Domestic Factions and the External Environment in Iran's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Since 1979 Iran's foreign policy has swung from pan-Islamism to nationalism,from ideology to pragmatism, from détente to post-détente. This article aims at explaining how domestic factionalism has affected Iran's foreign policy over the past 40 years and, vice-versa, how it has been shaped by external stimuli. Factionalism can be considered as an intervenient variable which, alongside the external environment, may have an impact on Iran's foreign policy making. But it can also be considered as a dependent variable which may be affected by external constraints. I argue that when factionalism emerges, Iran's foreign policy generally tends to be characterized by ideology. However, this may also be a function of increasing external pressures. At the same time, factionalism is generally toned down when either domestic imperatives or external forces push Iran to adopt a more pragmatic stance in foreign affairs. The background argument is that despite an influential role of religion in the country's politics and policies, Iran has remained committed to defensive and realist imperatives for most of the last 40 years. The main questions here addressed are: how does factional politics in Iran reflect upon a certain foreign policy making? How does factionalism is in turn affected by external challenges/ threats and how does it translate either into an ideological or a realist and pragmatic foreign policy?

Keywords: *Iran, Foreign Policy Analysis, Factionalism, Ideology, Pragmatism*

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Introduction

Many scholars have dealt with the debate whether Iran's foreign policy has beenaffected by ideology, pragmatism or a combination of both. At the same time, many others have studied the dynamics of factional politics in Iran and how it affected relations among competing institutions within the Islamic Republic. However, it seems that in the literature of *IR* and *foreign policy analysis* (FPA) there is a gap about how factionalism has affected Iran's foreign policy making and, vice-versa, how it has been shaped by the external environment. This article aims at filling this gap. The goal is to assess to what extent factional politics has affected Iran's decision making to produce either an ideological or a pragmatic attitude in the country's foreign affairs. It focuses on Iran's policy-making and foreign policy stance over the past four decades.

The primary assumption is that factionalism historically stems from the Iran's institutional architecture adopted as of 1979 and shapes the domestic political structure. Secondly, the institutional system is based on a complex mixture ofboth political and religious bodies. As a result, Iran's foreign policy has swung from Islamism to nationalism [Guolo, 2007: 131][1], from ideology

1. In the literature of Islamic fundamentalism, panislamism stands for an approach that appeals to the whole Islamic nation and claims for overcoming rigid historical schemes set up backto the origins of Islam, namely between Shiites and Sunnis. The purpose is to avoid *fitna* (internal sedition or war) while devoting all efforts to fight primarily against the external enemy (Israel and the United States). On the concept of *fitna*, see: Kepel (2004).

to pragmatism [Ramazani, 2004; Menashri, 2007; Rasmussen, 2009; Hunter, 2003; Rubin, 2006], from détente to post-détente [Ehteshami, 2007]. All things considered, the hypotheses is that whether the two blocks of competing institutions find a common ground, the system works in harmony and efficiency with a tendency to both tone down factional politics and exhibit a rather pragmatic stance in foreign affairs than ideological; but also, if some material conditions (either domestic or external) force Iran to adopt a pragmatic foreign policy line, factionalism is softened as well. If, on the contrary, disagreements over the ultimate goals emerge, the result is conflict, whilefactionalism exert a dominant role in shaping policy-making and foreign policy decisions and stances as well. In such cases, as will be outlined below, the intensity of domestic factionalism and the resulting foreign policy stances also depend on internal perceptions of external threats. If the external environment is challenging, it potentially leads decision-makers to exhibit a rather ideological foreign policy. If it is accommodating, this generally creates more opportunities to tone down domestic factionalism and exhibit a rather pragmatic foreign policy attitude. As Masoud Kazemzadeh has brilliantly outlined, the independent variable in Iran's foreign policy is not Islam in itself, but the distinct interpretations each faction has «of Shia Islam and fundamentalist ideology, which in turn have been transformed to distinct ideological and policy platforms» [Kazemzadeh, 2017: 199].

