as economic interests, in making this happen. Iran has been trying to limit the US presence in the region since 1979 which has been in line with Beijing's foreign policy objectives. It is clear that the BRI's role is not only to

promote cooperation, peace, and trade in Eurasia, but also to limit the American sphere of influence as well as US naval superiority.

It goes without saying that the BRI may positively affect Iran–China relations. Iran should maintain a constructive approach towards the BRI, both in case of the construction and its future operation. China can only benefit from this cooperation, especially with regard to imports of fossil fuels and exports of industrial products to Iran. Additionally, Iran’s geopolitical position enables China to exploit existing trade routes connecting Central Asian states with the Persian Gulf region and to create new transport corridors, with particular reference to the so-called Southern Corridor of the BRI, which is to cross Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, and the Balkans.

Jonathan Hillman points out that “the BRI’s roster may seem long at roughly 70 participants, but that still leaves about 125 countries that have not joined. Ultimately, the BRI’s longer-term political impacts hinge on its execution and its economic performance” (Hillman, 2018). As long as there is no complete network of roads, railways, cargo hubs, and new harbors, the BRI still remains a kind of promise rather than a concept written in stone. Some of the planned routes, especially the Southern Corridor running through Iran, may never leave the drawing board. All main routes must go through potential conflict areas in Central Asia and the Middle East. There is a high risk that China may be sucked into regional disputes and conflicts, in which Iran is already engaged. If that’s the case, Beijing will not be able to apply its traditional strategy of non-interference in the internal affairs of its partners including Iran, and China has to face the new American strategy in the region. James Dorsey is right in stating that:

Trump’s hard line toward Iran reinforced Chinese perceptions that U.S. hostility toward the Islamic republic was driven by a determination to prevent the rise of a regional power that refused to bow to America’s dictate rather than a desire to secure the flow of oil and prevent nuclear proliferation.

(Dorsey, 2019: 62)

Undoubtedly, this belief brings the People’s Republic of China even closer to Iran as both states share views on the US-led international system, US strategy in Asia, and the need for the establishment of a new international order. Tehran perceives Beijing as a counterweight to Washington in global affairs and a partner who will not allow Americans to freeze Iran out.

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9

IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA

An overview of Iran's attitude towards Central Asia in the post-Cold War period (1991–2005)

Central Asia has been traditionally dominated by Russians (Petersen, 2011). Yet the situation changed with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the establishment of five independent states (Naji, 2008: 142). These events opened up new opportunities for other regional players, for instance, Turkey, China, and Iran. At the very beginning of the 1990s, many analysts and scholars believed that Iran could become a kind of regional *gendarmarie*, because it possesses the longest coastline and is a strategic bridge between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf (Marshall, 2003: 152). In this context, Abbas Maleki points out that the dissolution of the Soviet Union drew attention of political elites in Iran to the country's strength as well as its geopolitical location in Eurasia (Maleki, 2011: 78–79). Kaveh L. Afrasiabi also claims that “Iran created expectations related to the emergence of a new regional order with regard to the promotion of peace and prosperity” (Afrasiabi, 2011: 197). However, not all analysts were so optimistic. For instance, in the opinion of Shireen Hunter:

with the Soviet Union's disintegration, Iran's importance as a buffer state faded. Its delicate strategic position between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea and its vast, albeit unrealized, potential became more of a liability than an asset. Both principal international actors and regional powers came to see Iran as a potential barrier to the achievement of their own ambitions or as a rival for influence in the post-Soviet space.

(Hunter, 2003: 136)

Notwithstanding these difficulties and challenges, the Iranian authorities decided to achieve their strategic objectives in Central Asia. They began this process with

diplomatic efforts. The first step undertaken by ayatollahs was connected with the opening of the Iranian embassies in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan in 1991. However, further political and ideological expansion in the region was much more complex and difficult than expected – even in Tajikistan with which Iran shares history and language (Jonson, 2006).

Bartosz Bojarczyk claims that the initial strategy of Iran towards Central Asia was divided into three stages. First, Iranians attempted to export “revolutionary ideas” to promote post-Soviet Islamization of the region. Later, similar to Turkey, Iran tried to emphasize the role of historical and civilizational connections with Central Asians. When these two approaches failed, Iranian authorities decided to focus solely on economic cooperation (Bojarczyk, 2008: 154–155).

Undoubtedly, the creation of five new states in Central Asia that had been part of the Soviet Union (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan) opened up new opportunities for Iranian authorities. However, Russia did not intend to withdraw from the region. Moreover, new opportunities attracted other external players such as Turkey, the United States, and the People’s Republic of China. For this reason, Tehran was forced to take all of these circumstances into consideration when preparing a new strategy towards the region. From a political perspective, Iran could cooperate closely with Russia and China in order to limit American influence in the region (Ahrari, 2001: 453–466). The other option would involve various forms of economic integration. According to Kaveh Afrasiabi:

it seems as though the Iranian idea of building confidence through economic links had not overcome distrust by the mid-1990s and that distrust prevailed. Furthermore, the economic exchanges remained on a relatively low scale. These two reasons contributed to turning some of its attention to the new markets in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

(Afrasiabi, 2011: 176)

At the invitation of Iran, the five former Soviet republics joined the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in 1992. On the basis of their accession, the members who founded the ECO in 1984 (Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan) intended to establish a stable and secure sphere of influence in the region. Iran invested more in its domestic road and railway infrastructure in the 1990s. As a result of new projects, Iranian authorities increased their transit revenues. The construction of new routes connecting Iranian ports with Central Asia created new opportunities of both political and geopolitical significance. Among them, for instance, was a new rail link that connected the Iranian city of Mashhad with Tejen in Turkmenistan. This link became Central Asia’s gateway to the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, at the very beginning of the 21st century, China and Russia managed to significantly limit both Turkish and Iranian influence in the region with the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). All

five Central Asian states joined the SCO. As of 2018, Iran still has only observer status and its position in Central Asia has weakened as far as prospects for economic integration are concerned. Tehran is still seeking SCO membership. According to Shahram Akbarzadeh:

Iran's eagerness to join the SCO may appear to contradict its self-promoted image as the champion of Muslim interests, but in reality it sits nicely within its overarching enmity for the USA. Indeed, the SCO is seen as a geopolitical counterweight to the United States. For Iran, this geopolitical opportunity overrides ideological imperatives, with the gap between ideology and geopolitics most evident under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

(Akbarzadeh, 2015: 88)

In the post-Cold War period, Iran shared some priorities in Central Asia with the Russian Federation. Mark N. Katz mentioned among them:

- A common desire to limit American influence;
- A common desire to limit Turkish influence in the region;
- A common desire to prevent secession in the region;
- A common fear of Sunni Islamic fundamentalism (Katz, 2006: 219–222).

One of the key issues in Iran's relations with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan were disputes related to the Caspian Sea legal regime in the post-Soviet era. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, both Iran and the Russian Federation claimed that the Caspian Sea had a legal regime based on two bilateral treaties, namely of 1921 and 1940. The Soviet Union and Iran classified the Caspian Sea as a lake and divided it into two zones. Natural resources were to be commonly shared. The situation became more complex with the emergence of new states such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan. Their authorities stated that these treaties had been signed by Russia/the Soviet Union and Iran, and therefore they did not concern them. In the opinion of Rasoul Mousavi, in the 1921 and 1940 treaties "there is no mention of the Caspian Sea's surface, seabed and resources. Hence, the littoral states define the division or demarcation based on their own national interests" (Mousavi, 2008: 32). What's more, countries interested in the region include not only littoral states, but also states seeking access to its resources such as, for example, the United States, the People's Republic of China, Turkey, India, Pakistan, and EU member states (Chapman, 2011: 58). Unavoidably, such a situation must result in legal disputes and incidents.

In 1996, the then President Rafsanjani "hoped for Gulf investment in Iran and suggested that Iran could become the biggest market for Saudi industrial products as well as a bridge for Saudi goods to Central Asia" (Chapman, 2011: 144). Yet the Iranian strategy in Central Asia was a hostage to US-Iran relations. As

Hunter points out, the United States in particular did a lot to prevent Iran from establishing any close relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus. Later, this policy resulted in Iran's isolation on the basis of President Clinton's strategy of "Dual Containment", which became one of the key elements of the US strategy towards the region and was connected to the establishment of American military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Hunter, 2003: 134). Of course, such proximity of US military troops was perceived as a threat in Iran. For this reason, Iranian authorities welcomed the closure of the last US military base in Manas in Kyrgyzstan in 2014 with a sigh of relief (Pillalamarri, 2014). Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan was used by US Air Force and Marine Corps only between 2001 and 2005 (Clarke, 2009: 183–185).

Some analysts are very pessimistic and critical in relation to Iran's achievements in Central Asia in the 1990s. According to Robert D. Kaplan:

Iran's geography, as noted, gives it frontage on Central Asia to the same extent that it has on Mesopotamia and the Middle East. But the disintegration of the Soviet Union has brought limited gains to Iran, when one takes into account the whole history of Greater Iran in the region.

(Kaplan, 2012: 276)

Iranian foreign policy towards Central Asia under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Did any positive change take place during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency? President Ahmadinejad and his administration were often unable to sacrifice ideational rhetoric for gains within the official foreign policy. In 2008, during the first term of Ahmadinejad's presidency, Mohammad Reza Dehshiri and Mohammad Reza Majidi wrote:

Islam forms the dominant ideological discourse of Iranian foreign policy. Regional and international equations, as well as identity factors, also have great impacts on Iran's foreign policy. Meanwhile, identity – as viewed in constructivism – takes precedence over national interest and is socially constructed...This identity is the outcome of the integration of ancient Persian civilization with Shiite Islam, making it both historical and religious.

(Dehshiri, 2008: 102–103)

The result of such an idealistic strategy was obvious. According to Maryam Panah, the Iranian approach to international relations, especially the persistence of the so-called revolutionary foreign policy, must have resulted in tensions and the isolation of Iran in the international system (Panah, 2007: 158). The international community, encouraged by the United States, began imposing political as

well as economic sanctions on Iran, believing that Iran (led by ideational leaders) posed a serious threat to international peace and security.

The Iranian position on the nuclear programme was not flexible, and without any significant progress during the P5+1 talks, Iranian foreign policy remained seriously limited. As a result, international sanctions became the main obstacle for the further development of Iran's relations with Central Asian states, especially in case of trade and investments.

However, some analysts claim that an unambiguous evaluation of Ahmadinejad's foreign policy is simply impossible. Eric Wentz underlined the fact that, according to many analysts, President Ahmadinejad side-lined Iranian pragmatists who tended to criticize him for his harsh and offensive rhetoric. At the same time, however, many conservative clerics and politicians "saw him as surrendering Iran's rightful strategic interests" (Wentz, 2015: 31). Ali Rahnema also noticed that "at times, he used Khatami's inclusivist discourse, reaching out to the international community, and at other times, he relied on an exclusivist discourse" (Rahnema, 2011: 36). Yet, various facts prove that Ahmadinejad's approach toward Central Asia was rather pragmatic. In 2010 Shireen T. Hunter presented a list of factors which affected the Iran's policy toward Central Asia at that time. She mentioned the following aspects:

- The primacy of security;
- The economic dimension;
- The Russian policy towards the region;
- The lack of "ideological connection with central Asia's Islamist movements";
- Limited symbolic and ideological significance of Central Asia from the Iranian point of view;
- The lack of significance of the region for the Iranian regime's legitimacy;
- The domination of local movements supported by Arabs, Afghans, and Pakistanis (Hunter, 2010: 174–175).

As far as the economic dimension is concerned, Iran continued to import gas from Turkmenistan, although it had its own huge gas deposits. According to Abbas Maleki, this was mainly because Iran could process gas and then export it as electricity or other forms of energy to other states, in addition to using it to satisfy domestic demand (Maleki, 2011: 98). Some of this gas was exported to Turkey. In 2012, Iran exported around 670 million cubic feet to Turkey and imported around 770 million cubic feet from Turkmenistan (Cordesman, 2014: 54).

Nevertheless, the total trade turnover with Central Asian states remained relatively low. According to the EU's list of Iran's major trade partners in the period between 2008 and 2012, Kazakhstan ranked 19th, Turkmenistan was 24th, Tajikistan 31st, and Uzbekistan was 40th (*Iran-EU*, 2006). Kyrgyzstan was not even ranked among the top 50 trade partners. Under the presidency of Ahmadinejad, Iran was the main investor in Tajikistan in 2010 and the second

biggest after China in 2011. Iranian Foreign Direct Investment in this Central Asian state amounted \$65.5 million in 2010 (*Iran-EU*, 2006).

However, despite cultural links between Iran and Tajikistan, their political relations under the presidency of Ahmadinejad were very complex. Some analysts, for instance Morteza Mahmoudi, specified the main tasks that could have been undertaken by Iran to improve the situation. He suggested developing cultural convergence, preventing the formation of challenges, correction of misunderstandings about Iranian culture, a quest for confidence building, and emphasis on the bilateral cooperation (Mahmoudi, 2007: 43). The problematic nature of Iran-Tajikistan relations was the best illustration of the political weakness of Iran's political position in the region under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

President Rouhani and Iran's attitude towards Central Asia: continuity or change?

Soon after Hassan Rouhani's electoral victory in 2013, a newly appointed minister of foreign affairs, Javad Zarif, declared:

Rouhani's foreign policy platform was based on a principled, sober, and wise critique of the conduct of foreign relations during the preceding eight years under the previous administration. Rouhani promised to remedy the unacceptable state of affairs through a major overhaul of the country's foreign policy...This vision aims to move Iran away from confrontation and toward dialogue, constructive interaction, and understanding, all with an eye to safeguarding national security, elevating the stature of Iran, and achieving long-term comprehensive development.

(Zarif, 2014: 7)

Such a declaration was a good message for neighbouring states including Central Asian countries. But what about actual actions of the new president and his administration?

The main change under the presidency of Rouhani has been a softened rhetoric. Since 2013, Iranian foreign policy has been less ideational and more pragmatic. Talks relating to the Iranian nuclear programme became the key to all other issues. President Rouhani and his aides, especially Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif, understood well that the lack of progress would bring the negotiations to a halt, and if the Iranian authorities had not ensured the success of nuclear negotiations in 2015, they would not have been able to modify Iranian foreign policy and stimulate cooperation between Iran and its partners including the Central Asian countries. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), agreed to in 2015, became the first step towards the lifting of economic sanctions and opening new opportunities for both sides. Obviously, such a change would not have been possible without the political support of the Supreme Leader, Ali

Khamenei, but it was the Iranian president who became personally responsible for the decision and its consequences. This way Rouhani was to guarantee the ultimate success of the new strategy as he was still supposed to act in accordance with Khamenei's guidelines.

Soon after Rouhani's election in 2013, Stephen Blank noticed that his:

government has formulated a new regionalism concept whereby Iran will try to augment its influence in neighbouring regions such as the Caucasus and Central Asia. The new regionalism policy aimed to overcome that setback to both sides' potential for trade, investment, and mutual influence.

(Blank, 2017)

This new opening gave a boost to the Iranian economy and strengthened its position in Central Asia.

The main factors behind Iran's foreign policy toward Central Asia under the presidency of Hassan Rouhani are:

- Lifting of economic sanctions imposed on Iran;
- Further institutionalization of cooperation with Central Asian countries;
- Potential for regional hydrocarbon cooperation especially in case of pipelines and new export routes for landlocked countries of Central Asia;
- Cooperation and common interests with Russia in the Caspian Sea region;
- Huge potential, strategic importance, and value of Iran for China especially in the framework of the Belt and Road initiative;
- Closer cooperation on security issues;
- Cultural diplomacy.

On 24 December 2016, President Rouhani declared, after his diplomatic trip across the region to Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, that "establishing close ties with neighbours, especially Central Asia and the Caucasus, is among the Islamic Republic's basic foreign policy principles" (*Iran Prioritizes*, 2017). He also stated that:

close relations may lead to more detailed consultations and planning, which will in turn result in more resistance against scourges such as insecurity, instability and terrorism that has engulfed the region. Iran plans to revive the ties in the post-sanctions era.

