



İSTANBUL POLITICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

 HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
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FOREIGN POLICY TALKS (2)

Seminar Report

IRAN & Middle Eastern Politics



What is the main political structure in Iran? How does society deal with it?

What are the main foreign policy mechanisms and issues in Iran?

How have the nuclear negotiations and their aftermath affected the relations between Iran and West?

What role can the EU play in relations with Iran? Is it possible for the EU to form a new policy paradigm towards Iran?

How can we explain Iran's rising interventionism in Middle East?

What is Iran's perception of threats in the Middle East?

How have the relations between Turkey and Iran changed after the Syrian crisis?

SPEAKER

Ali Fathollah-Nejad
Political Scientist, Iran Expert
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MODERATOR

Alphan Telek
Political Scientist,
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The second of the Foreign Policy Talks, a closed roundtable discussion with experts, academics and journalists, was held on February 26, 2019, with the participation of political scientist and Iran expert Ali Fathollah-Nejad. Alphan Telek, the Academy Director of Istanbul Political Research Institute (IstanPol) moderated the discussion .

Ali Fathollah-Nejad gave an insightful speech on Iran's political structure, its current foreign policy agenda and main issues in Iranian foreign and domestic politics. The session covered political and social dynamics in Iran, the future of Iranian political leadership, Iran-EU relations as well as Turkish-Iranian relations.

Iran's political influence and its military involvement in the Middle East are on the rise. To understand the reasons for this, the best approach would be to look at the domestic political and social dynamics in the Islamic Republic. Examining Iran's political structure could help explain foreign-policy-making in Iran, how its forms its foreign policy agenda and how it evaluates foreign policy priorities and engagements. Moreover, the nuclear negotiations between the West and Iran had a significant impact on the West's relations with Iran with major ramifications for the future of the Middle East. That is why a discussion on the relations between Western democracies and Iran is so relevant to Middle Eastern politics today.

In addition, it is also critical to discuss the role that the EU can play towards Iran . Deterioration of relations between Iran and US could provide a significant opportunity for the EU to establish healthy relations with Iran. The European involvement may have significant influence on the future of the Middle Eastern politics. Lastly, the Iranian-Turkish relations have a potential to transform regional crises, with the prospect to contribute regional stability and a sustainable dialogue. A discussion on Iranian foreign policy will provide new insights about the Middle East's current crises with implications for the world.

Domestic situation in Iran

Dr. Ali Fathollah-Nejad started his talk by discussing current situation in Iran. He argued that putting Iran on the agenda has a rationale. Firstly, Iran is one of the most important and influential actors in the region. Secondly, Iran experienced one of the most widespread protests in its near history at the beginning of 2018. According to Dr. Nejad, these protests mark the beginning of a new chapter in the Islamic Republic's history.

Dr. Nejad asserted that 2018's unprecedented and widespread protests were largely driven by the discontent of the Iranian lower classes. Iranians took up to the street with economic and political demands. Even though the protests initially targeted the moderate Hasan Rouhani presidency and his government – for the crumbling economy, in a short period of time, the protests spiraled out of control, spread all over the country. Dr. Nejad underlined the radical tone of these protests with a remarkable theme: Rejection of any political factions within the regime.

Rejection of political factions in Iran

Dr. Nejad noted that protesters targeted all factions within the regime, be it hard-liners or moderates. This moderate-hardliner traditional political cleavage was formed after 1979 Islamic revolution. For him, the total rejection of Iranian politics has been the most radical theme of these protests. Nejad maintained that the people's disgust of both moderates and hard-liners can be viewed as a rejection of 'the lesser and larger evil option'. Since the regime has so far allowed only two factions to get involved in the politics as legitimate actors, Iranians have to decide among one of these two factions—moderate and hard-liner ones. This is seen as a choice between lesser or greater evils. Nevertheless, due to the current economic and political atmosphere in the country, we observe a high level of frustration against all political factions among the people in Iran.

Iranian politics was formed around the dichotomy between hard-liners and moderates. Dr. Nejad described the hard-liners as a faction that is ideologically more committed to the ideas and aspirations of the Islamic revolution with a radical Islamic tone. There are also concrete material, economic interests that keep this faction intact.

On the other side, moderates emerged after the death of Imam Ayatollah Khomeini, which was followed by a period of economic liberalization under the reformist Khatami rule. The reformist Khatami period paved a way for the fusion of Islam and democracy.

However, despite their differences, Dr. Nejad stressed these two factions' common stake in regime survival since both stand to benefit from the regime economically and politically as the only legitimate actors. So, the political landscape is more of a grey one than a black-and-white-one.

Dr. Nejad noted the strong influence of the moderates, and mentioned certain important moderate figures in the Ruhani government, who are accused of human rights violations. Dr. Nejad stressed the commonalities between hard-liners and moderates today despite significant differences.