The main questions here addressed are: how does factional politics in Iranreflect upon a certain foreign policy making? How does factionalism is in turn affected by external challenges/threats and how do they translate either into an ideological or a realist and pragmatic foreign policy? A historical-political perspective will be adopted, keeping *foreign policy analysis* on the background as well. First, a focus on the Iranian constitutional structure and competing factions willbe sketched out. Secondly, a complete overview of the main phases in which the Iranian foreign policy can be divided from 1979 to the present

day will be presented. Interestingly, one can find a remarkable correspondence between specific turning points occurring both at home and abroad. This somehow reflects frequent interrelations between domestic politics and international events, an aspect that political scientists often refer to as "intermestic". Michael Brecher was the architect of a FPA model which keeps into account how the domestic structure and the external environment impact the foreign policy decision-making. Consequently, the foreign policy of any country can be examined as «a flow into and out of a network of structures or institutions which perform certain functions and thereby produce decisions. These, in turn, feedback into the system as inputs in a continuous flow of demands on policy» [Brecher et al., 1969: 80].

In the end, a short roundup of the main characteristics which come to light and a verification of theinitial hypotheses will be outlined.

I- Iran's political structure

The political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran hosts a vast array ofinstitutions. Each of them appeals to one out of two different sources of legitimacy: political-democratic and Islamic-religious [Buchta, 2000; Guolo, 2007: 158-168]. To put it with Italian scholar Renzo Guolo, the Islamic Republic resembles a «political oxymoron». Such a framework potentially generates competition among them. Disputes had been kept under control as long as Imam Khomeini stayed alive. On account of his authority and charisma, in fact, he sublimated the unity of the state under the banner of Islam. Political authority and spiritual leadership were thus matched together in his figure, according to the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (tutorship of the jurisconsult) proclaimed at the dawn of the 1979 Revolution. Anyway, as Imam Khomeini himself put it, factionalism would not represent a big problem for the safety of the Islamic Republic as long as its founding principles (Revolution and Islam) received support [Behrooz, 1991: 611].

II- Constitutional Tenets and Historical Constants

The principles of Iran's foreign policy are established in Chapter X of the Constitution, under articles 152-155. Indeed, they can be subsumed not only by some other constitutional provisions but also catching a glimpse to history.

First of all, independence. Iran has always rejected any form of domination aiming at undermining its territorial integrity. This is reflected in a constitutional declaration of non-alignment respect to the hegemonic superpowers (art. 152). Iran has always perceived a sense of strategic loneliness, since it is surrounded by fifteen states and has often felt threatened by Iraq, Russia, Turkey and the Arab countries. This has resulted in a syndrome of encirclement. A Supreme Council for national security is established under the article 177. It aims at «safeguarding the national interests and preserving the Islamic Revolution, the territorial integrity, and the national sovereignty». It is headed by the President. All in all, the first historical characteristic of Iran's foreign policy has to do with geopolitics [Ehteshami, 2002. For further historical accounts, see: Ramazani, 2004; Ramazani, 2008].

The second main trait of Iran's foreign policy is represented by its identity and role [Ehteshami, 2002: 286]. They have to do with Iran's particular understanding of religion and nationalism as well as its self-perception of cultural, linguistic, ethnical and religious distinctiveness from its neighbors [Rubin, 2006: 142]. Such a paradigm stemmed from Iran's rooted self-perception to constantly live within a state of "exceptionalism", from an ethno-national and religious point of view. First of all, Iran is a Persian nation,ethnically quite homogeneous while surrounded by a neighborhood of Arab states. Religiously speaking it is almost wholly Shiite within a Sunni-dominated region. This extraordinary situation of authenticity in the Middle East – in part shared only by such countries as Turkey and Israel – has brought Iran to constantly feel threatened from outside and frightened to be invaded by foreign powers [Ramazani, 2008]. The Islamic

character of Iran's foreign policy is also highlighted by additional provisions in the Constitution such as: the task to defend the rights of all Muslims (art. 152); the proclamation of its Army to be Islamic, meaning that it has to be committed to Islamist ideology; the establishment of an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, known also as the *Pasdaran*) in charge of protecting Revolutionary values. Moreover, the preamble provides the basic elements for the continuation of the revolution domestically and on the international scene, emboldening the strive with other Islamic movements in order to achieve the common end of a «single world community» as the Holy Book requires.

