AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF ARMENIA

Master's Essay

Determining Iran's Foreign Policy: Institutions, Power Clusters, and the

Public

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List of Abbreviations

EU – European Union

FP – Foreign Policy

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

IMF – International Monetary Fund

IRGC – Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps

SCFR – Strategic Council for Foreign Relations

SNCS – Supreme National Security Council

Abstract

This objective of this research is to show how government institutions, power centers and the public influence foreign policy decisions in Iran. The study has a qualitative research design and uses four research tools: content analysis, discourse analysis, meta-analysis and in-depth interviews. Findings are presented in two main sections. The first one provides an overview of the impact that the mentioned agents have on foreign policy. The second is a comparative case study, which illustrates the influence of these agents on Iran's nuclear program during Khatami's and Ahmadinejad's presidencies.

The paper makes the following conclusions. 1) The Iranian government intuitions have overlapping functions regarding foreign policy, which creates inter-agency competition. 2) Iran's foreign policy is mainly influenced by the power struggles among four major political factions, which are balanced by the Supreme Leader. 3) The public in Iran has an indirect impact on foreign policy through their support to one of the stated factions. In sum, Foreign Policy of Iran highly depends on the positions and interests of multiple stakeholders.

Introduction

The Iranian foreign policy has been a matter of frequent debates. The approaches and positions of the Islamic Republic are usually labeled as irrational and assertive. They are considered to be the main reasons for Iran's strained relations with the West. On the other hand, there are analysts, who argue that Iran does not act irrelevantly, but the West fails to understand its policies. So how is Iranian foreign policy formed, and whose interests are taken into consideration? This research aims to shed light on these matters by analyzing the role of the institutional structure of Iran's government, informal power centers, and the public.

Iran is a vital actor in the Middle East. Nowadays there are many discussions regarding the role of this country in settling the conflicts in this region. Iran also calls much attention due to its nuclear program, which has become the reason of its strained relations with western states. Despite its importance, the Iranian foreign policy is still not fully understood due to its great complexity. This study aims to contribute to the discussion of this issue; therefore, it has practical relevance.

The objective of the paper is to answer the following research questions and test the below-presented hypothesis:

RQ1: How does the formal structure of the Iranian government influence foreign policy decisions?

RQ2: What impact do the power clusters in Iran have on foreign policy decision-making?

RQ3: How does the public influence the foreign policy decisions of the Iranian government?

H1: Foreign Policy of Iran highly depends on the interests and positions of multiple stakeholders.

Before referring to the findings of the research, the paper provides a literature review of previous academic works that refer to the stated research questions. Afterward, the methodology of the study is presented. The latter shows all the research tools that were used in the framework of this study.

The findings of the study are presented in two main sections. The first one provides a deliberate overview on the role of institutions, power clusters, and the public. Each of the mentioned actors is discussed separately. The second section provides a comparative case study of Iran's nuclear program during Mohammad Khatami's and Mahmud Ahmadinejad's presidencies (from 1997 to 2013). The case study presents how the government structure, power clusters and the public influenced Iran's nuclear program. The period of Khatami's and Ahmadinejad's presidencies was chosen because they include dramatic changes in the Iranian political landscape. By comparing the two periods the paper illustrates how those changes influenced Iran's nuclear program.

The concluding section answers the stated research questions based on the analysis presented in the previous parts and states whether the hypothesis of the paper has been approved or not. In addition, it provides brief recommendations for future studies.

Literature Review

The analyzed literature shows that there are different stances regarding the impact of institutions, power clusters and the public on making Iran's foreign policy. This section provides a synthesis of academic works that reflect the mentioned positions. The observe studies are grouped based on their association with International Relations theories and Foreign Policy Analysis models.

The first group of academic works considers Iran as a "black box" and subordinates the role of the factors when analyzing its foreign policy (Ehtemshami 2002; Menashri 2007; Rakel 2007). These works are mainly based on the neorealist IR theory. They mostly consider states to be unitary actors of international relations. These works argue that Iranian foreign policy seeks power maximization regardless of the internal situation of the country. Iran's tense relations with the Western countries are just an interpretation of power games, where each side aims to get a relative gain over the other. In particular, they state that Iran aims to be the central actor in its Middle East, which is in contradiction with the interests of various regional actors, such as the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Many authors, who rely on the neorealist paradigm too, bring forward the security issues as the main driver of Iran's foreign policy decisions (Landau 2014; Brumberg 2001; Rieffer-Flanagan 2013). The pursuit of security is what states seek regardless of being democratic or authoritarian. This neorealist approach is based on the argument that the international environment is anarchic, where each state tries to increase its security. The same concept is applied in the case of Iran's foreign policy. The mentioned authors use the neorealist theory to explain the strained relations between Iran and the United States. In particular, they argue that the US security interests in the Middle East are in contradiction with Iran's aim to strengthen its own security. Active US policy in the region is viewed as a threat by the Iranian government. That is why the latter tries to take counter measurements, which in case

causes tense relations with the United States. In these studies, there is no reference to the domestic factors in both countries.

The same approach is apparent in various studies that refer to Iran's nuclear proliferation program (Sherrill 2012; Brown 2010; Solingen 2007). They argue that Iran's aim to use nuclear energy does not have anything to do with domestic need. Iran seeks to have its own nuclear weapon because it will keep other states away from taking any steps that are against Iran's security interests. Kenneth Waltz (2012) argues that Iran needs to have its own nuclear weapon to establish a balance of power in the region. In his article Waltz argues that nuclear proliferation brings stability because it restrains states to take any aggressive actions. Hence, the relations between the Western countries and Iran will be stabilized if the latter makes its own nuclear weapon.

The mentioned concept is also used to explain Iran's alliances with other states. The academic works, which discuss this issue, do not refer to the role of Iran's institutional structure, power centers or the role of public opinion (GAUSE 2003; Jafarzadeh 2008; Rasmussen 2009). They heavily rely on Stephen Walt's (1985) theory called the "balance of threat." Walt argues that states form alliances to ofset the threat coming from other actors. In this way, the mentioned works try to show why Iran has formed alliances with Russian Federation and China. They argue that this was a measurement taken against the threat coming from the United States and its allies. Iran cannot counter the Western counties alone. Hence, it needs China and Russia to do so. This is how the necessity of establishing a balance of threat becomes an important factor in foreign policy decisions, where alliances are formed regardless of domestic issues.

In contrast, there are other analysts, who attach greater importance to the role o institutions, power clusters, and the public when discussing Iran's foreign policy (Axworthy 2010; Beeman 2008; Telhami and Barnett 2004). These works are mainly based on the

constructivist IR theory. According to the latter, the foreign policy of a country is not determined by exogenous factors. Instead, institutions and identity determine how a certain country acts. Here identity is presented as the cumulative perception of the public. Therefore, a reference to the role of identity is directly linked to the impact of public opinion. The protectors of this approach usually criticize those, who view Iran as a black box. They argue that foreign policy of a state can be fully understood if the role of institutions and identity are taken into account.

 Researchers, who prioritize the role of identity in Iran's foreign policy, state that after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 the foreign policy of Iran made a dramatic shift concerning its relations with the West, which was a result of constructing a new identity (Ramazani 1989; Arshad 2004). They argue that the Islamic Revolution occurred because Iranians thought that the West was deteriorating their values. That is why the new Islamic government does not have a friendly position regarding the Western countries. In 2008, William Beeman published a thorough study on the mentioned issues. In this work he argues that the existing reluctance towards the role of Iranian identity has created many misperceptions concerning its foreign policy. The hostile stance that the Iranian government has towards the West is based on the new national identity formed after the revolution. The latter consists of a set of perceptions, where the United States is viewed as "The Great Satan" that Iran has to confront. The mentioned researchers argue that these aspects play a vital role in Iran's foreign policy decisions.

