

Foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran after the 2015 Nuclear Agreement

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Course description

This course covers the foreign policy of the Iran after the 2015 nuclear agreement. It covers different issues such as terrorism, war in Syria, relations with Hezbollah, Hamas, conflict with Israel, relations with Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The course will also cover Iran's foreign policy towards Russia, US, and EU.

During the course, I will explain the position of two important factions in Iran's political establishment regarding foreign policy toward regional and global countries: Normalizers who want to integrate Iran into the community of nations and their opposing forces, (hardliners), who don't want changes in Iran's international posture.

Schedule of topics:

Week 1

Understanding Iran's Foreign Policy - Realism and Idealism in International Relations

Theory

In this section we would use the International Relations (IR) theory to analyze Iran's foreign policy. The major IR schools –Realism/Neorealism and Idealism – offer a suitable template for understanding the Islamic Republic's foreign policy vision. On the one hand, the regime is guided by security and other realpolitik considerations. Rational choice theory which underlies Realism/Neorealism postulated that, in pursuing foreign policy goals, rational state actors consider the cost-benefits of their actions. On the other hand, the regime's commitment to revolutionary export – promoting the fundamentalist Shiite revolution in the region and beyond – indicates a deep streak of Idealism. While not “irrational,” Idealist foreign policy is not guided by the usual cost-benefit considerations. Iran's foreign policy presents serious analytical challenges because it is a mixture of Realism and Idealism.

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Furthermore, in this section, foreign policy of the Islamic Republic particularly in the early years - which was often characterized by subversion, taking hostages, provocation, agitation and terrorism - will be discussed. I will also discuss ideology and pragmatism in the foreign policy of the revolutionary Iran. This section also covers discussion on the unusual commitment of Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers to change the international order by standing up to the great powers (i.e. the United States) and Israel. By embarking on a high-profile revolutionary export venture, Khomeini's government challenged the legitimacy of neighboring countries, creating a negative reaction in the international community.

Week 2

First half of the session

Iran and the United States: The Rise and Fall of the Brief Détente

In this section, we will discuss the relations between the United States and Iran after the revolution. Unlike the Shah's regime, the new revolutionary regime wanted all U.S. influence out of Iran. Since the 1979 revolution, the new regime started a hostile policy toward the United States and labeled US as Great Satan a wall of mistrust formed between the two countries. I will also discuss the factors and interests that formed Iran-US policies towards each other after the revolution.

We will also discuss Iran-US relations and negotiations on the nuclear issue. Since 2002 in which it became apparent that Iran has an illicit nuclear program, the United States through overt and covert operations tried to compel Iran to give up its nuclear activities. It imposed an untold amount of sanctions on Iran and as a result the Iranians decided to negotiate a deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The Americans primarily demanded for "Zero enrichment" meaning the total dismantlement of the entire centrifuge program, but number of factors including common interest in war against terrorism in Syria (ISIS), Washington's hope for breakthrough in the relations with Tehran, and more importantly the fact that NPT entitled Iran to a civilian nuclear program caused the United States to give up on its primary demand.

Second Half

Iran and Russia: Completing the Pivot to the East?

In this section, we will discuss the relations between Iran and Russia and explain how the "US" factor shaped the relationship between the two countries. Both Iran and Russia share suspicions

of the United States, with the Moscow which does not want to see improved ties between Iran and the United States. Russia and Iran both support Bashar al Assad's regime in Syria and oppose Sunni jihadist movements such as the Islamic State (ISIS).

Iran and the European Union: Challenges and Opportunities

In this section, we will discuss relationship between Iran and the European Union and a potential for a structured and strategic relationship in the aftermath of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). I will explain the areas of disagreement and complaints between the two sides in addition to their common interests and matters of mutual benefit.

Week 3

Iran and Iraq: The Lebanonization Project in the Balance

In this section we would discuss the complexities of Iranian involvement in the affairs of Iraq and its stand on ISIS. Utilizing the political chaos that followed the American invasion in 2003, Iran has become an important player in Iraqi politics, notably through its support of Shite politicians and the powerful Shite militia. Privileging the Shiites has resulted in a backlash among the Sunni population, which generated Al Qaida in Iraq, the progenitor of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS, which follows an extremely radical Salafi ideology, considers Shiites to be apostates. Alarmed by the atrocities committed against the Shite population, Iran has joined a very loosely construed international coalition, including the United States and Saudi Arabia which fights ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

Week 4

Iran and Syria: Leveraging the Victory?

In this section we would discuss Iran's motives in supporting Bashar Al-Assad in the brutal civil war in Syria. Though an Alawite, Assad has played a key role in Iran's interests in southern Lebanon where the Shite Hezbollah militia is in charge. The Saudi effort to dislodge Assad because of his ties to Tehran has been another motivating factor. Iran's staunch support of the Assad regime, both directly and through Hezbollah, has increased Assad's chances of survival.

Week 5

Iran and Saudi Arabia: The Struggle for Regional Hegemony and Islamic Primacy

In this section, we will discuss rivalry and competition between Iran and its sunny neighbors Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Saudi Arabia has had a long history of strife with Iran. Immediately after it seized power in 1979, the new regime, intent on exporting its particular brand of Islamism and undermining the Sunni kingdom, launched operations against Riyadh and its Gulf neighbors. In its latest venture, Iran has promoted the Houthi rebellion in Yemen, arguably the most direct challenge to Saudi interest in decades. Riyadh has also taken a dim view of Iran's steadfast support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria. It is not surprising thus that the monarchy has considered the Iranian nuclear ambition as a protective umbrella for pursuing hegemony in the region.

Week 6

Iran and Turkey: Frenemies for Ever?

The history of Turkey and Iran, two of the Middle East's most powerful nation-states, is characterized by years of rivalry and cooperation, which remains the case today as both countries seek to shape the region in consistency with their respective vision.

While Turkey was West-oriented, the Iranian revolution of 1979 created tension with Ankara, as Turkey's ruling secular elite viewed Iran's new regime as a threat. This perception was in part fueled by the belief that Tehran had been the main sponsor of terrorist groups in Turkey with the intention of exporting its particular brand of Islamism to neighboring countries. In turn, Iran's new regime viewed Turkey as a threat to its revolutionary objectives, given Turkey's secular ideology and its membership of NATO.

Iran and Israel: Taking on the "Zionist Enemy"

The relations between Israel and Iran since the formation of the Israel state in 14 May 1948 has been a complex function of Iran's geostrategic imperatives as a non-Arab, non-Sunni state in an Arab and Sunni region. Under the Pahlavi regime, the two countries had a strategic alliance but when Ayatollah Khomeini came to power, an anti-Israeli stance quickly became a central tenet of the Islamic Republic.

In this section, we will discuss the roots of the enmity between the two countries and I will explain how strategic competition can describe their enmity rather than ideological diversions. Iran's pursuit of nuclear program led to a direct rivalry between Iran and Israel and consequently

many Israelis have come to regard Iran and its nuclear program as an existential threat more formidable than the Arabs.

Recommended readings for continued learning:

Farhad Rezaei, *Iran's Foreign Policy After the Nuclear Agreement: Politics of Normalizers and Traditionalists*, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.

Other interesting resources: