

Post-election Iran and Syria: Continuity or Change?

Hamidreza Azizi
SWP

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Editor

Abdulla Ibrahim, Project Lead
Researcher

Author

Hamidreza Azizi

Hamidreza Azizi, PhD, is an Alexander von Humboldt fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin. He was an assistant professor of regional studies at Shahid Beheshti University (2016-2020) and a guest lecturer at the department of regional studies at the University of Tehran (2016-2018).

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Introduction

On June 18, conservative cleric Ebrahim Raisi won Iran's presidential election to succeed moderate President Hassan Rouhani. For many, his victory came amid public dissatisfaction with the dire economic and political situation, along with widespread disqualification of reformist and moderate candidates, which significantly reduced voter turnout. Traditionally, lower turnout in Iranian elections means the victory of conservative or so-called 'hardline' figures and so Raisi's victory was in many ways following a theme. However, even though the election and its outcome indicate a significant shift in Iran's domestic politics toward more authoritarianism, its impacts on foreign policy, including Iran's strategy in Syria, will be less tangible. Over the past several years, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has almost completely dominated Iran's regional policy. At the same time, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei openly seeks to limit the role of the president in foreign policy. Consequently, this means that Iran's policy in Syria in the post-election period will be more about continuity than about change.

Syria in Iran's foreign policy

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, when Iran decided to directly intervene in the Arab country, its primary goal was to prevent the fall of its ally – President Bashar al-Assad – and to prevent a potential change in the regional balance of power to the detriment of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis. In other words, Iran was pursuing a fundamentally reactive strategy at the time. Ten years on, Iran's two original goals have been realized, and Bashar al-Assad, with the support of his Iranian and Russian allies, has been able to overcome the risk of collapse. This has led Iran to gradually hone a more active strategy. Currently, this plan has three main aspects: geopolitical, economic, and political. In the geopolitical arena, Iran seeks to establish a permanent sphere of influence in southern and southeastern Syria while simultaneously pressuring the United States to withdraw from the country. Iran has not only intensified recruitment from among the Deir ez-Zor tribes, but has also occasionally used them to target US interests. This sphere of influence also allows Iran to realize its ambitions to establish a potential new front against Israel. In fact, Iran's most important geopolitical goal in Syria is to complete the chain of "resistance forces" around Israel. In the economic field, Iran wants to make Syria the center of its regional economic plans by establishing land and maritime transit routes to the Mediterranean. Iran also eyes economic benefits from participating in Syria's post-war economic reconstruction, especially in the event of the revival of the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) and the lifting of US sanctions. Finally, in the political field, Iran is willing to continue cooperating with Russia and Turkey within the Astana format while at the same time playing a role in different UN-led initiatives to resolve the Syrian crisis. Iran's primary goal in this field is to introduce itself as an effective and indispensable actor whose contribution is essential to resolving regional crises.

A new Iranian president: Continuity of change in Syria?

Theoretically, the president in Iran plays a role in the foreign policy-making process in two main ways. On the one hand, the president is the one who appoints the foreign minister. Therefore, the Foreign Ministry is essentially subject to the general approaches and orientation of the ruling administration. Second, the president is the chairman of the Supreme National

Security Council (SNSC), the highest decision-making body in the matters of foreign policy, defense, and security affairs. In recent years, however, the power of the president and the Foreign Ministry, in foreign policy-making in general and in regional policy in particular, has been declining. Prior to the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, the Iranian administration was generally believed to play a decisive role in the nuclear file and relations with the West, while regional policy was controlled mainly by the IRGC or the military-security complex in general. However, the failed experience of the JCPOA significantly strengthened the hard liners' position in Iranian politics. As a result, even on the nuclear issue, the role of the Foreign Ministry seems to have diminished, and the SNSC currently conducts policy coordination under the Supreme Leader's direct supervision. In fact, the administration and the president have lost control over foreign policy to non-elected bodies to the extent that Khamenei explicitly urged the presidential candidates not to focus on this topic in the electoral campaigns.

As far as Syria is concerned, the role of the Iranian administration in policy-making and policy implementation is close to zero. This is what Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif explicitly mentioned in an interview in January. In another interview, which was leaked to the media against his will, Zarif stated that the IRGC directs Iran's policy in Syria without coordination with the Foreign Ministry. Therefore, it came as little surprise that foreign policy was discussed only marginally in the electoral debates, covering mainly the JCPOA and relations with the West. None of the candidates, neither in the debates nor in the election campaigns, mentioned Syria and Iran's policy toward the Syrian crisis. As such, Iran's strategy in Syria is expected to remain unchanged, regardless of the fact that a hardline president is replacing a moderate. Meanwhile, the role of the Foreign Ministry, as in the past, will be limited to implementing decisions made at higher levels of the Iranian government within diplomatic frameworks such as the Astana Format. In other words, the Iranian Foreign Ministry will have only a marginal role, if any, in shaping the country's Syria strategy.

