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## IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY, NUCLEAR ASPIRATIONS, AND TRUSTWORTHINESS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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**JCSP 41**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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## INTRODUCTION

*I am a man who has come from the East . . . I represent a great and renowned nation whose civilization began tens of centuries ago.*

--- Mohammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, speaking to the United Nations on September 21, 1998

While the borders of the Middle East have been redrawn for centuries by tribal disputes and foreign conquests, Iran, known as Persia prior to 1935, has existed more or less within the same boundaries for over two thousand years. Under Cyrus the Great, the Persians became a unified people and their cities, culture, and technology were admired throughout the known world.<sup>1</sup> Centuries before the Roman Empire rose and fell, they built a comprehensive network of roads, developed uniform weights and measures, standardized currency, and created a sophisticated postal system. For thousands of years the Persian people maintained influence over their empire and were considered a regional power.<sup>2</sup>

Culturally and ethnically diverse, Iranian people take great pride in their Shiite religious traditions, their history as descendants of the Persian Empire, and their strong belief in a rightful position as a regional hegemon.<sup>3</sup> It is this powerful sense of nationalism and glorious place in history that many Iranians seek to recapture today, perhaps at all costs, as their government continues its quest to build a nuclear weapon.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Iran*, directed by Charles Fitzgerald, Tom Kane and Jim Gaynor (New York: A & E Television Networks : Distributed by New Video, 2006; 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> W. Frederick Kagan, Ahmad Majidyar and Danielle Pletka, "Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan," *The American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War* (Spring, 2012), 1-93.

<sup>4</sup> Fitzgerald, Kane and Gaynor, *Iran* . . .

An examination of Iran's twenty-first century domestic and foreign policy reveals the country's smart power approach to establish regional influence.<sup>5</sup> Iran's strategy in the Middle East<sup>6</sup> has consisted of employing a myriad of strategic tools that vary from political influence and economic seduction to military inference.<sup>7</sup> This combination of soft and hard power is popular amongst the majority of the countries in the region, yet Iran remains mistrusted and disliked throughout much of the democratic world.<sup>8</sup> To understand Iran's foreign policy one must separate the government's statements, which are geared towards its domestic audience, from its policy decisions made in the global arena.<sup>9</sup> The British Ambassador to Iran in the 1970s, Sir Dennis Wright, summarized his dealings with Iranians as follows: "The Iranians are people who say the opposite of what they think and do the opposite of what they say. That does not necessarily mean that what they do does not conform to what they think."<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Iran's current foreign policy is reflective of and consistent with whom the Iranians are and what they want as a nation.

This paper will demonstrate that Iran's twenty-first century foreign policy, while still greatly shaped by its ideology and geopolitics, is becoming ever more pragmatic in order to achieve Iran's national interests, especially in the realm of its nuclear aspirations. The first section of this paper will first describe the framework to be used for the analysis, the Regional Security Complexes. It will also examine the importance of Iran's geostrategic location and

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<sup>5</sup> This paper will only focus on Iran from the early 2000 to present days.

<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this essay, the Middle East will consist of Afghanistan, Egypt, Gulf Cooperation Council, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

<sup>7</sup> Kagan, Majidyar and Pletka, *Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan*, 1-93.

<sup>8</sup> Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence: A Religious-Political State and Society in its Region* (London; New York: Zed, 2010), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Ann J. Rieffer-Flanagan, *Evolving Iran: An Introduction to Politics and Problems in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 147.

<sup>10</sup> Shmuel Bar, "Iran: Cultural Values, Self Images and Negotiation Behavior" (Ph.D, The Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy), 1-61.

touch briefly on the influence of its religious ideologies. The second section will examine Iran's twenty-first century foreign policy and its increasing trend towards realism, despite its use of hard-line rhetoric. The paper will then discuss Iran's rapprochement with the West vis-à-vis current negotiations regarding the possibility of nuclear agreement, highlighting its pragmatic approach to foreign policy. Lastly, the paper will touch on the concerns and critiques regarding Iran's trustworthiness as a world player, especially in regards to its nuclear ambitions. In its quest to safeguard its national independence and assert its sphere of regional influence, Iran's foreign and domestic actions over the past decade demonstrate its hard-headed yet restrained foreign policy approach.

## THE DETERMINANTS OF IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Today's security environment attributes great significance to regions as security formations. For that reason, regions are regarded as sub-systems where all other international theories can be applied, such as balance of power, polarity, interdependence, and alliance systems.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, regional security complexes can be addressed through power relations and, as a result, new security studies frameworks, such as Buzan & Weaver's Regional Security Complex theory, were developed with the aim of answering the security needs and deficiencies of "traditional" security studies.<sup>12</sup> According to Buzan & Weaver's model, for a country like Iran security interdependence is higher between units within the region than security interdependence with units outside the security complex. Similarly, Dr Chennoufi, Professor at Canadian Forces College (Toronto) and Chair of the Department of Security and International Affairs, stated during a seminar that the key to understanding the Middle East regional security dynamics and any of its countries' influence is through the lens of history, national identity, political actors, geography, and foreign policy.<sup>13</sup>

Geography plays a key role in shaping Iran's foreign policy. For years, Iran served as a balance against Arab power in the Middle East. Iran shares boundaries with seven states and, across the Gulf, six further states. "Its eastern boundary delineates the eastern frontier of the Middle East, while its western border with Iraq marks the edge of the Arab world, thus providing the Middle Eastern links between the Indian subcontinent, the Trans-Caucasus and Central

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<sup>11</sup> Dr Miloud Chennoufi, "Regional Studies and International Security: A Theoretical Framework" (Seminar, Canadian Forces College, Toronto), 1-22.

