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## THE IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE PERSIAN GULF REGION UNDER THE RULE OF PRESIDENT HASSAN ROUHANI: CONTINUITY OR CHANGE

Undoubtedly, the Islamic Republic of Iran still plays a very important role in the Middle East especially in the Persian Gulf region. Its location as well as its political and economic potential determine Iran's regional position. According to Kayhan Barzegar and Mohammad Reza Agharebparast, "since the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971, maintaining the security of this vital body of water has been of primary concern, both for its littoral states and for the western countries that acquire their energy from there. The Persian Gulf has witnessed a revolution, two [actually three – P.O.] major wars, and regime changes since the British withdrawal. [...] Meanwhile, internal instability and increasing dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regimes are rendering the hitherto accepted tenets of security obsolete" (Barzegar, Agharebparast, 2012: 8). Lawrence G. Potter claims that "the Gulf has always been a key international trade route connecting the Middle East to India, East Africa, Southeast Asia, and China. Its orientation was outward, toward the Indian Ocean, and its society reflected this" (Potter, 2009: 1).

At the same time there are some features which distinguish Iran from other states in the region. These differences have a substantial influence on its relations with neighbouring states. Firstly, it is the only non-Arab state in the Persian Gulf. Secondly, Iran is dominated by Shia Islam. The Iranian state is often depicted as a guardian of Shia doctrine and a protector of Shiites outside Iran, for example, in Bahrain. Thirdly, Iran is the only theocratical state not only in the Persian Gulf, but also in the whole world except for the Holy See. Fourthly, all states in the region excluding Iran are member states of the (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council (Potter, 2009: 15–16).<sup>1</sup> Fifthly, Iran is the only regional actor which officially uses the term Persian Gulf. All Arab states refer to the Persian Gulf simply as the Gulf or the Arab Gulf in order to underline the Arab dominance in the region and debase Persians (*The Gulf*, 2005: 9–22). Last but not least, only Iran likely undertook experiments and research related to nuclear weapons. Yet it should be emphasized that Iranian politicians deny the allegations and insist that all enrichment activities are intended solely for peaceful purposes (Mousavian, 2012: 32–33). Nevertheless, most of international community especially the West does not share the Iranian point of view.

The main aim of this article is to find out whether Iranian foreign policy towards the Arab states in the Persian Gulf region has undergone any significant changes since

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<sup>1</sup> The official name of the organization is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Yet Iranian authorities and scholars insist on using the term the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC).

Hassan Rouhani became the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran in August 2013. The question is if Hassan Rouhani's foreign policy represents a continuity or a change in comparison with the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad presidential rule between 2005–2013. Is the current Iran's foreign policy towards the Persian Gulf region idealistic or rather realistic? The main assumption is that there will be no Arab-Iranian rapprochement in the Persian Gulf without a prior normalization of political relations between Iran and the West especially the United States.

### **THEORY OF THE IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY: WAVES OF IDEALISM VS. WAVES OF REALISM**

Undoubtedly, the Iranian foreign policy has undergone significant changes since the successful revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. Mahdi Mohammad Nia argues that “anti-western revolutionary identity is considered as the nodal point of Iran's foreign policy discourse in relations to which signs and moment are organized in a chain of equivalence that gives meaning to the country's foreign policy behaviour. [...] To neutralize the western threats, Iranian officials continuously have emphasized the anti-western revolutionary identity and created a chain of equivalence around the new constructed identity” (Nia, 2012: 37). Yet this anti-western orientation constitutes a significant obstacle as far as the Iranian position in the region is concerned. As all Arab states in the Persian Gulf cooperate with the United States, no Arab-Iranian rapprochement would be possible without prior normalization of U.S.-Iran relations.

The Iranian foreign policy is very complex and has many unique features. Jalil Roshandel claims that Iran's strategic culture could be described as follows:

- Iran sees itself as a defender of Islam especially Shia Islam;
- Iran intends to become a regional hegemon;
- Iranians feel oppressed by international community;
- the main oppressors of Iran are the United States and Israel;
- “Iran understands the importance of possessing not only a strong military but, more specifically, a nuclear capability” (Roshandel, 2013: 50).