III- Foreign Policy Decision-Making

After Imam Khomeini passed away, the IRP split into two main camps: the pragmatic Rightist faction and the Left faction. The former is supportive of the private property and in favour of economic liberalization. It backs the interests of the *bazaaris* (the traditional Iranian bourgeoisie), abandoned the idea of exporting the Revolution and privileged the need to reconstruct the country's economy after the 1980-88 war against Iraq. The latter advocates state intervention in the economy, continues to back the exportation of the Revolution [Behrooz, 1991: 598], calls for a more isolationist foreign policy and a confrontationist stance against the United States (US). The former camp mostly comprised the religious leaders, both traditionalists – the so-called Right [Buchta, 2000: 13] – like the current Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and technocrats such as then President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani – the so-called Modernist Right [*Ibidem*] or *Kargozaran*. The latter camp comprised social revolutionaries, the independent clergy and religious laypersons [Rakel, 2009: 116, who were framed into the Combatant Clerics Society – whose main figures are Mohammad Musavi-Khoeiniha, former President Muhammad Khatami.

Factionalism evolved into a new fashion when a new political group stepped into the spotlight in the second half of the Nineties,

the Reformist faction, which came off the Left. Being represented by then President Khatami, this group had been progressively diverging from radicals in all camps. In domestic politics for instance, they supported the idea of social pluralism and predicated free economic enterprise to keep up with economic development. In foreign affairs, they advocated dialogue among civilizations and a normalization of relations with the West and the U.S. in particular, fully distancing themselves from the hardliners who kept on viewing the world as it was divided into two opposing camps, in line with the most influential fundamentalist approaches in political Islam [See: Kepel, 2000; Kepel, 2004; Lewis, 2003][1]. They totally abandoned the idea of exporting the Islamic Revolution abroad, while in some way their political views got closer to the positions of Rafsanjani's Modernist Right, who was in turn at odds with the traditional conservatives.

Before entering the next section, just a few words about the foreign policy decision making must be spent. It is implemented by four main levels or groups of actors: the Foreign Minister and the department heads, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), a ministerial committee and a bunch of strategic figures comprising the President and the head of the SNSC.

1. The importance of a deep dichotomy at the basis of the belief-system and world vision of contemporary Islamic fundamentalists is renowned. Islamic thinkers such as Hasan al-Banna and then Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, Abu Ala Mawdudi in Pakistan and Imam Ruollah Khomeini in Iran strongly believed in the division of the world into two main camps: *dar al-harb* (house of war) versus *dar al-Islam* (house of Islam), faith against infidelity or ignorance (*jahillyah*). This would direct all efforts to a «re- islamization of modernity» against the Western attempt to modernize Islam, by representing the appeal for rediscovering the roots of a «true Islam» and fighting against Western colonialism and imperialism from any point of view, military, political, economic and cultural.

IV- Iranian Foreign Policy and its Different Phases:

The Eighties: Ideology Dominates Foreign Policy: In the Eighties, Iran's foreign policy remained committed to an ideological rather than pragmatist approach. It was inspired by Imam Khomeini's most famous motto proclaimed at the dawn of the Revolution: «Neither East, nor West, only Islam», mirroring one of the most meaningful battle cries of the Revolution, «*Esteqlal, Azadi: Jomhouri Eslami*» (Independence, Freedom: Islamic Republic). At least three issues reflected the dominance of such religious zeal. First of all, the eight-year war against Iraq (1980-88) [Karsh, 1989; Potter and Sick, 2004; Hiro, 1991]. The erstwhile Algiers Treaty (1975) that settled a border dispute engendered by Iraq's craving for directly accessing the Persian Gulf left Saddam unsatisfied and looking for revenge. For this reason, Saddam decided to invade Iran, just exploiting the confusion after the ousting of the Shah's regime. All the Arab countries' efforts to support Iraq against Iran were perceived as a serious danger to its national territorial integrity. Iran showed a high capacity to face Saddam's challenge, by rallying and mobilizing millions of young people recruited within the *Basij*, the religiously inspired militias bound to the *Pasdaran* (Guardians of the Revolution) who were imbued with revolutionary values.

The second issue is represented by the diplomatic isolation stemming from the U.S embassy's activity in Iran. On 4th November 1979 a group called "Muslim student Followers of the Imam's line" (*Khat-e Imam*) took over the US Embassy in Teheran in support of the Iranian Revolution. The crisis ended after 444 days when the U.S embassy staff were leaved Iran although all diplomatic channels with Western powers remained closed. This event brought about devastating consequences on the war against Iraq. However, Iran did not avoid to be swallowed by one of the bloodiest conflicts of the XX century which lasted almost till the end of the decade.