<sup>12</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Vol. 91 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 49.

<sup>13</sup> Dr Miloud Chennoufi, "Regional Studies . . .

Asia”.<sup>14</sup> After World War II, the United States (US) viewed Iran as the first place where Soviet power had to be stopped, while the British before them had seen it as a way-station on the path to India. Furthermore, Iran’s Gulf coastline allows it to exercise a significant controlling influence over the Strait of Hormuz, considered one of the most strategic straits of water on the planet.<sup>15</sup> As such, geography is one of the key enablers of Iran’s influence over the Middle East and a key factor in its foreign policy.

Iran has entered the twenty-first century as an important regional power in the Middle East. It is the largest country in the region with a population of eighty million, the second highest rated military behind Israel,<sup>16</sup> and the second largest economy behind Saudi Arabia. It also has fourth largest proven oil reserves in the world. It is a country with millennia of history and, as such, remains very influential among Shia communities in the Gulf.<sup>17</sup> Iran is a major funder of Hezbollah, a significant backer of the Assad regime in Syria, and, post-Saddam has a closer relationship with Iraq. The sworn enemy of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Daesh, Iran has contributed over two-thousand troops in the war against ISIL in Iraq and Syria.<sup>18</sup> Iran is thus a very important strategic partner, an epicenter in the region, and is central to any prospect of peace and stability in the Middle East. Iran's foreign policy appears to be defensive, mainly pragmatic, and based on state-oriented and strategic issues.

Furthermore, Iran’s theological institutions have played an important role in maintaining the influence of Shiism in parts of the Islamic world and have been the most dramatic illustration

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<sup>14</sup> Ewan W. Anderson and W. B. Fisher, *The Middle East: Geography and Geopolitics* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000), 217.

<sup>15</sup> World Atlas, "Strait of Hormuz," Graphic Maps, <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/hormuz.htm> (accessed November, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> *Turning Point: Iran. Should You Still be Afraid of Iran?* directed by The National CBC (CBC studios: CBC, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

of the Islamic political revival that has aroused Muslims from Algeria to Indonesia.<sup>19</sup> Shia Islam, the faith of more than ninety percent of Iran's population, became the vehicle for mobilization of discontented Iranians. The discourse of the religious movement led by the Ayatollahs emphasized the importance of religious identity and social justice.<sup>20</sup> This approach has allowed Iran to affect the Alawite regime in Syria, spread its influence in Lebanon and establish a virtual border with Israel, a soft power approach consistent with a regional power's influence on its neighbouring countries' political actors.<sup>21</sup> Iran's foreign policy has been influenced by its geostrategic location, economic factors, history, cultural identity, and by religion. Iran believes in its uniqueness as a regional power and it is reflected in its foreign policy.

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<sup>19</sup> Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 339.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Ann J. Rieffer-Flanagan, *Evolving Iran: An Introduction to Politics and Problems in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 210.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Pahlavi, "The Place of Shi'ism in Iranian Grand Strategy," *Revue De Défense Nationale* 64, no. no. 8-9 (August-September, 2008), 43-52.

## IRAN'S TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FOREIGN POLICY

Today, Iran's efforts to spread its Revolution throughout the Middle East have been scaled back and, despite its use of harsh religious rhetoric, Iran displays evident signs of realism. Iran of the twenty-first century has significantly changed from where the country was decades ago, as evident by its trend towards realism. As such, the survival of the state and power politics are becoming more important than religious ideologies.<sup>22</sup> Iran's realism is evident in its foreign policy in the Middle East, which is targeted in nature and enabled through a smart power approach.<sup>23</sup> It is a policy that is pragmatic in nature and consistent with the regime's vision for the Middle East.

Iran's foreign policy reflects its commitment to Shiism as well as its national independence, as demonstrated in the country's constitution. Article 3 in Chapter I states that the government of Iran shall frame "...the foreign policy of the country on the basis of Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unsparing support to the freedom fighters of the world."<sup>24</sup> Article 152 in Chapter X further states that Iran's foreign policy shall enable "...the rejection of all forms of domination...the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects... the defence of the rights of all Muslims, nonalignment with respect to the hegemonist superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent States".<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Barbara Ann J. Rieffer-Flanagan, *Evolving Iran: An Introduction to Politics and Problems in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 215.