As noted above, social constructivists stress the role of institutions in foreign policy making. In Iran's case, the primary emphasis is put on its theocratic government and how it influences foreign policy decisions (Harris 2014; Morrow 2014; Moshaver 2007). These studies showcase that the religious government institutions are very powerful and can influence the decisions of the civil government. They also state that Iran fails to restore its relations with

Western countries because of the radical position of Iranian religious leaders. The Iranian civil government is accountable to the supreme leader and his advisers. The religious bodies of the government monitor the foreign policy of the country to make sure that it is conducted "in the right way" and does not harm the pride and values of Iranian people. With these arguments the mentioned studies aim to show that the structure of the Iranian government plays a decisive role regarding foreign policy issues.

All the arguments mentioned above are based on the concepts of International Relations theories. However, the theoretical framework for analyzing foreign policy decisions is not limited to these perceptions. In other words, in the literature foreign policy decisions are also widely discussed in the context of Foreign Policy Analysis models. As regard the Iranian FP, the following concepts are used in the reviewed literature: organizational process, self-aggrandizement, political process and rational choice models.

The organizational process model of Foreign Policy Analysis mainly states that the domestic power clusters play a vital role, as each of them tries to get their interests satisfied in the process of policy-making (Kiyaei 2014; Pirseyedi 2012). Accordingly, the interests of different domestic actors affect foreign policy decisions made by the Iranian government institutions. For instance, it is argued that sanction on Iran might not derive from the state's overall interests, but it is beneficial for individual oligarchs. The reason is that sanctions limit the import of certain goods, which gives the mentioned oligarchs monopolistic power. Taking this into account, it is argued that these oligarchs influence the foreign policy decisions made by the government.

The same model is also applied when analyzing the role of the religious government officials (Fischer 2003; Chehabi 1990). The arguments of these authors are similar to those mentioned by the constructivists, who emphasize the role of institutions. Mainly, they argue that religious officials might have different interests regarding foreign policy issues, and they

might use their leverages to pursue them. It is argued that these officials insist that foreign policy decisions should be made based on religious principles and doctrines. These principles might not be rational for the country, but they are used because of the interests of a power cluster.

The self-aggrandizement model is used to show that state leaders prioritize their interests or the interest of their regime and act in accordance with them. In such cases, researchers, who use this model for analyzing Iran's foreign policy, argue that the regime in Iran can make decisions that are irrational from the perspective of national interests. However, they might be beneficiary for the regime itself (Garrison et al. 2003). The survival of the regime becomes the primary goal and driving factor in foreign policy decisions.

When referring to the self-centered approach of the Iranian government researchers also state that the regime is conducting diversionary foreign policy (Fearon 1998; Davies 2008). The latter means that "leaders who are facing certain domestic economic, political, and social problems at home, and who do not have immediate solutions for these problems, resort to a strategy of diverting the attention of the public away from these domestic problems to provide temporary relief" (Levy 1988, p. 259). Iran also faces economic and social difficulties. To distract the public's attention from them the government uses external conflicts. In other words, the regime tries to show the public that they have an external enemy and should concentrate on dealing with it instead of complaining about the domestic situation. Hence, Iran needs to have an external conflict to use diversionary strategies; that is why it does not make much effort regarding settling its relations with the West.

The political process model is also widely used for explaining Iran's foreign policy decisions. According to this concept, FP decisions are influenced by non-governmental actors, such as NGOs, media and the public (Garrison et al. 2003). Several studies argue that the Iranian government takes into account public opinion when making foreign policy decisions (Soroka

2003; Gallagher 2014). Satisfying the public is critical for the government. Interestingly enough, the studies claim that the public in Iran is highly sensitive to the country's relative gains against the Western states. People in Iran do not accept any concessions made to theses countries. This is why the government restrains from making any compromise in the negotiations with the West. In other words, public opinion in Iran puts certain limitations in front of the government regarding its foreign policy.

Finally, there are also academic works that consider Iran's foreign policy rational (Moshirzadeh 2007; Akbarzadeh 2014; Amiri et al. 2011). They use the rational actor model, which claims that states act according to their national interests. Similar to the neorealist arguments, the rational actor model views states as monolithic actors in international relations, and does not refer to their internal conditions. Studies on the Iranian foreign policy, which use the rational actor model, only concentrate on inter-state relations. They rely on the neorealist concept that these relations are not affected by internal factors. They are driven by Iran's national interests, which are exogenously given. The rational actor model is the only Foreign Policy Analysis concept that does not attach any importance to the role of domestic factors.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative research design. The findings of the study are based on the data gathered through the following research tools:

- Content analysis

- Discourse analysis

- Meta-analysis

- In-depth interviews

- Analysis of secondary data

In the framework of the research, a content analysis of Iran's constitution and Supreme Leader's decree on the establishment of Strategic Council for Foreign Relations was conducted. The purpose of using this tool was to identify the functions of Iranian government institutions regarding foreign policy issues and showcase to what extent they overlap with each other. Besides, the content analysis helped to illustrate the main foreign policy principles that are stated in Iran's constitution. The latter was measured by identifying the intensity and frequency of using foreign policy related descriptors.

Two discourse analyses were conducted for this research. The first one measures how foreign policy issues are covered during Friday prayers in Iran. In this regard, the speeches of Tehran's Friday prayers were analyzed for a six-month period (from August 2014 to March 2015). In this case, the analysis measured the frequency of references to foreign policy related issues in 29 speeches.

The second discourse analysis refers to the Nowruz Speeches of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, former presidents Mohammad Khatami and Mahmud Ahmadinejad from 1998 to 2013. The objective of this analysis is to showcase the views of these three figures regarding Iran's nuclear development program. The reason for choosing Nowruz speeches is that they

present the comprehensive position of these political figures regarding Iran's main issues and their possible solutions.

As for the meta-analysis, it was used to showcase what the main power clusters are, which influence Iran's foreign policy. The analysis includes 15 academic works, six of which were conducted by Iranian and the rest by international researchers. The findings of these studies were coded in the following categories that refer to informal power centers: political parties, individual officials, business owners, political factions, and non-governmental organizations.

The next tool that was used for this research was a set of in-depth interviews with eight specialists of Iranian foreign policy. Out of eight interviews, two were conducted with experts living in Iran. A semi-structure format was selected for the interviews with six main questions and their follow-ups. This tool was used to clarify issues that were still left unclear after analyzing the results of the other instruments.

Besides, the research heavily relies on the use of secondary data due to its limited resources and time-constraint. Particularly, the analysis of public opinion in Iran is based on the date provided by Gallup International, RAND Corporation and University of Tehran Center for Public Opinion Research. The study also used a set of progress reports of World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), Amnesty International and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) on Iran's socio-economic conditions.

The research also relies on the date of BBC Monitoring. The latter is an online database that provides news archives on different countries. These archives include the news reports of international news agencies and several national media sources. This tool was used to identify the main events that occurred during the period of the case study (from 1997 to 2013).

Institutions, Power Clusters, and The Public: An Overview

The Role of Government Institutions

Due to the Islamic Revolution in 1979 a unique government structure has been established in Iran. Many scholars consider it to be a political innovation in the 20th century (Barsamian et al.). This chapter sheds light on the particular aspects of the system and shows how they influence foreign policy decisions. Accordingly, it answers the following research question of this paper: what impact do the government institutions have on foreign policy decision-making in Iran?

The cornerstone of the Iran's government structure is the 1979 constitution of the Islamic Republic. The document is a combination of theocratic principles and Western democratic values. Alongside to provisions on separation of power and human rights, the constitution also stresses the necessity of following the sharia laws. Incorporation of religious principles in the document is based on the position of revolutionary leaders concerning the need of preserving and following Islamic values. In this regard, the writings of al-e Ahmad and Imam Khomeini played a fundamental role.

