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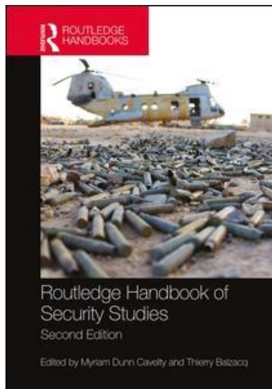

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IRAN

Rouzbeh Parsi

The primary reason for Iran's prominent role in the news and world politics in the last decade has been its nuclear programme. This does not mean that there are no other salient reasons for taking Iran into account when analysing Middle East affairs, but in terms of public perception and eventually actual politics, the nuclear issue became the one and only issue from the early 2000s onwards. In this chapter, I want to embed this current discussion in an account that is sensitive to the historical path dependencies (Amanat 1997; Atabaki and Zürcher 2003). I will look at Iran's political history (first section), the economy (second section), and then the foreign policy/security discussions (third section).

While research on Iranian nationalism and facets of identity and state policy has increased and improved in the past decade, decision-making in the Islamic Republic and various aspects of state–society relations remain woefully under-researched. The last major publications remain Buchta 2002 and Moslem 2002, which are in many ways outdated. Similarly Iranian military posture, defence policy, and foreign policy discourse have not been studied at length in a satisfactory manner (Golkar 2015; Ostovar 2016).

Iran's political history

The fear of outside meddling in domestic Iranian affairs, territorial loss, or fomenting of unrest among ethnic/religious minorities is deeply ingrained in the national consciousness, based on its history (Kashani-Sabet 1999). This means that Tehran will always attempt to confront enemies in foreign theatres rather than at home, and that its military doctrine is primarily defensive (Connell n.d.).

The long twentieth century

Throughout the nineteenth century Iran lost territory to both Russia and Great Britain. The treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turchomanchai (1828) ratified the Russian conquests and remain to this day important chapters in most Iranian national historical narratives. They are concrete instances of denigration and echo the fear of the territorial dismemberment of the country into the present. While Iran was never formally colonized, it was in many ways in the grip of the two great powers present in this part of West Asia: Britain and Russia; in the St Petersburg agreement

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of 1907 the two countries decided to split Iran into spheres of interest – without informing the Iranian government.

The outward failure to preserve the state has also had its domestic equivalent, reinforcing a narrative of impotence and loss of sovereignty. These included giving the rival imperial powers (Russia and Great Britain) concessions, i.e. monopolies and reduced custom tariffs, or capitulatory rights, i.e. exempting citizens of empires from national law in legal disputes (Zirinsky 2007). These infractions of national sovereignty became increasingly controversial within the body politic of Iran as nationalist sentiment grew in the twentieth century (cf. Aghaie and Marashi 2015; Ansari 2012; Katouzian 1998).

The twentieth century has in many ways been a very eventful century for Iran. Within a span of a century, the country has experienced two revolutions, the first one, the Constitutional revolution of 1906 symbolically inaugurated the century (Afary 1996; Martin 2013), while the second, the Islamic revolution of 1978–9, in many ways brought all the trajectories of change, intentional or otherwise, to their logical meeting point (Abrahamian 2008; Kurzman 2005). Through the century the Iranian state initiated reforms to remake Iran in line with what it perceived as modernity – the perpetually changing condition embodied in a geographical entity, Europe. Europe was understood as modern, and its attributes, ranging from attire to behavioural patterns and institutions, to be imitated and internalized, thus transforming the Iranian state and society into members of the modern world. These various reforms, and the understanding of modernity that underpinned them, in the end represent different understandings and perceptions of the varieties of modernities (plural) that Iran has been exposed to, internalized, and grappled with. The Iranian state Westernized its laws, streamlined the judiciary, universalized education, and implemented uniform military service for all males. The creation of a functioning army (external security) and a national gendarmerie and police force (domestic security) combined with the creation of an expanding bureaucracy and education system constitutes the basic core of state modernization.

The Islamic revolution of 1978–9

The revolution in 1978–9 was built on an alliance of sorts between Islamists and leftists. The former borrowed a lot from the vocabulary and methods of the latter. This made the leftists overestimate their own importance and underestimate the reach and strength of the groups motivated by Ayatollah Khomeini (Abrahamian 1993; Arjomand 1988).