<sup>23</sup> American Enterprise Institute, "Iranian Foreign Relations in the Middle East," *Iran Tracker* (2012), 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of foreign affairs, Islamic Republic of Iran, "Islamic Republic of Iran - Constitution," Islamic Republic of Iran, <http://en.mfa.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=2144> (accessed November, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of foreign affairs, Islamic Republic of Iran, "Islamic Republic of Iran - Constitution," Islamic Republic of Iran, <http://en.mfa.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=2144> (accessed November, 2014).

Some of Iran's twenty-first century foreign policy objectives in the Middle East derive directly from the confluence of events in Europe and the Middle East. Iran's regional influence and international prestige received a great boost in the early 1990s when the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the reorganization of now-independent republics, created an area of fluid potential in the region.<sup>26</sup> While remaining a steadfast supporter of the Palestinians, Iran ensures that its foreign policy reflects friendly diplomacy and collaboration so as to remain close to the majority of its neighbouring Arab and non-Arab countries.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, Iran's defiant position vis-à-vis the US has been instrumental to Iran's regional influence. The recent invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan by the US, combined with its deployment of permanent troops to Central Asia, the Middle East, and Turkey reinforce Iran's regional power as the Shias' protector against external threats.<sup>28</sup> A majority of the population in the Middle East view their national governments as clients of the US, disregarding the economic, political and cultural interests of their own people to that of neoliberalism and Zionism.<sup>29</sup> As a result, many populations of neighbouring countries view Iran as a model for the conquest of state power and revolutionary practice. Iran's targeted foreign policy in the Middle East remains very popular among the people of the region, while at the same time continuing to alienate the US and its allies. This disaffection with Iran has translated into diplomatic and economic hostilities, consequently reinforcing the Iranian government's domestic rhetoric and stance.

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<sup>26</sup> Roy Andersen, Robert F. Seibert and Jon G. Wagner, *Politics and Change in the Middle East: Sources of Conflict and Accommodation*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Pentice Hall, 2007), 281.

<sup>27</sup> Chester A. Crocker et al., *Rewiring Regional Security in a Fragmented World* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2011), 181.

<sup>28</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 195.

<sup>29</sup> Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence: A Religious-Political State and Society in its Region* (London ; New York: Zed, 2010), 214.

Likewise, Iran's popular and targeted foreign policy in the region has empowered Shia groups outside Iran who now consider Iran as their main guardian. This support is directly linked to Article 154 of Iran's constitution, which states: "...Iran has as its ideal human felicity throughout human society ... rule of justice and truth to be the right of all people of the world. Accordingly ... it supports the just struggles of the freedom fighters against the oppressors in every corner of the globe."<sup>30</sup> In the wake of the Iraqi war and continuing unrest in Palestine, armed conflicts continue to spill over into countries within the region and destabilize their already weakened governments. For Shia communities in countries like Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria, Iran's support to their causes provides them with valuable leverage and a strong voice when dealing with their governments.<sup>31</sup> Maintaining a partnership with Shia groups in the Middle East is instrumental to Iran's foreign policy as it heightens the country's regional power.<sup>32</sup>

Among the well-known groups supported by Iran are Hamas and Hezbollah, a support that is of a political nature as part of a well-crafted "smart" regional influence. Since the 1980s, Hamas and Hezbollah have evolved into mainstream political parties. While they both maintain military wings, these dominant Islamist political groups have sought to use political and electoral processes to achieve their objectives. Iran's support to a defiant Hamas and Hezbollah at the borders of Israel directly serves Iran's national interest, as it forces Israel to focus on the immediate and constant hostilities at its borders, rather than plan attacks on Iran's strategic

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<sup>30</sup> Ministry of foreign affairs, Islamic Republic of Iran, "Islamic Republic of Iran - Constitution," Islamic Republic of Iran, <http://en.mfa.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=2144> (accessed November, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Chester A. Crocker et al., *Rewiring Regional Security in a Fragmented World* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2011), 181.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

installations, in particular its nuclear facilities.<sup>33</sup> Besides, Iran's financial support for these organisations has been minimal, and they do not need Iran's military support. Hamas and Hezbollah's support emanate from the majority of people in the region who are opposed to what they view as the aggressive policies of the US and Israel,<sup>34</sup> an antagonistic sentiment shared by many Iranians, which the Iranian regime will have to rectify as the country aspires to end diplomatic isolation.<sup>35</sup>

Economic necessity is a critical driving force behind Iran's attempts to end the country's diplomatic isolation. Iran faces numerous challenges as the country navigates its way through a globalized world and, in particular, ending the commercial blockades imposed by the international community would unlock the path to prosperity. Although it is unlikely that Iran and the US are going to become friends, the increased threat that ISIL poses to the security and strategic interests of both countries, combined with an increase in regional terrorist groups, may encourage them to engage in real and constructive diplomatic dialogue.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the British Foreign Secretary, Sir William Hague has recently announced plans for the United Kingdom (UK) to re-open the British Embassy in Tehran. Recognizing the standing of Iran in the Middle East, Sir William underlined the importance of rebuilding strong diplomatic ties with Iran as the right step moving forward.<sup>37</sup> Sir William stressed his message by stating: "Iran is an

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<sup>33</sup> Barbara Ann J. Rieffer-Flanagan, *Evolving Iran: An Introduction to Politics and Problems in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 215.

