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DOMESTIC FACTORS IN THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT:

CANADIAN ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES WITH IRAN

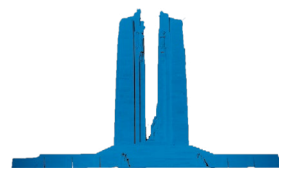
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DOMESTIC FACTORS IN THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT:

CANADIAN ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES WITH IRAN

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INTRODUCTION

Nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism are listed as two of the greatest threats facing the world today.¹ History has shown that nuclear proliferation is not the result of any sole factor and cannot be described by one deterministic theory; it is a state's response to a complex combination of factors and events. It cannot be restricted to the supply-side of technology and economics versus the demand-side of security arguments. A state's nuclear program is delicately intertwined with domestic politics, ranging from the political elite to the citizens. To understand a country's desire to pursue nuclear capabilities, the state can no longer be seen as a "black box" with internal decisions being irrelevant; policy-makers must consider domestic factors when advising on foreign policy. Furthermore, a state's response to a potential proliferator is driven by its own domestic politics which dictates its foreign policy strategies and tools.

Speculations about the true nature of the Iranian nuclear program have been in the international limelight for over a decade, with Iran repeatedly responding to international efforts of coercive diplomacy with defiance. The past policies targeting the Iranian nuclear program failed primarily because they did not address domestic dynamics in the regime; the nuclear crisis was framed instead around Western beliefs and values. When Iran's response to coercive diplomacy did not conform to Western expectations, assumptions of the militaristic nature of the nuclear program abounded and overshadowed policies. As a theocracy in a region that is characterized by instability and hostile relations between neighbours, Iran's behaviour is best understood through examining domestic factors.

The historic nuclear agreement between Iran, the European Union, and the Permanent 5+1 (P5+1) – the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China, plus Germany – on 14 July 2015 was successful as it adequately addressed Iranian domestic issues and provided the possibility of remission from sanctions for Iran. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as it is officially called, opens the door for a rapprochement with the West and presents an opportunity for Canada to engage bilaterally with the Iranian government on its record of human rights abuses and its regional role, as well as lay the foundations for economic opportunities and securing Canadian strategic interests.²

How does the recognition of the importance of domestic factors in Iran's nuclear program affect Canadian engagement strategies? In this paper I make two arguments. First, that acknowledging domestic factors of threat perception and foreign policy executive (FPE) cohesion in a country considering the acquisition of a nuclear arsenal allows external actors – such as a foreign state – to craft relevant and appropriate policy responses. This recognition allows the state to employ a correct balance of "carrot-and-stick" tactics and responses, such as security guarantees, engaging in negotiations, or diplomatic coercion. Secondly, Canada should adapt to a changing international environment by recognizing the



opportunity presented by the nuclear deal and the current Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and enter into bilateral security and economic relationships with Iran.

This paper will first provide a brief overview of the debates that surround proliferation, discussing the importance of domestic factors in a country's nuclear program, followed by a theoretical framework and a short case study of Iran that examines its responses to coercive diplomacy in 2006, 2010, and 2013. Exploring Canada's policy of controlled engagement towards Iran and the influence of Canada's relationship with Israel during the Harper administration will lead to recommendations for a rapprochement with Iran under the current government following the nuclear deal.

FACTORS THAT AFFECT PROLIFERATION

Research is divided over whether it is the supply-side of technological and economic capabilities, or the demand-side of international security, domestic politics, and norms, that ultimately determines nuclear proliferation.³ Political scientists have long attributed the cause of proliferation to national insecurity. Scott Sagan's influential article "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," examined the demand-side analysis of nuclear proliferation. Sagan went beyond the realist explanation of proliferation being caused by national insecurity, maintaining that nuclear weapons are "political objects" and "international normative symbols." Sagan created separate models for security, domestic politics, and norms to showcase the varying factors that affect nuclear proliferation.⁴

The non-proliferation regime has been both championed and criticized for its role, or lack thereof, in proliferation. For example, Amir Azaran views the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime, as effective insofar as it provides a setting for bargaining.⁵ Under the NPT, nuclear weapon states (NWS) and non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) have distinct obligations pertaining to non-proliferation; arguably Article IV is the most important, by giving NNWS the "inalienable right" to produce nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.⁶ Azaran criticizes the NPT for its general terms that are open to interpretation, which could allow for a NNWS to develop nuclear weapons capabilities while continuing to adhere to its Treaty obligations.⁷