(Iran Prioritizes, 2017)

Regarding specific initiatives and concepts, the Iranian president negotiated the framework for lifting visa issuance as well as addressing issues such as cultural cooperation, academic cooperation, security, active participation in the Eurasian Economic Union, removal of trade tariffs, agriculture, engineering, and energy projects especially new power plants and dams.

However, despite some progress in political relations with post-Soviet republics in Central Asia, Rouhani's Iran has also faced some regional problems, for instance, in relations with Tajikistan. In 2016, bilateral relations with this country were the lowest of the post-Soviet era. One of the reasons for this was connected to Iran's support of the Tajik opposition leader Muhiddin Kabiri in 2015, which was interpreted by the government in Dushanbe as proof of direct interference in internal affairs of Tajikistan. Taking into consideration the cultural and linguistic connections between these two states, as well as a relatively high level of past economic cooperation, this situation has to be classified as a failure of the current Iranian administration. Although it was not the president but the supreme leader who invited Kabiri to Tehran, it does not change the fact that Rouhani's administration must deal with the consequences of this diplomatic incident.

Interestingly, the change in the framework of Iran-Central Asia political relations is not reflected in economic indicators. For instance, trade turnover between Iran and Kazakhstan "saw a decline between 2014–2016; a relatively good result amounting to \$986 million in 2014 decreased to \$635 million in 2015 and \$596 million in 2016" (*Iran-Kazakhstan*, 2017). What's more, the Kazakh-Iranian trade revenue was based mainly on Kazakh exports to Iran. Accordingly, trade turnover between Turkmenistan and Iran was very low compared to Turkmenistan's turnover with other states in the area, especially Turkey and Georgia (*Turkmenistan*, 2017). The same phenomenon can be observed with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

Geopolitical determinants should create new opportunities for both Iran and the Central Asian states. For instance, Robert D. Kaplan underlines the fact that "part of Iran's appeal to India is as a viable transit state for Central Asian gas" (Kaplan, 2011: 14). In the post-JCPOA period both Iran and its Central Asian partners can only benefit from that. The potential for bilateral cooperation and trade development with India is huge. The only question is whether both sides will be eager to take advantage of geopolitics.

Edward Wastnidge quite rightly points out that, at the moment, Iran:

places a great deal of importance on Central Asia, which is further enhanced by its perception of a deep and longstanding historical and cultural relationship with the region. Added to this is the geographic proximity and opportunities afforded by acting as a gateway state, both to and from Central Asia, along with increased Chinese investment as part of its new Silk Road – inspired the Belt and Road Initiative.

(*Wastnidge*, 2017: 12)

Having a closer look at the planned economic corridors connecting China with Europe, we can see that the Chinese will not be able to succeed without the support of Iran and the Central Asian states. The "northern corridor" is to connect China with Germany through the Central Asian states, Russia, and Poland,

while the “southern corridor” will cross Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, and the Balkans (Cai, 2017). On this basis, it would seem that China has a vested interest in the promotion of peace and cooperation in the region. The more predictable are Iran and other partners in Central Asia, the better for the initiative. Any tensions or conflicts in the area may seriously undermine China’s position. For this reason, China will probably become the biggest promoter of peace and economic cooperation in Central Asia. Iran can benefit from the Chinese strategy, although it should still pay attention to its own national interests in the region.

Conclusion

In practice, Iran’s political influence in the region has been very limited since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although the Iranian authorities attempted to build it back up in the 1990s, they were not successful. Political and economic sanctions, imposed by the international community, only worsened the situation. In addition, Iran’s priority was the Persian Gulf region and not the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. President Ahmadinejad’s administration paid some attention to the region, but was more focused on the political developments in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Turkey, and its rivalry with Saudi Arabia than a constructive policy toward Turkmenistan and other partners. Ideational factors prevailed over pragmatism, although Ahmadinejad’s administration proved a few times that it was ready to sacrifice ideology for short-term economic gains. Tajikistan–Iran relations serve as the best example of such a political strategy.

The new approach, represented by President Rouhani, may open a new chapter in Iran–Central Asia relations. Nevertheless, at least as far as economic relations are concerned, the current change within the Iranian foreign policy toward Central Asia is not reflected in economic indicators, as it did not result in an increase of trade turnover; on the contrary, there has been a significant decrease. Other regional actors like Turkey and China play much more important roles in this regard – even much smaller states like Azerbaijan and Georgia have better economic indicators.

According to Thomas Juneau:

with an increasingly limited margin of manoeuvre, Iran is likely to be pushed toward greater reliance on spoiling. This, in turn, is likely to intensify the consequences of its policy choices, given that spoiling strategies annoy Iran’s neighbours and worsen its isolation.

(Juneau, 2015: 226)

This is one of the main reasons why Rouhani’s administration modified the Iranian policy toward Central Asian region – and both sides can benefit from that. However, at least for the time being, mutual mistrust seems to be the main obstacle. Furthermore, Iran still has to take Russian and Chinese influences in

the region into consideration. Without any significant increase in trade turnover with Central Asian states, all political initiatives of Iran may be doomed to failure.

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10

GOING EASTWARDS

Iran's relations with Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan

Iran and Afghanistan: a difficult neighbourhood

Afghanistan–Persia relations originate from the fragmentation of Persia in the 18th century. At that time, Ahmad Shah Durrani founded the Durrani Empire which laid the foundations for the modern state of Afghanistan (Foltz, 2016: 121). Afghanistan and Iran formally established diplomatic relations in 1935, although a treaty of friendship had previously been signed in 1921. These neighbouring states have a shared history, language, and culture. The Afghan dialect of Persian – Dari Persian – is one of two official languages in Afghanistan. At the time both states were monarchies what also facilitated the application of good neighbourly relations.

One of the most serious problems in Afghanistan–Iran relations was the Helmand River dispute. The issue has led to many tensions since the 1870s. In 1939 Mohammed Zahir Shah, then King of Afghanistan, and Reza Shah Pahlavi signed an agreement to share water rights – but the document was never ratified. The same situation occurred again in 1973, but still hasn't been ratified. As a consequence, the Helmand River issue remains unresolved and it still is the main source of contention.

In 1937, Iran signed a nonaggression pact, often referred to as the Treaty of Saadabad, with Iraq, Turkey, and Afghanistan (*Treaty*, 1937). Its main provisions included respect for territorial integrity, inviolability of borders, and non-interference in domestic affairs (Bolat, 2019: 139; *Treaty*, 1937). The agreement also foresaw consultations on regional disputes and in the event of aggression by any third party (Roberts, 2003: 67). The pact had been signed for a period of five years and later was automatically extended for a further five years in 1943. However, according to some scholars, the Anglo-Soviet occupation of 1941 already rendered null and void the treaty (Yann, 2019: 241). Iran was no longer a sovereign state at that time.

The Iranian shah tried to play a constructive role during the Pakistani-Afghan dispute over Pashtunistan in 1961. He offered both sides good offices to enable them to re-establish diplomatic relations. Then prime minister of Afghanistan, Daoud Khan, intended to unite Pashtun-dominated areas in Pakistan with Afghanistan. Such a policy must have led to stiff resistance from the Pakistani authorities. Although the process of securing good offices was very complex and took a long time, Mohammad Reza's initiative resulted in a diplomatic success in 1963 (Malik, 1994: 127). According to the agreement, a significant part of Pashtunistan's territory remained in Pakistan as a semi-autonomous region, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

Iran-Afghanistan relations remained positive until the end of the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The year of 1979 marked a significant turning point in the history of both Iran and Afghanistan. The Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan changed the regional balance of power and seriously destabilized the situation in the Middle East and South Asia. These changes also affected their bilateral relations. The Iran-Afghanistan relations were generally friendly during the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty, even if short crises occurred from time to time. After the victory of the revolutionary forces, "Iran's Afghan policy became Shiite-centric" (Milani, 2010: 156).

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was one of the main issues that dominated Iran's foreign policy in the 1980s (Hunter, 1992: 110). Although the Iranian authorities, especially Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini, condemned the Soviet aggression, Iran did not intend to provoke Moscow. The Soviets did not pose a serious threat to the Islamic Republic. At the same time, they counter-weighted the American influence in the region and this factor was of great benefit to Iran. In the opinion of Homa Katouzian, Iran "did try to some extent to play off Russia against America. But this policy began to lose its force from the mid-1980s when U.S.-Soviet relations took a favourable turn" (Katouzian, 2010: 344). Any political rapprochement between Washington and Moscow was obviously not in line with Iran's expectations and interests.

The Iran-Iraq war further complicated the situation in the region and reduced Iran's capacity to engage diplomatically and militarily in Afghanistan. Tehran played a role of a passive observer, focusing primarily on the survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran. But it managed to offer some support to the mujahideen forces, namely Afghan Shi'ites, fighting against the Afghan government and it allowed more than one million Afghan refugees to enter Iranian territory (Milani, 2010: 155). Leaders of these groups had to pledge loyalty to the Iranian revolution and the Islamic Republic of Iran which led to tensions with other rebel groups.

Unfortunately, the situation in Afghanistan did not improve in the post-war period and the country was plunged into an internal crisis. The situation soon deteriorated and led to the outbreak of internal strife. In the 1990s, Iran did its best to counterbalance the Taliban's influence in Afghanistan. For this purpose, Iranians offered their support to the Northern Alliance forces and their

commander Ahmad Shah Massoud who fought against the Taliban. The main issues were connected to the Taliban's Sunni-first ideology, the persecution of the Afghan Shi'ites, and the Taliban's attacks of Iranian citizens (Levkowitz, 2017). Such a policy must have resulted in tensions and crises with the Taliban-led Afghanistan. One of the most major incidents took place during the siege of the Iranian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998 when Taliban forces executed Iranian diplomats – an incident which further deteriorated their bilateral relations (Report, 1998).

The above-mentioned reasons also resulted in Iran's decision to back the coalition forces in the fight against the Taliban in the post-9/11 period (Axworthy, 2010: 284). Although this cooperation was discreet, the Iranians, especially President Khatami, expected the US administration to modify its policy toward their country. The situation, however, suddenly deteriorated when President Bush gave his speech on "the Axis of Evil" on 29 January 2002. The main accusations were related to Iran's long-range missiles programmes, state-sponsored terrorism, and the persecution of political opponents (*President delivers*, 2002). Bush's statement caused outrage in Tehran. In the opinion of Richard Foltz, "the declaration was taken in Iran as a deliberate slap in the face and undermined Khatami's support within the country" (Foltz, 2016: 118). Only his political opponents could benefit from these tensions.

The US intervention in Afghanistan, and the war on Iraq that followed, changed the regional balance of power to a large extent. Iranian authorities had no choice but to adapt to the new circumstances. Tehran was primarily concerned with the US military presence in two neighbouring states. According to Kayhan Barzegar, "ever since the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, Iran's foreign policy in Afghanistan has been based on two aims: upholding stability and opposing the presence of foreign forces" (Barzegar, 2014: 123). At the very beginning of the 21st century, Iran became indirectly involved in two major regional conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In both states, the Iranians tried to limit the American influence and, in this way, avoid a geopolitical encirclement by the United States and their allies.

Iran criticized the 2012 US-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), officially titled the Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States, which provides the framework for the relationship between these states after the drawdown of US forces. Iran claims that such an agreement is against the traditional neutrality of Afghanistan in South and Central Asia. However, at the same time, Iran has become more engaged in the internal affairs of Afghanistan since President Obama's decision on the withdrawal of US military personnel. Tehran agreed even to formalize its ties with the Taliban and allowed them to open a foreign office in Mashhad. In addition, the Iranians invited representatives of the fundamentalist movement to Iran in 2015. Even Akhtar Mansour, the Taliban leader, had been allowed to stay in Iran before being killed in an American drone strike when he came back to Afghanistan (Levkowitz, 2017).

But the Helmand River dispute still remains a challenge and a threat to their bilateral relations; the most recent related crisis took place in 2018. The tension was caused by declining rainfall and mismanagement of water. As a consequence, the Iranian authorities accused Afghanistan for not allowing sufficient amounts of water into Iran. Kabul, in turn, criticized Iran's meddling in Afghan internal affairs, especially Taliban militants' cooperation with the IRGC. Tehran denies all such accusations (Majidiyar, 2018). In addition, Iran still objects to the establishment of dams on three rivers on the Afghan side. These are the Helmand, Harirod, and Farah rivers. In response to the Afghan actions, the Iranian side threatened to use the issue of refugees and border transactions to exert more pressure on Afghanistan. At the same time, Kabul underlined the fact that Iran was receiving twice as much water as was agreed upon in the 1973 Helmand River Treaty (Ahmadi, 2018). Climate changes, the growing demand in Iran, and seasonal droughts continuously result in bilateral tensions.

During the conflict in Syria, Iran helped to recruit Shi'a fighters, among others, from Pakistan and Afghanistan. Equipped and trained by the IRGC members, they fought against enemies of the Assad regime. In 2014 these fighters joined an all-Afghan Shi'a militia, Liwa Fatemiyoun, under the command of Iranian officers. The total number of fighters was estimated at 10,000–20,000 Afghans (Jamal, 2018).

In the opinion of Joshua Levkowitz, "the Trump administration's u-turn has created the uncertainty in Afghanistan. This uncertainty may have played a role in influencing Iran to hedge its bets vis-à-vis Afghan actors, in particular the Taliban" (Levkowitz, 2017). The negotiations between the US administration and the Taliban leadership in 2020 posed a big threat to Iranian interests in the region. A peace deal may be good for Afghanistan and other actors, but not for Tehran which will lose some leverage on the Afghan political scene. Iranian fears of geostrategic encirclement is becoming a reality.

However, not all regional developments are unfavourable to Tehran. Iran may profit, for example, from the recent tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Landlocked Afghanistan has had access to Pakistani seaports for international trade for decades. But the current situation resulted in significant changes and the Afghan authorities were forced to look for new trade routes and access to the Indian Ocean (*Afghanistan Begins*, 2019). In addition, it would be difficult to imagine the Afghan trade with India would transit through Pakistani territory. In this case, Iran appears to be a very significant partner. The Chabahar Port, an Iranian seaport located on the Gulf of Oman, is connected with Afghanistan and enables the Afghans to intensify their trade cooperation with India.

What is the future of Iran's relations with Afghanistan? Much depends on further political developments on the domestic political scene in Afghanistan. In addition, Tehran's relations with the Taliban leadership could become a decisive factor. It's worth remembering that Iran played an important role in the overthrow of the Taliban government. However, it later appeared that both sides shared animosity towards the United States and this is what brought them together. Despite

this, the situation changed when the Taliban representatives entered negotiations with the American administration. In 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo demanded the Taliban to cut all ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The question is if they will observe such commitment. Kashif Hussein claims that “the misunderstandings leading to mistrust which prompted sectarian hatred between Iran and the Taliban have been evaporating, paving the way for a stable long-term alignment glued by and centred on political Islam” (Hussein, 2020). As a consequence, the Taliban would have too much to lose if they did not cooperate with the Iranian authorities. Such an attitude may, in turn, undermine the peace process in Afghanistan.

India and Iran

Both Iran and India have experienced British domination, although Persia was *de jure* a sovereign state and India was a British colony. World War Two also resulted in significant ideological changes and a new international order; Pakistan and India proclaimed independence of British rule in 1947. This changed the regional balance of power and forced Iran to adapt to the new situation.

According to Christine Fair, Iran-India relations can be divided into three phases. The first phase covers the period of the Cold War, while the second is dedicated to the period from the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the 9/11 attacks. The third posited phase is the period after 2001 (Fair, 2004: 6).

The Imperial State of Iran established diplomatic relations with India in 1950. Their interests, however, were rather divergent than convergent at that time. While a non-aligned India fostered strong military links with the Soviet Union, Iran enjoyed close ties with the United States. In addition, Iran supported Pakistan and this was not in line with India's expectations and regional projection of power.

At the very beginning India had high hopes for the radical political changes in Iran, however, policies of the new Iranian government resulted in a few significant differences. Although Iran joined the Non-Aligned Movement, its revolutionary rhetoric as well as support for the insurgency in Kashmir further added to the complexities. In addition, while India's reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was rather soft, Tehran criticised the Soviet Union very severely. The situation changed after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Iranian authorities not only modified their ideological approach, but also decided to acknowledge Kashmir as an integral part of India (Ashwarya, 2017).