In 1962 Jalal al-e Ahmad, who is a renowned Iranian thinker, published a book called Gharbzadegi or Westoxication, where he alerts Iranian people that their values are endangered (Al-e Ahmad 1964). In particular, the author states that Iranians started adopting and following the Western lifestyle, which leads to a loss of their national identity. According to the author, westoxication was a social disease that had been brought to Iran by Western interventionists; hence, it was necessary to limit Western policies in the country. The book later became one of the ideological cornerstones of the Iranian revolution.

The idea of fighting against Western policies was later developed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution. In his book called "Velayat-e faqih"

(Governance of the Jurist) Khomeini argues that Islam is under the attack of Western governments (Khomeini 1979). He accused the Pahlevi regime of the existing situation and called for an Islamic revolution. Khomeini believed that the mentioned issues could be solved only if an Islamic state was established and the interventions of Western states were prohibited. In his book Khomeini also states that they should export the principles of Vilayat-e faqih to other countries and fight against mustakbirun (tyrants) for protecting the rights of mustad'afun (the oppressed).

The Velayat-e faqih and "Gharbzadegi" had a significant influence in deciding the main foreign policy principles of the Islamic Republic. In particular, the arguments on limiting Western interventions and spreading pan-Islamic values and principles can be seen in the 1979 constitution. A content analysis of the document proves the mentioned point. In particular, it shows that all the articles on the foreign policy of Iran refer to putting restrictions on the interventions of other states into Iranian affairs and supporting the struggle of oppressed for overthrowing tyrannies. These points are also mentioned in other parts of the constitution. For instance, more than half of the provisions that have the word "foreign" in them refer to restrictions on foreign intervention in Iran (Constitution of Iran 1989).

Besides, in the preamble of the constitution it is stated that spreading the principles of the Vilayat-e faqih in other countries is an evolutionary course of the Islamic Revolution. Therefore, the government of Iran should support it with all means. This is why article 2, which states the goals of the Islamic Republic, includes provisions that have a pan-Islamic nature and are beyond the domestic affairs of the country. These Islamic principles are of primary importance, as according to Article 177 they cannot be amended.

To preserve religious values and implement the stated objectives Islamic principles are incorporated into the formal government structure of Iran. Religious institutions monitor the work of civilian government bodies for avoiding anti-Islamic decisions. Below are presented

the government agencies, which have a stake in the foreign policy decision-making, and the way work with each other.

The Supreme Leader heads the described dualistic government structure. The constitution grants him authority over many issues. He is considered to be the supervisor of "proper execution of the general policies of the system" (Constitution of Iran 1989). The Supreme Leader appoints various high-level officials and ratifies presidency of the elected candidate. The system gives him the opportunity to exercise control over the government's everyday policies regarding foreign affairs. For this purpose, he has special representatives attached to Iranian embassies in other states, who serve as watchdogs for him (Hunter 1987).

Compared to the Supreme Leader, the President of Iran has limited authorities. However, he plays a vital role in foreign policy-making. He supervises the everyday policy implementation, signs international treaties and the credentials of Iranian ambassadors. Though the Supreme Leader has the final say regarding foreign policy issue, it is the president's and his administration's domain to frame those policies. In this case, the Supreme Leader does not take part in the actual process of drafting policies and just approves or denies the options that the president provides (Buchta 2000). The law in Iran does not provide a clear distinction between the role of the president and the Supreme Leader in foreign policy related issues. The existing uncertainty usually creates disputes between the two top institutions of the country.

The legislative domain of foreign policy decisions is in the hand of Majlis and the Guardian Council. The Majlis of Iran passes laws regarding foreign policy and ratifies international treaties. However, the Guardian Council can usually limit its power. According to Article 98 of the Iranian constitution the latter can block the laws passed by the Majlis, if it finds them anti-Islamic or against the principles of Vilayat-e Faqih. Being granted such power, the Guardian Council usually creates difficulties for the legislative processes in the country.

Contradictions between the representatives of the Council and the Majlis are quite common (Mirsepassi 2010).

Another institution that has a significant impact on foreign policy decision-making is the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). In particular, it plays a crucial role in drafting the state's national security and defense policies. This institution is actively involved in the issues related to Iran's nuclear program (Buchta 2000). This is where the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, the special advisor to the Supreme Leader on foreign affairs and the foreign minister usually debate on one of the central foreign policy issue of the state; its nuclear program.

Alongside to so many institutions and officials dealing with foreign policy issues, Iran also has so-called Strategic Council for Foreign Relations. It is an advisory body to the Supreme Leader. The institution is relatively new and usually consists of former and current high-ranking officials, who have significant experience in foreign affairs. This is where former and incumbent foreign ministers often try to justify their positions in front of the Supreme Leader.

Finally, when referring to the foreign policy decision-making in Iran, it is vital to discuss the role of security forces too. Alongside to the conventional army, which is called Artesh, Iran also has Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It is to guarantee the security of the regime. In terms of foreign policy issues, IRGP is actively involved in Iran's nuclear program. As the protector of the Vilayat-e Faqih, the Guard Corps also plays a vital role in spreading the pan-Islamic values in other states (Green et al. 2009). In this regard, IRGP has been actively involved in military affairs in the Middle East.

These are the primary institutions that have noticeable leverages in foreign policy decision-making. The document analysis of the Constitution and the Supreme Leader's decree on the

establishment of Strategic Council for Foreign Relations shows that often they deal with identical issues. This situation creates overlaps. Government bodies and officials start to compete for having a bigger say in a particular sphere. Below are presented the results of the document analysis. In particular, it is illustrated in what cases the functions of Iranian government institutions overlap regarding foreign policy issues.

Table 1: Institutions that have overlapping functions	
Institutions	**Overlapping functions**
Supreme Leader **President**	Deciding general foreign policy guidelines
Ministry of Foreign Affairs **Strategic Council for Foreign Relations** **The Supreme National Security Council**	Drafting foreign policy strategies
Majlis **The Guardian Council**	Drafting laws on foreign affairs
Iranian Embassies **Special Representatives of the Supreme Leader**	Representing the Islamic Republic of Iran
Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps **The Supreme National Security Council** **Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics**	Dealing with national security, external threats and the nuclear program of Iran

As illustrated, each institution tries to have the upper role in foreign policy processes. The following state of affairs can be explained through the Bureaucratic Politics Model (Freedman 1976). The latter is an approach in Foreign Policy Analysis. It claims that foreign

policy decisions are often results of complex bureaucratic bargaining, where each government institution acts as a stand-alone stakeholder and tries to get its position accepted. In this dualistic system, religious officials usually try to prioritize their views, which creates contradictions in the government and hinders long-term strategic planning.

The conflict between institutions regarding foreign policy has been apparent since the very birth of the Islamic Republic. The primary reason the first prime minister of the same Islamic Republic Mehdi Bazargan resigned was a disagreement with the Supreme Leader Khomeini on a foreign policy issue (Atabaki 2009). In particular, Bazargan had a moderate position regarding Iran's relations with other states. This is why his pragmatic views were constantly in contradiction with those of the Supreme Leader. In November 1979, Bazargan resigned from his position as a sign of protest after the members of the US embassy in Iran were taken as hostages.

The first president of the Islamic Republic Abolhasan Bani-Sadr had a similar dispute with Khomeini and the clergy in Iran. As a civilian official, he also had a different position regarding the hostage crisis and other foreign policy issues. The clergies tried to diminish his power and make him just a figurehead. The struggle between the president and the clerics ended with the impeachment of Bani-Sadr in June 1981 (Axworthy 2010). Afterward, he started to work with anti-regime faction for removing Khomeini. As a result, Khomeini ordered to arrest him on the basis of treason.