In 1905 the Constitutional revolution had started as a protest movement escalating into a much more fundamental change than anticipated (Bayat 1991). In contrast, the 1978 revolutionaries had a much more explicitly radical goal in mind from the very outset. Whether Islamist or leftist, the ambition was to overthrow the monarch, an outcome which at that point seemed far-fetched, as the Shah had one of the strongest military and security apparatuses in the region and was in no shortage of powerful allies and money. Yet the combination of cyclical perseverance (religious calendar of mourning for those killed by the state) and the clumsy missteps of a repressive state in disarray tested the mettle of the Pahlavi political and security establishment. The Shah (undoubtedly affected by the brain cancer he had been diagnosed with but kept secret) decided not to use overwhelming force against the demonstrators, and all his belated attempts at placating the protestors were rebuffed by the intransigent Khomeini. Very much as during the oil nationalization crisis with Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953, he left the country and allies to fend for themselves. This allowed Khomeini to return and, as the paramount leader of the revolution, take the reins of power.

The Islamic Republic

The Islamic Republic ate its own proverbial children. The Islamists first eliminated the Mojahedin-e Khalq (a sect like an amalgam of Marxism and Islamism, now an opposition movement, cf. Abrahamian 1989) who fought with them for control over the new state. Then the purge of all the variations of communists and socialists followed. The previously so strong Iranian communist party, Tudeh, was already a faint echo of itself in terms of organizational capacity and was more or less wholly eradicated by its previous revolutionary allies (Behrooz 1999).

What remained then were different versions of Islamism which fairly soon developed their own ideological spectrum; depending on the issue, we could recognize these as leftist or rightist positions. The reason for this development lies in the very nature of revolutions and the attempt to maintain political control (theocracy) and engender popular support (republic).

In short, revolutions seldom resolve the societal fissures that gave rise to them. On the contrary they quite often make things worse, exacerbating the social conflicts in society. The structural problems of the Islamic Republic: lack of social justice and economic development, and constantly circumscribed political anticipation for the populace, forces all circles within the power elite to constantly come up with answers and justifications. This need to produce such supposed remedies, short- as well as long-term attempts of all kinds, remains a constant feature of a system whose tolerance of ideological diversity has varied considerably over the years. Just like a parallel natural structure (fractal), e.g. a broccoli, the political discourse in Iran varies in breadth, but no matter how narrow this spectrum may be it will still produce a variety of answers in response to a fundamental set of re-occurring questions. Thus, regardless of how skewed the system may be towards the more conservative end of the spectrum, those conservatives allowed to stand for election will recreate a left–right span within their own group when addressing and identifying a plethora of political and social issues. Thus, one way or another, the functional equivalent of left/right or reformist/conservative positions and representatives will emerge (Parsi 2014).

The religious dimension

One of the salient but often misunderstood dimensions in modern Iranian history and politics is religion. Religion has played an important part in Iranian politics, both as an ideology and, more importantly, because of the status and influence of the *ulama*, the jurisprudents whose profession it is to interpret religious law. Obviously the role of religion and this 'clergy' has also increased with the creation of the Islamic Republic (Akhavi 1996, 2008; Mottahedeh 2000). Yet it is important to remember that religion is many different things that are not necessarily logically or practically entwined. It can be a component of a state ideology; be integral to a commonly held culture in society; be a practised belief among the population. But what it is not is a 'thing' that simply exists and sways minds and influences decisions. A reified concept of religion leads to residual explanations. In short whatever is left after accounting for more 'conventionally' nuanced phenomena (economy; politics) can be stuffed into the box of religion and tradition (Asad 1993, 2003; Shakman Hurd 2008).

Thus the republican element of this theocracy should not be neglected or underestimated. This system is a bewildering amalgam of religiously defined elements cohabitating with republican elements. Sovereignty rests, uneasily, with both those traditionally seen as the interpreters of the word of God (jurisprudents), and the people. The former follows (with variations and innovations) an age old system of theology and religious law, hierarchies that have resisted institutionalization and therefore remained quite dynamic. The latter bestows the right to participatory politics to all citizens, who get to choose president and parliament. Yet the right

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to vote is circumscribed through mechanisms that allow institutions appointed by the supreme leader to vet candidates for elected institutions – and also overturn decisions by those elected representatives (Arjomand 2009; Parsi 2012).