Another important factor was the military conflict between Iraq and Iran. The war affected not only both states, but also other regional actors and their main partners. In the opinion of Mushtaq Hussain:

the ensuing Iran–Iraq war and the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan then acted as further spoilers for the development of cordial ties between India and Iran. Extraneous factors continually prevented Indo-Iranian

political relations from maturing. Economic relations, in turn, were held hostage and remained far from substantive.

(Hussain, 2012: 859)

As a consequence, the bilateral relationship worsened during the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s. When Saddam Hussain came to power in Iraq in 1979, he intensified the cooperation with India. On this basis, Indians secured a number of major contracts in irrigation, agriculture, and petrochemical industry. Although India tried to be neutral during the war, the economic cooperation and supplies of the Iraqi oil brought New Delhi closer to Baghdad.

The bilateral relations saw no improvements until the beginning of the 1990s. The end of the Cold War and the Iran–Iraq war created new opportunities for cooperation. Both India and Iran, for instance, shared a very similar position on the political struggle in post-war Afghanistan. In this case, Delhi and Tehran offered their support to the Northern Alliance and opposed the Taliban forces. In the same period Iran often blocked anti-India resolutions drafted by the Pakistani representatives at such international organizations such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Iran, however, has also offered to act as a mediator between India and Pakistan as a result of being on good terms with both states.

One of the most important events relating to the Iran–India cooperation on security matters took place in 2001, when both states signed a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation. The document is often referred to as the Tehran Declaration. One year later, President Khatami came to India and signed the New Delhi Declaration. According to this document, the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Iran decided:

- To exploit the full potential of the bilateral relationship in the interest of the people of the two countries and of regional peace and stability, with a vision of a strategic partnership for a more stable, secure, and prosperous region and for enhanced regional and global cooperation;
- Explore opportunities for cooperation in defence in agreed areas, including training and exchange of visits.

(The New Delhi, 2003)

The declaration enabled politicians on both sides to begin talks on more material aspects. In addition, India and Iran exchanged views on various diplomatic and economic processes in the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian sub-continent. India also engaged in Khatami's concept of the Dialogue Among Civilizations (Wastnidge, 2016: 83).

As a consequence, India and Iran created a strategic partnership and at the same time raised concern in the United States and Pakistan. In the opinion of Christine Fair, this is the way New Delhi showed its disapproval of the growing US military presence and Washington's plans to attack Iraq. The Indian authorities also intended to exert pressure on Pakistan (Fair, 2004: 6). However, some

Iranian analysts soon began complaining that India was not implementing the signed agreements. In their opinion, the Indian attitude towards Iran should have been more transparent. Iranian authorities also voiced their displeasure when India's minister for external affairs omitted Iran during his visit to the Persian Gulf. At the same time, Pranab Mukherjee visited Riyadh and this further worsened the situation (Hunter, 2010: 130).

A dynamic economic cooperation constitutes yet another significant factor in the framework of the Iran-India relations. Although both states have been engaged in some unsuccessful projects like the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (IPI), they continue to pay attention to the development of mutually beneficial economic relations.

Iran provides India with access to the landlocked states in Central Asia and to Afghanistan (Roy, 2012: 957–975). According to Nikolay Kozhanov, “the calculations of New Delhi were relatively simple: as long as Pakistan remained one of the main opponents of India there would be no alternative to the Iranian safe route to Afghanistan and post-Soviet Central Asia” (Kozhanov, 2018: 124). It is thanks to the Iranian route that Indian enterprises can bypass Pakistan and export their products to these states. The Iranian port of Chabahar clearly plays a very significant role in this case, as it provides an alternative for trade between India and Afghanistan. Its future importance became clear when India, Iran, and Afghanistan signed a joint memorandum of understanding in 2016. The document is often referred to as the Chabahar Agreement. On its basis, the Indian authorities agreed to invest around \$85 million in the further development of the port of Chabahar, to open a credit line for Iran, and to invest more than \$8 billion in the expansion of Chabahar Special Economic Zone (*Iran, India*, 2018). As a consequence, in December 2018, Iran formally handed over the port of Chabahar to India. The first shipment of Afghan goods to India through the port of Chabahar took place in February 2019 (*Afghanistan Begins*, 2019). At the same time, it is necessary to stress that a year earlier the Iranian minister of foreign affairs had invited Pakistan to participate in the Chabahar project which must have surprised the Indian authorities. At that time, Zarif also suggested that Iran was interested in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Syed, 2018). It is evident, however, that the main objective of such mixed diplomatic messages from Tehran was clear; Iran intended to keep the balance in its relations with India *and* Pakistan at all costs.

Interestingly, the United States exempted the port from Iran-related sanctions in order to meet expectations of the Indian government and secure supplies for Afghanistan (Laskar, 2018). The move was widely interpreted as an attempt to strengthen an India-US alliance despite the reinstatement of sanctions against Iran.

However, India and Iran also had some divergent interests at the beginning of the 21st century. While India supported the presence of NATO forces in Afghanistan, Iran openly opposed it. Tehran perceived the Western military presence in the region as a direct threat to Iranian national security. With US forces located in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran feared it could have become another target.

The tense situation in Jammu and Kashmir also affected Iran's relationship with India. The biggest diplomatic crisis took place in 2010 after Ali Khamenei's speech. The supreme leader appealed to Muslims worldwide to support the freedom struggle in Kashmir. This step was interpreted by India as a direct interference in its internal affairs. As a consequence, the Indian authorities summoned the Iranian ambassador in New Delhi and lodged a formal protest.

Another problematic issue was the Iranian nuclear programme. Although India cooperated with Iran on many diplomatic and economic matters, any scenario in which Tehran would acquire nuclear weapons was completely unacceptable. After the reinstatement of the US sanctions in 2018, India continued to play a balancing act and maintain good relations both with Iran and the United States. Although New Delhi was forced to stop importing oil from Iran, both sides noted progress in port operations at Chabahar Port (Bhaumik, 2019). Good economic relations are accompanied by good diplomatic ties. US sanctions may only strengthen Tehran's relationship with the Indian authorities, even if trade exchange between the two states shows a negative trend.

Iran's relations with Pakistan

The Imperial State of Iran was the first state to recognize Pakistan. In 1948 both states had established diplomatic relations and, a year later, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and then Pakistani Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, signed a Treaty of Friendship (Fair, 2004: 8). Pakistan maintained very positive and close relations with other Muslim states like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to counterbalance the Indian influence in the region. In addition, Tehran backed Pakistan's entry into the United Nations and offered support to the Pakistani forces in the conflict with India over Kashmir (Pande, 2011: 140).

Iran and Pakistan cooperated closely during the Cold War, especially under the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Both states were close US allies and played significant roles in the Americans' rivalry with the Soviets in Asia. They also cooperated with the United Kingdom. In 1955 Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey joined the Baghdad Pact – a security organization established by the British. The United States was informally associated with the organization. Although Washington offered generous military and economic support to all parties, it did not join the Baghdad Pact. The organization was, however, short lived. In 1958 Iraq left the organization after the coup that had brought down King Faisal II. The pact was soon renamed the Central Treaty Organization – CENTO (Baghdad Pact, 2008: 27). This alliance survived until 1979 when Iran left it.

During the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey formed another regional organization – the Regional Cooperation for Development – RCD in 1964 (Blood, 1995: 301). All member states signed the Treaty of Izmir in 1977.

Iran was among the states that supported Pakistan during the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 (Wolpert, 2010). Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi also provided

Pakistan with military equipment and economic assistance during the Pakistan-India war in 1971. The conflict, which resulted in the breakup of East and West Pakistan, was not in line with the shah's regional strategy. But this time Iran did not condemn India as an aggressor like it had done before during the 1965 war. The Iranian authorities only "cautioned all the powers from interfering in Pakistan's internal affairs, in a veiled reference to India" (Ashwarya, 2017). However, Iran's material assistance was much more important for the Pakistanis than any diplomatic actions at that time. Overall, it could be concluded that Iran-Pakistan relations were very positive and constructive under the reign of the last shah. Despite this, an adverse change was about to come.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 was not favourable for Pakistan. The Pakistani President at the time, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, was a close ally of the deposed Iranian monarch. But Zia changed his mind in mid-1979 when he began praising Ruhollah Khomeini and his Islamic revolution. In addition, Pakistan was one of the first countries to recognize the new post-revolutionary government and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. One of the most important factors which brought both states closer was "the concurrence of their positions regarding the Afghan affairs" (Belokrentisky, Moskalenko, 2013: 302). Nevertheless, Pakistan remained a US ally until the end of Cold War and this led to occasional tensions in Iran-Pakistan relations.

After the 1979 revolution in Iran, the sectarian factor also became a significant issue in Iran's relations with Pakistan. While the Iranian regime supported Shi'a Muslims, the Pakistani Prime Minister, Zia ul-Haq, "promoted religious extremism of the Sunni variety for consolidating his dictatorial rule and for supporting the Afghan jihad against the Soviet occupation" (Husain, 2016: 107). In addition, the Iranian media were very critical of Pakistan and tended to present it as a proxy for the American interests. Such a narrative must have been very painful for Pakistanis who perceived Iranians as close friends and allies. Pakistan's good intentions became clear when its authorities condemned the unsuccessful US attempt to forcibly rescue American diplomats from the Iranian captivity in April 1980. Islamabad perceived this incident as a violation of Iran's sovereignty (Sattar, 2007: 159).

During the Iran-Iraq war, Pakistan tried to keep the balance in its relations with both conflicted parties. Despite pressure from the United States, Pakistan never openly supported Iraq. Its authorities stated neutrality and unsuccessfully attempted to mediate between Iraq and Iran (Belokrentisky, Moskalenko, 2013: 302). According to some sources, however, Pakistan maintained closer ties with Iran. In the opinion of Pierre Razoux, President Zia:

took advantage of geographic proximity and Iran's isolation to increase his volume of exchanges with Iran tenfold over a few years. However, he refused to deliver Tehran weapons in order to preserve both his status as an arbitrator of the Islamic cause and his lucrative relationship with Saudi Arabia.

(Razoux, 2015: 204)

In 1985 the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) was formed, thus replacing the RCD. After the end of the Cold War, five post-Soviet republics in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Azerbaijan joined the organization. In this context Edward Wastnidge highlights the fact that “all of the ECO countries share an Islamic heritage, are geographically contiguous, and can be viewed as constituting part of the ‘new regionalism’ that prevailed in the international climate following the end of the Cold War” (Wastnidge, 2016: 108).

Since 1988, the Pakistani Army Chief Mirza Aslam Beg has opted for a strategic alliance with Iran. Such an option appeared after the Soviet troops had begun withdrawing from Afghanistan and Iran had signed the UN brokered ceasefire agreement with Iraq. Beg believed that thanks to their strategic depth, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran would be able to struggle against global hegemony. The Pakistani commander was convinced that the Islamic Republic of Iran had been consolidated during the war against Iraq, and therefore became a resilient ally.

The Iranian-Pakistani relations were again tested in the end of the Cold War. After Supreme Leader Khomeini passed away on 3 June 1989, Pakistan proclaimed ten days of national mourning and Pakistanis did not conform to declarations and political gestures. When Beg visited Tehran in 1990, he offered President Rafsanjani assistance with nuclear technology in return for “a direct military support for Pakistan in the event of another war with India” (Vatanka, 2017: 197–198). Such a conflict over Kashmir was very probable at that time and meant Islamabad was looking for allies in the Islamic world.

During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Pakistan supported the multinational forces against Iraq which was in line with Tehran’s regional interests of that time. However, both states also had some divergent interests in the 1990s. The most complex issue was connected with the political situation in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion. While Pakistanis supported the Taliban, Iran opposed them and backed other groups including Afghan Shi’ites.

The nuclear issue became another significant factor within Iran-Pakistan relations at the very beginning of the 21st century. In 2003 investigators found Pakistani tubes for centrifuges on a vessel bound for Libya. The investigation proved that it was a part of a bigger Pakistani network selling “bombs for cash” (Cantey, 2018: 274). Later, some Pakistani experts and officials admitted that they had shipped plans and supplies, and had provided assistance not only to Libya, but also to Iran and North Korea (Albright, Hinderstein, 2004: 61). Although some Pakistanis did not perceive the nuclear programme of Iran as a direct threat to Pakistan’s security, others were seriously concerned. According to Cheema:

for Pakistan it is bad enough to live under the shadow of a large nuclear country, but to be sandwiched between two nuclear neighbours would indeed be an unenviable situation. No wonder, the nuclear-related US–Iran

“war of words” over the last few years was of great interest and concern to Pakistan.

(Cheema, 2009: 56)

However, at the same time, the Pakistani authorities were reluctant to impose economic sanctions in accordance with the UN resolutions and did their best to keep the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline, as well as bilateral trade, unaffected.

The situation in the province of Balochistan soon became another divisive issue for many years. The history of the Baloch national struggle dates back to the 1920s. The partition of India and the creation of Pakistan crushed hopes of various independence movements at the time in this North-West Frontier Province (Titus, Swidler, 2000: 47). Since then, Pakistan has faced a few armed insurgencies and its authorities have combated some Baloch independence movements (Raisani, 2018: 117). Nowadays, Balochistan is divided between Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. According to Naseer Dashti:

the protracted conflict of the Baloch with the Iranian and Pakistani states is only one example of the complexities created by colonial powers in the process of implementing strategies to safeguard their political, economic, and strategic interests in the Middle East, Central and South Asia. The Baloch are among many nations in the contemporary world who are still facing the curse of colonialism.

(Dashti, 2017: 2)

The Pakistani and Iranian states have been torn with internal conflicts against the Baloch and they have also affected their bilateral relations. In the opinion of Najeeb A. Jan:

there is already a long history of the brutalization of Baluchistan that has yet to be fully documented. The 1990s conflict between the MQM – Muhajir Qaumi Movement, and the State was also written in terms of mutilated bodies in gunny bags.

(Jan, 2019: 100)

As a part of Balochistan constitutes a province of Iran, its authorities are also very sensitive in relation to this situation. Tehran accuses various terrorist groups operating in the Pakistan part of Balochistan of conducting attacks on the Iranian territory. Among them are organizations like Jundullah and Jaish ul-Adal. In 2014, Iran linked these groups to attacks on its soil and the issue was raised during Ali Khamenei's official meeting with the Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. In addition, the supreme leader suggested that the Baloch terrorist groups receive the covert support of the Western intelligence agencies and this way try to meddle in the Iran-Pakistan relations (Husain, 2016: 120).

Soon after, Saudi Arabia had severed diplomatic relations with Iran in January 2016, then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited both Tehran and Riyadh in an attempt to mediate between two conflicting parties (Nawaz, 2016). On 25 March 2016 President Rouhani came to Islamabad on an official visit with the main aim of strengthening diplomatic and economic relations between Iran and Pakistan. The event constituted another step in the process of progressive reconciliation diplomacy. Prime Minister Sharif's initiative was continued by his successor, Imran Khan, at the very beginning of 2020 (Hasan, 2020).

Zakir Mahmood Malik claims that Pakistan could bring Saudi Arabia and Iran to the negotiating table. In his opinion, the Pakistani authorities should also try to unite all Muslims and this way restore *Ummah* (Malik, 2015: 222). There is evidence which shows that Saudis and Iranians accept Pakistan's role as a mediator and therefore Islamabad enjoys very good relations with both states. In March 2018 the Iranian minister of foreign affairs visited Islamabad to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the bilateral relations. During his lecture at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, Javad Zarif openly declared: "Our relations with India, just like Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia, are not against Pakistan as we understand Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia are not against Iran" (Syed, 2018). This way, the Iranian minister justified Tehran's closer economic cooperation with India, especially in the case of the Chabahar project. At the same time, he emphasized Pakistan's role as a potential mediator. Minister Zarif did not blame the Pakistani authorities for their close relationship with Saudi Arabia and was aware of the importance of the Saudi financial assistance for Pakistan.