Social mirror of Iran: Middle-class poor

Dr. Nejad underlined the fact that unlike the protests in Arab Spring, there is no intersectional alliance between the middle class and lower classes in Iran. Tellingly, the Iranian middle class avoided participating in the last year's protests. Referring to Asef Bayat's works on 2018 protests, Dr. Nejad argued that the principle social base of the 2018 protests were those middle-class poor Iranians. These people have middle-class qualifications and aspirations but they are socio-economically poor.

According to Dr. Nejad, this concept – middle-class poor – encapsulates the entire social problem in Iran. For example, Iran is a high number of unemployed university graduates. This creates a significant frustration and resentment, particularly among the youth and women. In this line, the youth unemployment in Iran is among the highest in the world. Furthermore, Iranian people are increasingly frustrated by the exclusive and exploitative economic system, dominated by the regime—mostly hard-liners.

Dr. Nejad pointed to the slogans in these protests, questioning Iranian presence in Syria and tying domestic problems in Iran to Iran's investment in wars in Middle East, such as the war in Syria.

Dr. Nejad also noted the Iranian regime's use of the Syrian crisis to delegitimize the protests. Playing the fear card, the regime propagated that protests could lead Iran to turn into Syria, which was formulated as "Look at Libya, look at Syria". Dr. Nejad underlined that since both moderates and hard-liners opposed the protests, protestors understood that there was basically no difference between these two political factions.

Triple crisis of Iran

Dr. Nejad stressed ramifications of these protests. First, lesser or larger evil thinking is over. For Iranian people, both moderates and hard-liners lost their legitimacy. Second, Iran's factionalism is in a crisis. After 2018 protests, a number of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders stated that Iran's national security would be threatened not by outside but inside.

Dr. Nejad underscored a triple crisis in today's Iran: political, socio-economic and ecological crises. Iran will soon enter a post-Khamenei era, he argued, it is leading towards a political stalemate.

There is a complete uncertainty as to the post-Khamenei era in Iran. The only certain is change and that Iran will enter into a new era. As for the succession, there are a number of candidates from hard-liners, positioning themselves for post-Khamenei period. Dr. Nejad stressed the critical influence of the IRGC, underscoring that it is the ultimate power broker.

Dr. Nejad predicted a larger role for the IRGC in post-Khamenei Iran. To Nejad, IRGC already plays a major, if not determining, role in the financial, judicial, intelligence and political spheres, seeking to expand its influence.

Dr. Nejad suggested that, particularly after the 2018 protests, many in Iran debate whether there would be a military government in post-Khamenei era. Tellingly, IRGC frames itself as a nationalistic power rather than an Islamist one. Dr. Nejad argued that IRGC could benefit from increasing anti-clerical sentiment among the Iranians and it could play a crucial role in post-Khamenei era.

Dr. Nejad maintained that the end of factionalism and the political stalemate have ushered in a range of uncertainties, carrying the potential to instigate a major political crisis. Last but not least, the ecological crisis in Iran exacerbates the social and economic problems in the country. Instances such as water shortages has provoked social unrest across the country.

Many view Iran's triple crises as a sign, indicating that Iran is on the verge of another revolution or a collapse. However, Dr. Nejad maintained that to have a radical change or transformation, a form of social organization that touches different groups across the Iranian society is needed, as in the case of the Arab uprisings.

As he alluded earlier, this kind of intersectional class alliances has not yet materialized in Iran. Moreover, the US economic sanctions on the country deepened Iran's economic crises.

Dual structure of Iran's foreign policy

When it comes to Iran's foreign policy, there is much confusion. Dr. Nejad indicated that Iranian elite had monopolized political and economic power. This monopolization of power, he argued, had played significant a role in Iranian foreign policy-making. Dr. Nejad noted the outsiders' view of the Iranian foreign policy of Iran a Janus face, formed by the foreign ministry and the Supreme Leader's office.

The government and foreign ministry, providing an open face, willing to cooperate with international actors, represent one side. This open side played a critical role in nuclear negotiations with Hasan Rouhani and Javad Zarif, expressing their willingness to reach an agreement with the Western powers. Moderates call this engagement a constructive agreement.

Dr. Nejad claimed that the hard-liner faction forming the other side of the Janus face had more influence in foreign policy-making than the moderates. Supreme Leader's Office and IRGC lead the foreign policy -making in Iran. How can we explain this situation, he asked.

In respective foreign policy doctrines, the moderate camp favors international cooperation, arguing for a win-win scenario in the international arena. The hard-liner camp, on the other hand, views foreign policy as a zero-sum-game. For instance, hard-liners have a simplistic view of the regional policy, where the weaker the US, the stronger the Islamic Republic is. This hard-liner foreign policy doctrine has so far been more influential than the moderate.