To avoid such institutional errors in future, Ayatollah Khomeini conducted a set of reforms. Firstly, he strengthened the position of clerics by allowing them to hold high positions in the government. Second of all, he banned the work of all political parties except the Islamic Republic Party (Abrahamian 2008). To decrease the intensity of bureaucratic clashes, the Supreme Leader established a new institution in 1988 called the Expediency Council. Its role

is to deal with the contradictions of two legislative institutions: the Majlis and the Guardian Council. The Expediency Council has members from the Majlis, ministries, and the Guardian Council. Finally, in the framework of the 1989 constitutional amendments the post of prime minister was abolished. Khomeini made this decision when President Ali Khamenei had disputes with the prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi.

Despite the institutional reforms, the complexity of the system continued to cause challenges for decision-making. Such difficulties especially become apparent during the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami. The latters had a moderate view regarding Iran's socio-economic policies and relations with other states, which were usually in contradiction with the views of the Supreme Leader. As a result, the same difficulties that were apparent during the first years of the Islamic Republic are also seen here. A more deliberate practical interpretation of this issue is presented in the case study section of this research.

To sum up, the foreign policy of Iran is officially based on two central principles: exporting the Vilayat-e Faqih and prohibiting the intervention of other states in Iran's domestic affairs. Based on such a rigid ideology certain powerful religious institutions have been created, which have overlapping roles with civilian government bodies. As a result, a complex bureaucratic system has been established, where the efficiency of foreign policy-making is hindered due to the inter-institutional competition.

Power Clusters

Showcasing the role for formal institutions is not enough for an in-depth analysis of foreign policy decision-making in Iran. It is also necessary to present what role informal networks and different factions have. Besides, the role prescribed to a particular official or institution is not necessarily exercised the way it is stated in the law. As David Thaler et al. notice, "An

office's title is only as meaningful as the person who holds it" (Thaler et al. 2010, p. 21). This chapter aims to show what the actual power centers in Iran are and what role they have in foreign policy decisions.

The findings regarding the informal power structure in Iran derive from a meta-analysis of 15 research studies. They show that there are many power centers in Iran, and when it comes to having an influence on policymaking they unite in a few factions. The latters are backstage groupings of individuals, political parties, and personal networks. They are not rigid structures; usually there is competition not only between but also inside the factions. This is why political figures often change their groupings.

The political life in Iran is filled with severe struggles between the following main factions: traditional conservatives, reformists, pragmatic conservatives, and principalists. There is only one aspect that all of them agree upon, and that is the existing political system. In other words, the mentioned factions support the Vilayat-e Faqih. Those who are against the existing structure are not considered khodi (one of us), and usually have limited opportunities in the political life of the country (Green et al. 2010). The differences of these factions refer to general policies of the government but not its structure. Below are briefly presented the positions and ideological backgrounds of these factions regarding the mentioned policies.

Traditional conservatives support the radical views that Khomeini used to have. They insist on strict Islamic lifestyle and Iran's economic self-sufficiency. The faction prioritizes self-sufficiency of the country in order to avoid any case of dependence from other states. Traditionalists are one of the central pillars of the existing regime. The current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was one of the central figures of the faction. Today he continues to attach great importance to the traditionalists' position. This faction has powerful leverages in

the Guardian Council (Kamrava 2007). In the illustrated formal government structure, they usually use the Council to prohibit the Majlis from drafting laws that are in contradiction with their position.
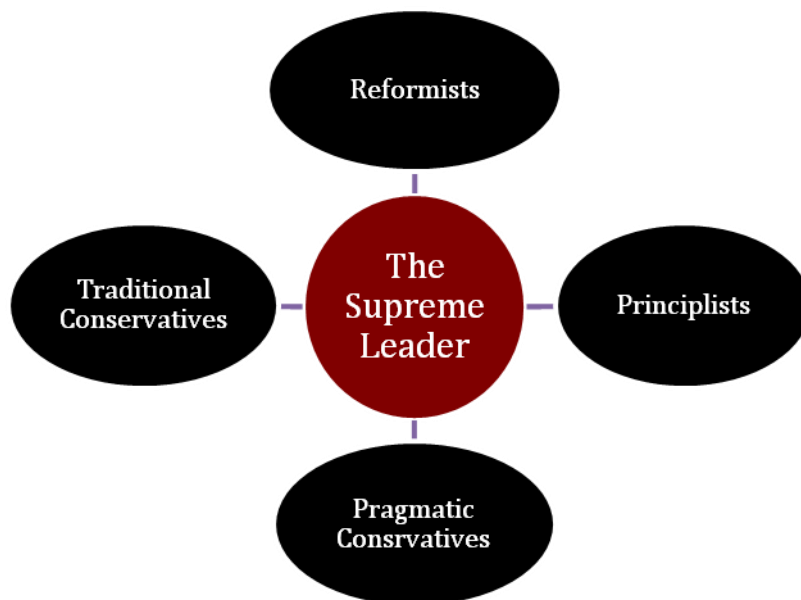
In 1980s, the radical position of traditionalist became debatable. It was hard for the state to follow the same revolutionary ideology, which was not always in parallel with Iran's national interests. This was when a group of moderate clerics established the reformist faction. Reformists argue for more cooperation with other states, economic liberalization and promotion of civil society. They call for Iran's engagement in global economic and political systems. They support Iran's nuclear program, but at the same time stress the necessity of halting the strained relations with the West. This faction was especially influential in 1990s when they became a majority in the Majlis, and their representative Mohammad Khatami became the president of Iran (Hunter and Gregorian 2008). They were in constant competition with the Guardian Council, which was dominated by traditionalists. The same Council banned many reformist candidates in the 2004 parliamentary elections. This faction has been relatively marginalized after Ahmadinejad became the president.

Unlike the reformists, the faction of pragmatic conservatives does not aim to liberalize the political system. However, their positions on the foreign policy issue are quite similar. Pragmatic conservatives also argue that it is necessary to establish economic and political cooperation with other states, which they believe is essential for solving the socio-economic difficulties in Iran. However, pragmatic conservatives are more suspicious towards the United States and offer more cautious foreign policy strategies (Kamrava 2007). The current president of Iran Hassan Rouhani is a pragmatic conservative.

Principalists are usually associated with the Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Former war veterans and militants are at the cornerstone of this grouping. Principalists and traditional

conservatives have similar views on many issues. Both of them prioritize the revolutionary principles and call for a pure Islamic lifestyle. However, this faction has been struggling with traditionalists for many years. Principalists represent the new generation of hardliners, who try to grasp the power of the old clergy. This is why, Ahmadinejad, who is also a principalist, was often criticized by Iranian clerics (Naji 2008).

The following four factions are the main power clusters in Iran. As for the Supreme Leader, he is considered to be above the factional clashes. His primary aim is to keep the regime's security. This is why he monitors the work of the factions and uses their competition in order not to let any of them to get too strong. The following phenomenon is known among specialist of Iranian politics as a "suspended equilibrium" (Kamrava 2004). In the Iranian political system the Supreme Leader balances all the four major political factions making sure none of them gets strong enough to challenge his authority. The below-illustrated diagram is a simplified interpretation of the discussed informal structure, where the primary ambition of the Supreme Leader is the security of his regime.

Despite his traditionalist views, the Supreme Leader does not necessarily support the radical factions. In his speech, he might support the positions of a certain faction and then use his

leverages to appoint a representative of a rival faction to a high-ranking position. The Supreme Leader might also trigger inter-factional clashes. The struggle between and inside factions are necessary for the Supreme Leader, as they give him the opportunity to intervene and dictate his position. If there is no struggle and the system is strictly dominated by one power system, the Supreme Leader might be sidelined, and his actual role in Iranian politics will be diminished. The case study of this paper deliberately presents how the stated arguments work in practice.