Pakistan has already tried to mediate in the Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy wars. It attempted, for example, to act as a conciliator to end the conflict in Yemen in October 2018 (Tanzeem, 2018). Although the initiative was not successful, it proved that Islamabad tries to play an important intermediary role in the Iran-Saudi Arabia reconciliation process. The problem is, however, that Riyadh can offer Pakistanis much more than Iran. The Saudi crown prince visited Pakistan in February 2019. During the visit, Mohammad bin Salman signed deals worth more than \$20 billion with Pakistan (*Saudi Arabia Signs*, 2019). Islamabad therefore leans more in the Saudi direction. At the moment everything indicates that Iran's main assets are its geographic proximity and the role it can play in the Indo-Pakistan rivalry.

Conclusion

South Asia constitutes an important alternative for Iranian authorities, especially after the reinstatement of economic sanctions by the United States in 2018. In political terms, Iran still balances between India and Pakistan. Tehran could also potentially count on Pakistan's assistance in a process of normalizing the diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. In economic terms, Iran already makes

profit from ensuring India's access to Central Asia. The question arises, however, if Tehran would support any peace dialogue between India and Pakistan in the future. On the one hand, a rapprochement between India and Pakistan could stabilize the situation in the region. On the other hand, such developments would jeopardize Iran's economic interests as the state of transit between India and Central Asia. Iran's relations with Afghanistan, in turn, remain very complex and vulnerable to tensions.

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IRAN'S RELATIONS WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION

The framework for bilateral cooperation: from “the critical dialogue” to “the comprehensive dialogue”

The bilateral relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the European Union are complex and nuanced. This analysis is formed on the basis that Iran is a unitary state, while the EU is a political and economic union of 27 states. The end of the Cold War and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini determined the position of Iran on the international stage in the 1990s. Internal as well as external changes resulted in a significant revision of the Iranian foreign policy objectives. Shireen T. Hunter points out that since the establishment of the European Union, its relations with Iran “have been mostly conducted within the EU framework and in the context of, first, the critical dialogue and, later, the comprehensive dialogue” (Hunter, 2010: 84).

Soon after its establishment in 1992, the EU introduced the critical dialogue, namely a common and new approach to Iran. The main aim of this dialogue was to acknowledge American concerns in principle and, at the same time, improve relations with Iran. Representatives of EU institutions assumed that engagement would encourage Iran to moderate its regional policies. In practice, however, this approach appeared to be more effective in trade and economic cooperation rather than with Iran's policies on the Middle East peace process or on human rights violations (Moshaver, 2003: 294). The route to the comprehensive dialogue between the EU and Iran was opened when Mohammad Khatami became the Iranian president in 1997. The new president tried to improve relations with European partners. This rapprochement was necessary after the assassinations of Iranian dissidents in Paris and Berlin. EU officials accused President Rafsanjani and Supreme Leader Khatami of their involvement in these deadly attacks. For this reason, the European Union tried to strengthen Khatami and the moderate reformists around him in turn (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2013: 155).

The US-led war in Iraq and the disagreement over it between some EU members states and the United States created a new situation. According to Anoushiravan Ehteshami:

both Iran and the European Union had much to gain from putting the EU's constructive engagement dialogue with Tehran. Iran could try to engage Europe against the United States; the European Union could claim to be taking direct and effective action to bring Iran into line on the nuclear and other issues without the need or threat of use of force.

(Ehteshami, 2014: 278)

But everything changed when the international community learned about the scale of the Iranian nuclear project. In June 2003, the IAEA Board of Governors expressed concern about Iran's failures and lack of cooperation with the agency. Actions undertaken by the Iranian government attracted a lot of criticism, especially since some experts feared that Iran might have acquired nuclear weapons. The situation became even more complicated when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2005.

EU–Iran relations in the pre-JCPOA period

According to Radoslaw Fiedler, there were three important factors affecting EU–Iran relations at the beginning of the 21st century. These were:

- The EU's imbalanced institutional framework;
- The domination of the nuclear issue;
- The risks connected with the potential EU rapprochement with Tehran, especially in the framework of US–EU transatlantic relations (Fiedler, 2017: 14).

The Iranian nuclear programme resulted in tense relations and led to international sanctions. The EU's representatives became very concerned. Some EU member states decided to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Following the IAEA Board of Governors' statement, France, Germany and the UK decided to initiate joint action. Their ministers of foreign affairs formed a diplomatic group, which is often referred to as EU-3 (*Iran's Strategic*, 2005: 17–18). This group attempted to limit the Iranian nuclear programme. The group grew further in 2006, when China, Russia, and the United States joined EU-3. Then some politicians and journalists coined a new name EU3+3. Most analysts, however, adopted a different name – the P5+1 group.

The situation became increasingly complex when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the presidential elections in 2005. His predecessor, Khatami, was perceived as a reformist and a leader who could have improved Iran's relations with the West. The victory of Ahmadinejad, however, shattered that prospect.

Furthermore, the European engagement with Iran to try to mitigate its radical behavior seemed to have failed as well (Drenou, 2008: 83). According to Walter Posch, Ahmadinejad's "inflammatory remarks on Israel and denial of the Holocaust, which are particularly sensitive issues in Europe, poisoned the diplomatic climate. They also destroyed the inroads achieved during the Khatami presidency" (Posch, 2010: 191).

Ahmadinejad's harsh rhetoric and anti-Western comments resulted in a loss of confidence that Iran's intention was to use its nuclear programme exclusively for peaceful purposes. As Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit put it, "President Ahmadinejad's provocative style had brought Iran to the brink of catastrophe. On more than one occasion, Washington or Tel Aviv threatened military intervention, while economic sanctions and fiscal mismanagement reaped havoc on the oil-rich Iranian economy" (Akbarzadeh, Conduit, 2016: 2). EU member states, as well as EU institutions, were also alarmed at reports about the progress of Iranian scientists. Because of the increasing doubts about the peaceful nature of the nuclear programme, at the end of 2011 the UK and France proposed to implement a full embargo on oil.

The EU–Iran relations further deteriorated when the EU imposed economic sanctions on Iran in 2012 ("Council Regulation", 2012). The EU banned its member states from importing oil and introduced new financial sanctions which in practice excluded Iran from the global financial system (Juneau, 2013: 28). In this way, European institutions intended to exert pressure on the Iranian government to force it to abandon its nuclear programme or at least agree to more detailed controls. The only hesitation centered on the lack of a sufficient excess supply of oil. However, that situation changed when Saudi Arabia declared that it would seek to make up the difference. This statement triggered European action (Cordesman, Gold, Coughlin-Schulte, 2014: 45). Maaïke Wærnaar underlines the fact that as Western pressure on Iran persisted, relations with important economic partners were made increasingly difficult and Iranians felt the effect of international sanctions (Wærnaar, 2013: 134–135).

However, even when the EU introduced those extensive sanctions, its approach toward Iran was still softer than the American one. According to Shahriar Sabet-Saeidi, the EU always takes a softer position towards Iran than the US on controversial issues – primarily because Europe needs Iran's help to secure its interests in Afghanistan as well as in the Middle East (Sabet-Saeidi, 2011: 65). This constructive European attitude resulted in, for example, the first diplomatic success in Geneva in 2013.

Another factor relates to the political changes in the Arab world after 2011 that resulted from the Arab Spring. This represented a serious challenge to the EU and Iran. Both sides welcomed political changes in the Middle East region 2011, but for different reasons. Europeans tried to respond to these changes by protecting their interests in the framework of the well-established Euro-Mediterranean relations and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). For this reason, the first EU reactions were not to support progressive changes in the region (Bicchi,

2014: 435; Fioramonti, 2012: 29). According to Tobias Schumacher, this strategy endangered the Arab societies trust in the EU as a crisis manager and a potential democracy promoter. The EU's "informational diffusion" was thus replaced by "informational confusion". The European indecision was characterized by "the predominance of uncoordinated intergovernmental action over collective efforts which continued to generate friction" (Schumacher, 2015: 563)

At the same time, Iran aimed to strengthen its regional role. In the opinion of Morgane Colleau, "Iran's history of great civilization and its cultural legacy have produced long-standing national perceptions of a legitimate and key role to play in the regional environment" (Colleau, 2017: 89). The main problem was, however, a dualism of foreign policy. While Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei perceived changes in the Arab world as inspired by the Iranian revolution, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was convinced that the so-called Arab Spring derived from an American-Israeli conspiracy with its main aim to make divisions within the Islamic world. According to Amir Mohammad Haji-Yousefi:

the consequence of the first perception is the widespread support of people's political struggles in the region, and establishment and development of relations at a societal level, whereas the second perception has resulted in a strengthening of ties between Tehran and the states in the region so as to prevent the instability and division of these states.

(Haji-Yousefi, 2012: 23)

From the EU's point of view, neither perception was acceptable.

Despite these tensions and political differences, the EU continued to fund humanitarian projects targeting Afghan refugees in Iran, support that was initiated in 1997. Its primary aim was to help refugees, while the secondary aim was to prevent Afghan refugees from making the move to Europe. The EU offers assistance to people who seek safety from pervasive insecurity. There were more than 200,000 Afghans in Iran in 2007 alone (Stanzel, 2016). Obviously, the more projects financed, the greater the chance that the refugees would stay in Iran instead of moving forward to the EU.

In the pre-JCPOA period, the EU was very critical of the lack respect for civil liberties and human rights in Iran. The best example was the EU's reaction to the controversial re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and oppression of participants in the Green Movement's protests in 2009. Two years later, the EU adopted restrictive measures relating to human rights violations in Iran. The most important measures dealt with freezing assets and visa bans for individuals who were responsible for such violations (from the EU's point of view). In addition, European countries agreed that they will not allow any EU company to export to Iran any "equipment which might be used for internal repression and equipment for monitoring telecommunications" (*Measures responding*, 2017).

The best opportunity to improve bilateral relations arose when Hassan Rouhani won the presidential election and came to power in 2013. Javad Zarif,

the newly appointed minister of foreign affairs, openly said that the president intended to improve relations with the West, including European partners. In his article entitled *What Iran Really Wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era*, Javad Zarif declared:

Iran will also engage with European countries and other Western states with the goal of reinvigorating and further expanding relations. This normalization process must be based on the principles of mutual respect and mutual interest, and it must address issues of legitimate concern to both sides.

(Zarif, 2014: 10)

President Rouhani and his aides resumed negotiations and gave a new impetus to the talks with the P5+1 group. The first step toward normalization of bilateral relations took place with formal adoption of the Joint Plan of Action (JPA) in Geneva in 2013 (Joint, 2013). The JPA was in line with Iranian interests, especially as far as the EU–Iran bilateral trade was concerned. Although the EU did not decide to lift its sanctions imposed on Iran in 2012, the trade turnover increased by 68% in 2014 (Entessar, Afrasiabi, 2015: 169).

As a result of the new approach of Iranian diplomacy, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in Vienna on 14 July 2015. In comparison to the previous ten years, the deal was a political milestone in Iran's relations with the West in general and in particular with the EU.

The post-JCPOA period: political aspects

In the framework of the JCPOA Iran committed to:

- Reduce its stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98%;
- Put more than two thirds of its centrifuges in storage;
- Modernize the Arak heavy water reactor;
- Stop enriching uranium at Fordow facility for 15 years;
- Agree to multilayered oversight of the entire nuclear infrastructure by the IAEA (Joint, 2015).

Under the agreement, Iran gained access to more than \$100 billion in assets frozen overseas and was able to resume selling oil. Should Iran violate any part of the sanctions, they would not be waived. Iran complied with the JCPOA obligations from the beginning and therefore the implementation of sanctions relief began sooner than expected. Although there were some problems and concerns relating to the ballistic missiles programme, the EU and its member states waited for the definitive opinion of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (Axworthy, 2017: 173). On 16 January 2016, the IAEA announced that Iran had met the fundamental conditions envisaged in the JCPOA (Verification, 2016).

As a consequence, on 22 January the Council decided to lift the nuclear-related sanctions (“Council Implementing”, 2016). That day is often referred to as “the Implementation Day”. Some restrictions remained in place, for instance, an arms embargo and missile technology sanctions. In addition, some persons and entities remained subject to an asset freeze and visa ban (*Information Note*, 2016).

There are three main objectives of EU–Iran relations in the post-JCPOA period, namely:

- The full implementation of the main provisions of the accord;
- Increased cooperation in areas of mutual interest;
- Promotion of regional peace, security, stability, and peaceful settlement of regional conflicts (*Iran and the EU*, 2016).

The JCPOA opened the door to political dialogue as well as new investments, and a further increase in trade. On the basis of the joint statement of the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, which was issued by Federica Mogherini and Javad Zarif in April 2016, the EU is likely to improve banking cooperation, make some investments under the umbrella of the European Investment Bank, cooperate in a variety of sectors, and build on expertise in the field of SMEs. The EU also supports Iran’s membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO), and its further integration into the world economy.

The post-JCPOA situation, nevertheless, has become much more complex and unpredictable since Donald Trump won the US presidential elections in November 2016. Even as a candidate he often criticized the Obama administration for the deal with Iran. For instance, during a speech addressed to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in March 2016 Donald Trump said:

My number-one priority is to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran. And let me tell you, this deal is catastrophic for America, for Israel and for the whole of the Middle East. The problem here is fundamental. We’ve rewarded the world’s leading state sponsor of terror with \$150 billion, and we received absolutely nothing in return. They can keep the terms and still get the bomb by simply running out the clock. And of course, they’ll keep the billions and billions of dollars that we so stupidly and foolishly gave them.

(*Trump*, 2016)

European institutions do not see any need for the introduction of new non-nuclear sanctions as suggested by some members of President Trump’s administration. Nevertheless, while European powers do not support new sanctions against Iran, they closely watch Iran’s role in the region. The regional order, peace, and stability in the Middle East remain significant matters, especially to key member states like France, Italy, and Germany. If Iran or its proxies cross any

red line, for example any direct military engagement in the Yemeni conflict, or any hostile actions against Arab states in the Persian Gulf, Brussels may be open to the Trump administration's suggestions. Despite this, everything indicates that the EU would rather focus on cooperating with Iran, especially on such issues as trade, combating terrorism, and refugee crisis.

The European Union has not reacted to any warnings from President Trump, at least for the moment. For instance, on 12 January 2018 the US president declared:

Today, I am waiving the application of certain nuclear sanctions, but only in order to secure our European allies' agreement to fix the terrible flaws of the Iran nuclear deal. This is the last chance. In the absence of such an agreement, the United States will not again waive sanctions in order to stay in the Iran nuclear deal. And if at any time I judge that such an agreement is not within reach, I will withdraw from the deal immediately.

(Trump, 2016)

He presented his opinion the day after an EU/E3 and Iran meeting on 11 January 2018, when Federica Mogherini had made the following statement:

While we have expressed concerns related to other issues, such as development of ballistic missiles and increasing tensions in the region, these issues are outside the scope of the nuclear agreement and are and will be addressed in the relevant formats and fora. The deal is working; it is delivering on its main goal, which means keeping the Iranian nuclear program in check and under close surveillance. The European Union remains committed to support the full and effective implementation of the agreement, including to make sure that the lifting of nuclear related sanctions has a positive impact on trade and economic relations with Iran, including benefits for the Iranian people.

(Mogherini, 2018)

Her statement, no doubt, is underpinned by the facts. Since the JCPOA was finalized, a large number of European delegations have paid official visits to Tehran. What's more, European countries support Iran's ambitions to accede to the WTO, although the United States opposes this initiative (Katzman, 2017: 51), and EU imports from Iran increased 334.8% and its exports by 27.8% in 2016 alone (*Iran*, 2018). But the EU and Iran's worst expectations came true when President Trump decided not to waive sanctions imposed on Iran and withdraw the US from the JCPOA. This matter has been described and analysed in detail in the chapter dedicated to the US-Iran relations.