The Iranian economy

Oil was discovered in Iran in 1908 and when the British First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill completed the switch of the Royal Navy from coal to oil in the 1910s the United Kingdom acquired a majority share in the newly founded Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, presently British Petroleum (BP)). Since then, access to oil has been central to economic growth and military capability for countries across the globe. Just in the last thirty-odd years the Persian Gulf countries have exported 25–30 per cent of the oil available on the world market (see US Energy Information Agency 2015).

Nationalization of oil

Oil has been the single most important transformative element of the Iranian economy in the twentieth century. It provided the struggling Iranian state with income that over time made it rather independent of other forms of domestic revenue (the rentier state argument). This steady income, which grew rapidly with the oil crisis (in general the price of oil is very cyclical and neither boom nor bust has proved to be stable), allowed the state to grow as an institution, i.e. modernize itself and society, at a pace that other means of revenue (e.g. taxation) would never have supported.

The modernizing state was becoming increasingly self-aware, and the new generations of citizens its institutions educated were in turn fostered in a state nationalist ideology. Thus by the late 1940s the political rallying cry to nationalize Iran's oil assets brought cohesion to a very motley group of political and societal forces, and challenged both the British control of Iran's most important natural resource and the Shah, who defended the status quo. Similar sentiments and attempts were evident in other oil-producing countries like Venezuela and Saudi Arabia.

As a countermove to Iran's nationalization of its oil assets in early 1951, Great Britain instigated an oil embargo against Iran (with echoes into the present, when the EU implemented far reaching sanctions against the country) which broke the back of the Iranian economy and exacerbated already existing fissures in Mossadeq's coalition. In August 1953, British and American intelligence services organized a coup which solidified and steadily hardened the Shah's autocratic grip on Iranian society (Kinzer 2003). While the CIA was instrumental, it could not have succeeded without the active support of royalist elements in the Iranian Army and members of the clergy. This 'success' came into a different light with the unexpected and unlikely (as most revolutions are) revolution in 1979 that ended 2,500 years of monarchy in Iran and engendered the first modern theocratic republic in modern times (Kurzman 2005). The coup that allowed the Shah to continue modernizing the country but also left his increasing autocracy unchecked eventually generated a much larger earthquake, a revolution that upset both the regional balance and lost the US a vital ally – in CIA parlance, 'blowback' (Johnson 2004).

Beyond oil

While oil has been very much at the centre of the development of the Iranian state and society, it is important to remember that the Iranian economy has developed beyond oil in several crucial ways. The non-oil sector, covering both manufacturing and service, has grown, especially

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with lower oil prices and international economic isolation due to sanctions from the mid-2000s. These developments have a long trajectory but have also been accelerated by the isolation of the Islamic Republic. For better or worse, intentionally or not, substitutes have had to be found for goods and services that Iran has been deprived of due to sanctions and boycott. Combined with the baby boom of the 1980s, Iran now has a young and highly educated work force with a high potential both as a consumer market and a regional powerhouse of production of goods (Alizadeh and Hakimian 2014; Pesaran 2011).

The economy is in general badly managed and also hampered by bureaucracy and corruption. The structural problems of the economy, however, have also been exacerbated by isolation and sanctions. The US has sanctioned Iran for various issues (human rights violations; terrorism) since the hostage crisis in 1979–81, both by executive order (president) and acts of congress. The Iran Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) of 1996 (renewed in 2006 as the Iran Sanctions Act) epitomizes the attempt to box Iran in after the end of the Iran–Iraq war in 1988. By targeting third parties, Washington was trying to isolate and undermine the Islamic Republic. These sanctions increase the cost for those who do business with Iran while limiting Tehran's choice. The real pain inflicted by sanction came, however, with the sanctions implemented by the European Union (based on UN Security Council resolutions, especially no. 1929 of June 2010, and in cooperation with the US) which eventually shut Iran out of the SWIFT global banking system and barred EU member states from purchasing Iranian oil (International Crisis Group 2013).