Yet it does not mean that the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has not undergone any significant changes since 1979. On the contrary, there were various periods in which Iranian authorities were either pragmatic and ready for international cooperation or eager to promote the Shia values and confront with the Arab states in the Middle East. Although the Supreme Leader is the most influential politician in Iran, foreign policy making also depends on the President. According to article 125 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran of 1979, “the President or his legal representative has the authority to sign treaties, protocols, contracts, and agreements concluded by the Iranian government with other governments, as well as agreements pertaining to international organizations, after obtaining the approval of the Islamic Consultative Assembly” (*Constitution*, 1979/1989). For this reason the Iranian foreign policy varies from president to president. In each case, however, it always requires approval from the Supreme Leader. Article 110 of the Constitution states that among the

duties and powers of the Supreme Leader is “delineation of the general policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran after consultation with the Nation’s Exigency Council” (*Constitution*, 1979/1989).

According to Mohammad Reza Deshiri, “in a detailed classification of the periods and evolutions of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, we can scrutinize them from the point of view of the distinction or rapprochement between idealism and realism; that is to say that from 1979 to 1997 there existed a kind of distinction and distance between idealism and realism in such a way that taking into account the various oscillations and alternations of foreign policy, these two approaches were distinct from one another, although this distinction should not be considered as a sign of antagonism or inconsistency in the country’s foreign policy” (Deshiri, 2010: 4). In case of the period between 1997 and 2009, Deshiri claims that one can observe “the rapprochement of the two idealist and realist approaches” (Deshiri, 2010: 5). In the opinion of Rouhollah K. Ramazani one can even observe “the conundrum of spirituality and pragmatism”, which can be described as “spiritual pragmatic paradigm” (Ramazani, 2013: 196). Yet the most essential issue with regard to Deshiri’s theory is to present Iranian understanding as well as definitions of idealism and realism. According to Iranians, realism means that pragmatism and national interest prevail over Shia ideology and spiritual dimension, namely a ‘promotion’ of religious values in the Middle East. Idealism’s underlying assumption is that Iran is ready to sacrifice its political as well as economic gains in the name of ideological and religious correctness. For example, Iran is ready to support Shia organizations in Arab states, albeit such actions negatively affect Iran’s bilateral relations with these states.

On the basis of political changes in Iran, Deshiri divided the Iranian foreign policy into eleven periods/waves, namely:

- the first wave of idealism (1979–1984);
- the first wave of realism (1984–1986);
- the second wave of idealism (1986–1987);
- the second wave of realism (1987–1988);
- the third wave of idealism (1988–1989);
- the third wave of realism (1989–1996);
- the fourth wave of idealism (1996–1997);
- the fourth wave of realism (1997–2000);
- the fifth wave of idealism (2000–2001);
- the fifth wave of realism (2001–2005);
- the sixth wave of idealism (2005–2009) (Deshiri, 2010: 19–55).

Yet, Rouhollah K. Ramazani claims “that the tension between religious ideology and pragmatism has persisted throughout Iranian history. The Iranian Revolution simply put it on graphic display in the contemporary period. [...] The balance of ideology and pragmatism in the making of Iranian foreign policy decisions has been one of the most persistent, intricate, and difficult issues in all Iranian history, from the sixth century BC” (Ramazani, 2013: 184). However, it can be argued that within the current Iranian foreign policy one can not really distinguish between idealism and realism. According to Mohammad Reza Deshiri and Mohammad Reza Majidi, “Iran’s foreign policy can be characterized as realist idealism and it can be further defined as reformist,

as it expresses dissatisfaction with the existing international system. As it is interlinked with national development and domestic policy, Iran's foreign policy requires an international framework within which its national development must be achieved" (Deshiri, Majidi, 2009: 104). Similarly Mahdi Mohammad Nia claims that "Iran's foreign policy discourse consists of several signifiers such as non-domination, independence, resistance, anti-arrogance campaign, nationalism, Islamic unity, and responsibility" (Nia, 2012: 37). Vali Nasr goes even further saying that the record of the past three decades shows that as objectionable and problematic as Iran's behaviour has been, it is still driven by the cold calculations of regime survival and national interests (*Can*, 2013: 12).