Iran's position on the political changes in the Arab world after 2011 as well as its political and military involvement in the ongoing Syrian conflict do not align with the EU's expectations or interests of its member states. While the

Iranian government continues to support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the EU demands his surrender and will not accept any political role for him in post-war Syria. The EU and Iran also disagree on the ongoing conflict in Yemen. This conflict gained momentum in the spring of 2015 when the Saudi Arabian-led intervention began. Therefore, it is not possible to compare the EU and Iranian positions prior to and after the JCPOA agreement was reached. Nevertheless, one can notice some important differences as far as their current stances are concerned.

The rise of the so-called Islamic State brought Iran and the EU's shared interests into sharper focus. After 2014 it became clear that it would be almost impossible to defeat this terrorist organization without Iranian ground forces and Iran-backed militias, especially in Iraq. In an open letter to youth in Europe and the US, issued in November 2015, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei condemned terrorist attacks in France. He also urged them to study to understand true Islam. With this letter, Iran both confirmed its anti-IS stance and convergent interests in the Middle East and beyond the region. But at the same time the supreme leader criticized the West:

Alongside this direct support, the palpable and known supporters of Takfiri terrorism, despite having the most primitive political establishments, have always been among the allies of the West, and that is while the most progressive and the clearest thoughts born out of dynamic democracies in the region have been ruthlessly suppressed. The West's double-standards vis-à-vis the movement of awakening in the Muslim world is a telling example of contradiction in the Western policies.

(Khamenei, 2015)

In the post-JCPOA period, the EU continues to give humanitarian assistance to Iran. In 2017 the European Commission allocated ten million euros to Afghan refugees, especially to integrate their children into the Iranian education system (*European*, 2018). Another five million euros will be transferred to Iran in 2018 (*Humanitarian Aid*, 2018).

Although the EU decided to lift nuclear-related sanctions against Iran after the agreement on JCPOA, it still extends sanctions for serious human rights violations. On 11 April 2017 the Council of the EU decided to extend the sanctions put in place in 2011 to 13 April 2018. At present, these sanctions include a travel ban and an asset freeze against 82 people, as well as a ban on exports of equipment which might be used for internal repression (*Council Extends*, 2017). Despite this, some analysts and politicians criticized the EU's weak response to the latest wave of anti-government protests in January 2018 (Snell, 2018; Erlanger, 2018; Vaez, 2018). Did the EU compromise on them in order to avoid bilateral tensions with Iran? For the moment, everything indicates that the EU adopted a strategy of "wait and see". Although EU institutions monitor the current developments and extend sanctions relating to human rights violations, they do not want to

provoke the Iranian side for no apparent reason. European states may also seek other reasons to exert more pressure on Iran. For instance, in January 2018 the German diplomacy considered the introduction of new sanctions in order to support the US administration's point of view in response to the Iranian missile programme as well as meddling in the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East region (*European countries*, 2018). At least for the moment, everything indicates that the EU is satisfied with provisions of the JCPOA deal, the process of their implementation as well as the first tangible results. For this reason, the EU condemned the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018 as the failure of the agreement will not be in line with EU's political and economic interests in Iran.

Conclusion

The JCPOA agreement and its implementation improved political relations between the EU and Iran. It seems that the deal increased mutual confidence not only in nuclear-related aspects, but also in non-nuclear issues. Although their views diverge on some issues, such as the Arab Spring and human rights violations in Iran, one can say that the JCPOA agreement has had a moderate impact on EU–Iran political relations, including developing bilateral cooperation on diplomatic contacts, the EU's continued assistance to undocumented Afghan refugees in Iran, the implementation of the JCPOA's provisions, the EU's support of Iran's accession to the WTO, and trade.

Nothing currently indicates that the EU will change its general approach toward Iran. Europeans do not intend to renegotiate or amend the deal as suggested by President Trump. On 6 November 2018, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini declared, "We are encouraging small and medium-sized enterprises in particular to increase business with and in Iran as part of something that for us is a security priority" (Mogherini, 2018), and it seems that is just the beginning. EU institutions will likely turn a blind eye to European enterprises' activities in Iran. They may even accept special purpose vehicles (SPV), established by European energy giants in third party countries to secure Iranian oil.

The EU could support imposing new non-nuclear-related sanctions, but not the US withdrawal from the Iran deal. Europeans are satisfied with the JCPOA, as well as with Iran's fulfilment of its terms. Even when major European companies like Daimler or Total stopped doing business with Iran, they did so because of American pressure, not out of a sense of transatlantic solidarity. Going forward, EU leaders will likely think twice before they support any American initiative on an international dispute or conflict.

That said, the situation might change if Iran crosses a red line, for instance, in case of the ballistic missiles programme, serious human rights violations, or engagement in any new conflict in the Middle East. The initiative of German diplomacy of January 2018 clearly indicates that Iran cannot be absolutely certain that the EU will never change its position on the JCPOA. For the time being,

trade and potential investments seem to drive the bilateral relations, but the EU may change its mind once its companies begin losing tenders or contracts. President Rouhani and Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif seem to understand that, and therefore are especially attentive to maintaining constructive and fruitful relations with the EU. They also know that Iran will benefit as long as the EU and the US have divergent views on Iran.

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12

RUSSIA–IRAN RELATIONS

The Soviet Union and its relations with Iran at the end of the Cold War

Russian–Iranian relations have been very nuanced and complicated since the 19th century. One of the most humiliating events in Persia's relations with Russia took place in 1907, when the Anglo–Russian agreement was signed. On this basis both powers divided Persia into their own spheres of influence (Andreeva, 2007: 20). The Russian interference in Persia's internal affairs at the turn of century, as well as the partial occupation of Iranian territory during World War Two, resulted in mutual distrust and animosity. It seems that this negative historical experience still impedes bilateral cooperation and results in occasional crises and tensions, although both countries share common platforms at the regional and global levels.

Although Iran was a close US ally under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule, it maintained relatively good diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and other socialist states. This was noticeable especially in the 1970s due to high oil revenues and a *détente* which resulted in the lessening of tensions between the West and the East. Socialist states possessed access to some advanced technologies and raw materials, as well as a relatively well-developed industry, while the Iranian empire had the investment capital and access to hard currency. Obviously, the American administration was concerned with such a rapprochement, but there was not much it could do to block it. As long as the shah was loyal to the United States in the cases of diplomatic and security issues, Americans turned a blind eye to the Soviet–Iranian relations. However, the situation changed dramatically in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. What was perceived in Washington DC as a source of significant threat to US interests in the Middle East, was welcomed by the Soviet Union. Moscow finally found a chance to undermine the American supremacy in the region.

The success of the Iranian revolution as well, as the Iraqi attack on Iran, upset the balance of power in the Middle East. The regional order, which was previously in favour of the United States, was changed to the disadvantage of the West. But Iran did not intend to replace the alliance with America with any closer strategic relations with the Soviet Union. Khomeini's doctrine of "neither East, nor West" became one of the most important pillars of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy. The ayatollah referred to the Soviet Union as "The Lesser Satan". He pointed to "the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, Soviet arms supplies to Iraq in its war with the Islamic Republic, and the revelations of espionage by Tudeh party members as evidence of Soviet hostility" (Bill, 1988: 275).

The Iranian authorities highlighted the importance of independence and non-alignment for the future development as well as for national security. In the opinion of Jalal Dehghani Firoozabadi and Ali Akbar Assadi, it meant that "one of the main actors in the Middle East defined an independent status far from alliance with great powers for itself in the bipolar system and rose as a new political force in the region" (Firoozabadi, Assadi, 2013: 164).

At the same time, the Soviet Union continued to support Tudeh, Iran's communist party. Communists had been persecuted under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule, and the theocratic regime also perceived them as a threat to national security. But according to Talal Nizameddin:

despite mutual suspicions during the first decade after the Iranian revolution, the complexities of the Cold War and the Middle East arena created opportunities for Soviet leaders to build positive relations with Iran because of its belligerent hostility toward the United States. An anti-Western Iran counterbalanced the military weight of NATO-member Turkey in south-western Asia and rivalled Sunni Saudi Arabia, which was the chief sponsor of Jihadis operating in Afghanistan.

(Nizameddin, 2013: 255)

Mark N. Katz outlines the fact that tensions between the Soviet Union and Iran eased as a result of four major turning points at the end of 1980s. He notes the end of Iran–Iraq war, the death of Supreme Leader Khomeini, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the collapse of the communist system in Central Eastern Europe (Katz, 2010: 187).

Iran–Russia relations in the 1990s

The beginning of the 1990s was a difficult period for both the Soviet Union and Iran. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the geopolitical situation in Central Asia changed dramatically. Such developments resulted in a new political reality for Iran, as the Soviet Union was replaced with three new neighbouring states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. Moreover, the Russian Federation became the successor of the Soviet Union which was

of particular importance for Iran – especially in light of prior agreements from Soviet times.

Russia intended to help Iran complete the nuclear reactor at Bushehr. Its construction had been initiated by Siemens under the Mohammad Pahlavi rule, but later this cooperation with West Germany was brought to a halt due to the revolution. Moreover, the Russian state budget was hard hit during the transformation from a centrally planned economy to a free market economy. For this reason, Russian enterprises, especially those offering military equipment, were looking for new outlets. At the same time, Iran's access to the world arms market was poor, so both sides were eager to cooperate. As a result, Russia began selling weapons to Iran. These contracts also included missiles. The Iranian authorities and army officers wanted to strengthen Iran's missile capabilities in order to avoid a repeat of the situation that had taken place during the war against Iraq.

The Iran–Russia relations became strained when Russia reached a consensus with the United States in 1995. US Vice-President Al Gore and the Prime Minister of Russia, Viktor Chernomyrdin, signed an agreement which significantly limited Russia's nuclear assistance as well as arms sales to Iran. Although this Russo–American rapprochement was short-lived, it only deepened Iran's suspicions towards Russia. Russia faced many economic and social issues in the 1990s, its economy almost broke down, and it seemed that Moscow was ready to please the West in order to raise capital, as well as to obtain foreign investments.

There were also other serious challenges to the Iran–Russia cooperation. The legal status of the Caspian Sea has become one of the most significant problems in Iran's relations with Russia and other post-Soviet states since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. It should be emphasized that Iran and the Russian Federation do not have any common land boundaries. The only connection both states have is the water of the Caspian Sea.

The collapse of the Soviet state also caused geopolitical and geostrategic problems in the Caucasus. Bahram Amirahmadian outlines the fact that documents relating to the limitation of the border between Persia and the Russian Empire in the Caucasus had been signed in 1829 and later revised in 1954 (Amirahmadian, 2006: 61). The dissolution of the USSR created a new geopolitical situation in the region. Two new states bordering Iran emerged in the Caucasus (Armenia and Azerbaijan). The problem was that they were at war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Although Iran was seriously weakened after the war with Iraq and did not intend to take sides in any conflict, the Azeri–Armenian conflict between 1988–1994 forced Tehran to react. Military support was out of question, but Iran tried to protect its interests in the region. During the conflict Iran, similar to Russia, offered its support to Armenia. The province of Iravan (present day Armenia) once belonged to Persia. Persians lost control over this area on the basis of the Treaty of Turkmanchai in 1828.

The Iranian authorities backed up Armenia instead of Azerbaijan despite the significant Azeri minority living in Iran. Such a decision was motivated mainly by Azerbaijan's irredentist sentiments, as well as the promotion of the idea of

the so-called “Greater Azerbaijan” at the expense of Iranian Azerbaijan. Another aspect, which pushed Iran toward Armenia, related to a close political and military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel. This alliance was perceived in Tehran as an attempt to contain Iranian influence in the region. Tensions and a lack of mutual trust dominated their bilateral relations during the 1990s and in the first decade of the 21st century. Iranian–Azeri relations have only begun to improve considerably since Hassan Rouhani became the Iranian president in 2013.

When Armenia became a Russian province in the 19th century, many Armenians remained in Persia. Today, they form an ethnic and religious minority which is still quite active both politically and economically. What’s more, Armenians enjoy some political freedom, for instance, they can now officially mark the Armenian genocide’s anniversary.

Iran and Russia under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami

At the end of the 1990s, Iran and Russia were deeply concerned about Taliban excesses in Afghanistan. In addition, Russia helped Iran with its national nuclear programme. According to Serdar Guner and Nur Bilge Criss, this Russian assistance was “aimed not only at earning cash but also at empowering the country, poised against U.S. interests in the region” (Guner, 1999: 368). However, Russia was very cautious as President Boris Yeltsin did not want to antagonize America for no apparent reason. Both states were also engaged in regional crises in Central Asia and the Caucasus. It was Vladimir Putin’s presidency that gave a boost to Russian–Iranian cooperation.

In the first months of his presidency, Vladimir Putin did a lot in order to improve Russia’s bilateral relations with Iran. One of the most significant decisions was made in October 2000 when the Russian leader abrogated the 1995 Gore–Chernomyrdin agreement, on the basis of which the Russian Federation had limited its military and atomic energy assistance to Tehran (Katz, 2006). The Khatami administration welcomed Putin’s decision. Soon after that, the Iranian president visited Moscow in March 2001. This event constituted the highest-level official visit to the Russian Federation since 1989. Both sides were not hiding that the main objective of Khatami’s visit was to sign agreements on arms sales (Shaffer, 2001) and, interestingly, the Iranian president made no mention of the war in Chechnya. At the close of the visit it was also clear that Russia proposed the Iranian delegation a close cooperation on nuclear issues, including the construction of the second reactor for the nuclear power plant in Bushehr (*Khatami visit*, 2001).

Daniel Byman et al. claim that, in this period, Iran had no other choice but to cooperate with the Russian Federation. In this case, Tehran could count on arms sales that replaced embargoed equipment produced by the United States and its allies. At the same time, Russia provided Iranians with access to nuclear technology. This way, Moscow “while certainly not the supplier of choice, has become

the supplier of necessity” (Byman et al. 2001: 59). Under the Khatami presidency their relationship was based on common trade interests rather than convergent political aims and values. Both sides opposed the emergence of a unipolar world order, especially in the form of American dominance in the international system, although Moscow was concerned with the occasional signs of conciliation in Iran’s attitude toward the United States.

Russian–Iranian relations under President Ahmadinejad

Under the Khatami presidency, Russia feared that Tehran could abandon it and move closer to the United States. Such developments could weaken Russia’s position in the Middle East, as well as seriously limit its sphere of influence and pose a threat to Moscow’s main ally in the Arab world – Syria. For this reason, the Russian administration welcomed the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the Iranian presidential elections of 2005 with a sigh of relief. However, it soon became clear that the new president of Iran and his vision of foreign policy also posed a big challenge to Russia’s actions and interests both at regional and global levels. For instance, Ahmadinejad’s statement that Iran would continue to enrich uranium and would not agree on any concessions put Russia in a difficult situation. Such an approach must have resulted in a failure of the EU-3/Iran negotiations and a referral of this case to the United Nations Security Council. In Mark N. Katz’s opinion:

in that event, if Moscow supported Tehran, it could find itself pitted against the consolidated position of Europe and the United States. And demarches like that are not forgotten. On the other hand, by siding with the European Union, Russia would risk losing multimillion-dollar contracts in Iran.

(Katz, 2006)

In these circumstances, Russia signed a major arms deal with Iran in 2005. Short-range missiles Tor-M1 were acquired to protect nuclear facilities in Iran. Bernd Kaussler highlights the fact that “while the contract would be broken by the Russian government in 2010, largely because of U.S. opposition, Russia’s provision of good offices during that period was perceived by the Iranian government as an effective buffer against the West” (Kaussler, 2014: 46).

Nevertheless, such differences of opinions led to occasional crises. In 2010, Iran and Russia clashed over the Iranian nuclear programme when Russians officially backed the imposition of economic sanctions by the UN. Undoubtedly, this was the most serious crisis in their relationship of the 21st century. Although the Russian Federation did not oppose peaceful use of nuclear energy by Iran, it expressed concerns about the Iranian secrecy surrounding the programme.

During Ahmadinejad’s presidency, Iran stepped up its efforts to produce new short-range and medium-range ballistic missiles. As some experts point out, the Russian involvement in these Iranian projects is unclear. According to some

sources, Iran gained access to Russian technologies via North Korea, while some analysts claim that “Iranian scientists and technicians have been able to reverse engineer variations of derivatives of Soviet-era ballistic missiles with varying degrees of Russian assistance” (Hildreth, 2013: 39).