The state subsidies are a prime example of the difficult intersection of political and economic priorities. They were introduced during the war against Iraq in 1980–8, in order to support the poor and the wobbly middle class, and it has been clear for many years that they need to be dismantled. This is understood by all political factions as a necessary and unavoidable undertaking, yet the process has been avoided because it is politically difficult and socially dangerous. When the Ahmadinejad administration initiated the reform, it botched it, and it remains to be seen how exactly the subsidies are going to shrink without creating socio-economic havoc (Harris 2013, 2015).

Tehran has for some years now worked on becoming a regional energy hub (Central Asia; Pakistan; India) and also exports industrial products to neighbours. Iran's ability to attract and convince its neighbours to participate in such schemes is much better now, as sanctions and banking restrictions will be lifted as part of the nuclear agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that was signed in July 2015.

Iran and international security

The Islamic Republic has ever since its inception been considered a spoiler and singularly intent on upsetting any regional modus vivendi or balance. In the early hot years of the revolution this was in many respects an accurate description and one the revolutionaries in Tehran would have enthusiastically subscribed to. With the end of the war against Iraq and the inevitable transition of Iranian society into a post-revolutionary phase, the discrepancy between fiery rhetoric and actual capability and willingness to change the regional order has grown. Today Iran is in many ways a status quo power that prefers a predictable environment to one in turmoil.

The nuclear issue

Iran's nuclear activities date back to cooperation with the US in the 1960s. The Shah wanted nuclear reactors for generating electricity and for their status value: in essence, nuclear power was a component in the transformation of Iran from a Third World state into a First World power (Patrikarakos 2012). This ambition yielded the Tehran Research Reactor in 1967, but did not get

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much further after the revolution, due to the war and lack of interest of the Islamic Republic. In the war against Iraq, Iranian troops were subjected to chemical gas attacks by Iraq, and this reinforced the sentiment that weapons of mass destruction were immoral – thus both Ayatollah Khomeini, the first supreme leader and his successor, Ayatollah Khamenei, have publicly stated their rejection of weapons of mass destruction (Porter 2014).[1] The weight of these statements vis-à-vis actual policy is obviously a matter of debate.

Iran began investigating the means for uranium enrichment in the late 1980s, but it was only after the nuclear-related construction work at Arak and Natanz was 'exposed' in 2002 that the issue became headline news. Most likely some aspects of this work were already known to Western intelligence agencies.

This then became an issue between the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Iran, where the former demanded a suspension of all nuclear enrichment-related activities. Iran refused, and what followed were tense negotiations where the EU (eventually known as the E3, i.e. Great Britain, France and Germany) became Iran's counterpart in trying to resolve the issue. The Bush administration refused to negotiate with Iran, since it neither recognized the legitimacy of the polity of the Islamic Republic nor believed, as a principle, in the need to negotiate with 'rogue states'. The high representative of the EU, Javier Solana, and the foreign ministers of the E3 negotiated with Iran from 2003 onwards, trying to enforce the idea of zero enrichment, i.e. no enrichment of uranium on Iranian soil. Solana's successor Catherine Ashton continued this role but in a more formalized manner, as the Lisbon Treaty gave her the role of both vice president of the Commission and high representative with a foreign policy service (the European External Action Service). In effect the high representative became the coordinator of the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) efforts to solve this issue.

The problem with the negotiations was that the Bush administration was absent but yet very present. It was beating the drums of war against Iraq and implicitly putting Iran as next in line for similar treatment (Dunn 2007). The potential goodwill from cooperating with Tehran on defeating the Taliban was destroyed through the infamous State of the Union speech in January 2003 which depicted Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an 'Axis of Evil'. The Iranians were acutely aware of the Bush administration's bellicosity and so probably the only relevant security-related bargaining chip the E3 could have used would have been an American guarantee of not pursuing 'regime change' in Iran. The E3 effected a freeze on Iranian enrichment activities while negotiations were conducted but this became, to all intents and purposes, a stalling operation, since Washington refused to cooperate. In Iran things turned for the worse as well, as the Khatami administration, humiliated by all the rebuffed attempts at some understanding with the US and EU, was succeeded by hard-right-wing President Ahmadinejad. The new president had made a tougher line against the West, and standing firm on the nuclear issue, a central part of his election platform.