In this case one can observe that periods of dominance of spirituality in the Iranian foreign policy, namely waves of idealism, alternate with periods of dominance of pragmatism, namely waves of realism. Accordingly, the second presidential term of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad should be described as the seventh wave of idealism. The main aims of the Iranian foreign policy remained unchanged in comparison with the previous period, namely during his first presidential term between 2005–2009. Most of scholars analyze Iran's relations with the West under the rule of Ahmadinejad. Yet another important question is what was the then Iranian policy towards the Persian Gulf region in general and towards the Arab states in particular.

#### **IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE PERSIAN GULF REGION UNDER THE PRESIDENCY OF MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD**

Undoubtedly, negotiation process related to the Iranian national nuclear program has become one of the most important issues if not the most important one in the Persian Gulf region since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Dobbins, Nader, Kaye, Wehrey, 2011; Fiedler, 2013; Gold, 2009; Patrikarakos, 2012; Davis, Pfaltzgraff, 2013; *Iran: the Nuclear*, 2012; Melman, Javedanfar, 2008). No progress during negotiations between Iran and Western powers negatively affected the Iranian position in the Persian Gulf. Most of Arab states were afraid of Iran's program and were concerned that it posed serious threat to regional security. Despite of various Iranian cooperation initiatives undertaken under the rule of Ahmadinejad, this factor undermined Arab-Iranian relations between 2005–2013. Moreover, there was a risk of a new arms race in the region, although not all scholars agreed with it. For instance, Michael Axworthy wrote that "the supposed and oftmentioned threat of an arms race in the Middle East was something of a chimera – Israel's possession of a nuclear weapon had not prompted Saudi Arabia to acquire one" (Axworthy, 2013: 422). Nevertheless, the Iranian nuclear program constituted the biggest obstacle to an Arab-Iranian rapprochement during the Ahmadinejad presidency, namely from 2005 until 2013. One could observe lack of mutual trust.

However, in the opinion of Shireen T. Hunter "despite a much less congenial atmosphere, Ahmadinejad's government demonstrated great eagerness to expand relations with Gulf Arab states. For example, Iran made a number of proposals for the creation of a security system in the Persian Gulf, including an agency to deal with regional security

issues, and an economic cooperation council. Iran also urged expanded bilateral economic and other ties with the Gulf states” (Hunter, 2010: 199). This way the President combined his idealist views with a very pragmatic approach towards the Arab states. Unfortunately, international context was not advantageous to Iran. Its strained relations with the West made it impossible to improve relations with the U.S. allies in the region, for example, Qatar or Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, the Iranian authorities did their best to achieve this aim.

The most significant event in the framework of Saudi-Iranian relations was King Abdullah’s invitation for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The Iranian President accepted the invitation and visited Riyadh in March 2007. This gesture was commented in detail by world press, because Saudi kings invite only leaders of ally states. It was interpreted as a demonstration of independence from the United States. At the same time, Ahmadinejad’s visit was seen as a gesture of good will of the Iranian authorities. Alidad Mafinezam and Aria Mehrabi claim that “the most significant reason for the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the 1990’s has been the fact that Iran has steadily distanced itself from the militant and revolutionary zeal that had characterized it in the 1980s. As a matter of fact, Iranian leaders no longer question the Islamic legitimacy of the Saudi Kingdom and have dropped their claims to being the only legitimate interpreters and practitioners of Islam” (Mafinezam, Mehrabi, 2008: 70). Yet this new approach failed during the Ahmadinejad presidency and there were a few reasons for that.

Firstly, Saudi Arabia was and still is dependant on its close relations with the West in general and with the United States in particular. This way hostile relations between the United States and Iran badly affected the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. Secondly, Saudi Arabia feared the Iranian nuclear program and perceived it as a dire threat to peace and security in the Persian Gulf region in general and to its national security in particular. Although there was no evidence that the Iranian nuclear program had any military dimension, authorities of most of Arab states in the region were convinced that Iran’s real intention was to acquire nuclear weapons and dominate the Persian Gulf. Thirdly, different positions on the so-called Arab Spring, namely a process of political and social changes in the Arab states after 2010. Iran and Saudi Arabia represented two different approaches what was noticeable especially in the case of Bahrain and the case of Syria (Hokayem, 2013: 110–128). This issue is still topical. For instance, while Iran backs the Bashar Assad’s regime in Syria, Saudi Arabia supports some opposition groups (Pierret, 2013: 248–249).