Finally, the harsh dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia

during the Eighties was evidently characterized by its ideological nature. The main issue of contention was the management of pilgrimage (*hajj*). The Iranians put the blame on the Saudis for trying to "wahhabitize" the pilgrimage. During the 1987 *hajj*, for example, hundreds of Iranian pilgrims were killed after being attacked by the Saudi security forces. Iran's efforts to summon all Muslim world up against Saudi Arabia waned since Riyadh had already rallied both all the Islamist movements and the governments of the Muslim countries around it [Guolo, 2007: 135]. It goes without saying that the *hajj* represented the battlefield in which Iran and Saudi Arabia fought for reaping consensus within the *ummah*. In claiming to be the right and successful model to follow, Iran and Saudi Arabia tried to undermine each other's legitimacy [Khosrokhavar, 2003]. The Imamite doctrine in particular has always been seen by the al-Saud family as a heresy.

Just before passing away, Imam Khomeini managed to revise the Constitution. A vast array of provisions was taken. One of them concerned the head of power. The Prime Minister was suppressed and its prerogatives were taken by a stronger President of Republic, chief of the executive power and responsible of the foreign policy process through the mechanism set up by the National Security Council(NSC). But Imam Khomeini's political masterpieces were both the introduction of new rules to become Supreme Leader and the establishment of the Council of Expediency. The principle of *marja-e taqlid* (source of emulation) was upset so that the new Leader would not necessarily have been an *Ayatollah*. By dropping the rank to become Leader, Imam Khomeini meant to both increase the political profile of the new *Faqih* – who would be elected by the Assembly of Experts not for his theological knowledge but for his political capacities – while promoting Ayatollah Khamenei to his own succession.

Concluding, even though factional politics had not fully emerged in this period yet, one can observe that a thorough hostile external environment (independent variable) pushed all internal

forces to coalesce, an output that was made easier thanks to Imam Khomeini's ability to channel ideological divisions, settle all disputes between opposing interests and prevent major clashes among competing factions.

The Rafsanjiani Presidency (1989-1997): Economic Reconstruction and Strategic Constraints: Iran's foreign policy in the Nineties was dominated by the need of economic reconstruction determined by the end of the painful war against Iraq and thetransformations of the international system (1989-91). As Ayatollah Khamenei was appointed asLeader of the Revolution, the new elected President of Republic was Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, former speaker of Majlis. After the end of war with Iraq, the country was devastated, its infrastructures shuttered, its economy seriously damaged, whilethe oil market crumbled; the unemployment was high and so was the import dependency. At that time, the main bone of contention between the conservatives and the radicals was how to lead the reconstruction. While the latter called for a more interventionist role of the state, the former pushed for foreign involvement and investment and access to international markets [Behrooz, 1991: 608].

This initial phase was characterized by a process of de-ideologization compared to the previous decade [Ansari, 2008: 108-109; Ehteshami, 2002: 291; Guolo, 2007: 136; Parsi, 2007: 262]. In fact, the need to re-launch the country's economy sparked the government to adopt a pragmatic foreign policy both with Iran's neighbors and toward Western powers. Such a foreign policy line met the favors of the conservatives bound to the Supreme Leader. Factionalism in this phase was thus toned down due to an increased political consensus shared by competing institutions about the ultimate goals of the Islamic Republic, in parallel with the overshadowing of the Radical Left, which lost the election for the third *Majlis* (1988-1992) and was then sidelined [Mohammadi, 2014: 10-13]. Rafsanjani was in this sense able to reap consensus among members of the new middle

class and vast swathes of people sharing liberal tendencies [Rakel, 2009: 117-118].

The end of the Cold war produced various rebounds on the Middle East scenario and determined numerous consequences on Iran's foreign policy stance. Among them, a redefinition of the country's relationships with the Western powers, the Arab countries and Israel. Iran's cautious approach to the West (and Europe in particular) was primarily dictated by economic imperatives. In those years, the Iranian economic system experienced a process of deregulation and liberalization, formerly held in large part in the hands of the State. A major shift in Iran's foreign policy occurred in 1991. While Iraq was noticeably weakened after two devastating wars, Israel turned to see Iran as a foe inasmuch «as the only country left in the region with an offensive capability that can threaten Israel» [Parsi, 2008: 137]. Oddly enough, only four years before, in 1987, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres had publicly labelled Iran as a geostrategic friend. Now, despite the decreasing revolutionary zeal in Iran's foreign policy, things totally changed. Under Democratic President Bill Clinton, the U.S. administration inaugurated a «dual-containment» policy aimed at isolating both Iraq and Iran. In compliance with this political goal, Israel engaged in what was dubbed the Israeli-Palestinian peace-process.

