



## Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

### Return of Defensive Realists in Tehran

Nationalism has greatly shaped debates in Iran on what role the country should assume in the Middle East and in the world. How have these debates evolved under President Hassan Rouhani's administration over the past two years? How do they differ from the debates that occurred during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency? These questions were addressed by Farideh Farhi, Affiliate Graduate of Faculty, University of Hawaii at Manoa at a Rising Powers Initiative conference on "Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: A Resurgence of Nationalism?" held this winter at GWU. The conference reconvened authors to update their findings in the book *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan, and Russia* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

#### Undercurrents in Iranian Politics

The 1979 revolution weighs heavily in influencing Iran's foreign policy debates and nationalism. Regardless of leadership change, several undercurrents remain constant in Iranian politics. The first undercurrent is the fear of external manipulation of domestic cleavages to undermine the theocratic regime. Though Iran was never colonized, it has been subject to external powers' intervention in internal affairs. The second undercurrent shaping Iranian politics, particularly post-revolution, is Iran's sense of loneliness and isolation. Despite its regional power status, Iran does not possess strategic allies. This is important particularly in the Middle East, where every country is very clear on where

it stands. This loneliness has led to a sense of insecurity for Iran in a region where conflict is rife. Efforts by superpowers to contain Iran constitute another undercurrent in Iran. While Iran has attempted to engage in the global economy as an oil exporter, the United States and other Western powers have prevented Iran from integrating into the global economy and partake in the institutions governing it, largely due to fear of Iran's rise as an aspiring power in the region and its nuclear power status. These factors contribute to and shape Iranian nationalism which in turn shapes Iranian foreign policy debates.

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### **2013 Elections: Return of the Defensive Realists**

With regard to Iran's current foreign policy debates, the 2013 elections served as a pivotal moment; it marked the comeback of the defensive realist camp, that had been at the helm of Iran's foreign policy and security prior to Ahmadinejad's 2009 election. While President Rouhani ultimately was seen as a candidate of moderation and reform, almost all of the presidential candidates would have brought Iran toward the center, a sign that people were ready to move on from the polarizing politics that occurred after the 2009 elections and harsh crackdown that followed. Rouhani promised pushbacks against a securitized environment and economic improvements. He also explicitly linked Iran's economic issues with its foreign policy, discussing Iran's nuclear centrifuges as both an economic and foreign policy issue in an unprecedentedly frank manner.

How has Rouhani fared since the elections? In practice, the Rouhani team differs little from the Ahmadienijad administration in terms of their emphasis on nationalism, because in a sense, every post-revolution group in Iran is nationalist. The regime draws strength from a strong post-revolutionary insistence on sovereignty, "national honor," and a refusal to acquiesce to the demands of "arrogant and meddling powers," as referred to in Iranian discourse. Rather, the difference in the new administration is mostly tactical- instead of talking about foreign

enemies, the new team talks about domestic reconciliation and support as the main source of strength in Iran's foreign and security policy. This in turn has affected Iran's views and posture on important issues concerning its regional role and relations with the United States.

### **Regional Ambitions**

In terms of regional ambitions, the Rouhani team -which Farhi terms as defensive realists-differs from the Ahmadenijad team -or offensive realists- in that they do not view the entire Middle East region as an important playground. Rather, the focus is more on what could be considered Iran's civilizational sphere of influence- the Persian Gulf, South Asia, and Southwest Asia. The rise of ISIS in the past year has led Iran to feel vindicated in terms of the key role it can play in bringing about security, while also forcing outside players that have been engaged in the containment of Iran to understand the important role Iran can play. Nonetheless, neighboring states have observed Iran warily, fearing that Tehran's hegemonic aspirations would be unleashed if the U.S. abandons its containment policy in the region.

### **U.S.-Iran Relations**

In dealing with the United States, the Rouhani administration has gone aggressively after a nuclear deal, based on the argument that Iran's regional ambitions cannot be fulfilled without resolving its thorny relationship with Washington. Offensive realists and many other hardliners in Iran have long argued that the United States will never come to terms with the Islamic republic, and therefore, Iran's prominence in the region has to come through resistance and the establishment of policies that would show America's weakness in the region. Both offensive and defensive realists agree that the United States is in decline in the Middle East; however, defensive realists argue that despite its relative decline, Washington still has enough power to sanction Iran to the extent that it already has. Thus, defensive realists accept the fact that American influence in the region remains strong and will continue for some time, and argue for "dealing" with the United States in a non-confrontational manner.

### **Conclusion**

Iran's hardliners remain skeptical that the United States will agree to come to terms with a nuclear Iran. If the talks ultimately succeed however, normalization of relations with Iran will not come about immediately. In the same way that the American Revolution framed foreign policy debates in the United States for

many years, the nationalistic undercurrents driving the debate and discourse concerning Iranian foreign policy and worldviews are unlikely to dissipate any time soon. Moreover, the outcomes of Iran's 2016 elections have the potential to dramatically alter the course of Iran's foreign policy debates in the same way that the current administration's regional and global posture constitutes a dramatic departure from the Ahmadenijad years. The only permanent reality in Iran is that contested politics are here to stay, with nationalism at its helm.

*By Winnie Nham, Research Manager, Rising Powers Initiative, GWU*

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### ***About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies***

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