A similar approach was represented by Simon Mabon in whose opinion there were five conditions which have to be fulfilled in order to improve the nature of Saudi-Iranian relations, namely:

- the resolution of domestic problems both in Saudi Arabia and Iran;
- religious tolerance for doctrinal differences;
- restrained behaviour within the Middle East;
- reconsideration of the U.S. role in the region;
- a resolution of the Iranian nuclear program (Mabon, 2013: 219–221).

Political opponents and critics of President Ahmadinejad especially abroad also pointed up his spiritual fascinations and religious idealism. Despite the fact that he al-

ways emphasized the importance of Shia Islam in politics and social life in Iran, some of his decisions related to the Iranian foreign policy were very pragmatic. In the opinion of Rouhollah K. Ramazani, “the real question of concern is whether Ahmadinejad’s ultra-conservative interpretation of spirituality and his reputation as an ideologue demonstrate that he has not been pragmatic in foreign policymaking. It is best to examine his nuclear policy in detail which, contrary to conventional wisdom, shows that he has been somewhat pragmatic” (Ramazani, 2010: 65). As a matter of fact, Iran cooperated with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and participated in various international negotiations including the talks with the P5+1 group.

Iran’s military expenditures increased under the rule of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. His harsh rhetoric resulted in a significant increase of military expenditures, namely from 8.5 billion USD in 2005 to 10.1 billion USD in 2010. Anoushiravan Ehteshami points out that “Iran more than doubled its defense spending in the second half of the decade, in response to the rising hostility toward it, growing talk of a coordinated attack on its vital nuclear facilities and defense infrastructure, and of course the entrenched American forces on its two longest borders” (Ehteshami, 2013: 231). It should be underlined that if any coordinated attack took place, Americans would use their military bases and aircraft carriers located in the Middle East as well as bases of their Arab allies in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. At the same time they would be able to move their troops from Iraq to Iran, however, it is very likely that Iraqi Shiites would attempt to block any such military manoeuvres.

Due to objective political limitations, Iran searched for economic cooperation. Under Ahmadinejad’s presidency, Iran began trying to develop economic relations with a few Arab states in the region especially Iraq and the United Arab Emirates. According to Abbas Maleki, Iran has been trying “to design networking of oil and gas production and consumption in the Persian Gulf which is vital for all of the regional states. Initiatives like Iran Iraq pipelines for both oil and products between Basra refinery in Iraq and Abadan refinery in Iran is one of them” (Maleki, 2008: 99). Yet Mahjoob Zweiri claims that “as a consequence of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, two main sources of tension have troubled Arab–Iranian relations. The first pertains to security. Iran is concerned about the presence of American forces in the region. The GCC is anxious about Iran’s nuclear ambition and its impact on stability in the Gulf. The second source of worry is about political and social issues, including the emergence of a new political elite in Iraq and the re-emergence of the debate about identity and citizenship, which are becoming real challenges facing states in the Middle East” (Zweiri, 2011: 117).

Iran’s attitude towards the political changes in the Arab world, namely so-called Arab Spring, is another important factor which has to be taken into consideration while analyzing its regional policy in the Persian Gulf. As regards that, the case of social protests in Bahrain and the Iranian involvement in this state seem to be the most representative cases. The other issue is Iran’s stance during unrests in Saudi Arabi and Kuwait. “Characterizing the Arab upheavals as an ‘Islamic Awakening’, Iranian policymakers started to support indigenous and genuine democracy-seeking revolutionary movements and at the same time tried to keep it away from extra-regional influences. In both cases both inside and outside of the Persian Gulf region, Iran kept insisting on its traditional position against any intervention of intrusive forces” (Soltaninejad, 2012: 131).