<sup>34</sup> Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence: A Religious-Political State and Society in its Region* (London ; New York: Zed, 2010), 224.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Akhilesh Pillalamarri, "Iran's Important Role in the Future of the Middle East," *The Diplomat* (Summer 2014, 2014), 1-1.

<sup>37</sup> BBC, "UK to Re-Open Iran Embassy Says Hague," *BBC News UK Politics* (Summer, 2014), 1-2.

important country in a volatile region, and maintaining embassies around the world, even under difficult conditions, is a central pillar of the UK's global diplomatic approach.”<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, Iran’s twenty-first century represents stability in the Middle East. As journalist Robert Kaplan often argues, Iran is essentially an oasis of stability in a desert of weak states because of its coherence and sense of naturalness.<sup>39</sup> The west can look to Iran to support Afghanistan in countering Pakistan’s meddling as well as to assist Syria and Iraq in dealing with ISIL. Iran is a key stakeholder in Palestine and Lebanon and can help police the Persian Gulf.<sup>40</sup> As already noted, British legislators have recently promoted the development of ties and increased consultations with Iran. In a meeting between the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the British House of Commons and the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sir Richard Ottaway highlighted the particularity of the Middle East as well as the diplomatic and military roles of Iran in the region especially in combating terrorism.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, Iran’s military is also increasing its strength and international recognition, bolstering the country’s regional hard power. Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, Commander of the Iranian Navy, said in a recent interview with Al-Alam News Network that Iran’s forces have now gained such a high level of power that they can stage joint exercises with other countries.<sup>42</sup> As its military forces gain in strength and international credibility, it is likely that Iran will stage joint exercises with foreign forces.<sup>43</sup> Recently, Iran has raised the possibility of joint military

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Akhilesh Pillalamarri, "Iran's Important Role in the Future of the Middle East," *The Diplomat* (Summer 2014), 1-1.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> MEHRNEWS, "Regional Issues Not due to Sectarian Discord: Deputy-FM." *MEHRNEWS* (Summer, 2014), 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> Tasnim News Agency, "Commander: Iran Likely to Hold Joint Naval Drill with Russia, China," *The Iran Project Military issues* (December, 2014), 1-2.

<sup>43</sup> Tasnim News Agency, "Commander: Iran Likely to Hold Joint Naval Drill with Russia, China," *The Iran Project Military issues* (December, 2014), 1-2.

exercises with China and Russia in the Persian Gulf, a clear indication of Iran's military hard power projection in the Middle East.<sup>44</sup> This type of multi-vector cooperation fits well with Iran's pragmatism in foreign policy as it bestows additional opportunities for diversifying external relations thus providing a much needed balance among the various centers of power.

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<sup>44</sup> Iran Daily. "Cmdr.: Navy Likely to Hold Joint Drill with Russia, China." *Iran Daily* (December, 2014): 1-2.

## NUCLEAR IRAN<sup>45</sup>

Recently, Iran's foreign policy has been marked by timid, yet significant signs, of rapprochement with the US, Europe and most pro-Western countries in the region regarding its nuclear program, another sign of Iran's increasing pragmatic approach to world politics in its quest to achieve its objectives. Iran is currently in the midst of negotiations with the P5+1<sup>46</sup> regarding an agreement to limit its nuclear activities.<sup>47</sup> While the West is seeking to restrict Iran's ability to produce nuclear weapons, Iran's primary objective is to have economic sanctions lifted.<sup>48</sup> The potential deal will be based on the Joint Plan of Action (JPA) that was reached on November 24, 2013 (and came into effect on January 20, 2014), in which Iran agreed to scale back aspects of its nuclear program.<sup>49</sup> In the most recent set of negotiations, completed on April 2, 2015, Iran agreed to a reduction of its current centrifuges as well as its stockpile of enriched uranium; the storage and supervision of obsolete centrifuges; the regular inspection of nuclear facilities; and changes to the Arak heavy-water reactor so it is unable to create weapons-grade plutonium.<sup>50</sup>

With the June 30, 2015 deadline to reach an agreement fast approaching,<sup>51</sup> the economic implications of a deal for both Iran and the international community are vast. Most importantly, a successful agreement would provide much-needed relief to Iran's economy from crippling

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<sup>45</sup> Due to the rapidly changing nature of current negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program, this section relies primarily on reliable news sources.

<sup>46</sup> The five permanent members of the Security Council, United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom, and Germany.