The JCPOA revival and Iran's policy in Syria

During the election debates, the presidential candidates briefly expressed their views on Iran's nuclear program and the revival of the JCPOA. What was most interesting was that even hardline candidates, including President-elect Ebrahim Raisi and former SNSC Secretary Saeed Jalili, who were known as staunch critics of the JCPOA, acknowledged the need to revive the agreement for the sanctions to be lifted. As mentioned before, this is mainly due to the fact that decision-making on the nuclear issue is now beyond the control of the president and Foreign Ministry. As such, the candidates were merely expressing the Iranian government's desire, at this stage, to try and lift the sanctions via negotiations. Nevertheless, at the same time, it shows that different political factions, from reformists to hardliners, have accepted the realities on the ground and know that improving Iran's deteriorating economic situation will not be possible as long as the sanctions are in place. However, when it comes to the possibility of follow-up negotiations with Washington on other issues, there is no such consensus among those groups. While the two reformist and moderate candidates, Mohsen Mehralizadeh and Abdolnaser Hemmati, stressed the need for continued diplomacy and normalization of relations with the West, other candidates insisted that the world is bigger than the United States and Iran could pursue its interests by expanding ties with its neighbors and non-Western powers. This, in turn, underscores Khamenei's steadfast stance that negotiations

with the United States are not and will not be permitted except on the nuclear issue. The same position prevented Rouhani from building upon the 2015 nuclear deal to reach a more comprehensive agreement with Washington. As such, even if one of the non-hardline candidates had won the election, the Islamic Republic's basic position would have still been to reject negotiations with the US on its missile program or regional issues.

However, this does not mean that the window of regional diplomacy with Iran is completely closed as international relations for Tehran are still very important. Indeed, the same hardline camp and the Supreme Leader himself emphasized the need to establish friendly relations with neighboring countries. It should be noted that the recent Iraqi-mediated talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia were conducted by the SNSC, not the Foreign Ministry. This means that at the highest level of the Iranian government, there is a serious will to normalize relations with Riyadh. If the talks make progress, Tehran and Riyadh can be expected to reach a comprehensive framework in which the issues of Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon could be discussed alongside each other. Indeed, such a framework would be a rather comprehensive *modus vivendi* in which Iran, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and its allies, on the other, recognize and respect each other's influence and interests in the four countries. In this case, Iran could be expected to reduce its direct military presence in Syria and, in exchange, ask the other parties not to undermine its economic plans in the country. However, it would be more challenging to reach an understanding on Iran's proxies in Syria, as it is unrealistic to expect that Tehran would simply agree to withdraw or disband those groups. The current trend suggests that Iran is likely to move toward integrating its proxies into the Syrian armed forces, but in such a way that their autonomy and loyalty to Iran remain more or less intact.

Scenarios for Iran's policy in Syria

Based on the abovementioned facts, the new Iranian president will not be able to alter general approaches and strategies in Iran's foreign policy. Indeed, this does not mean that the Foreign Ministry will have no role in determining how those strategies could be best implemented. What is certain at the moment is that the Islamic Republic as a whole wants to revive the JCPOA, confine diplomacy with the West to the nuclear issue, and, at the same time, pursue direct diplomacy with its Arab neighbors. As such, there are two conceivable scenarios for the future of Iran's foreign policy, each of which could have different implications for Iran's Syria strategy. Those scenarios depend on whether or not the ongoing negotiations to revive the JCPOA will be successful.

If, as expected, Iran and the world powers reach a successful outcome in the Vienna talks, it could affect Iran's role in Syria in two ways. On the one hand, Iran is expected to use part of the economic benefits of the sanctions removal to consolidate its influence in Syria. This would be both in the form of continued financial support for proxy groups and investment in Syria's economy and infrastructure. But on the other hand, Tehran is likely to keep tensions with the US low across the region, including in Syria, to prevent the JCPOA from falling apart once again. Moreover, the JCPOA revival could also give Iran more confidence in continuing diplomatic engagement with Arab states, as Tehran would no longer be perceived to be in a weak international position.

But if the JCPOA talks fail, the military and security approach to Iran's foreign policy may prevail, bringing about a new wave of aggression throughout the region. In this case, Tehran might, for example, try to extend the battlefield of its proxy confrontation with the US from Iraq to Syria, which in turn would jeopardize the prospect of stability in Syria. Meanwhile, although the continuation of sanctions would decrease potential financial resources available to Iran, the same security approach would cause the Islamic Republic not to reduce its support for proxy groups – as was the case during Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign. If the choice is between economy and security, Iran will most probably prefer to delay its participation in Syria's economic reconstruction but not to reduce its military spending in Syria. In this case, even Iran's political role in Syria will once again be largely overshadowed by its military considerations.