In 2005, Iran joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an observer member. A year later, Tehran applied for full membership. However, the SCO members (including Russia) were reluctant to approve the Iranian application for full membership, mainly due to Iran’s complex and strained relations with the West, especially in relation to the Iranian nuclear programme. But even in the post-JCPOA period the Russian Federation did not change its point of view. According to Mohammad A. Mousavi and Esfandiar Khodaei, the main reason for this is that neither Moscow nor Beijing want to let any other regional power play a significant role in their areas of influence. What’s more, Russia competes with Iran in the global energy market and China does not share Iran’s definition of terrorism (Mousavi, Khodaei, 2013: 188–190). If the Islamic Republic of Iran joined the SCO, it would have to modify its attitude toward some terrorist organizations. For example, in Lebanon and in Palestine, because the fight against the so-called three evils – extremism, separatism, and terrorism – still forms the core of the SCO activity.

Russia and Iran’s positions became more convergent when Moscow openly supported Tehran in the face of a potential American intervention. Stanislav Pritchkin emphasized the fact that:

at a Caspian summit in Tehran in 2007, the presidents of the littoral states adopted some key security principles for the region. The parties pledged not to use their armed forces in regional disputes, and not to open up their borders to armed forces of third-party countries who could then carry out acts of aggression against the neighboring coastal states. At the time, the US was considering a military strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities.

(Pritchkin, 2017)

It seems that Iran shared most of Russia’s concerns in relation to the Arab Spring. According to Karina Fayzullina, the Russian stance was based on the following assumptions:

- Revolutions are not good and they can only lead to regional tensions and conflicts;
- The West and its regional allies pose a threat to Russian interests in the MENA region;
- Principles are more important than short-term market interests;
- The supremacy of international regulations should be guaranteed;
- Moscow should avoid any repetition of the Libyan scenario (Fayzullina, 2016: 615).

The convergence of Russian and Iranian positions on political changes in the Arab World has been particularly evident since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, and although their bilateral relations are still characterized by a significant lack of trust, they have more convergent than divergent interests in the Middle East. Their main intention has been to limit Western influence in the region in general and in Syria in particular. In this case, President Putin secured a very good partner in President Ahmadinejad; his confrontational and intransigent attitude toward the West was appreciated by the Kremlin.

President Hassan Rouhani and his foreign policy towards the Russian Federation

Despite many historical differences, a lack of mutual trust, and often divergent interests, Iran and the Russian Federation remain allies under Hassan Rouhani's presidency. In 2013 Rouhani described the Russian Federation as a state which "has a special place in Iran's foreign policy". Vladimir Putin reacted to these words saying:

We know how many things in world affairs revolve around the Iranian nuclear issue, but what we also know in Russia is that Iran is our good neighbor, and neighbors are not chosen. We had, we have, and we probably will have a very large scope of cooperation.

(Vasiliev, 2018: 359)

And both leaders did not stop at these diplomatic declarations.

There are at least three issues that bind Russia and Iran together. The first is their anti-American attitude, the second is the Syrian conflict, and the third is their cooperation in relation to the Iranian nuclear programme. At the very beginning of the 21st century, Russia seemed to support Iran mainly because of its opposition to US foreign policy, both at regional and international levels. Rouhani intensified Russian–Iranian relations. Between 2013–2017, the Iranian president met Vladimir Putin eight times (Reazei, 2018: 58). Yet, as Alex Vatanka described it, "it is not a common set of values that brings them together, but rather the desire to preserve their own power and to limit their sense of isolation in the international arena" (Vatanka, 2017).

Russia also remained the main supplier of conventional weapons, as well as missile technology. In this context, Kimberly Marten points to the role of informal political networks in Russia. In her opinion "Putin's policy choices in Iran aligned well with the economic interests of his close personal network in the St. Petersburg nuclear industry, in Russian defense industries, and in Gazprombank" (Marten, 2015: 80). At the same time, one should emphasize the fact that Russia abided by all sanctions imposed on Iran by the UN, including the arms embargo of 2010 (Katzman, 2015: 26).

The war in Syria turned out to be the most spectacular, as well as the most peculiar, example of the new anti-Western coalition. Although Russia and Iran emphasize the fact that they are interested in a political solution to the conflict, both actors have engaged militarily in the ongoing war in Syria in order to back the Syrian president. Jay Sekulow points out that “Iran and Russia share one goal in Syria – to keep the Assad regime in power” (Sekulow, 2016: 172). For this reason, Iran sent IRGC officers to organize Shi’a militias in Syria. At the same time, Russia provided the Syrian regime with air support. Contrary to popular belief, Rouhani’s administration did not decide to decrease the level of military support for Assad. According to some estimates, Iran deployed up to 15,000 soldiers to Syria. Around 10,000 were IRGC members, and 5,000 were from the regular Iranian army. In addition, more than 80,000 non-Iranian militiamen and agents are said to be on Iran’s payroll (Rafizadeh, 2016). These are mainly fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Afghan Fatemiyoun Division, the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade, and Shi’a Iraqi militias (Alfoneh, 2018).

The first serious test of Russian and Iranian support for Assad took place in August 2013, when the Syrian regime was accused of using chemical weapons against rebel forces near Damascus. In this case, there are a few important factors that deserve a more detailed presentation. First, both Russia and Iran had serious doubts about the allegations of Assad’s involvement in the attack. Second, Russia and Iran were determined to avert any potential military intervention in Syria (Saghafi-Ameri, 2018). Undoubtedly, both partners wanted to avoid a repetition of the Libyan scenario. The NATO-led operation changed the political and military situation in Libya in 2011. Any Western intervention in Syria could affect the current balance of power to the disadvantage of Russia and Iran. If the West did intervene and that resulted in a regime change, the Russian Federation would lose its military base in Tartus and Iran would lose its strategic depth as well as its main ally in the Arab world. Irani needed Syria to support the Lebanese Hezbollah, and in this way exert pressure on Israel. Third, neither Moscow nor Tehran supported the use of chemical weapons during the conflict. For this reason, they decided to advance a plan to establish a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. On the basis of the Syrian incident, Iran backed the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs’ initiative to establish the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone. It should be emphasized that Iran had previously proposed such a step in 1974. In the letter sent to the Secretary General in January 2014, Iranian authorities backed the Egyptian initiative and declared:

Taking into account the initiative presented by the Arab Republic of Egypt in the United Nations General Assembly, on 28 September 2013, the Islamic Republic of Iran reiterates its longstanding position in support of the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction.

(Letter, 2014)

Fourth, it was clear that any Western military intervention would kill all chances of Iran agreeing to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Finally, Iran and Russia were ready to fight radicalism in Syria, especially militant Islamist groups – both partners perceive radical Sunni groups to be threats to their national security.

When the Russian air force deployed new military units and fighter planes to Syria in 2015, Iran dispatched thousands of Shi'a fighters, mainly from Afghanistan and Iraq. Both Moscow and Tehran decided to increase their support for Assad's regime in order to safeguard their interests. While the Russian Federation wanted to block any Western activities in Syria, Iran intended to strengthen its regional position and maintain its strategic depth. According to Dmitri Trenin:

Iran has turned out to be a difficult ally...Whereas Tehran sought to keep the Alawites in power in Damascus as part of its drive for regional predominance, extending Tehran's reach to the Mediterranean coast, Moscow was aiming for a compromise deal involving power-sharing among different groups in Syria, as long as these groups recognized Russia's role in the Middle East and its presence in the country.

(Trenin, 2018: 74)

Regarding the Iranian nuclear programme, Russia remained one of the biggest defenders of the post-JCPOA order. Moscow consistently supported Iran's position that the nuclear deal was final and that the document did not need amendments or additions. However, President Trump insisted on changes. For instance, in May 2018 the US president warned his European allies that if they did not agree on changes to the deal, he would not waive the sanctions that were imposed on Iran. The situation became even more complex when French President Emmanuel Macron urged the US to preserve the Iran nuclear deal during his state visit to Washington DC. With this move, France joined the EU, Germany, Russia, and China in opposing any renegotiation of the JCPOA. But at the same time, Macron declared that his country may take part in talks which could result in "a more comprehensive deal addressing all concerns" (*France's Macron, 2018*). Such a scenario was not acceptable to Russia, as Moscow claimed that Iran had complied with all of JCPOA's requirements.

In addition, Russia moved from words to deeds. Together with China it tried to persuade UN member states to back "a draft statement expressing unwavering support for the Iran nuclear deal" and this put pressure on the US administration (Miles, 2018). On 24 April 2018 Vladimir Yermakov, the Head of the Russian Delegation at the Second Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, declared in Geneva as follows:

The JCPOA gives full confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of the Iran's nuclear program while ensuring its inherent right to the development of a civil nuclear program...The JCPOA is quite a fragile compromise. Any

deviation from its general philosophy or breach or non-compliance with its provisions as well as any attempts to amend its text for someone's benefit will inevitably affect the global non-proliferation regime and have powerful negative consequences for regional and global stability and security.

(Statement by Director, 2018)

His statement was undoubtedly very clear; Russia intended neither to quit the deal nor to renegotiate its provisions.

The alliance with Iran became even more important to Russia as a result of its deepening political isolation after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, Iran did not support Putin's policy toward Ukraine. Such unilateral actions reminded them of Iran's historical experience, including the Soviet occupation. As Nader Entessar and Kaveh L. Afrasiabi put it, "notwithstanding the rapid sharpening of U.S.–Russia tensions in 2014, any major pro-Russia tilt in the polarizing situation would likely cause certain backlashes against Iran by the U.S. and other Western powers, and their regional allies" (Entessar, Afrasiabi, 2015: 145).

In December 2017, Iran came closer to agreeing to the Caspian Sea's legal status. Representatives of Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan reached a consensus and decided to meet in order to sign the final agreement during the Aktau Summit. Eight months later, on 12 August 2018, the landmark agreement was signed. The conference was of particular importance to Iran as the event took place a few days after the US administration had re-imposed economic sanctions (Greenwood, 2018). President Putin and President Rouhani met on the sidelines of the conference, a move that was interpreted broadly as a clear message to President Donald Trump.

Maaïke Warnaar highlights the fact that:

Russia and China are desirable partners for Iran, because of their large economies, their permanent membership in the UN Security Council, and because both countries are less concerned about Iran's human rights record and support for organizations that the West deems terrorist. Moreover, Iran's options in the Middle East are limited, and an eastward glance is the logical alternative, particularly as Iran has long historical ties with Asia.

(Warnaar, 2013: 132)

Such an observation seems to be particularly true in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. Iran has no other option but to look for a closer economic cooperation with China and Russia.

Iran and Russia continued their cooperation with regard to the Syrian conflict. On 4 April 2018, during a meeting with President Rouhani in Ankara, President Putin stated:

We are working together on the most painful current subjects, including that of the Syrian problem. I am very glad that we have met once again,

because such meetings offer us an opportunity to talk about bilateral ties and what we can do to develop them, as well as about international affairs, primarily in the region.

(Meeting with President, 2018)

Rouhani notes that both sides maintained close cooperation, especially with the Syrian conflict. In addition, the Iranian leader mentioned three common goals, namely security and stability, the repatriation of refugees, and a peaceful settlement to the Syrian war which should be in line with the wishes and expectations of Syrians. In this context, Mark N. Katz pointed out the main interests that both Russia and Iran shared in 2018:

- Opposition to the American dominance in the Middle East;
- An impression that the US supports internal opposition movements in order to destabilize the political situation in Iran and in Russia;
- Fear of Sunni *ihadists* especially terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State;
- An almost unreserved support of the Assad regime in Syria (Katz, 2018).

Conclusion

Some authors point to the Russia–Iran alliance as a threat to international order, as well as stability in the Middle East. According to Jay Sekulow:

if Russia and Iran continue to fight for the Assad regime in Syria, the result will be an expansion of Iran's influence in Syria. This expansion will further destabilize the Middle East by placing Iranian forces in Sunni-Arab lands as well as on the border with Israel, expanding the Iranian hegemon, and strengthening Russia's presence in the region at the United States' expense.

(Sekulow, 2016: 173)

In addition to that, Jay Solomon claims that:

the joint Russian–Iranian operation challenged the Obama administration's hopes for how Tehran would behave in a post-deal environment... President Obama's critics concluded that the Russians and Iranians had colluded to manipulate the American negotiators at the end of the nuclear talks.

(Solomon, 2016: 285)

However, some analysts are far less optimistic about the future of Iran–Russia cooperation. In the opinion of Mark N. Katz, "Iran's relations with Russia have been complicated in the past, are complicated now, and are likely to remain

complicated long into the future. Moscow and Tehran have been frustrated by what each sees as the other's lack of cooperation" (Katz, 2013: 167). Additionally, President Putin maintains good relations not only with Iran, but also with its main adversaries in the region such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. On top of this, Shireen T. Hunter has presented a long list of areas in which Russian and Iranian interests have been mainly divergent since the end of Cold War: energy, pipeline systems, Iran's regional influence, Shi'a ideology, attitude toward the Arab World, relations with the West, and relations with the US (Hunter, 2010: 106). Nevertheless, Flanagan is probably right saying that:

Iran has developed its cooperation with Russia – despite abiding historical suspicions about Moscow's intentions and its policies toward Muslim communities – in support of its larger strategic goal of counterbalancing U.S. dominance and promoting a multipolar world.

(Flanagan, 2013: 172)

As long as President Trump challenges Iran in the Middle East, Tehran will be forced to cooperate with the Russian Federation, and that's in line with Moscow's aspirations and plans.

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13

(LACK OF) RELATIONS BETWEEN IRAN AND THE UNITED STATES

From the island of stability to the source of threat

On 31 December 1977, Jimmy Carter visited Tehran and spent the New Year's Eve with Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. During a fancy dinner, the US President addressed the Iranian monarch and other guests. In his speech, he described Iran as an island of stability in the Middle East (Carter, 1977). The 1978 events, therefore, caught the US administration by surprise. The fall of the shah and the end of the Imperial State of Iran changed the geopolitical landscape in the region, and posed a real threat to political and economic interests of the US. The day after the shah had left Tehran, Harold H. Saunders, Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asian Affairs, presented a testimony about the situation in Iran before the House of Representatives' Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East. In his testimony, Saunders presented three main principles that formed the basis of US policy towards Iran:

- All fundamental decisions including institutional aspects are to be made by the Iranian people;
- The US supports the decisions of the Iranian government wherever and however it can be helpful;
- “No outside power should exploit instability in Iran for its own advantage” (Saunders, 1980: 472–473).

The question is the Iranian response to the above US policy.

On the one hand, Alethia H. Cook and Jalil Roshandel emphasize the fact that “the American role in the 1953 coup will forever be viewed by Iranians as concrete evidence of American imperialistic intentions toward the Middle East in general and Iran in particular” (Cook, Roshandel, 2009: 15). James A. Bill

adds that when the American administration allowed the shah to enter the US, many Iranians were convinced that it was just a prelude to another *coup d'état*, similar to the one of 1953 (Bill, 1988: 267). On the other hand, many Americans still remember the occupation of their embassy in Tehran and the humiliating hostage crisis which lasted 444 days. Undoubtedly, it was a pivotal event, because the US, as a result, broke off diplomatic relations with Iran on 7 April 1980 (Bowden, 2006). Since then, the two countries have not maintained any official contacts. Iranian interests are represented in the US by the Pakistani embassy, while the Swiss embassy in Tehran takes care of American citizens and their interests in Iran.

Khomeini expected that Iran might have been confronted by both superpowers. His concept of neither West nor East was the best illustration of his point of view and at the same time, this became the main cause of Iran's international isolation. This situation appeared to be extremely dangerous during the Iraqi aggression of 1980. As Richard W. Cottam put it:

no major Iranian official, regardless of faction, doubted that the Iraqi attack was inspired by and orchestrated by the U.S. Having suffered a major blow to its credibility, the U.S. government mobilized its regional surrogates to restore the damaged power balance

(Cottam, 1988: 223)

The Iranian authorities criticized the US on many occasions and accused Americans of interference in its internal affairs. Tehran also condemned:

continued U.S. intelligence activity in Iran both during and after the revolution, congressional condemnations of the Iranian revolutionary government, the admission of the shah into America despite strong Iranian protestations, the economic boycott and actual military invasion associated with the hostage crisis, and the American tilt to the Iraqi side in the Persian Gulf war.