The first step of this strategy was the 1991 Conference in Madrid (from which Iran was deliberately excluded) that brought the two conflicting parts to negotiate an agreement, formally signed at Oslo in September 1993. Israel's efforts to isolate Iran paralleled the weakening line of the pragmatist faction in Iran. In the 1992 *Majlis* elections, the right wing won a landslide victory; even if Rafsanjani was confirmed in the 1993 Presidential elections,his power started to decline and the foreign policy process came back in the hands of the traditionalist conservatives. That is why Iran, fearful of isolation, attempted to boycott the peace-process and to summon up the Islamist front in the Middle East restoring the traditional Islamist slogan against

the «Little Satan», a derogatory epithet used for referring to Israel. Such a move pushed the U.S. to establish the ILSA (Iran and Libya Sanctions Act)[1], the first of a series of economic sanctions which have been crippling the Iranian economy up to 2015.

To sum up, Rafsanjani's first presidency can be catalogued as a period when factional politics (dependent variable) was toned down because of prevailing environmental constraints (independent variable), namely the need to aim at economic recovery at home; in the second (1993-1997), factionalism grew and Iran's foreign stance turned to be more ideological because of an increasingly threatening external environment.

The Khatami Era (1997-2005): At the turn of the mid-Nineties the conditions were already prolific in Iran for the rise of political forces not more leaning to a conservative stance in both social and economic issues but committed to a full political openness and an emphasis on civil society [Mohammadi, 2014: 16]. Rafsanjani's efforts to mend fences with Western powers proved to be unsuccessful, while the domestic economic situation brought about negative afterwards. The electoral success of the reformist candidate Muhammad Khatami in 1997 – who defeated former speaker of Majlis Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, backed by the conservatives – was seen as a staunch and committed backlash against the conservatives. Khatami, despite his clergy membership (he had also been the Ministry of culture in the Eighties), was able to gain consensus among a vast majority of the population, a less pervasive state and more chances in the labor market.

Khatami's political discourse was characterized by his insistence on reforming both the domestic and foreign policy realms. At home, he focused on some concepts such as the «Islamic democracy», «people's government» (*mardom-salari*), «civil society» (*jameh-madani*) «pluralism» (*kathrat-garai*). On the foreign policy side, Khatami championed the so-called

1. https://www.congress.gov/bill/104th-congress/house-bill/3107/text. Accessed: 10/24/2017.

«dialogue of civilizations», based on peaceful cooperation among diverse nations and religions, especially between Islam and the West, Iran and the US. Although he acknowledged bitter cultural and religious differences, he believed that there was no reason to support and justify the so-called «clash of civilizations»[1]. Khatami's understanding of the concept of religion was meant for peaceful purposes and «reinforced the non-ideological aspects of Rafsanjani's foreign policy» [Ehteshami, 2002: 302]. His political masterpiece was in fact to set and coordinate the OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference) meeting in Tehran in 1997, a move that made him popular among the Arab countries and outside the Middle East too.

While Iran-U.S. relations after 1979 have always been characterized by reciprocal mistrust, Khatami's foreign policy was aimed at thawing them. However, his steps never totally complied the Clinton Administration's will. Althoughthe U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright showed a conciliatory stance towards the Iranian reformist government, several elements played against any rapprochement.On the Iranian side, the economic sanctions did not ease the situation. Israel and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) pressured the Clinton administration to sink the engagement. According to precious accounts in Parsi (2007), Kepel (2004) and Mearsheimer and Walt (2007), the AIPAC is a powerful political lobby that had been exerting pressures on the U.S. administration to adopt a pro-Israeli foreign policy. It gained growing ascendancy by the half of the Nineties and has been particularly active under the Bush Administration. The terrorist attacks in 2001 urged the U.S. to realize «that the real Islamic threat did not lay in Shia Iran – as Israel had insisted since 1991 – but in extremist elements in the Sunni world» [Parsi,

1. During the Nineties the clash of civilizations was a very popular thesis, especially among Western circles, that was postulated by Samuel Huntington in his book published in 1996, which discussed in details the same idea expressed within an article issued in 1993 on Foreign Affairs.