Although the Bahraini population is dominated by Shia Muslims, the ruling elites are Sunni. In the past Iranian authorities often claimed that Shiites in Bahrain were oppressed by Sunnis and on this basis they interfered indirectly in the Bahraini internal policy (Alhasan, 2011; Marshall, 2003: 25–27). Any action directed against Bahraini Shiites was deplored by the Islamic Republic of Iran. The same phenomenon was observed during the social unrest in Bahrain of 2011. In this case both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia accused Iran of interference in internal politics of Bahrain. Under such circumstances Mahmoud Ahmadinejad could count on any significant progress neither in bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia nor with Bahrain. Later it appeared that his successor, Hassan Rouhani, had to face the same problem.

Yet, there was even an internal political dispute in Iran with regard to the so-called Arab spring. There was a difference of opinion between Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as to sources of the political change in the Arab states after 2010. Amid Mohammad Haji-Yousefi claims that “while the Supreme Leader believes that the Middle East developments are inspired by the Islamic Revolution of Iran and are of an Islamic nature, the executive, particularly, the President withholds the opinion that the so stated developments derived from a U.S.-Israeli conspiracy aiming at dividing and undermining the Islamic world” (Haji-Yousefi, 2012: 23). Besides, both politicians used different terms in order to define the process of change in the Arab world. Ayatollah Khamenei often referred to this process as the Islamic Awakening, while President Ahmadinejad used the term Human Awakening (Haji-Yousefi, 2012: 26).

In the opinion of Mehran Kamrava, “the discrepancy between the appearances of Iranian policy and its substance is primarily a function of the populist rhetoric through which most Iranian political leaders, particularly President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, enunciate Tehran’s positions on various international and regional issues. However, Iranian foreign and national security policies, both in relation to Iran’s immediate neighbourhood and in the larger global arena, are influenced far more by pragmatic, balance of power considerations than by ideological or supposedly revolutionary pursuits” (Kamrava, 2013: 104). The question is if such claim is true in case of President Hassan Rouhani who came to power in 2013. What’s more, had Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy been pragmatic in comparison with the new policy introduced by Rouhani?

## **THE PERSIAN GULF POLICY OF IRAN UNDER THE PRESIDENCY OF HASSAN ROUHANI**

In the opinion of Mahmood Monshipouri, “Rouhani’s victory in Iran’s 2013 presidential election is a clear protest vote against his predecessor’s management of the country’s relations with the Western world. Although Rouhani’s support for broader social freedoms, as well as his advocacy for women’s rights rendered him a favorite candidate for change, undoubtedly economic insecurity – caused by the imposition of sanctions by the Western world in reaction to Iran’s nuclear program – was a key factor in his victory” (Monshipouri, 2013: 51). As a matter of fact, Rouhani’s administration did a lot in order to improve relations with the West. The best example of such rap-

prochement is the Joint Plan of Action signed by the P5+1 members and Iran on 24 November 2013 (*Joint*, 2013). The question is if the same detente can be observed as far as Iran's relations with the Arab states in the Persian Gulf are concerned.

Since the victory of Hassan Rouhani the Iranian foreign policy in the region has undergone significant changes and there is growing evidence proving that. Iran's recent rapprochement with Qatar could serve as one of the best examples of the reorientation in its foreign policy. On 15 March 2014 Iran-Qatar first ever joint political Committee convened in Tehran. The meeting was dedicated to further development of bilateral ties which aim is to bring both states closer and support political dialogue. As regards that, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian discussed with his Qatari counterpart, Mohammad Ibn Abdullah al-Ramihi, issues related to regional security as well as humanitarian crisis in Syria (*Iran-Qatar*, 2014). For the first time since the beginning of the internal conflict in Syria, namely since spring 2011, both Iran and Qatar agreed to cooperate on this matter. Such declaration can mean a major breakthrough if one takes into consideration their official positions on the Syrian crisis. Iran still supports the Syrian regime while Qatar backs some anti-Assad movements in this Arab state. For this reason their will to cooperate on this matter may be essential and result in a significant progress within the framework of Syrian negotiations between Bashar al-Assad and the main opposition groups. Yet the conflict seems to be very complex and even such Iran-Qatar cooperation might not be enough to change the deteriorating situation in Syria. Good relations with other important actors in the region will be essential too and the Iranian President seems to share such point of view.