(Bill, 1988: 275)

Moreover, two crucial incidents took place in the 1980s. The first one was connected with the so-called Iran–Contra affair, which is also often referred to as the “Irangate” scandal. The US administration allowed Israel to provide Iran with missiles in 1985, mainly because the Iranians had promised to free the American hostages held in Lebanon. The Iranian side directed its ambassador to Syria Mohtashemi-Pour, a very skilled diplomat, to negotiate terms of the hostages' release (Limbert, 2009: 123). Later, Israel began supplying Iran with ammunition and aircraft spare parts. As Reese Erlich put it, “Iran paid the United States for the arms, and the Reagan administration secretly used the money to arm the Contras fighting the leftist government in Nicaragua” (Erlich, 2007: 66).

The second incident of 1988 was fatal. Missiles fired from the USS Vincennes shot down an Iranian civilian plane flying from Tehran to Dubai. In total there were 290 people onboard Iran Air flight 655 – all of them lost their lives. The Iranian authorities claimed that the shootdown was intentional and a way for America to exert pressure on Iran. They also tried to prove that the incident amounted to an international crime. After eight years, both parties reached an agreement. Although the US did not formally apologize to the Iranian side, Americans agreed to pay almost \$62 million in compensation to relatives of the victims. Nevertheless, this fatal incident is still used by some Iranian neoconservatives as an example that proves the US's hostile attitude toward their state.

Iran's attitude towards the United States in the 1990s

The end of the Cold War, as well as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, changed the political geography in the Middle East in general and in the Persian Gulf in particular. It also affected the US strategy toward the Middle East and its regional alliances. Those significant changes in the international system coincided with constitutional reforms in Iran and the death of Ruhollah Khomeini on 3 June 1989. Ali Khamenei assumed the office of the supreme leader on 4 June and opened a new chapter in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Undoubtedly, then Speaker of the Parliament, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani stood behind Khamenei's nomination. Two months later Rafsanjani became Iran's fourth president.

According to some authors, when Rafsanjani became the Iranian president in 1989, he was convinced that any “national rehabilitation required a more normal relationship with the international community in general and the United States in particular” (Malici, Walker, 2017: 151). The US emerged as the only superpower. It easily defeated Saddam Hussein and strengthened its military presence in the Persian Gulf. Both Khamenei and Rafsanjani understood that the only way to counterbalance the American influence would be to maintain close relations with Russia and China. However, in the early 1990s, a cautious rapprochement with the US seemed to be a better choice (Takeyh, 2009: 129). As Trita Parsi put it, “improved relations with Washington were necessary in order to rebuild the Iranian economy and become a model for other Muslim states” (Parsi, 2008: 132). That was one of the reasons Iranian authorities remained officially neutral during the Gulf War, however, they cooperated unofficially with the American forces.

Another diplomatic attempt to improve bilateral relations took place in 1990 when the Iranian ambassador to the UN presented four conditions to Americans. Tehran expected the US administration to:

- Release Iranian assets frozen since 1979;
- End the embargo on the military equipment bought and paid for by the shah;

- Support the 1975 Algiers agreement between Iraq and Iran;
- And exert pressure on Saddam Hussein and force Iraqi troops to end the occupation of a small part of the Iranian territory (Limbert, 2009: 144).

But the administration of President George H. W. Bush did not respond to Iran's goodwill gestures and remained very suspicious. To the US, the real intentions of Tehran were unclear. The department of state was concerned with Iranian actions, such as its support for the Lebanese Hezbollah and its harboring of dozens of Iraqi warplanes. The US was convinced that the main goal of Iran was to prevent any Western military presence in the Persian Gulf region (Krauss, 1991). Nevertheless, American companies continued trading with their Iranian counterparts. This boost in bilateral trade was, however, short lived. In 1995 the Clinton administration introduced a total embargo on trade deals with Iranian enterprises (Keddie, 2003: 265), and the sanctions regime was to become even more severe the following year. Obviously, Tehran did not accept the American actions, but it could do nothing to block these adverse developments. Clinton's principal adviser, Martin Indyk, proposed a new concept of dual containment to isolate both Iran and Iraq both regionally and internationally (Gerges, 2012: 177).

In 1996, the US Congress passed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA). The Clinton administration justified its decision proving that Iran and Libya were the most dangerous sponsors of international terrorism. New sanctions were intended to prevent any money transfers to terrorist organizations as well as to block any flow of resources necessary to obtain weapons of mass destruction. In addition, the ILSA also introduced secondary sanctions that were directed against all countries which had invested or planned to invest in Iranian oil and gas companies. The US threatened all such countries with serious consequences such as deprivation of access to American markets and finance. Undoubtedly, the American administration wanted to make sure that all other countries, especially its Western allies, would adapt the new policy and do their best to isolate Iran on the international stage. But that wasn't all. Akan Malici and Stephen G. Walker claim that "along with ILSA, Congress passed a secret intelligence authorization act, that included \$18 million earmarked for covert action against the Tehran regime" (Malici, Walker, 2017: 146). These actions resulted in deep mistrust between both parties. Moreover, the Israeli government and intelligence played significant roles in the process. In the opinion of Scott Ritter:

the Israeli government was overreacting regarding the developments surrounding Iran's nuclear program in 1994–1995...But the Israeli position, soon mirrored by Washington D.C. was absolute: Iran had no logical need for a nuclear energy program, and as such any effort in the field of nuclear activity only served as a cover for a secret nuclear weapons program.

(Ritter, 2006: 26)

In a few years, the Iranian nuclear programme would result in new tensions and would deepen Iran's international isolation.

It seemed that only a significant political change in both Iran and Iraq, or in one of the two, could have resulted in any improvement. The 1997 presidential elections in Iran created a good opportunity for that. Mohammad Khatami's electoral victory signaled a new opening. The new president declared that Iran would avoid confrontations, pursue a non-aggressive foreign policy, and abandon the concept of exporting the Islamic revolution. As Mark Gasiorowski put it, "many reformists had concluded that Iran should normalize its relations with the United States and most other countries" (Gasiorowski, 2017: 301). On this basis, the Iranian administration began promoting a qualitative change in the framework of its relations with the international community in general and with the West in particular. Undoubtedly, an economic factor played one of the most important roles in the process because Iran desperately needed foreign investments and still suffered from the consequences of the war against Iraq. For this reason, Khatami was trying to make goodwill gestures, yet his actions were ignored by the Clinton administration to a great extent. What's more, Iran was put on Washington's list of state sponsors of terrorism. America still remembered the Iran-Contra affair and tended to perceive Khatami as another politician fully dependent on the supreme leader. The situation became even more complex after the US secretary of state's speech on Iran in 1998; although Madeleine Albright apologized to Iranians for the American involvement in the 1953 *coup d'état*, at she also criticized Iran for violations of democratic principles and standards. As a consequence, her speech did not contribute to an improvement in bilateral relations. On the contrary, Albright's remarks led to another crisis and increased tensions. The Iranian ayatollahs were convinced that Americans were trying to exert pressure and interfere in the internal affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

A similar result occurred when Bill Clinton sent a letter to Khatami in August 1999. This initiative was highly confidential and aimed at finding out whether the IRGC's officials might have been involved in the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia in 1996. In this attack 19 US citizens were killed and almost 400 others wounded. Clinton's aides assumed that President Khatami could manage this issue within Iran's power structure. In the letter relayed to Iran by Oman, Clinton wrote:

We acknowledge that the bombing occurred prior to your election. Those responsible, however, have yet to face justice for this crime...In order to protect our citizens, which is the first responsibility of any government, and in order to lay a sound basis for better relations between our countries, we need a clear commitment from you that you will ensure an end of Iranian involvement in terrorist activity, particularly threats to American citizens, and will bring those in Iran responsible for the bombing to justice either in Iran or by extraditing them to Saudi Arabia.

(Message, 1999)

No doubt the letter was intended to be a sign of good will to Khatami, but this was completely misunderstood in Tehran. Some Iranian officials and experts perceived this action as “an attempt to widen the differences between Khatami and the Leadership, and to test Khatami’s will and his ability to stand against the IRGC and the Leadership by responding positively to Clinton’s letter” (Mousavian, 2014: 154). At that time, Iranian authorities were facing the biggest protests since 1979. As a result, Khatami did not want to reply personally, as such action would only increase internal tensions within the Iranian leadership. Because all officials were occupied with the protests, it took until September 1999 before the Iranian government finally responded to Clinton’s letter – but the response was not in line with Washington’s expectations. The Iranian authorities responded as follows: “The allegations contained in the message attributed to President Clinton are inaccurate and unacceptable. The Islamic Republic of Iran views the recurrence of such unfounded allegations in the gravest terms” (*Iranian response*, 1999).

In retrospect, everything indicates that both the US and Iran wasted the best opportunity for a political rapprochement. Iranians did not take advantage of the Democrats’ dominance in Washington DC, while the US administration failed to exploit Khatami’s presidency in Iran. The first decade of the 21st century was to be marked by the prevalence of conservative circles in both countries that would further hinder the dialogue.

Iran and the United States in the post-9/11 period

Neither the Iranian authorities nor Iranian citizens were involved in the attacks carried out by al-Qaeda’s terrorists on 11 September 2001. What’s more, both Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Khatami condemned these terrorist acts. People in Tehran and Isfahan went out to streets in a candlelight vigil to show their solidarity with Americans. Such developments would have seemed impossible even a few days prior to 9/11, but Tehran changed its negative rhetoric and offered support to America. For example, contrary to Russia or Pakistan, Iran backed the American plan to attack al-Qaeda training camps in the Afghan territory (Sadat, Hughes, 2010).

Iranians did a lot to try to convince Americans that they could be reliable partners and did not pose any threat to the US. Tehran tried to point to Sunni *jihadists* as common enemies of Iran and the West. Nonetheless, President George W. Bush’s administration did not modify its general attitude toward Iran and still perceived it as a threat to US national security. The worst, however, was still to come. A few months later, in January 2002, George W. Bush characterized Iran as a part of the “axis of evil” during his State of the Union speech. William O. Beeman notes that:

the epithet was shocking to Iranians, especially since Iran had been cooperating with the United States in its military action against the Taliban in

Afghanistan up to that point. It seemed that Iran could never do anything that would garner a positive reaction from a U.S. administration.

(Beeman, 2005: 133)

Iran offered the US help in its efforts to establish a new government in Afghanistan and supported Americans in covert operations against the Taliban. On this basis, Tehran was extraditing al-Qaeda members, cooperating with US intelligence, and offering to search for American pilots shot down over the Afghan territory (Patrikarakos, 2012: 171). But President Bush did not trust the Iranian authorities and intended to exert more pressure in order to force Tehran to abandon its nuclear ambitions. The situation deteriorated even more when American troops took over Iraq's territory. According to David Hastings Dunn, some members of the US administration did not want to stop with Iraq in 2003. Forced regime change in Iran seemed to be the best available option after the successful military campaign in neighbouring Iraq (Dunn, 2007: 19). However, this was impossible for two reasons. First of all, any military campaign against Iran would have been much more complicated and risky. Second, Americans had not known in 2003 what was to happen a year or two later. The Iraqi uprisings and asymmetric conflicts with terrorist organizations affected the American strategy and trapped the coalition forces in Iraq. The Iranian authorities did not seem to take the American threats seriously, although William Beeman claims that in reality Tehran was very concerned about them (Beeman, 2005: 133).

Manshour Varasteh points out that after 9/11 "the U.S. government changed its foreign policy strategy on Iran from 'dual containment' to 'axis of evil' and considered it to be an immediate threat to American foreign interest" (Varasteh, 2013: 41). This was surprising to Iranians, given that they had nothing to do with terrorist actions against the US. Despite this, the American administration was alarmed at the progress of the Iranian nuclear programme. President Bush's aides were shocked by revelations made by some analysts as well as intelligence officers. Public opinion was soon informed about secret nuclear facilities in Natanz and Arak. The existence of the nuclear facilities in Arak was revealed during a press conference in the US in August 2002. A member of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) presented facts which greatly surprised Western experts (Bernstein, 2014: 159). In the opinion of Alireza Jafarzadeh, "in an attempt to protect its covert nuclear programs from further exposure and possible attack, Iran took two critical actions: it brought the programs increasingly under IRGC control and moved more of the activities physically underground" (Jafarzadeh, 2007: 175). Critics of Iran in the US administration finally found a very strong excuse for their actions and decided to take advantage of the situation. The best way to achieve this was to isolate Iran both politically and economically. As a consequence, the Bush administration undertook a series of actions aimed at weakening of Iran's position in the Middle East.

In May 2003, despite the tremendous pressure exerted by the US administration, the Iranian leadership decided to send Americans a classified letter offering

broad concessions. In this way, Tehran intended to avoid international sanctions and convince President Bush that Iran did not pose a threat to the US and Israel. In the opinion of Barbara Slavin “Iranian officials put forward the agenda in part out of nervousness about Iraq and concern that Iran might be the next target of the United States” (Slavin, 2007: 205).

The main purpose of the letter was to secure a dialogue of mutual respect. Due to the lack of diplomatic relations, the letter was conveyed by the Swiss ambassador to Tehran. The Iranian goals included:

- Abolishment of all sanctions;
- No American interference and no support for any regime change in Iran;
- Support for democratic changes;
- Pursuit of the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran’s (MKO) members;
- Full access to peaceful nuclear technology;
- And pursuit of anti-Iranian terrorists (Iran’s 2003: 229).

At the same time Iran offered to stop any support for Palestinian groups, accept the Saudi proposal concerning the Middle East process, coordinate on actions in Iraq, and take decisive actions against all terrorist organizations (Iran’s 2003: 230). Javad Zarif, then Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations, who was responsible for contacts with the Bush administration, hoped the US would accept these points. Although his approach was very constructive, the US rejected the offer. That said, it should be noted that the American administration was divided on the issue (Slavin, 2007: 204–208).

Overall, US–Iran relations during the Khatami presidency were characterized by more divergent than convergent issues. Among the most important differences and problems are the following aspects:

- Khatami defended Iran’s right to nuclear technology;
- Iranian support for the Palestinian cause;
- Putting Iran on the “axis of evil” list;
- The hostile and hawkish attitude of George W. Bush and some of his aides;
- The economic and financial sanctions imposed on Iran (Tazmini, 2013: 89–92).

On the other hand, Khatami’s period resulted in a few significant positive milestones:

- Americans removed Iran from the list of states dealing with narcotics;
- The US designated MKO as a terrorist organization;
- Sanctions were removed on the sale of food and medicine to Iran;
- Visa facilitation changes for Iranian citizens;
- Secretary of State Madeline Albright officially acknowledged American involvement in the 1953 *coup d’état* (Tazmini, 2013: 90).

The future would show that the Khatami period had been the best opportunity for a bilateral rapprochement. After 2005, the Bush administration had to cope with less flexible and more conservative representatives of the Iranian regime.

Iran and the United States under President Ahmadinejad

The electoral victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 ended the Khatami presidency. This meant not only a personnel change, but also a big challenge for the US. The new president was very critical of the Bush administration and accused Americans of destabilizing the political situation in the Middle East. Nevertheless, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice persuaded President Bush and his aides that the US should speak to Iran face to face. Such an offer was very symbolic given that there had been no direct talks since 1980. The Iranian side was ready to accept this proposal, although it did not intend to suspend nuclear enrichment before the beginning of the talks. The Iranian regime was divided on this issue. The presidential camp wanted to take an uncompromising stance, while the second group led by Ali Larijani believed in negotiations and understood that a sacrifice would have to be made in order to gain something. Ultimately, President Ahmadinejad rebuffed the American offer. As a consequence, the US administration decided to go down the alternative path of sanctions. In December 2006, much to Iran's surprise, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1737, which introduced a travel ban for some Iranian officials and was the beginning of economic sanctions (Resolution 2006). However, the situation did not improve from a US perspective. As David Patrikarakos put it, "the sanctions had not stopped Iranian enrichment; in fact, they had the reverse effect" (Patrikarakos, 2012: 233).