In such a political system foreign policy is usually used as a means of dealing with inter-factional struggles and issues concerning the security of the existing regime. Here political factions usually use foreign policy to justify their actions and criticize their opponents. This is also apparent in the strategies of the last two presidents.

As a principalist, Ahmadinejad conducted radical policies. This is why reformists and pragmatist usually criticized him. However, Ahmadinejad argued that it was part of his "brave resistance" against the states that want to exploit Iran. In this way, the hardships that the country faced because of the sanction were presented to be negligible compared to the values that the president struggled for (Naji 2008). The current president of Iran interpreted the same foreign policy differently. In particular, Rouhani called the same "brave resistance" a bold strategy that created many problems for the Iranian people (Karimi 2013).

To sum up, the foreign policy of Iran is generated as result power relations between the Supreme Leader and four major political factions. The faction that has the upper hand during a particular period tries to dictate its strategies, which are usually confronted by other factions. Therefore, a policy can be successful if it has a strong support base.

The Role of the Public

n the presented political struggle, where the Supreme Leader does the utmost to maintain the regime security, and each faction slams the others with heavy criticism, it is also important to show what segments of the society supports these power centers regarding foreign policy issues. As public support is not a stable phenomenon, and it can frequently change, it is also vital to present how it is formed and what role the mentioned power clusters have in it.

The overall position of the Iranian public regarding the foreign policy issues is based on a radical attitude towards the Western states. To put it differently, people in Iran consider that Western countries aim to undermine Iran's strength, so they can spread their influence over it. This can be seen in the 30 surveys that have been conducted by Gallup from 2006 to 2015. The results of the surveys also indicate that Iranians heavily criticize the West for the difficulties that they face. One of the striking points of the latest survey results is that more than half of the respondents have been personally hit by the sanctions on Iran, but they still continue to support Iran's nuclear program. As for the economic hardships, they mainly blame the United States and its allies rather than the Iranian government.

The interviewed experts argue that the Supreme Leader, who needs to keep the negative image of the West fresh in the minds of the people for showing that his regime is still relevant, profoundly influences such a perception. Since 1979, the dualistic regime of Iran has had many failures regarding economic, social and foreign policy, which can put the effectiveness of the existing structure under question and raise public discontent. To avoid such a situation, the Supreme Leader uses diversionary strategies by shifting public attention from domestic issues to foreign affairs, where others are blamed for the difficulties that Iran faces. His diversionary policies become apparent when referring to the tools that he uses for public propaganda.

In particular, he uses Friday prayers or Jummahs to divert the attention of the people on an external enemy. As Friday prayers are an essential part of the Islamic lifestyle, many people in Iran attend them. To use Jummahs for his propaganda, the Supreme Leader personally assigns the leaders of prayers. The discourse analysis of the Friday prayers in Tehran (from August 2014 to February 2015) shows how the regime uses these events for consolidating the public against the "external enemy" (The Iran Project 2015). The below presented table shows how intensely the Friday prayers in Tehran discuss foreign policy issues.

Table 2: Discourse Analysis of Friday Prays in Tehran (From August 2014 to March 2015)		
The total number of prayers	The number of prayers, where the main topic was a foreign policy issue	The number of prayers, where other states are mentioned with negative remarks
29	26	22

The demonstrated results show that prayer leaders mainly discuss foreign policy issues. In most of the cases, they criticize the policies of the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. They usually make radical claims, such as "the United States must stop its racist policy", "ISIS enjoys West's support". It is also important to show that the prayers refer to domestic issues in very few cases. This is an explicit expression of a diversionary foreign policy. The regime tries to avoid any threat towards its security; hence, it takes measures to concentrate public attention on foreign policy issues.

By using the mentioned tactics the Supreme Leader creates a substantial support base for his regime, but this is not the only way that he secures his position. The Supreme Leader also gets immense support from non-governmental organizations called Bonyads. These are charity foundations that control large national companies. Bonyads are free from government monitoring and only report to the Supreme Leader. It is estimated that around 20% of Iran's

total GDP comes from the companies owned by bonyads (World Bank 2015). These privileged entities serve for the Supreme Leader as a vital leverage for implementing his intentions.

Similar to the discussed case, the major political factions also highly depend on particular segments of the society that support their policies. As for the traditional conservatives, their primary support comes from clerics and Bazaari merchants. As traditionalist conservatives prioritize Islamic values, they get vast support from the Shia clerics. The public polls of University of Tehran Center for Public Opinion Research (2014) show that people who have a strong affiliation with religion tend to support the traditionalist faction. Traditionalists use clergy to disseminate their position in the public. In this way, they manage to get the support of a significant segment of the population when struggling against the other factions.

The traditionalist conservative faction also heavily relies on the support of bazaari merchants. The cooperation of traditionalist clergy and the Iranian bazaar has deep roots. During the reign of the Shah, the government abandoned the bazaar, and priority was given to the new and Western models of trade and business development. As the interviewed specialists point out, this situation created frustration among the bazaari merchants, who joined the clergy for toppling the shah's regime and reestablishing their traditional role in the Iranian economy. Many of the bazaar merchants continue to support the traditionalist conservatives, as the latters emphasize the role of traditional phenomena in Iran.

Whether the traditionalist faction is influential highly depends on how strong clergies and traditional bazaari merchants are in Iran. This can be seen in the impact that the changing nature of the bazaar had on the influence of the traditionalist faction. Reports on Iranian economy indicate that the bazaar has gone through massive transformations since 1979 and diverted from its traditional characteristics (Elson and Nadel 2011). Therefore, nowadays many bazaari merchants do not intend to support the traditionalist faction. As a result, the

traditionalist conservatives lost an important part of their public support. Therefore, latest surveys showcase a decrease in the number of people, who support the positions of the mentioned faction (Gallup 2015).

Many of the bazaari merchants, who import goods from other countries, started supporting the pragmatic conservative faction. As mentioned in the previous section, pragmatists call for economic reforms and facilitation of trade partnership with other states, which can be beneficiary for major bazaari merchants, who are involved in the external trade. The policies of the pragmatist faction are also appealing to the urban middle-class in Iran. Members of this segment believe that they have been heavily hit by the economic restrictions put on Iran: therefore they are inclined towards a more moderate foreign policy and economic cooperation. The pragmatist conservatives use their moderate economic position to attract these groups. In this way, they create a vital support for their policies.

The pragmatist faction is also backed by technocrats. The large numbers of individuals, who work in the public administration, consider the views of this faction the most relevant for the development of Iran. These figures, who are not so inclined towards religious ideologies, support the idea of boosting Iran's economic integration and trade relations with other countries. Specialists argue that technocrats play a vital role in making policy recommendations, which tend to be similar to those of pragmatic conservatives. In this way, they make the position of this faction stronger.

Unlike the presented segments of the society, the supporters of the principalist faction prefer more radical policies. Former war veterans, who represent the new generation of hardliners, mainly support the principalists. They have rigid ideology towards the West and believe that they present a great danger to Iran. These war veterans occupy central positions in the Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The principalists rely on the institutional power of the IRGC and use it for their factional objectives.

The IRGC also has economic leverages. After the war with Iraq, IGC officials were involved in an infrastructure recovery programs. This helped them get a stake in this sector as dominant business owners. Afterward, they expanded their leverages over large companies in the sphere of energy resources, telecommunication, and construction. Reports of various international organizations indicate that these major business owners benefit from the economic sanctions imposed on Iran (IMF 2015). As many companies are restricted to work in the country, the IRGC-affiliated corporations gain monopolistic power. This is why they support the principalist faction, which has radical position towards the West. If the principalists are in power, there is not much possibility that the sanctions will be lifted, and the mentioned companies will maintain their monopolistic control. This is why the latters actively support the principalist faction.