2007: 225]. Since the new threat came from a Sunni Islamist group, sheltered by the Taliban emirate of Afghanistan (a fierce enemy of Shia Iran), the Bush Administration believed that Iran could act as a suitable counterbalance to Al-Qaeda. But this proved to be a big illusion and soon waned. Initially, Khatami sent numerous signals to President George W. Bush in order to offer Iran's collaboration in the struggle against global terrorism. The Iranian President just tried to exploit such an opportunity to once again reconcile with the U.S.. However,despite Khatami's initial domestic and international popularity, Iran's conservatives had gradually succeeded in regaining ground. They exploited the failure of the Israeli-Palestinian peace-process in Summer 2000, restored the traditional anti- Israeli rhetoric to make a direct appeal to Islam [Kepel, 2004] and paved the way for the rise of the neoconservatives – also known as principalists (*Osoulgarayan*) – who first won the 2003 local elections and then succeeded in winning the Presidency in 2005 [Mohammadi, 2014: 17-18].

Mahmud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013): At the dawn of the new millennium Iran had the chance to fulfil long-standing aims of regional hegemony. After the 9/11 events the collapse of two among the most seriously challenging states to Iranian security – Taliban Afghanistan and Ba'athist Iraq – turned into a panacea for Tehran. Iranian leaders welcomed the opening of the Geneva channel established by the U.S. in October 2001 to look for cooperation inAfghanistan against al-Qaeda. For Iran this represented a great opportunity to approach Washington and try to settle political disputes over its role in the Middle East bound to both favoring Islamist movements and threatening Israel. Therefore the 2002 Bush's first State of the Union address claimed for a renewed US' engagement in the Middle East and warned about the emergence of an «Axis of Evil» formed by Iran, Iraq and North Korea. The new neoconservatives-dominated U.S. Administration's outlook to international relations resulted in a renewal of a pro-Israel stance grounded on a strategy based on

such concepts as «regime-change» and «exportation of democracy» in the Middle East.

Iran's top priorities in Iraq were to safeguard its own security along with the establishment of good relations with neighbors and Baghdad in particular [Barzegar, 2008b; Barzegar, 2010], to concretely play an active role in the country's post-war reconstruction and to exert an influenceover the vast Iraqi Shia community, especially the new coalition of government and the most influential local Shiite factions – al-Dawa, the Supreme Council of Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and al-Sadr's group. For this reason, the Arab states were frightened that Iran could exert the function of an «extra-state guardianship» [Guolo, 2007: 131-132] on all the Shiite communities in the region [Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007: 118]. Indeed, King Abdullah of Jordan warned his Arab counterparts in 2004 about the emergence of a «Shiite crescent» resulting from Iran's projection and influence all around the Middle East [Barzegar, 2008a].

It is worth mentioning that in that phase Israel felt more threatened by Iran than Iraq [*Ibidem,* 239]. Tel Aviv became increasingly fearful of Tehran's nuclear program – which had moved forward over the previous years [Lotfian, 2008]. In this stage, Iran's stance towards the U.S. depended just on the prospective outputs of nuclear negotiations. As the U.S. neoconservatives were more inclined to support Israel's position rather than agree with Iran, the dealings over the nuclear question failed in the end, while a grand bargain regarding security issues irreparably sank.

Consequently, those who succeeded in exploiting such a challenging situation inIran were the neoconservatives. They gathered around former Mayor of Tehran Mahmud Ahmadinejad who became President. Felt betrayed by the U.S. and acknowledging the failure of accommodationist policies pursued by Khatami, Ahmadinejad resorted to revolutionary rhetoric against Israel. This, in addition to the new politics of confrontation towards the US, the renewal of support to the

Islamist movement in the region, the backing of Hezbollah during the war against Israel on July 2006 and the standoff over the nuclear issue, further increased Arab states' fears. Despite rhetoric, Ahmadinejad was indeed supportive of negotiations with the US. The split within the conservative camp consolidated during Ahmadinejad's second presidential-term. As the domestic economic situation deteriorated, Iran's position in the regional chessboard was going to be troublesome.