Lacking support from Washington, and unable to get the Iranians to abandon their insistence on enrichment (no matter how symbolic), the negotiation effort collapsed in 2005. What followed was a continuous escalation and hardening of the positions of all sides involved. By the time the Bush administration came around to the idea of a negotiated settlement in 2008, the situation in Iraq had deteriorated (obviously related) and the Iranian government was increasingly attached to nuclear enrichment as a prestige project. In short, all sides had in different ways backed themselves into corners where they were far too comfortable to feel compelled to extract themselves.

The IAEA could not force Iran to comply with its demands and Ahmadinejad's confrontational style made things even worse. In 2006 the IAEA took the unprecedented step of referring Iran to the UN Security Council, which exacerbated and highlighted the extremely complicated political dimension of the matter. From this moment onwards, the UN, the EU, and the US increasingly sanctioned Iran in the hope of forcing it to comply with the zero enrichment

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demand, while Iran increased its enrichment capacity (centrifuges; stockpiles) in order to signal its refusal to give up enrichment or be cowed by the sanctions inflicted upon it.

Most international state actors, including those inclined to give Iran a fair hearing, became increasingly exasperated with the negotiation stance and style of the Ahmadinejad administration. The president went out of his way to raise the hackles of Western powers with inflammatory comments. These comments played well with more ardent revolution-nostalgic constituents in Iran, but spelled disaster for Iran's ability to sway international opinion in general and that of other state actors in particular. Russia and China had their own reasons for being reticent about stringent UN sanctions on Iran. These reasons ranged from principles of national sovereignty and an unwillingness to sign up to open-ended sanctions regimes reminiscent of those imposed on Iraq after 1991, to trade ties. These caveats notwithstanding, they did agree on UN Security Council resolutions imposing a series of sanctions and restrictions on Iran due to its refusal to cooperate to solve the issue.

The Obama administration was also in the beginning very much on the sanctions and zero enrichment line. In fact by 2009 sanctions had become the only game in town, both in Brussels and Washington (Parsi 2013). At times it was not clear to what end, nor was there much discussion about the actual impact of sanctions. This is an important question both for the research community and the policy world: to what extent can we ascertain the effect of sanctions (impact on target) and whether they are effective (force target to change behaviour or comply with demands)? (See the chapter on sanctions in this volume.) This discussion was rather subdued, if not wholly absent. Simply put, the US/EU could not stomach a frank review of how far sanctions could get them in changing Iran's stand on the nuclear issue. The sanctions policy had taken on a life of its own, substituting for a more comprehensive policy; the instrument had become a goal in itself.

The status dimension of the issue, of being in charge of this dossier, became evident when two emerging regional powers, Turkey and Brazil, pursued a negotiation track of their own with Iran. They initially had the blessing of the Obama administration to do this, but when they actually managed to reach an agreement with Iran, Washington immediately rejected the results. While the deal would not have resolved all the outstanding issues, it would have significantly diminished Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium, while acknowledging Iran's right to enrich. This deal came about just as Washington had managed to get Russia and China on board for a new Security Council resolution (1929) that significantly increased sanctions on Iran. In a classic case of process triumphing over substance, the Obama administration opted for more sanctions rather than a partial solution to the actual problem. Similarly to the out-of-hand rejection of a regional contact group for Syria which would include Iran in 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dismissed the Turkey/Brazil proposal (Parsi 2010).

Towards the nuclear deal

The ensuing impasse with its escalatory dynamics (more sanctions, more centrifuges) continued until a variable on each side of the equation changed: the Obama administration realized that enrichment on Iranian soil was a reality that could not be sanctioned away, and President Ahmadinejad's second term came to an end. Already, before the end of his tenure, he had in many ways become a lame duck, and secret talks between Iranian and US officials took place in Oman in late 2012/early 2013. In the Iranian presidential elections in 2013 the centrist candidate Hassan Rouhani won, receiving the votes of the reformist candidate, who bowed out. Rouhani is a well-connected national security operator and was the chief nuclear negotiator during the rule of President Khatami. In this regard he was exactly the right person to rekindle the talks on the Iranian side, having the confidence of the supreme leader as well as credibility as a negotiator in the eyes of the US and the EU.