Finally, students, women and intelligentsia support the reformist political faction, which calls for socio-economic reforms, promotion of democratic values and friendly relations with the West. The mentioned groups are the main promoters of civil society in Iran. A large proportion of Iranian women support the reformists, as this faction also puts emphasis on the gender issues in the country. Students and the intelligentsia support the faction because they are prone to Western democratic values. Compared to the support groups of other factions these segments of the population do not have much economic or institutional power. Their influence is mainly seen during elections (Gallup 2015). This is why the reformist faction does not receive much support during the everyday policy-making process.

The illustration of the segments of Iranian society who support the discussed power centers is of high importance, as it helps to have a comprehensive understanding of the strength of these clusters. For implementing their policies and resisting the opposition groups the political factions in Iran need to have a strong support from the public. If this support diminishes, their positions become weaker. The next chapter presents how important the

support of the public was for the political factions during Khatami's and Ahmadinejad's presidencies.

Iran's Nuclear Program during Khatami's and Ahmadinejad's Presidencies

Balancing the Reformist President

1997 is marked in the history of Iran as the year of reformists' triumph. This is when a moderate cleric, who previously was just the head of the National Library, won the presidential elections. Mohammad Khatami was able to beat Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, who was supported by the Supreme Leader himself. Khatami's positions regarding making socio-economic reforms and normalizing relations with the West were the key of his success. In the 1997 presidential elections, the support base of the reformist faction had a significant impact. Women, students, and intelligentsia wanted to have a president, who would democratize the country; therefore, they voted for Khatami.

Having a populist president, who promised to bring change in Iran, seemed very promising. The International Media widely discussed the possibility of settling Iran's strained relations with the West. However, does having a moderate president necessarily mean that Iran will conduct a moderate foreign policy? The previous chapter shows that there are many other power centers in Iran who can hinder the mentioned policy if it contradicts their positions and interests. Accordingly, this chapter presents how the mentioned contradictions influenced Khatami's policies.

Firstly, it is necessary to discuss the contradictions between Khatami and the Supreme Leader, Ali Hosseini Khamenei. A discourse analysis of their Nowruz speeches from 1998 to 2005 shows the differences in their positions regarding foreign policy issues. Khatami's stance is based on his concept named "Dialogue among Civilizations", where he calls for cooperation and settlement of the existing conflicts by peaceful means. Khatami emphasizes the need for building mutual trust with the United States and its allies. In this regard, he also states that for establishing such relations compromises should be made.

As for Khamenei, his position is dramatically different. His speeches indicate that Iran's self-sufficiency and independence are the main factors that Khamenei believes the Iranian government should strive for. They also show how suspicious he his towards the intentions of the United States. In his speeches, Khamenei stated multiple times that the United States and its allies aim to see a weakened Iran. Therefore, he does not believe that making compromises will be beneficiary for Iran; it will just show how weak the country is.

The presented results of the discourse analysis show that the Supreme Leader and the president have different positions regarding foreign policy issue. Therefore, Khamenei took measurements to make sure that the president does not lead the country to a direction that is against his policies. It is noteworthy that he did not counter Khatami directly; instead, he used his institutional power and leverages to balance the reformist president with the help of other political factions.

The first step that Khamenei did to balance the reformist president is to intervene in the elections of the Speaker of the Parliament. With his support Khatami's rival during the presidential elections, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri was reelected in that position. In this way, he countered the reformist executive branch with a traditionalist legislature. However, after the 2000 parliamentary elections this balance was distorted. Reformist candidates managed to win the majority of the seats in the parliament. The interviewed specialist stated that the results were mainly based on the strong support that reformists received from their support base, women, and students.

The dominant position of the reformist faction in the parliament contradicted Khamenei's ambition to balance the power of political faction in Iranian government institutions. Therefore, in 2001 he intervened in the struggle between the Parliament and the Judiciary on appointing the members of the Guardian Council. The reformist Parliament refused to accept judiciary's nominees, who were traditionalist candidates. In this situation Khamenei used the

Expediency Council to "settle" the issue and made the parliament accept the nominations. As a result, traditionalists took control over the Guardian Council, an institution that had overlapping functions with the parliament. In this way, they could block the legal acts passed by the reformist parliament.

Besides the traditionalist conservative faction, principalists also played a vital role in countering the reformists through the Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. In the first chapter of the paper, it is stated that IRGC has certain functions that refer to the foreign policy of Iran, especially on issues that relate to national security. As principalists mainly dominated the institution, it created additional difficulties for Khatami when conducting his foreign policy.

The dominance of different factions in major government institutions intensified inter-factional struggle in Iran. In this situation the opposing power centers tried to sabotage the attempts of the reformist faction. The so-called Karine-A affair is typical example of that. In early 2002, when Khatami was working on settling the relations with the West and building a positive image for Iran, Israeli navy captured a merchant ship in the Read Sea. The ship was secretly transporting weapons for Palestine. The conducted investigations found that the weapons had been sent from Iran to the Hezbollah fighters in Palestine (BBC 2002). Just several days after this event George Bush mentioned Iran as part of the "Evil Axis".

So why did Iran send weapons to Palestine when the president was dedicating many resources to settling the relations with the West? In his study, Ali Ansari (2006) provides an extensive analysis of this case by referring to the political discourse over this issue. He shows that there was a considerable suspicion why Iran would decide to help Hezbollah in such a badly organized covert operation. Besides, when referring to the discourse of high-ranking Iranian officials, he showed that Khatami was not aware of the discussed plan. Taking this

into account, it can be argued that the rival factions in Iran, who aimed to sabotage Khatami's reconciliation attempts, conducted the operation.

The described events show that Khamenei managed to build a foundation for factional struggle in Iranian politics. These struggles gave him the chance to intervene as an "arbiter" and eventually dictate his positions. This is also apparent in the case of Iran's nuclear program.

Iran's Nuclear Program and Khatami's Weakened Position

It is noteworthy that Iran's nuclear program was not either a matter of factional struggles or a foreign policy-related issue before 2002. The reason is that the program was conducted in secrecy. As it was classified, it did not create any problems for Khatami's moderate foreign policy. Though U.S. intelligence reported about the possibility of nuclear enrichment in Iran, it did not create many difficulties for these matters.

As regards Khamenei, for him the nuclear program was of utmost importance. In the previous section, it is stated that the Supreme Leader attached great importance to Iran's self-sufficiency. The nuclear program is a vital component of this position, as it can become an important energy source for the country. The other factions did not present any concerns regarding the program either when it was classified.

This situation changed in August 2002 when it was exposed that Iran secretly enriched uranium in Natanz and Arak. It became evident that Iran actively develops its nuclear energy, which raised many concerns in the West. Particularly, the United States government accused Iran of having the intention to develop nuclear weapons. On December 18 President Khatami stated that Iran did not have any intention to develop nuclear weapons, and all the accusations were irrelevant.

It was vital for Khatami and his administration to convince the world that their intentions are peaceful. Therefore, in 2003 the government of Iran presented a negotiation proposal to the United States, where they stated their right of developing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes (Radio Liberty 2003). The Bush administration turned down the offer. Experts argue that the existing situation was alarming for Khatami because of the assertive position of the US government regarding the Middle East issues. In particular, the reformist government in Iran feared that a military operation would be conducted against Iran after finishing the war in Iraq.

Taking this into account, Khamenei and other reformist officials made multiple statements regarding the necessity of negotiations on the issue. Finally, European Union decided to take the initiative and accepted the offer of the Iranian government to negotiate on certain issues including the nuclear program. As a result, the so-called EU-3 group was formed, where the foreign ministers of France, Germany and Great Britain were involved.