In summary, Ahmadinejad's first term was characterized by a rising challenging external environment. This resulted in coalescing domestic factions charged with decision-making powers. Consequently, Iran's foreign policy resorted to fierce realistic Ness. Given bad economic performances and rising domestic rifts, Ahmadinejad's second term was characterized by an increasingly high factionalism which in turn pushed foreign policy makers to look for cooperation to the detriment of rival factions – in spite of new rounds of sanctions from the U.S. – a stance that paved the way to the following era of President Hassan Rouhani.

The First Presidential Term of Hassan Rouhani (2013-2017): For the next presidential mandate, Hassan Rouhani represented the best possible option due to his affiliation to the pragmatic-conservative camp as well as having received support from such reform-minded politicians as Rafsanjani [Mohammadi, 2014: 29]. Officially, for both Western and Middle Eastern media the master of the final agreement known as *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA) reached in Vienna on July 2015 was just the new President.

Iran's comeback to a realist foreign policy was the natural outcome of a systemic process of interactions between external and internal environments. If the achievement of a nuclear deal with Western powers was facilitated by a climate of confidence among US President Obama, European countries and Iranian President Rouhani, it looks like that such a breakthrough was sustained by an increasing internal public demand for economic

growth. Due to long-standing sanctions, the country expressed the need to enjoy new opportunities and be more competitive in the international markets. When Rouhani took office, he stated that Iran would pursue a policy of constructive interactions with neighbors and world powers based on cooperation in the fields of energy, trade, environment and security. Nevertheless, if the JCPOA proved to be a game changer for Iran in the regional balance of power, Arab states felt uncomfortable with the new power position reached by Iran. Tehran was accused to destabilize regional security by promoting sectarian policies all around the Middle East and resorting to "Persian nationalism"[71]. In Western perceptions, noticeable examples are given by Iran's support for Assad and Shiite groups in Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, military and economic assistance to Houtis in Yemen, cooperation with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria.

Indeed, and contrary to Western beliefs, Iran's ramifications beyond its national borders proved to be once again neither ideological nor based on irrationality. They just represent the cornerstone of a «strategic depth» doctrine based on the «idea of stretching the frontlines of conflict outward from Iranian borders to reduce rivals' options for attacking Iranian territory directly» [Barzegar and Divsallar, 2017: 48]. Indeed Iran's efforts are not aimed at maximizing competitive advantages typical of ideological-revolutionary states in search of hegemonic power by adopting offensive positions. On the contrary, such a defensive approach towards Middle East issues – especially during Rouhani's first mandate – rather mirrors Iran's conservative orientation towards balance of power, balance of threats and deterrence.

Rouhani's first term was thus characterized by a recovery of an accommodationist foreign policy line due to a more cooperative external environment. This resulted in mitigating domestic factionalism after years of exacerbated public debate, economic sanctions and social unrest.

V- The Main Argument:

The main goal of this paper was to show how factionalism has influenced Iran's foreign policy since the 1979 Revolution, alongside external constraints. In the Eighties, Iran's foreign policy was characterized by a rather ideological approach on the surface due to the intensity of revolutionary zeal combined with the aim to become a model for neighboring states. Exhibiting such an ideological attitude was also due to Imam Khomeini's key position on top of the system whose presence functioned as a «balancing force» [Behrooz, 1991: 612] between competing sources of legitimacy which merged into his figure. As long as Imam Khomeini was alive, factionalism was not a prominent aspect of the Iranian political system yet. This represented the exception that proves the rule because through his charisma he was able to appease disputes and conflicts.

At this point, the power of ideology must be clarified. Both ideology and religion (or rather the ideological and political exploitation of religion) have often played a big role, given the country's self-perception of a combination of both an identity-related exceptionalism and a strategic loneliness in the Middle East/Muslim world. However, a more accurate focus shows that Iran has normally acted as a «rational actor» [Ehteshami, 2002: 284] so that its ideological approach to foreign affairs (and the Middle East in particular) may be considered as a mere facade. While the Shia factor has undoubtedly exerted a prominent role on Iran's strategic considerations, it was rather tactical and instrumental: «although ideology is an extremely important factor in Iran's foreign policy, the role that it plays in this particular relationship serves more pragmatic and strategic purposes and the factor of ideology is placed in the service of Iran's national interests and as a means of achieving the objectives of national security and other interests» [Barzegar, 2008: 53]. Indeed, Iran's foreign policy has always been dominated by strategic considerations, while religion has often been an important factor.