Although in the past Oman was the only Arab state in the region to enjoy good diplomatic relations with Iran especially under the Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, these relations have recently been upgraded on Rouhani's initiative. Sultan Qaboos from Oman was the first official guest of President Hassan Rouhani following his inauguration on August 3. Another example of detente in the Persian Gulf region is President Rouhani's meeting with King Sultan Qaboos in Oman on 12 March 2014. During their bilateral talks the Iranian President "stressed development of relations between the two countries in all fields including energy, shipping, customs affairs, financial issues, environment, and tourism and maintaining Hormuz Strait security" (*President*, 2014). While leaving Muscat President Rouhani added that Iran "attaches great importance to ties with the Islamic countries, particularly the littoral states of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman due to significance of the strategic Hormuz Strait" (*Iran*, 2014). Iran-Oman cooperation is therefore essential not only for both states, but also for the whole Persian Gulf. The reason for it is Iran and Oman's joint control over the Strait of Hormuz as well as the Gulf of Oman. Any serious tension between these two states might result in a blockade of maritime transport in the Strait of Hormuz and lead to an oil crisis as it is the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean.

Iran's relations with the most powerful Arab state in the Persian Gulf region, namely with Saudi Arabia, have been strained for a long time. There are many reasons for that, however, most of them are of political and religious nature. Saudi Arabia is commonly perceived as a defender of Sunnis while Iran dominates in the Shia community. For instance, both Bahrain and Syria have become theaters of Saudi-Iranian rivalry lately. Yet in March 2014 President Rouhani attempted to improve relations with Iran's biggest re-



gional rival. During the bilateral meeting with the new Saudi ambassador to Iran, Abdolrahma Bin Gharman al-Shahri, Hassan Rouhani declared: "Expansion of relations with neighboring Muslim countries particularly Saudi Arabia is a priority in Iran's foreign policy. Boost of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran can help halt unrests in some regional countries and prevent spread of sectarian violence in the region" (*Boost*, 2014). Undoubtedly, he is right as far as internal tensions in Bahrain and the conflict in Syria are concerned. Lack of cooperation between the main regional powers will hinder any peace initiatives. Yet at the moment it seems that Iran is trying to take advantage of Qatar-Saudi Arabia rivalry in the Persian Gulf. Its recent rapprochement with Qatar is the best example of such new attitude (Lehmann, 2014).

The declared re-orientation in Iran's foreign policy has been also vindicated by activities of the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, who was nominated by President Rouhani in August 2013. Soon after that Minister Zarif decided to visit almost all Arab states in the Persian Gulf region with the exception of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Undoubtedly, it was a clear sign that he attached great importance to reconciliation in the region. As a result, in December 2013 the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman (*Iran FM*, 2013; *FM wraps*, 2013). He also met Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Tehran on 5 December 2013. During the talk Zarif said that "both sides should do their best mainly in economic arena to meet the two nations interests" and at the same time he also "expressed regret over devastating terrorist moves in Iraq and Syria and said terrorism has turned into a rampant phenomenon which should be controlled" (*Iranian*, 2013). This way terrorism appeared to be the main obstacle for the further development of Iraqi-Iranian relations. However, the biggest problem was connected with the Iraq based Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MKO) activities which posed a serious threat to internal security of Iran and its citizens.

On 26 February 2014 Mohammad Javad Zarif met with his Iraqi counterpart, Hoshyar Zebar, and underlined a growing need for further development of bilateral ties especially political and economic (*Iran, Iraq*, 2014). The first step was made a few months earlier when Iraq managed to force MKO to shut its base on the Iraqi territory. Iran thanked Iraq for this decision as MKO members were held responsible for many terrorist attacks against Iran and its citizens (*Iran thanks*, 2013). Earlier, in 2003, MKO signed an agreement with the U.S. forces in Iraq which agreed not to attack MKO members and vehicles (Varasteh, 2013: 89). Such action was clearly aimed at weakening of the Iranian regime. Thanks to that MKO fighters were able to carry out attacks against Iran from the Iraqi territory between 2003–2013. Yet the 2013 decision of Iraqi authorities seriously limited their activities.