Notably, Khamenei himself also supported the idea of negotiations considering the possible threat from the United States. However, Khamenei did not have any intention to make significant compromises; his aim was to use the negotiations for avoiding any possibility of a military attack on the United States. To ensure that these negotiations proceeded in the way that he preferred, he used his leverages at the Supreme National Security Council to appoint Hassan Rowhani as the head of the negotiating team. By entrusting the nuclear issue to Rouhani, who was a pragmatic conservative, Khamenei aimed to make sure that the negotiating team would not make substantial compromises to the other side.

Finally, on October 21 the Iranian government agreed to suspend the nuclear enrichment program during the negotiations with EU-3. Rouhani, who was one of the central figures in these negotiations, presented this agreement not as compromise made by the Iranian government, but rather as an act based on its free will. Besides, he emphasized that the

decision was temporary. In this way, he wanted to show that the agreement has little binding power. On November 11 Khamenei also made a speech, where he stated that this agreement shattered the attempts of the United States and Israel to find excuses for starting a military operation against Iran (BBC 2003). To put it simply, with this agreement Khamenei and Rouhani wanted to prove the United States and its allies wrong regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Despite making a declaration that Iran will freeze the nuclear enrichment program, the government only halted the work of ten centrifuges in Natanz. The rest of the other plants continued to work at the same pace. This issue was raised after the inspections of the International Atomic Energy Agency when it was discovered that Iran was not following the provisions of the statement made in October 2003 (IAEA 2003). In 2013, Khatami also stated that Iran continued its nuclear program in his interview to the IRIB TV. He particularly stated that while he had been negotiating with the EU representatives, the number of centrifuges increased from 150 to 1750.

In this way, Khamenei made sure that the nuclear program continued and at the same time held negotiations with the West for avoiding any military attack against Iran. As for Khatami, this negotiating tactics undermined his policies based on "Dialogue among Civilizations", as Western states became more and more suspicious regarding Iran's real ambitions. To put it differently, Khamenei' steps made the foreign policy of Khatami's administration challenging.

Besides the mentioned difficulties, Khatami also faced problems concerning the public support. In particular, women and students, who are the main support base of the reformist faction and supported Khatami during his presidential elections, were highly frustrated (Tehran Center for Public Opinion Research 2006). The reason is that they did not find it beneficiary to put so munch financial resources into the nuclear program. Instead, the funds

could be used for conducting the reforms that Khatami promised during his campaigns. In addition, other segments of the population, who were against making any concessions to the West, held protests in October 2003. In a nutshell, Khatami and his reformist administration were criticized by both their supporters and hardliners.

Such a public discontent hand its impact on the failure of the reformist faction in 2004 parliamentary elections. This was when the principalist faction gained the majority in Majlis. Many former IRGC officials became members of parliament. They had a different position regarding Iran's nuclear program than Khatami. Therefore, they used their power in the parliament to counter the president's foreign policy strategies.

After gaining a majority in the parliament, increased their criticism towards Khatami for his foreign policy decisions. Ali Larijani, who was the security adviser of the Supreme Leader, described Khatami's decisions regarding the nuclear program the following way: " We gave away a pearl and received bonbons in exchange" (Radio Liberty 2004). Later this expression was widely circulated among the principalist members of the parliament. They believed that Iran could have a stronger position regarding the nuclear program.

Besides the parliament, other institutions, which were dominated by hardliners, pressured reformists as well. In this regard, Saeed Jalili, who was the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council at that time, had a great influence in increasing the pressure over Khatami. He argued that Iran's nuclear program was not just a matter of reaching national self-sufficiency. He believed that it was directly related to the sovereignty of the country, which is entrenched in the fundamental principles of the revolution. In other words, the development of the nuclear program shows Iran's independence and the ability to resist the pressure of Western states.

The main support base of the principalist faction, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, also actively pressured Khatami and his fellow reformists. Nuclear enrichment was beneficiary for the interests of this institution, which is in charge of the security-related issues of the program. Hence, prioritization of Iran's nuclear development activities increases the influence of IRGC in the internal political affairs. Besides, IRGC officials also wanted to use the nuclear program for military purposes. By using the program for developing Iranian warfare they could increase the military capacity of the state, which is under their control.

As a result, the increasing influence of the principalist faction had it its impact on the nuclear negotiations with EU-3. Hossein Musavian, who was in Iran's negotiating team, stated that the settlement process reached a deadlock by referring to the contradicting positions in the Iranian government (Financial Times 2004). Such a reference to the destructive actions of the principalist faction resulted in Msavian's arrest. IRGC arrested him based on charges of espionage. This step once again showed principalists' rigid position regarding the negotiations.

The mentioned activities, which sabotaged reformists; attempts of settling the nuclear issue through making certain compromises was undermined by their political rivals. As it is illustrated above, Khamenei created the preconditions for such a rivalry in Iran's political system, which helped him balance the political factions. The opponents of the reformist faction, who increased their influence due to Khamenei's support, undermined Khatami's policies. Eventually, the president and his administration could not implement their decisions appropriately, which had an impact on their popularity among Iranians. The vivid interpretation of this phenomenon can be seen during the 2005 presidential elections when Mahmud Ahmadinejad, a principalist politician, was elected the president of Iran.

The Rise of the Principalist Faction?

After the 2005 presidential elections, the principalist faction took over the executive and legislative bodies of the government. As a result, there was a dramatic shift from the previous strategies of reconciliation. In particular, the new government gave preference to more rigid policies and abandoned the moderate options of the reformist faction.

To showcase how the change in the power relations influenced the nuclear program, it is necessary to present the position of Ahmadinejad and Khamenei. To do so, this section presents a discourse analysis of their Novruz speeches from 2006 to 2013. One of the striking features of the analysis is that unlike Khatami Ahmadinejad mostly shares the position of the Supreme Leader regarding foreign policy issues.

In his speeches, Ahmadinejad also considers Iran's sovereignty as a vital issue. He believed that it was a matter of national reputation to show how strong and independent Iran was. Therefore, he found it unacceptable to make any concessions to the West, who tried to put pressure on Iran. As an alternative, Ahmadinejad presented the so-called "steadfastness" or "resistance" approach. The latters refer to the necessity of resisting the "bullying" of the United States and its allies.

Having such a rigid position, Ahmadinejad and his principalist supporters decided to abandon the warnings of the International Atomic Energy Agency and continue Iran's nuclear enrichment program. As a result, in January 2006 the Natanz nuclear plant restarted its uranium enrichment program. Besides, in August 2006 a heavy water reactor was built in Arak (NY Times 2006). These events were followed by the reports of the IAEA, where the peaceful intentions of Iran regarding the nuclear program were questioned. After the assessment of the agency, Iran's nuclear program was sent to the UN Security Council. As a result, the first round of UN sanction was imposed in December 2006.

The presented events show the dramatic shifts that happened in Iran's nuclear policy due to the positions of the principalist faction. Does this mean that Ahmadinejad and his supporters took full control over the program? To answer these questions, it is vital to observe the steps that Khamenei and other political factions took in this regard.

Though Khamenei mostly shared Ahmadinejad's position regarding showing how independent and strong Iran is, he took certain steps to balance the principalist president as well. As in Khatami's case, Khamenei tried to obtain control over the president, so he could pull his strings when necessary. The establishment of the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations (SCFR) was one of those steps (Radio Liberty 2006). This institution, which was created based on the decree of the Supreme Leader, was planned to play a central role in Iran's nuclear program. In this way, Khamenei tried to limit Ahmadinejad's powers.

Khamenei appointed Kamal Kharrazi, who was the foreign minister of Iran during Khatami's presidency, as the head of the council. He also included other politicians that did not share Ahmadinejad's position regarding Iran's foreign policy. As the council started to play a vital role in Iran's nuclear program, these figures usually struggled with Ahmadinejad and other principalists.