<sup>47</sup> The Economist, "Everything You Want to Know about the Iranian Nuclear Deal," *The Economist*, no. Economist.com (April, 5th, 2015), 1-10, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/04/economist-explains-3>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> BBC, "Iran Nuclear Talks: 'Framework' Deal Agreed," *BBC News World Middle East*, no. BBC.com (April, 3rd, 2015), 1-8, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32166814>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>51</sup> The Economist, "Everything You Want to Know . . .

economic sanctions.<sup>52</sup> The sanctions, which the regime has referred to a “crime against humanity”<sup>53</sup>, restrict Iran’s ability to exploit and export its rich oil and gas resources.<sup>54</sup> The sanctions also disconnect Iran from SWIFT, “...the financial-messaging system used to transfer money between the world’s banks...”.<sup>55</sup> While Iran has the most to gain from the removal of the sanctions, an agreement would also open up vast commercial opportunities to the international community. Although in the last three years Iran’s GDP has decreased by twenty-five percent, it is still home to the world’s eighteenth largest economy and the Middle East’s second-largest stock exchange.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, current negotiations might pave the way for future relations between the West and Iran. Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has previously said that the nuclear discussions have nothing to do with relations between the two countries, but rather are solely about resolving “the nuclear issue”.<sup>57</sup> He stated that Iran has “serious differences” with the US and that the discussions have been marked by distrust on both sides.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, President Obama has stated that the most recent agreement is based on “unprecedented verification”, not trust.<sup>59</sup> However, it is obvious to observers that negotiations “...have marked a remarkable shift in the frozen relationship between the U.S. and Iran. It has become normal for officials from both

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<sup>52</sup> Elise Laboot, Mariano Castillo and Shoichet E. Catherine, "Optimism as Iran Nuclear Deal Framework Announced; More Work Ahead," *CNN*, no. edition.cnn.com, 1-8, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/02/world/iran-nuclear-talks>, (April, 3rd, 2015).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> The Economist, "Everything You Want to Know about the Iranian Nuclear Deal," *The Economist*, no. Economist.com (April, 5th, 2015), 1-10, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/04/economist-explains-3>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> The Economist, "Awaiting the Gold Rush," *The Economist* Economist.com (November, 1st, 2014), 1-4, <http://www.economist.com/news/business/21629396-foreign-firms-are-keen-get-back-iran-if-sanctions-are-liftedbut-it-will-not-be-easy?src=widget/iran>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>57</sup> Elise Laboot, Mariano Castillo and Shoichet E. Catherine, "Optimism . . .

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Obama: Iran Deal Based on "Unprecedented Verification"*, Internet Broadcast, directed by The White House The White House, 2015, April 4th), <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2015-04-04/obama-iran-deal-based-on-unprecedented-verification->, (Accessed: April 2015).

countries to communicate and hold face-to-face meetings.”<sup>60</sup> Until two years ago, the US and Iran had not engaged in official talks in over three decades.<sup>61</sup> Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said recently of the negotiations: "Some think we have no option except to fight the world or to surrender. But there is a third way, too. We have to have cooperation with the world.”<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, while Iran and the US are on opposite sides of the foreign policy spectrum in many respects, a nuclear agreement would open the countries to diplomacy on other shared interests, such as the fight against Sunni extremists and ISIL.<sup>63</sup>

Despite the possible benefits of a deal, there are many critics, both domestic and foreign, who feel that a nuclear agreement is a bad idea. Both Israel and GCC countries, such as Saudi Arabia, dislike Iran’s rising regional influence.<sup>64</sup> Many are concerned that a nuclear Iran will tip the balance of power in the Middle East. For some, a nuclear Iran would affect the dynamic of power in the region and pose an imminent threat to Israel, neighbouring countries, and possibly US presence and interests in the area.<sup>65</sup> However, Iran has avoided a direct military confrontation with Israel for more than thirty years and the international community has witnessed its willingness to trade arms with the US through Israel. Iran also cooperated in the war in

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<sup>60</sup> CBC, "Obama Defends Nuclear Framework Deal with Iran," *CBC News World*, no. CBC.ca (April, 5th, 2015), 1-2, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/obama-defends-nuclear-framework-deal-with-iran-1.3022050>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>61</sup> Elise Laboot, Mariano Castillo and Shoichet E. Catherine, "Optimism as Iran Nuclear Deal Framework Announced; More Work Ahead," *CNN*, no. edition.cnn.com, 1-8, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/02/world/iran-nuclear-talks>, (April, 3rd, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> CBC, "Iran Nuclear Deal: Hassan Rouhani, Iranian President, Says Nation Will Abide by Promises," *CBC News World*, no. CBC.ca (April, 3rd, 2015), 1-2, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/iran-nuclear-deal-hassan-rouhani-iranian-president-says-nation-will-abide-by-promises-1.3020643>, (April, 3rd, 2015).

<sup>63</sup> Simon Tisdall, "Iran Nuclear Deal could Transform Obama and Rouhani Presidencies," *The Guardian Middle East*, no. Iran (March, 22nd, 2015), 1-3, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/22/iran-nuclear-deal-could-transform-obama-and-rouhani-presidencies>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>64</sup> Jethro Mullen, "21 Questions on Iran Nuclear Talks: What's Going on? what's at Stake?" *CNN CNN U.S.*, no. Iran (April, 2nd, 2015), 1-5, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/31/world/iran-nuclear-talks-21-questions/index.html>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>65</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 195.