The above initiatives and activities undertaken by the Rouhani's administration are very positive and should be perceived as indications of the new regional policy of Iran. Yet Iran's strained relations with both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain still pose the biggest threat to regional cooperation and security. Undoubtedly, everything will depend on Shia-Sunni rivalry in the Middle East in general and in the Persian Gulf region in particular, negotiations concerning the Iranian nuclear program as well as Iran and Saudi Arabia's attitudes towards political and social changes in some Arab states especially in Syria.

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Since Hassan Rouhani came to power in summer 2014 the Iranian foreign policy has undergone significant modifications. One can observe a noticeable detente in Iran's relations with the West. The same process is taking place at the regional level, although the main aims of the Iranian foreign policy in the Persian Gulf are the same as they were under the Ahmadinejad rule. The main difference is that so far Rouhani's government has been more active and bilateral contacts have been more fruitful. The reason for it is quite obvious. The better relations between Iran and the West, the bigger chance for the Arab-Iranian cooperation in the Persian Gulf. Yet Rouhani still has to face the same problems and challenges as his predecessor, for example, within bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia or Bahrain.

Although Iran under the rule of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad maintained harmonious relations with Iraq and Oman, its relations with other Arab states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain remained strained. Ahmadinejad had intended to improve relations with the GCC states and had undertaken a few major initiatives, but he did not succeed ultimately due to the difference of opinions on the Arab/Islamic Awakening especially the Syrian crisis and the Persian Gulf states' fears of the Iranian nuclear program. In this context the recent events prove that so far Rouhani has managed to improve relations with Qatar, however, Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are still difficult and poor. In December 2013 Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif visited all Arab states in the region except for Saudi Arabia and Bahrain what was very meaningful.

Is Rouhani's foreign policy idealistic or realistic? Although President Rouhani seems to be more pragmatic in comparison with his predecessor, it has to be emphasized that it is still the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who has the final word on essential decisions related to the Iranian foreign policy. Elements of both idealism and realism are noticeable in this case. As Rouhollah K. Ramazani points out, "the salience of the spiritual pragmatic paradigm over the past three decades since the Revolution has deep roots in Iran's diplomatic culture, defined as those values, norms, mores, modes of thinking and ways of acting which have developed over centuries as a result of Iran's diplomatic interaction with other nations. These attributes have survived change and have influenced generations of Iran's foreign policymakers and diplomats and their negotiating style" (Ramazani, 2010: 75). Yet it should be underlined that official Rouhani's rhetoric is more pragmatic and friendly than the radical rhetoric of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Last but not least, it has to be emphasized that there will be no Arab-Iranian rapprochement in the Persian Gulf without a prior normalization of political relations between Iran and the West especially the United States. A breakthrough with regard to the P5+1 and Iran negotiation process seems to be essential if Iran really intends to cooperate with the Arab states in the region.

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## ABSTRACT

Although Iran borders with many states and has direct access to the Caspian Sea as well as the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf region seems to be the most vital area to its security and prosperity. Yet since the 70's Iran's relations with the Arab states in the region have been rather strained and complex. The main reason for that had been the success of the Islamic revolution in 1979 which later resulted in a new dimension of Sunni-Shia rivalry. Moreover, post-revolutionary Iranian authorities also intended to maintain the regional hegemony from the Imperial State of Iran period. As a result, successive Iranian governments competed for hegemony in the Persian Gulf with the littoral Arab states which consolidated their regional positions due to close links and intensive cooperation with the West especially with the United States. Despite some political and economic initiatives which were undertaken by President Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad, this rivalry was also evident between 2005–2013. The main aim of this article is to find out whether Iranian foreign policy towards the Arab states in the Persian Gulf region has undergone any significant changes since Hassan Rouhani became the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran in August 2013. According to Mohammad Reza Deshiri, the Iranian foreign policy after 1979 can be divided into so-called waves of idealism and realism. During dominance of idealism values and spirituality are more important than pragmatism while during the realistic waves political as well as economic interests prevail over spirituality. Iranian idealism is connected with export of revolutionary ideas, Shia dominance as well as the restoration of unity among all Muslims (*ummah*). On this basis both presidential terms of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad can be classified as ‘waves of idealism’, albeit some of his ideas were very pragmatic. The question is if Hassan Rouhani’s foreign policy represents a continuity or a change. Is the current Iran’s foreign policy towards the Persian Gulf region idealistic or rather realistic? The main assumption is that there will be no Arab-Iranian rapprochement in the Persian Gulf without a prior normalization of political relations between Iran and the West especially the United States.