Khamenei did not limit himself to the establishment of the Strategic Council. He took other steps for balancing Ahmadinejad. In particular, he appointed Hassan Rouhani and Khatami as members of the Expediency Council's Strategic Research Center. This body, which was headed by the former pragmatist President Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, was instructed by the Supreme Leader to look carefully over the work of the executive branch. Eventually, the Expediency Council, which according to the constitution is responsible for settling the conflicts between government institutions, became a headache for Ahmadinejad.

This institution, which de-jure does not have any stake in foreign policy decision-making, became a tool for countering Ahmadinejad's nuclear policies. Its role especially became apparent, when discussing the possibility of a military attack against Iran because of Ahmadinejad's "steadfastness". In 2007 100 members of the Iranian parliament referred to Rafsanjani for dealing with Ahmadinejad's bold policies, which could result into a military conflict (Aftabnews 2007). In addition, the secretary of the Expediency Council, Mohsen Rezaee stated that there is a possibility that the United States and its allies could attack Iranian nuclear plants.

Such a criticism provided difficulties for Ahmadinejad in his "resistance" policies. Also, there was also immense external pressure through economic sanctions. In this situation, Ahmadinejad and the principalist faction needed to have significant support from the public, which could strengthen their positions. This is how Ahmadinejad decided to refer to the Iranian people for help.

To get the mentioned support, in 2007 Ahmadinejad conducted a public campaign for spreading the principalist's position on Iran's nuclear program (Thaler et al. 2010). In the framework of the campaign, he traveled to 30 remote communities for convincing people that Iran should not make any concessions to the West and should stand still in its positions. Ahmadinejad also used the campaign to blame the United States and its allies for the existing situation. In this way, he tried to divert criticism from him to an external enemy. As regards his internal opponents, Ahmadinejad called the "cowards" (Radio Liberty 2007).

These events deepened the factional struggle over the nuclear issue. The public also was not united on this matter. Polling reports indicate that there was no dominant position regarding Ahmadinejad's nuclear policies. This is how the complex the situation in Iran was during the 2009 elections when it took immense effort from Ahmadinejad to secure his position for the second term.

Ahmadinejad's Second Term: Has He Gone Too Far?

After the elections, it was clear that no tangible breakthrough could be expected regarding Iran's nuclear program. However, Ahmadinejad had to put much effort in continuing his policy of "resistance". Increasing external pressure and frustration at home created significant challenges for the president and his factions.

Starting from 2009 Iranian economy has faced many hardships. Iran experienced GDP growth during the first term of Ahmadinejad's presidency, but after 2009 this indicator went down, as the country was heavily hit by the international economic crisis (World Bank 2015). Besides, due to Iran's "steadfastness" the West continued to increase economic sanctions on the country. Eventually, the Iranian currency was devalued, and trade went down. Public polls show that after 2012 more than half of the Iranians told that they experienced the negative impact of the sanctions personally (Gallup 2012). Hence, continuation of Ahmadinejad's's resistance policy became more and more costly.

Six out of the eight interviewed experts argue that in this situation principalists became more vulnerable to the criticism of other factions. To avoid their negative impact on the position of his faction, Ahmadinejad tried to shift the balance of power in the Iranian political system by decreasing the institutional power of other factions. In this regard, the president decided to fire the intelligence minister Heydar Moslehi, who was a prominent figure for the traditionalist faction (The Guardian 2011). This attempt to change the balance of power was against Khamenei's strategy of suspended equilibrium; therefore; Ahmadinejad's steps brought tension to his relations with the Supreme Leader. In response, Khamenei demanded to reappoint Heydar Moslehi in his position, which Ahmadinejad was forced to carry out.

The interviewed specialists argue that these events had their impact on Iran's negotiations with the West. In particular, Ahmadinejad had to divert slightly from his position and continue the negotiations with the West. For instance, on May 9 2011, Ahmadinejad made an

statement, indicating that the government of Iran will respond to the offer made by Catherine Ashton, who was the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and First Vice-President of the European Commission at that time, regarding starting negotiations on Iran's nuclear program (Aljazeera 2011). The interviewed experts argue that with this step, Ahmadinejad tried to decrease the pressure of other factions by showing that he still considers diplomacy as an option for dealing with Iran's nuclear program.

The members of reformist and conservative pragmatist factions showed skepticism regarding the success of this initiative (Raja News 2011). They stated that Ahmadinejad would not make any changes in his position, as they will be against the whole ideology of the principalist faction. Their main argument was that Ahmadinejad showed preparedness to negotiate just for the sake of showing that he also tries to find a common language with the West.

The mentioned estimations turned out to be correct. The reason is that Ahmadinejad continued the nuclear enrichment alongside the negotiations with the West. In particular, Ahmadinejad took steps to add new centrifuges, which increased the possibility of developing a nuclear weapon (NY Times 2011). This created difficulties for the Iranian negotiating team, who were trying to convince their Western colleagues that Iran's nuclear intentions were peaceful. Ahmadinejad's actions show that he gave little value to the negotiations. This was apparent for the West as well, which resulted in more severe sanctions in 2013.

The worsening economic situations and constant failures in the negotiations with the West had an adverse impact on the reputation of the principalist faction. Eventually, these events played a decisive role in the outcomes of the 2013 presidential elections in Iran when Hassan Rouhani, who was a pragmatic conservative, became the president of Iran.

Conclusion

The presented analyses illustrate to what extent Iran's foreign policy depends on its institutional structure, informal power centers and the Iranian public. Below are stated the answers of the indicated research questions based on the findings of the paper.

Firstly, the study shows that the formal structure of Iranian government creates functional overlaps among the government institutions regarding foreign policy issues. This situation creates inter-agency competition, as each of the institutions tries to play the central role in influencing foreign policy decision-making. In this way the institutional structure creates obstacles in conducting the foreign policy of the country.

As regards the role of the power clusters, the study shows that the positions of the Supreme Leader and four major political factions mainly determine foreign policy decisions in Iran. In particular, the dominance of one faction in Iran's political system has a significant impact on the foreign policy decisions in the government. The case study shows that when reformists had control over the executive and legislative branches of the government, Iran mainly conducted moderate foreign policy. However, the situation changed, when principalists became the dominant faction in the country.

On the other hand, the analysis shows that foreign policy is influenced but not strictly determined by the position of the dominant faction. The reason is that the Supreme Leader uses his leverages to balance the four factions. The overlapping functions of Iranian institutions give him the opportunity to create competition between different factions by appointing their members in different high-ranking positions. In this way he creates limitations for the dominant faction through its opponents. Besides, the inter-factional struggle gives him the opportunity to intervene in the decision-making process regarding foreign policy issues.

In such a complex system each faction needs strong public support for implementing its policies. In this way, different segments of the public have an indirect impact on the foreign policy of the country. In other words, a faction is able to implement its policies if it receives necessary public support.

As a result, the study approves the provided hypothesis. To put it differently, Foreign Policy of Iran high depends on the interests of multiple stakeholders. In this complex government structure the institutions, political factions and the public do play a significant role.

This research can be a starting point for future studies in the sphere. More analysis will help to have a comprehensive understanding regarding the role of the mentioned agents. The necessity of such studies increases considering the vital role that Iran plays in the Middle East nowadays.

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Appendix

Interview Questionnaire

1. How did the power struggle between reformist and principlist faction influence Iran's nuclear program and its negotiations with the West during Khatami's presidency?

2. What impact did the public opinion in Iran have on the nuclear negotiations with the West during Khatami's presidency?

3. Explain Ahmadinejad's position regarding Iran's nuclear program.

4. How did the power struggle between political factions influence Iran's nuclear program and its negotiations with the West during Ahmadinejad's presidency?

5. What was the public reaction to Ahmadinejad's nuclear policies and what impact did it have on them?

6. How would you explain the Supreme Leader's position regarding the different policies of Ahmadinejad and Khatami regarding Iran's nuclear program?