Afghanistan, in addition to its efforts to improve relations with Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Middle East.<sup>66</sup>

Shia fundamentalists in Iran are also highly critical of Rouhani's moderate approach to politics and view the agreement as advantageous solely for the West.<sup>67</sup> Some want the conservative-dominated Iranian parliament to approve any agreement.<sup>68</sup> Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has "final say on all matters", has not spoken publicly on the agreement, although "supporters of the negotiations have claimed that the nuclear talks have been conducted under [his] direct supervision...".<sup>69</sup> Perhaps Iranian hardliners are concerned that if the economic sanctions are removed, Rouhani's moderate presidency will be a success and Iran's doors will be opened to more relations with Europe and the US.<sup>70</sup> Despite conservative opposition, though, many Iranians have demonstrated their support for the recent negotiations.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the hostility of many towards the prospect of a nuclear deal, for Iran nuclear energy in the twenty-first century is an essential element of progress as well as a geopolitical apparatus.<sup>72</sup> Nuclear power is a matter of survival for Iran considering regional instability and relationships with a hostile Turkish regime, nuclear Pakistan, and nuclear Israel.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, nuclear technology would not only manage unanticipated regional threats but would also revive

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<sup>66</sup> Barbara Ann J. Rieffer-Flanagan, *Evolving Iran: An Introduction to Politics and Problems in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 215.

<sup>67</sup> CBC, "Iran Nuclear Deal: Hassan Rouhani, Iranian President, Says Nation Will Abide by Promises," *CBC News World*, no. CBC.ca (April, 3rd, 2015), 1-2, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/iran-nuclear-deal-hassan-rouhani-iranian-president-says-nation-will-abide-by-promises-1.3020643>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Simon Tisdall, "Iran Nuclear Deal could Transform Obama and Rouhani Presidencies," *The Guardian Middle East*, no. Iran (March, 22nd, 2015), 1-3, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/22/iran-nuclear-deal-could-transform-obama-and-rouhani-presidencies>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>71</sup> CBC, "Iran Nuclear Deal: Hassan Rouhani . . .

<sup>72</sup> William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 5th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013), 495.

<sup>73</sup> Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 339.

the national pride of a once glorious regional hegemony. A nuclear Iran would gain the prestige and relative importance accorded to newly nuclear states in international politics and would bolster its smart power within the region.<sup>74</sup> Given the importance of nuclear power to Iran, the country is demonstrating its move away from ideological extremism towards pragmatism through its willingness to make concessions in order to reach an agreement with the West and achieve its aims of regional power.

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<sup>74</sup> Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi, *Iran in the 21st Century: Politics, Economics and Conflict*, Vol. 3 (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 9.

## BUT CAN IRAN BE TRUSTED?

Known for his controversial views on nuclear energy, human rights and Israel, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran former president, overtly claimed during his presidency that the “Holocaust never happened”, “Israel should be wiped off the face of the earth”, “the American should never be trusted”, and “if Iran wanted nuclear power they would have it”.<sup>75</sup>

. . . the last year has seen a new administration in Iran but does that mean a new attitude? some say yes, others say don't be fooled Iran hasn't changed. What to believe?

--- Peter Mansbridge, The National CBC News, December 2014.

In spite of Iran's relatively realist and pragmatic approach, or perhaps because of it, for many there exists an inherent distrust of the Iranian regime, especially in regards to its nuclear intentions. To be sure, there are many dangers if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, including an increased risk of support for terrorist activities and possibility of regional war, a Middle East nuclear arms race, and a reordering of the geopolitical power in the region.<sup>76</sup> Iran maintains that its nuclear program has always been peaceful and subject to the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).<sup>77</sup> According to Iran, its nuclear program does not pose a threat to any nation, but rather is an exercise of its rights under the Non-proliferation Treaty to produce nuclear power for civilian purposes.<sup>78</sup> Iran states that its main goal is to produce nuclear electricity in order to meet its increasing energy demands, which cannot be met solely through

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<sup>75</sup> *Turning Point: Iran. Should You Still be Afraid of Iran?* directed by The National CBC (CBC studios: CBC, 2014).

<sup>76</sup> M. James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh, "After Iran Gets the Bomb - Containment and its Complications," *Foreign Affairs*, no. Persian Gulf (March/April, 2010), 1-25, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/persian-gulf/2010-02-22/after-iran-gets-bomb>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>77</sup> The Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Oslo, "Basic Facts about Iran's Peaceful Nuclear Activities," no. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2015), 1-5, <http://iranembassy.no/en/6.htm>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

fossil fuels.<sup>79</sup> According to Rouhani, Iran's "...enrichment and entire nuclear technology is only for the development of Iran. It will not be against regional countries or against the world."<sup>80</sup>

Despite its claims that its intentions are peaceful, opponents cite the doctrine of *taqiyya* as evidence that Iran's claims are not to be trusted. *Taqiyya* is defined by The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World as "...the precautionary dissimulation of religious belief and practice in the face of persecution."<sup>81</sup> *Taqiyya* arose as a means of protection, both at the individual and communal level, out of the historical persecution of the Shia minority by the Sunni majority.<sup>82</sup> While the practice is rooted in scripture<sup>83</sup> as well as *hadiths*,<sup>84</sup> there is a lack of consensus amongst Islamic scholars as to when *taqiyya* is permissible or obligatory. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, in order for one to engage in *taqiyya*, "... the danger to the believer must be unavoidable." For example, risk of flogging and imprisonment are not sufficient bases for *taqiyya*. Furthermore, it cannot be used if it will cause the death of a Muslim. According to Paul E. Walker, one is only obligated to employ it where there is unavoidable and definite danger and one is allowed to use it when faced with mortal danger to oneself or a family member, "... the loss of virtue of a female family member, or the serious deprivation of livelihood."