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The new Iranian president and his foreign minister, the veteran diplomat Javad Zarif, embarked on a 'charm offensive' to restore the relationship with European countries that Ahmadinejad and sanctions had wrecked. New negotiations began in earnest, and in November 2013 a Joint Plan of Action was agreed upon.[2] This interim agreement slowed the pace of enrichment in Iran and removed parts of the existing stockpile, thus distancing Iran from the amount set as a red line by several parties, including Israel. The break-out time that is often referred to is the time it takes Iran to produce enough 20 per cent enriched uranium that, if enriched to weapons grade, i.e. 90 per cent, would be sufficient for one nuclear explosive device (Thielmann 2014; Vaez 2015). In return, Iran would receive some of the money that had been frozen in accounts all over the world due to the banking sanctions.

This was a breakthrough, as it ended the negative cycle of grandstanding on both sides. The process was immediately set upon by groups and forces on both sides of the barricades, as it were, who have in many ways gotten used to, are comfortable with, and bank on the institutional enmity between Iran and the US. Iranian hardliners, American right-wing politicians, lobby groups like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and the Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu opposed the idea of any kind of diplomatic solution to the problem and often employed similar arguments to depict any negotiated settlement as treasonous, dangerous, and capitulation to the rogues on the other side of the conflict.

The extent to which all actors, in their domestic politics, were wedded to the status quo and often had internal opposition and foes more formidable than the counterparts they were engaged in negotiating with, became increasingly clear as the negotiations progressed. The negotiations had a rhythm that stalled in 2014, since they were primarily conducted in intense bursts that indicated that the matter was solvable but also made the gaps between the negotiating positions clear. These high-level meetings did yield results (and surprises) but were, as individual episodes, too short to bring the matter to a close.

In the last round in 2014 the negotiating parties gave themselves two deadlines: 1 April 2015 for reaching a framework agreement encompassing all the basic conditions that needed to be met in a final settlement of the issue. Its content was, in a sense, not particularly surprising, since the fundamental contours had been clear for some time; what had been lacking previously was the political will to accept painful concessions and the risk entailed in making peace with the enemy. The second deadline for the final settlement was 1 July. Thus, instead of continuing with intense bursts of negotiations, the whole spring, especially April–July, became one long negotiation marathon. This allowed the parties to really delve into the knots and resolve them one by one. Even then the negotiations went into overtime, with Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif spending an unprecedented amount of time together to iron out all the remaining questions.

On 14 July the deal was sealed by the Iranian foreign minister and the P5+1 representatives led by the EU High Representative Frederica Mogherini. The JCPOA is an incredibly detailed text setting out not only Iran's obligations under the NPT and Additional Protocol, but even more stringent controls and constraints on its nuclear enrichment programme. It also sets out how the sanctions on Iran are going to be removed, in the intricate legal web of UN, US, and EU regulations (International Crisis Group 2013).

Foreign policy

Iran's geopolitical outlook is now one of preserving the regional status quo while insisting on foreign troops (i.e. non-regional – in short American) leaving the theatre. This both plays to

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Iran's strength (one of the larger countries of the region) and stays true to the revolutionary ethos of anti-imperialist anti-Americanism. The prospect of this being more than wishful thinking has increased in the last ten years due to the American invasion of Iraq. The invasion removed Saddam Hussein as a threat against Iran, while the disastrous aftermath of the American invasion in turn created opportunities for Iran-friendly Iraqi dissident groups to gain ground, and compelled the US to rethink its presence and commitments in the Middle East (Parsi and Rydqvist 2011; Ramazani 2013)

The nuclear agreement and the concomitant opening of a continuous dialogue and exchange between Washington and Tehran will therefore have repercussions on the strategic balance in the region. Major American allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel, the former more than the latter, will have to adjust accordingly – they can no longer assume that the US will keep Iran boxed in. In fact Tehran and Washington have not only conflicting interests (conventional wisdom all sides are comfortable with highlighting) but also overlapping interests which cannot be ignored by returning to the instinctive mutual condemnation of the past thirty-odd years.