In the Nineties the economic hardships inherited from the war

against Iraq compelled Iran to act in a pragmatic way and search for mending fences with almost all the main Muslim neighboring countries. Under the presidential mandates of both pragmatic Rafsanjani and reformist Khatami, Iran's foreign policy was characterized by a restoration of realist imperatives in foreign conduct. Rafsanjani's presidency was marked by a rather evident "commonality of interests" with the Leader regarding either economic matter and foreign policy goals. As a consequence, political factionalism was markedly toned down and resulted in a pragmatic foreign policy attitude in his first term. Economic reconstruction and normalization of dealings with the West became predominant. In Khatami's era, Iran tried to legitimize itself as an international player by exploiting religion to establish a dialogue among civilizations in order to reach cooperation, coexistence and peace as well as to restore its political legitimacy in the Middle East after an exhausting struggle against Saudi Arabia in the Eighties.

The 9/11 events represented a major shift in Iran's foreign policy. As Iran's initial effort to bridge the gap with the US over the war on terror went wrong, the rise of *principalists* around Ahmadinejad led to a restoration of an ideological approach against the "Great and the Little Satan" (the U.S. and Israel). This opened a new era opf confrontation between the US and Iran, which tried to regain legitimacy in the Middle East by reinforcing its relations with Islamist movements like Hezbollah and Hamas and by exerting its influence over the Shia communities in Iraq.

However, the case of Khatami's second mandate (2001-2005) brings to the surface a scheme in mutual influences between factional politics and foreign affairs. It confirms one of the hypotheses given in the introduction. External threats normally push internal forces to coalesce, despite eliciting clear-cut divisions. Especially when such rifts do not have to do with the ultimate goals of the Islamic Republic, factionalism is usually toned down, Even the case of Ahmadinejad's second mandate (2009-2013). During this time the system was able to exhibit a

realistic need to mend fences with external powers and create the conditions for the ensuing cooperative and pragmatic attitude in response to U.S. President Barack Obama's attempts to find a solution to the nuclear issue.

Table 1. How domestic factors combined with the perception of external environment affect Iran's foreign policy *

Government	External environment	Domestic factionalism	Foreign policy stance
Imam Khomeini 1979-89	Challenging	Kept under control	Ideological
Rafsanjani 1989-93	Accommodating	Low	Pragmatic/cooperative
Rafsanjani 1993-97	Challenging	High	Ideological
Khatami 1997-2001	Accommodating	Low	Pragmatic/cooperative
Khatami 2001-05	Challenging	High	Ideological
Ahmadinejad 2005-09	Challenging	Low	Ideological
Ahmadinejad 2009-13	Challenging	High	Pragmatic/cooperative
Rouhani 2013-17	Accommodating	Low	Pragmatic/cooperative
Rouhani 2017-21	*Challenging*	*High*	*Ideological*

* Source: author's overview based on case analysis presented in this article.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis made in this article, and synthesized in the Table 1, it can be claimed that a high degree of domestic factionalism does not necessarily result in ideological policies against rivals and foes – even if it often may occur. At the same time, a low degree of factionalism does not inevitably translate into the search of a cooperative engagement in foreign affairs – although there is a noticeable correlation. Thus, it must be stressed the crucial importance of the external environment alongside factionalism to result in specific foreign policy stances. Some patterns emerge. The most remarkable is that when an accommodating external environment is associated to a mitigation in domestic factionalism, Iran's foreign policy exhibit a pragmatic cooperative attitude. On the contrary, the most dissonant and peculiar case is represented by Ahmadinejad's first term (2005-09), when a low degree of factionalism was made possible upon

sidelining the Reformists, while a threatening external environment pushed domestic forces to coalesce. A challenging external environment was the main driver which pushed decision-makers to adopt a rather ideological foreign policy stance before restoring a more suited realist attitude in the 2009-2013 period.

Rouhani's second mandate (2017-21) was not included in the analysis (that is why it appears in italics in the Table), but it seems that a recurring pattern emerges anyway. The strengthening of a challenging external environment – especially after then-US President Donald Trump announced his country would withdraw from the JCPOA on May 8th 2018 – created the premises for the deterioration of internal economic performances which damaged Rouhani's consensus. This situation pushed Iran to restore an ideological foreign policy stance towards regional rivals about such issues like the conflicts in Syria and Yemen and resulted in the escalation with the US which culminated into the brutal assassination of IRGC General Qassem Soleimani on January 3rd 2020.

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