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<sup>79</sup> The Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Oslo, "Basic Facts about Iran's Peaceful Nuclear Activities," no. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2015), 1-5, <http://iranembassy.no/en/6.htm>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>80</sup> CBC, "Iran Nuclear Deal: Hassan Rouhani, Iranian President, Says Nation Will Abide by Promises," *CBC News World*, no. CBC.ca (April, 3rd, 2015), 1-2, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/iran-nuclear-deal-hassan-rouhani-iranian-president-says-nation-will-abide-by-promises-1.3020643>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>81</sup> E. Paul Walker, "Taqiyah," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, no. Islam (, 1-3, [http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0784?\\_hi=0&\\_pos=3](http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0784?_hi=0&_pos=3), (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> "*Quran 3:28 and 16:106*", The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, "Taqiyah," *Islamic Studies*, no. Islam (2015). [http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2338?\\_hi=0&\\_pos=7892](http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2338?_hi=0&_pos=7892), (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>84</sup> "*Statements and Actions of the Prophet Muhammad*", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Islam, <http://www.britannica.com/>, (Accessed: April 2015).

Despite the traditional definition of *taqiyya* that appears to limit its use solely to extreme cases, critics maintain that it is an undeniable aspect of Iran's foreign policy. While Mamoun Fandy acknowledges that many governments are not entirely open about their strategic interests, he argues that, in the case of Iran, *taqiyya* is a 'religious edict' that encourages, or even compels, deceit.<sup>85</sup> Unlike religious scholars, he defines *taqiyya* as "... the Shiite religious rationale for concealment or dissimulation in political or worldly affairs."<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Raymond Ibrahim argues that *taqiyya* is "a form of Islamic warfare" employed by Shias and Sunnis alike.<sup>87</sup> He also disagrees with academics regarding the traditional definition of *taqiyya*, asserting that it includes deceiving non-Muslims in general. He writes: "This phenomenon should provide a context for Shi'i Iran's zeal—*taqiyya* being especially second nature to Shi'ism—to acquire nuclear power while insisting that its motives are entirely peaceful."<sup>88</sup> Conversely, Iranian President Rouhani has pledged that Iran will honour promises reached in the agreement, maintaining that Iran does "not seek to deceive" the world.<sup>89</sup>

Such weariness on the part of many critics is bolstered by previous instances in which Iran has evaded sanctions and agreements in the past. In 2002, it was revealed that Iran had kept secret the existence of two nuclear facilities from the IAEA, which led to the levying of

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<sup>85</sup> Mamoun Fandy, "The Real Reason Iran can'T be Trusted - as they Confront Iran's Nuclear Aims, Negotiators must Mind the Shiite Doctrine of Deceit Called 'Taqiyya,'" *The Christian Science Monitor*, no. Taqiyya (November, 20th, 2009), 1-4, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2009/1120/p09s03-coop.html>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Raymond Ibrahim, Ayman Zawahiri and Osama Bin Laden, *The Al Qaeda Reader*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 3-13.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> CBC, "Iran Nuclear Deal: Hassan Rouhani, Iranian President, Says Nation Will Abide by Promises," *CBC News World*, no. CBC.ca (April, 3rd, 2015), 1-2, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/iran-nuclear-deal-hassan-rouhani-iranian-president-says-nation-will-abide-by-promises-1.3020643>, (April, 3rd, 2015).

sanctions by the international community.<sup>90</sup> A recent U.N. report further indicated that Iran has evaded sanctions regarding its nuclear programs "...from concealing titanium tubes inside steel pipes to using its petrochemical industry as a cover to obtain items for a heavy-water nuclear reactor."<sup>91</sup> Recent agreements with Iran attempt to limit its ability to hide aspects of its nuclear program by providing for regular inspections, leading President Obama to declare: "If Iran cheats, the world will know it."<sup>92</sup>

However, alongside the concerns regarding the role religion and *taqiyya* plays in Iran's foreign policy are also major pragmatic concerns that cannot be underestimated. Ideology does not seem to be as much of a priority to the Iranian regime as other, more pressing concerns.<sup>93</sup> Foremost among these are the economy and meeting the needs of its growing population.<sup>94</sup> Even though Iran declares the US to be "the Great Satan" and calls for an end to Israel's existence, it has not engaged in military action with them.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, even though it defends the cause of the Palestinians, it maintains diplomatic and commercial relations with Russia and China even in the face of their actions against Muslim minorities.<sup>96</sup> In order to maintain its influence and pursue its interests, Iran has had to make concessions and agreements with its enemies, contrary to its