Iran and Turkey have had a long-standing historic rivalry, but this is now subsumed in a very mutually beneficial economic relationship that transcends sectarian rhetoric and proxy wars such as the one in Syria. In this regard Turkey is not a threat to Iran. Similarly Saudi Arabia, for all its belligerent and passive aggressive manoeuvring, does not constitute a conventional military threat. The only country that has actually invaded Iran in modern times is Iraq, and this country constitutes a strategic ally that Tehran can ill afford to turn against it. This, together with the proliferation of *takfiri* jihadists in Iraq and Syria and also now in Afghanistan, are the most pressing military threats against Iran (cf. Esfandiary and Tabatabai 2015).[3] Iran's involvement in Syria is, in this sense, more optional than the engagement in Iraq. In Syria, Iran has two objectives: securing a land route to its ally Hezbollah in Lebanon (its outer defence against Israel), and denying control of Syria to *salafi* jihadist groups ideologically and/or politically aligned with Saudi Arabia. Thus Tehran's support is not predicated on Bashar al-Assad as a person and, considering the cost (money as well as troops), will not be open-ended (Goodarzi 2009).

Conclusion

Iran is torn between its revolutionary past and a need for normalization of its relations with the outside world. The defiant and confrontational version of the revolutionary heritage is propagated by a politically conservative section within the political elite and their supporters, while society at large is more inclined towards normalization and accommodation with the outside world. Iran is in many ways a post-revolutionary society (the majority of the population was born after the 1978 revolution) governed by a political elite that has yet to come to terms with this reality. Thus Iran, as a supposedly revolutionary state, generates at times very contradictory policies and positions, both domestically and in its foreign and security policy.

The security services and armed forces are guardians both of the country and the state, and a specific, quite hard-line, interpretation of what the revolutionary ethos requires of Iran as a state actor on the international scene. This is in general a rather bleak perspective which tends to securitize (Buzan et al. 1998) all kinds of issues, domestic and foreign. Yet, the resolution of the nuclear issue does yield lessons not only on common mistakes but also on ways out of these security dilemma impasses. They furthermore point to some of the grave mistakes made in the Syrian conflict and indicate that while the success of the nuclear negotiations may be replicable to some degree, the lessons of that issue have not yet been fully digested.

First, it is important to underline that the negotiating partners were for a long time locked in their own policy, which was not primarily dictated by the characteristics of the issue at hand,

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but rather by what was acceptable and feasible in their own domestic political environment. In short, foreign policy is dictated by domestic concerns, and is not necessarily geared toward solving a problem on the international scene. In the political context of Western capitals, sanctions went from being a means, to becoming the least common denominator and thus all too seldom questioned or challenged with regard to whether they would achieve the stated aim of their implementation. In Tehran, in turn, nuclear enrichment and production of centrifuges became an unquestionable policy fixture whose costs and negative political fallout were for a long time left unmentioned.

Second, for quite some time both sides insisted on preconditions for negotiations that preempted the whole point of negotiating (compared with the endless posturing about how to negotiate the Syrian ordeal). Third, when serious negotiations were eventually undertaken, both sides overestimated their own strength and underestimated that of their adversary. Both sides believed that they entered the negotiations from a position of strength, while their adversary had been forced to the table due to its relative weakness. Thus the expectations on what the other side would give up were exaggerated, while the concessions each side imagined it would have to make were too modest.

These three mistakes were made and hence prolonged the impasse and aggravated the problem, and also its implications for resolving other issues in the region such as Iraq and Syria (the US insisting on excluding Iran from political deliberations). Yet, the formula of win-win, i.e. that a negotiated solution is not framed and constrained by a zero-sum game approach, allowed the negotiators to eventually reach a mutually acceptable agreement.

Notes

1 'Imam Opposed Weapons of Mass Destruction (W.M.D)', 2013-09-22, http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/n6140/News/Imam_Opposed_Weapons_of_Mass_Destruction_W_M_D_; 'Iran Nuke Program 2 ABCs from Khamenei', 2014-11-18, http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2014/nov/18/iran-nuke-program-3-abcs-khamenei

2 Joint Plan of Action, 24 November 2013, http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/131124_03_en.pdf

3 For a collection of reactions by top Iranian officials to the success of Da'esh see 'Why must we tackle Qasem Soleimani's warning about Da'esh attacking Iran seriously?', Mashregh News, 2015-05-30, http://www.mashreghnews.ir/fa/news/422659/چرا-باید-هشدار-قاسم-سلیمانی-درباره-حمله-داعش-به-ایران-را-جدی-بگیریم

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