There was a further intriguing factor; in 2006 President Ahmadinejad sent a missive to the US president. It was the first direct contact between the heads of state of Iran and the US since 1980. In his letter to President Bush the Iranian president criticized the US military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as condemning the existence of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. At the same time, Ahmadinejad described the costs of the establishment of Israel and referred to the 9/11 attacks as "a horrendous incident" (Ahmadinejad, 2006). The letter, however, did not contain any substantial proposals and was rather dedicated to political and religious issues.

Because his attempts appeared to be fruitless, the Iranian president decided to continue with the policy of confrontation, and he did not intend to limit his actions to the Middle East region. Ahmadinejad seemed to believe in the old saying "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". That was the reason Iran intensified its contacts with Venezuela and Cuba. According to Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, these actions proved the pragmatism of the Iranian president since all three states had contrasting ideologies. At the same time, it was obvious that such an alliance could only provoke the US and

become another source of bilateral tensions (Ehteshami, Zweiri, 2009: 107). Ilan Berman points out that this bizarre “outreach was intended to shore up support for the Iranian regime’s nuclear effort, and to fracture the fragile international consensus concerning the need for sanctions in response to Iranian behavior” (Berman, 2014: 3). Given the US interests and its historical attitude toward Latin America, such actions must have been perceived as anti-American in Washington.

It came as a big surprise to the international community when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sent a congratulatory letter to Barack Obama after his electoral victory in 2008. The Iranian president congratulated Obama and suggested that the new administration modify the American foreign policy, especially in regards to its engagement in the Middle East, and although Ahmadinejad’s letter remained unanswered, President Obama showed a few signs of conciliation. He reportedly sent a letter to Ali Khamenei and addressed Iranians on the occasion of the Persian New Year in March 2009. Commentators and analysts paid attention to the fact that the American president used the official name of the Iranian state – the Islamic Republic of Iran (Parsi, 2017: 69). According to Shireen T. Hunter, Obama’s actions resulted in mixed feelings among members of the Iranian establishment. The supreme leader, for instance, “was more specific on the aspects of American policy he wanted to see changed and referred to the alleged U.S. interference in Baluchistan and Kurdistan by supporting separatist elements” (Hunter, 2010: 69). It seems that some members of the American establishment shared opinions similar to the opinion of Naseer Dashti. He openly wrote that:

an independent Baluchistan, as a result of exercising its right of self-determination, will bring about the geographical separation of Shia fundamentalism and Sunni fanaticism. It would also create a strong watching corridor against the rising Islamic fundamentalism in the Persian Gulf region.

(Dashti, 2017: 262)

However, no rapprochement between Iran and the US was possible due to the unsolved problem of the Iranian nuclear programme, and the situation became even more complex after the violent crackdown on demonstrators in Iran in 2009. Supporters of Mir Hossein Mousavi protested the outcome of the presidential elections and urged the removal of Ahmadinejad from power. The brutal suppression of the so-called “Green Movement” was condemned by the international community. Trita Parsi quite rightly noted the fact that these events seriously affected Obama’s policy towards Iran and undermined his strategy. In his opinion, shootings in the streets of Tehran “provided strong impetus to revisit the issue of sanctions in Congress, even though most recognized that sanctioning Iran prior to the commencement of talks could make diplomacy dead on arrival” (Parsi, 2012: 103).

The US administration was anxious about the Iranian nuclear programme and therefore tried to create an international coalition to exert pressure on Tehran. At the beginning the biggest problem was, as Matthew Kroenig put it, that other countries did not want to follow the US because its position was perceived as hypocritical. Americans intended to impose new sanctions on Iran and this way build international support for nuclear non-proliferation; however, at the same time the Americans still maintained a large nuclear arsenal (Kroenig, 2018: 161). However, Ahmadinejad's tough negotiation position convinced partners of the US that sanctions were inevitable and that was the only way to force the Iranian authorities to comply with the international provisions. In 2012 the EU and some Asian states imposed new sanctions on Iran, aimed at putting more pressure on Tehran. These actions were widely perceived as a US diplomatic success.

In the opinion of Sasan Fayazmanesh:

the tough but direct diplomacy pronounced by Obama after he became president was the same as the tough and aggressive diplomacy. The carrots and sticks offered to Iran were also the same as those of the Bush administration. The carrots were still unclear. The sticks were quite clear: tightened sanctions.

(Fayazmanesh, 2013: 113)

Nevertheless, in 2013 both sides entered into a new phase of talks, and the electoral victory of Hassan Rouhani only intensified the negotiation process.

Rouhani, Trump, the JCPOA, and the unpredictable future

The new minister of foreign affairs, Javad Zarif, declared in his article published in *Foreign Affairs* in 2014:

Iran will prudently manage its relations with the United States by containing existing disagreements and preventing further tensions from emerging unnecessarily, thereby gradually easing tensions. Iran will also engage with European countries and other Western states with the goal of reinvigorating and further expanding relations. This normalization process must be based on the principles of mutual respect and mutual interest, and it must address issues of legitimate concern to both sides.

(Zarif, 2014: 10)

Undoubtedly, the main motivation for a change and a new opening in relations with the West was economic. Iran suffered from international sanctions and market conditions deteriorated significantly. Such developments became dangerous for the regime as its citizens' financial situations were worsening.

In reality, Rouhani's strategy was very clever. In the opinion of Masoud Kazemzadeh, the Iranian president knew that the best scenario was to separate

the US from the EU. Rouhani was convinced that as long as Americans and Europeans stuck together, Russia would not veto any resolution at the Security Council. He also assumed that the Chinese would not sacrifice their good trade relations with the US, unless the Russian Federation or the EU openly challenged the Americans (Kazemzadeh, 2014: 134). At the same time, the Iranian president was convinced that no sanctions would be lifted without significant progress in the nuclear talks. With the authorization of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, his team could proceed with the talks and finally reach a mutually beneficial agreement.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in 2015. The deal, reached in Vienna, was a milestone in Iran's relations with the international community. Representatives of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Germany, and the EU achieved a compromise (Afrasiabi, Entessar, 2015: 169–175). In the final negotiating stages, Iran was represented by Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif, whose attitude proved to be convincing to other partners. His direct meetings with US Secretary of State, John Kerry, were historic milestones. Iranians welcomed the JCPOA with a sigh of relief as all citizens expected the sanctions to be lifted, but this did not mean that all political fractions were satisfied with the final outcome. Both Rouhani and Zarif faced some criticism with regard to the concessions made in Vienna.

According to Kumuda Simpson:

despite the historic deal reached between the P5+1 and Iran in July 2015, the narrative of Iran's disruptive behavior didn't disappear. If anything, the nuclear deal allowed both opponents and supporters of the deal to look beyond the nuclear issue and once again focus on other aspects of Iran's regional behavior.

(Simpson, 2016: 135)

Some experts in the US suggested that if diplomatic measures failed, the Obama administration should consider a military option. One of them was Matthew Kroenig, who claimed that a preventive military strike on nuclear facilities in Iran would be a better scenario than a nuclear-armed Iran (Kroenig, 2014: 226). Some other, like Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary A. Kelanic, underlined the importance of restraints which will expire ten years after the signing of the JCPOA. If Iran took any steps to weaponize its nuclear programme then, the US would have to attack Iranian facilities. The risk is that Iran might retaliate by attempting to block the Strait of Hormuz to stop oil exports from the Persian Gulf (Glaser, Kelanic, 2016: 239). Kenneth M. Polack wrote about the best way to contain Iran as follows:

We will be addressing the messes in the region as best we can. It is another reason for the United States to help those Arab states that have already undergone major political upheavals – Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, and

Iraq – to build viable governments able to secure their territory, get their economies moving, and provide basic services for their entire populations.
(Pollack, 2013: 317)

Seyed Hossein Mousavian is probably right saying that “one major factor that continues to bedevil Iran–U.S. relations is Tehran’s general lack of understanding of U.S. politics, and Washington’s lack of understanding of politics in Iran” (Mousavian, 2014: 154). There is no better example of such a claim than President Trump’s attitude toward Iran.

It is no exaggeration to say that the most unpredictable factor of the current US–Iranian relations is President Donald Trump. On the one hand, his anti-Iranian attitude may seriously undermine the progress made during the Obama presidency, and his harsh and confrontational rhetoric is good news for Iranian conservatives and hardliners. Undoubtedly, Trump’s remarks and comments were not helpful when President Rouhani campaigned for re-election in 2017. On the other hand, however, the US president can surprise not only his adversaries, but also his close aides. For instance, in July 2018, during a press conference with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, Donald Trump suddenly declared that he was ready to meet and talk to representatives of Iran. He said: “They want to meet, I’ll meet. Anytime they want. Anytime they want. It’s good for the country, good for them, good for us, and good for the world. No preconditions. If they want to meet, I’ll meet” (Geran, DeYoung, Sonmez, 2018). The only problem was that the Iranian authorities did not intend to take part in any new negotiations, especially any bilateral talks with the US. For this reason, too, Trump’s astonishing declaration was ignored. Iran’s main objective was to preserve the JCPOA even without American participation. Besides, the Iranian leadership was convinced that President Trump was “totally beholden to Israel and Saudi Arabia” (*Iran Won’t Sit*, 2018).

The US administration re-imposed sanctions on Iran in August and November 2018. President Trump’s decision will not have a major impact on American commercial interests as the US economic presence in Iran is quite limited. It will, however, affect America’s allies in Europe, which have benefited significantly from growing trade with Iran since the agreement was signed and do not see eye-to-eye with Washington on sanctions. Secretary Michael R. Pompeo justified the US decision in the following manner:

Over the past four decades, the [Iranian] regime has sown a great deal of destruction and instability, bad behavior that did not end with the JCPOA. The deal did not permanently prevent Iran’s pursuit of a nuclear weapon...Nor did the deal curtail Iran’s violent and destabilizing activity in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Gaza...In place of the Iran nuclear deal, President Trump has initiated a multipronged pressure campaign. Its first component is economic sanctions.

(Pompeo, 2018)

The other two elements of the Trump doctrine are deterrence and a commitment to exposing the regime's brutality. Undoubtedly, such a confrontational strategy cannot result in any US–Iranian rapprochement over the coming years – quite the contrary, it can lead to war. The events of January 2020 only proved how quickly a crisis can occur. The killing of the IRGC Quds Force's General Qassem Soleimani almost resulted in a military conflict (Mulroy, Oehlerich, 2020). In addition, the US decision to reinstate sanctions jeopardized the whole diplomatic effort and achievements which were accomplished during the nuclear talks. It also led to financial and investment losses for European allies. Last but not least, Donald Trump's decision was a signal to the international community that a superpower does not have to keep agreements.

Conclusion

What is the most likely scenario for the coming years? It seems that Iran will do whatever it can to resist any political, economic, or military pressure from the US in the coming years. Supreme Leader Khamenei will not agree on any bilateral talks with Americans because such a decision would undermine his whole political legacy. It is more likely that US–Iran relations will continue to deteriorate rapidly and such developments will only boost Iranian conservatives. Will Donald Trump succeed and force Iran to sign a new deal beneficial for the United States? It is very unlikely. Morgane Colleau is probably right saying that “Iran will continue to hedge its bets to expand its influence...The more partners Iran has, the more able it will be to balance against external threats and engage with the U.S. from a position of strength” (Colleau, 2016: 51). Since 1989, Iran has tried to reach out to America on a few occasions, without much success. But the US administration has its regional interests and objectives, which could not have been sacrificed in order to improve bilateral relations with Iran. It seems that as long as both sides pursue divergent objectives in the Middle East, it will be virtually impossible to achieve any political rapprochement.

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CONCLUSION

Despite many obstacles and financial challenges, the Islamic Republic of Iran conducts a multidimensional foreign policy. Iranians are active in their immediate “neighbourhood”, namely in the Persian Gulf region and Central Asia. At the same time, they are also active in other parts of the Middle East, like Syria and Lebanon. In addition to that, Tehran tries to play a more important role in its relations with global powers like the United States, the Russian Federation, China, and the European Union.

Iranian decision-makers and diplomats do their best to maintain the balance between ideological provisions and pragmatism. Although Shi’ism and Khomeinism still play very important roles in the making of foreign policy, it is noticeable that the Iranian authorities are often ready to sacrifice ideology in order to make gains and to achieve their political or economic goals. The nuclear negotiations preceding the signing of the JCPOA in 2015 were probably the best example of such a pragmatic attitude, but these pragmatic elements and concepts had been apparent even before Hassan Rouhani came to power in 2013. The Iranian authorities, for instance, have sought ways to normalize diplomatic relations with the United States since the end of Iran-Iraq war. So far, the Islamic Republic of Iran has successfully adjusted its foreign policy to ever-changing circumstances without risking a major shift in its power structure.

Khomeini, Khamenei, Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad – all of them understood well that compromise is the essence of diplomacy. Even when their rhetoric was harsh and offensive, it was often addressed rather to Iranians than foreign politicians or diplomats. Current President Rouhani seems to realize that he has to comment on international events in a very specific manner at home and, at the same time, be more flexible, reliable, and open during his visits abroad – such behaviour may create an erroneous impression that pragmatism

prevails over ideological factors, but this is not strictly true. All decisions and all actions taken are always limited to an extent by ideology.

Factional infightings within Iran's domestic politics affect both foreign policy-making and foreign policy implementation. The struggle between reformists and hardliners is noticeable at both state level and international level. Although provisions deriving from Shi'ism and Khomeinism are always highlighted in the Iranian foreign policy, the level of compliance with them varies depending on which faction has the upper hand.

Although Iran's significance in the Middle East has been limited since the 1979 revolution, now it is reemerging as a regional power. Tehran projects power not only in Syria and Lebanon, but also in Iraq, Palestine, Yemen, and Bahrain. In addition, its rivalry with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel affects not only the regional balance of power, but also external actors – for instance, the United States, Russia, India, Pakistan, the European Union, and the People's Republic of China.

According to Bernard Hourcade, Iran should not be seen only in terms of Shi'ism and its regional activism. In his opinion:

Iran is becoming a leading actor in the Middle East, disturbing the regional order, but its current strength may be more related to its ability to make friends, the integration of women into society, its potential for economic growth and the influence of artists.

(Hourcade, 2018)

These new factors may help Iran to overcome negative consequences of economic sanctions and to reform its political system. However, at least for the time being, the reinstatement of US sanctions and their global impact constitute the main challenges to the Iranian diplomacy.

On the basis of the aspects analysed in this book, a few short-term scenarios can be described. They are ordered according to the level of probability:

1. Iran remains a signatory of the JCPOA and continues to develop political and economic relations with most countries. It enhances cooperation with Asian partners to mitigate the negative effects of the extended US sanctions. At the same time, Tehran tries to normalize its relations with Saudi Arabia in order to strengthen its regional position and to increase trade turnover with some Arab states, for example, with the United Arab Emirates. In this scenario, Iranian leaders will focus mainly on political cooperation with Russia and China. They will aim for relief from Western pressure.
2. Iran enters new talks with the P5+1 members, and negotiates a new deal on its nuclear programme. This time, the commitment will be legally binding and will include provisions related to other issues including the Iranian missile programme and its regional policies.

3. Iran withdraws from the JCPOA and continues developing its national nuclear programme. Such developments result in a regional arms race, as well as a new wave of tensions in the region. The international community imposes sanctions to exert pressure on Iran, but to no avail. In a few years, Iran acquires nuclear weapons, presents the international community with a *fait accompli*, and becomes a nuclear power. This event changes the balance of power in the Middle East and mobilizes other states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to seek nuclear options.

No matter which of the above-mentioned scenarios becomes a reality, Iranian foreign policy will remain one of the most interesting issues both for scholars and practitioners dealing with the Middle East region. Much will depend on the international community's approach to Iran and its actions. In addition to that, it will be necessary to pay attention to domestic tensions which may change the internal balance of power. Although, at least for the time being, a regime change is not clearly an option.

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