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<sup>90</sup> The Economist, "Everything You Want to Know about the Iranian Nuclear Deal," *The Economist*, no. Economist.com (April, 5th, 2015), 1-10, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/04/economist-explains-3>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>91</sup> Louis Charbonneau, "U.N. Experts' Report shows Iran's Deceptive Procurement Tactics," *Reuters World*, no. Iran (May, 12th, 2014), 1-4, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/12/us-iran-nuclear-sanctions-idUSBREA4B0BG20140512>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>92</sup> BBC, "Iran Nuclear Talks: 'Framework' Deal Agreed," *BBC News World Middle East*, no. BBC.com (April, 3rd, 2015), 1-8, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32166814>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>93</sup> M. James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh, "After Iran Gets the Bomb - Containment and its Complications," *Foreign Affairs*, no. Persian Gulf (March/April, 2010), 1-25, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/persian-gulf/2010-02-22/after-iran-gets-bomb>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

hard-line revolutionary and religious dogma.<sup>97</sup> Thus, pragmatism is playing a large role in the politics and policy of Iran, perhaps more so than Islamist rhetoric, especially in the sphere of nuclear power.

Furthermore, Iran has changed greatly since the time of the Islamist Revolution. The population of Iran is increasingly urban, educated, and consumerist.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, the previous administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as well as other events in the Middle east, have given a boost to pragmatism, causing religious rhetoric to recede.<sup>99</sup> It is also worth noting that while Iran is not a democracy, neither it “is not a straightforward dictatorship.”<sup>100</sup> While Khamenei has the final say on all matters,

...his role is to adjudicate between the claims of an elite made up of thousands of politicians, clerics, generals, academics and business people. They form a confusing and ever-shifting pattern of competing factions and coalitions. Although this hardly amounts to democracy, it is a political marketplace and, as Mr Ahmadinejad discovered, policies that tack away from the consensus do not last. That is why [in 2013] Iran elected a president, Hassan Rohani, who wants to open up to the world and who has reined in the hardline Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Mr Rohani belongs to the establishment, naturally, but it says a lot about today’s Iran that his cabinet contains more doctorates from American universities than Barack Obama’s.<sup>101</sup>

As such, although Iran’s domestic and foreign policy is laden with ideology, the priority of acquiring and preserving its regional power demonstrates the necessity of acting with constraint.<sup>102</sup> According to President Obama, the fact that Khamenei has allowed concessions

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<sup>97</sup> M. James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh, "After Iran Gets the Bomb - Containment and its Complications," *Foreign Affairs*, no. Persian Gulf (March/April, 2010), 1-25, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/persian-gulf/2010-02-22/after-iran-gets-bomb>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>98</sup> The Economist, "The Revolution is Over," *The Economist*, no. Iran (November, 1st, 2014), <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21629338-changes-iran-make-nuclear-deal-more-likely-not-month-perhaps-eventually?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> M. James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh, "After Iran Gets . . .

during the nuclear talks is an indication that if Iran wants to make a full return to international relations, it will have to make changes.<sup>103</sup> As such, Iran's foreign policy is becoming more consistent with realism than with revolutionary Islam.<sup>104</sup> Perhaps the very fact that the development of a nuclear program is a necessary to Iran's assertion of national independence and regional influence is indicative of its intentions and trustworthiness.

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<sup>103</sup> CBC, "Obama Defends Nuclear Framework Deal with Iran," *CBC News World*, no. CBC.ca (April, 5th, 2015), 1-2, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/obama-defends-nuclear-framework-deal-with-iran-1.3022050>, (Accessed: April 2015).

<sup>104</sup> Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 339.

## CONCLUSION

Iran is a regional power that influences the Middle East through a myriad of determinants such as the country's geography, ancient history, national identity, relationships with key political actors, and foreign policy. Twenty-first century Iran has become a major regional player that exercises smart power in the Middle East by means of a targeted, but restrained and practical foreign policy. While Iran's national identity, religious culture, and theological institutions remain critical factors to its regional influence and foreign policy, other pressing concerns (such as economic security and nuclear power) is coming to play a larger role in its policy.

As such, Iran's twenty-first century foreign policy in the Middle East reveals a realist country that has matured both politically and diplomatically, gradually embracing the reality of the new world order. Iran is displaying skilful employment of a targeted foreign policy within the region, combining hard and soft power approaches depending on the actors and situations. It is highly probable that in the near future Iran's smart power projections within the Middle East will gain recognition by the US and other powerful countries with a leading role in shaping the Middle East. Iran will likely welcome this long awaited recognition of its regional hegemonic status and will continue to seek every opportunity to extract itself from diplomatic isolation and move towards political stability and economic prosperity.

China and Russia's reactions to Iran's rapprochement with the West, Iran's ability to handle new pressures from the great powers, and how it could affect its regional influence as ISIL gains ground in Syria and Iraq, are topics meriting future exploration.

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