## **POLITYKA ZAGRANICZNA IRANU W ZATOCE PERSKIEJ POD RZĄDAMI PREZYDENTA ROWHANIEGO: KONTYNUACJA CZY ZMIANA?**

### **STRESZCZENIE**

Chociaż Iran graniczy z wieloma państwami i posiada bezpośredni dostęp zarówno do Morza Kaspijskiego, jak i do Oceanu Indyjskiego, region Zatoki Perskiej wydaje się być dlań najważniejszy z punktu widzenia jego żywotnych interesów – bezpieczeństwa i rozwoju. Jednakże od lat 70. XX wieku stosunki Iranu z arabskimi państwami Zatoki Perskiej są napięte i złożone. Główną przyczyną takiego stanu rzeczy stał się sukces rewolucji irańskiej w 1979 roku oraz będące jej efektem zmiany ustrojowe i zapowiedź promowania doktryny szyickiej w regionie. Główną płaszczyzną konfliktu stała się rywalizacja wyznaniowa pomiędzy sunnitami i szyitami. Ponadto, w praktyce władze Islamskiej Republiki Iranu nie zrezygnowały z dążenia do zapewnienia Iranowi pozycji regionalnego hegemonu, co stanowiło jeden z celów irańskiej polityki zagranicznej jeszcze w okresie Cesarstwa Iranu. W praktyce wszystkie kolejne rządy Iranu rywalizowały z arabskimi państwami w regionie, które z kolei w coraz większym stopniu dążyły do umocnienia swej regionalnej pozycji dzięki bliskiej współpracy z Zachodem, a zwłaszcza ze Stanami Zjednoczonymi. W ten sposób wykorzystywały, z korzyścią dla siebie, napięte stosunki pomiędzy USA a Iranem. Pomimo kilku inicjatyw politycznych i gospodarczych, podjętych przez administrację Mahmuda Ahmadineżada, stosunki irańsko-arabskie pozostawały napięte w latach 2005–2013. Głównym celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie czy polityka zagraniczna Iranu względem państw arabskich w Zatoce Perskiej uległa zmianie po objęciu urzędu prezydenckiego przez Hassana Rouhaniego w sierpniu 2013 roku, czy też nie. Według Mohammada Rezy Deshiriego, politykę zagraniczną Iranu po 1979 roku można podzielić na tzw. fale idealizmu oraz fale realizmu. W okresach prymatu idealizmu, wartości oraz duchowość związana z doktryną szyicką przeważają nad pragmatyzmem. Z kolei podczas dominacji realizmu, pragmatyzm oraz interesy polityczne i gospodarcze przeważają nad duchowością. Podstawę irańskiego idealizmu stanowią eksport ideałów rewolucji, zapewnienie dominacji doktrynie szyickiej oraz odtworzenie wspólnoty wszystkich muzułmanów (*ummah*). Na tej podstawie okres obu kadencji Mahmuda Ahmadineżada można określić mianem fal idealizmu, choć część z jego inicjatyw miała także pragmatyczny charakter. Podstawowe pytanie badawcze dotyczy tego czy prezydentura Hassana Rouhaniego oznacza kontynuację czy też zmianę polityki zagranicznej. Czy bieżąca polityka zagraniczna Iranu wobec państw arabskich w Zatoce Perskiej jest

idealistyczna czy też realistyczna? Główne założenie stanowi twierdzenie, iż w obecnej sytuacji jakiegokolwiek zbliżenie arabsko-irańskie w regionie Zatoki Perskiej nie będzie możliwe bez uprzedniej normalizacji stosunków pomiędzy Iranem a państwami zachodnimi, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Stanów Zjednoczonych.