Dr. Nejad then discussed Iran's regional positioning. He pointed to the fact that Iran has very historically had very few country allies in its region, suggesting the term "strategic loneliness" to explain Iran's regional standing. He maintained that Iran's regional isolation explains its pursuance of deterrent capabilities, including ballistic missile programs to defend itself, which was viewed as a threat by international actors.

Islamic Republic's threat perception and its foreign policy

Dr. Nejad pointed to the 1979 Revolution as a geopolitical shock that pushed Iran outside of the Western orbit. The revolutionary discourses of the regime placed Tehran in antagonistic position towards that of the West and the Arab monarchies, underscoring antagonistic relations between Iran and Arab oil monarchies. Furthermore, Turkey was a part of NATO. To Dr. Nejad, the regional antagonisms and Iran's sense of loneliness put Iran in a unique position, prompting itself to pursue an independent foreign policy. Dr. Nejad stressed Iran framed its policy based on the perception that it does not have any allies in the region. Occupying a strategically located position, that is why Iran has tried to form an ideologically-based regional network. Dr. Najed asserted that Iran's perceived strategic loneliness lead Iran to establish and support non-state allies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Dr. Nejad underscores Iran's threat regional perception, exacerbated by the strong presence of antagonistic global and regional players, including US, Israel Saudi Arabia and Iraq. One should view Iran's ballistic missile programs and its regional positioning within the framework of this threat perception. On the other hand, Dr. Nejad maintained, the Iranian regime made use of crises in the region as a tool for domestic power consolidation. Therefore, the resolution of the regional crises is not always in the interest of the regime in Iran.

Dr. Nejad stressed the political and economic connection between domestic and foreign crises in Iran. Iranian regime has mastered the art of exploiting external crises for domestic power consolidation. He mentioned the civil war in Syria as an example, where the regime used a crisis to consolidate power domestically.

Iran's presence in Syria

For Dr. Nejad, Iran's rationale in its Syria policy is to maintain a presence in Syria for deterrence. Dr. Nejad underlined that difficulties that Iran had faced in maintaining its military presence in Syria given internal and external backlash. Nejad pointed to the arguments for an interventionist approach in Tehran, indicating to talks and rumors in Iranian policy establishment. The rhetoric in Iran argues that Iran should respond to attacks and ongoing regional crises meant that Iran could not merely adopt a wait-and-see approach.

There are several criticisms against the Islamic regime for supporting the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. He asserted that Iran was seen as a soft power in the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad era. However, this situation has dramatically changed with Iran's support for the Assad regime during the Rouhani's period.

Moreover, Dr. Nejad argued that with the territorial defeat of ISIS, the differences over the future of Syria between Iran and Russia became clear, pointing to the Iranian frustration towards Russia. He argued that Iranians do not view Russia as a strategic partner.

Iran-Turkey relations

Dr. Nejad noted that despite the differences over several issues, Turkey-Iran relations had a solid base. However, he asserted that similar to other actors, Turkey has tried to benefit from the sanctions imposed on Iran. He argued that US sanctions basically legalized illegal trade, putting Iran into a very weak position in terms of bargaining. He puts forward that some countries in the region like India, China and Turkey have benefited from the weak position of Iran. Dr. Nejad noted certain circles on the both side of the border reaping benefits of the opportunities, provided by the sanctions.

Iran- EU relations

Lastly, Dr. Nejad touched upon the relations between Iran and EU. He maintained that Europeans remained as only allies of Iran at the moment. While the antagonism prevailed in the relations between US and Iran after the 1979 revolution, European countries have always maintained their relations with Iran. During this period, several US administrations opted for a demonized image of Iran, but, Europe basically did not follow this path.

Dr. Nejad mentioned economic and geo-strategic interests as the primary drivers of the relations between Europe and Iran. Germans and Europeans built Iran's industrial infrastructure. And Iran provides an important market potential for Europeans. Geo-strategically, energy markets and Iran's proximity to oil-rich Gulf states constitute the cardinal interests for EU. So, Dr. Nejad claimed that EU had been engaging in a diplomatic process with Iran for the peaceful settlement of the issue around the Iranian nuclear program.

In this line, Dr. Nejad noted Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's resignation as the foremost a blow to the Europeans since the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini and Javad Zarif had had close working relationship.

Dr. Nejad believes that the relations between EU and Iran will enter a new phase. Zarif has resigned and Mogherini is going to leave the office soon. In this line, Dr. Nejad argued that more confrontation should be expected in the Iran-EU relations during this new period in contrast to the Zarif period when co-operation prevailed.

* This seminar report has been authored by Alphan Telek.

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