There has been the tendency to solely examine the impact of international factors on a country's nuclear policy. The focus on the ineffectiveness of sanctions, the inequality entrenched in the NPT, and the importance of security has created a significant gap in literature, as scholars have not delved into the "black box" of domestic politics to understand *why* a country responds a certain way to international factors. Key domestic factors include the fluctuating variables of threat perception, combining national security and threats to the country's nuclear infrastructure, and FPE cohesion, which is the unity of the



political elite that affect the state's response to coercive diplomacy. Threats to a country's nuclear program are a crucial factor. Nuclear energy is often viewed as a non-negotiable right to NNWS under the NPT, by having forfeited the ability to pursue nuclear weapon capabilities.⁸

Although it can be argued that many states face varying degrees of similar security issues, domestic factors are a reflection of the FPE's perception of international factors. These are subsequently displayed in the nuclear program policies of the state and influence whether a state will comply with the non-proliferation regime.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND THE CASE OF IRAN

While economic sanctions, UN Security Council Resolutions, and diplomatic efforts are all salient conditions, domestic factors are what largely determine a country's policy decision of compliance or non-compliance. Yet there remains continuing uncertainty on the degree to which security versus prestige has an impact on a country's pursuit of nuclear weapons, as well as a lack of a deterministic theory to explain what leads a state to proliferation. For this reason, my argument will adopt a theoretical framework that combines aspects of neoclassical realism, liberal pluralism, and social constructivism theories in an attempt to explain the influence of domestic factors on a country's nuclear policy. The framework has an independent variable of coercive diplomatic tactics that interact with the two intervening domestic-level variables – threat perception and FPE cohesion – with eight possible outcomes of compliance, non-compliance, and indeterminate, depending on the level of cohesion of the FPE for the support of the nuclear program.

The presidential election of the hardline conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 and again in 2009 caused Iran to return to its revolutionary roots, increasing tensions between Iran and the international community. Unlike the previous administration, which had shown itself willing to pursue negotiations of its nuclear program,⁹ Ahmadinejad adopted an aggressive stance towards the international community when its nuclear program was threatened, announcing its resistance to halting uranium enrichment due to its "inalienable right" to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes under the NPT.¹⁰ Between 2006 and 2013, the UN Security Council adopted four Resolutions condemning the Iranian nuclear program and their progress with uranium enrichment, with the United States, the European Union, and other actors adopting unilateral sanctions against the regime.¹¹ Due to the international community's application of coercive diplomacy, including the risk of military action that jeopardized Iran's nuclear program and the regime, threat perception and FPE cohesion for the continuation of the nuclear program were high, resulting in non-compliance as the Iranian nuclear infrastructure progressed.



A watershed moment for the Iranian nuclear program took place on 14 June 2013, when the moderate Hassan Rouhani was elected president. Following his inauguration, President Rouhani called for “more serious and explicit negotiations” between Iran and the P5+1 regarding Iran’s nuclear program. Although he maintained that Iran would not abandon its uranium enrichment activities, Rouhani promised increased transparency regarding Iranian nuclear activities,¹² making a “win-win” settlement possible and eventually paving the way for the nuclear agreement in July 2015.¹³ Coercive diplomacy significantly declined and Tehran was promised relief from sanctions with its compliance. As a result, Iranian threat perception was reduced and the FPE agreed to comply with the international community. The nuclear deal between the P5+1, EU, and Iran ended two years of fruitful negotiations surrounding Iran’s nuclear program and succeeded in blocking Iran’s path to nuclear weapons for the next decade.¹⁴ However, President Rouhani represents a window of opportunity, in which further engagement with Iran could direct it on the path of long-term compliance.

Iran’s nuclear strategy can be described as nuclear hedging, defined by Ariel Levite as “a national strategy of maintaining, or at least appearing to maintain, a viable option for the relatively rapid acquisition of nuclear weapons, based on an indigenous technical capacity to produce them within a relatively short time frame ranging from several weeks to a few years.”¹⁵ Through the JCPOA, the international community has recognized Iran’s strategy of hedging. Although entailing a considerable reduction in enrichment capabilities, Iran has the tacit knowledge and technology for nuclear reversal.¹⁶ This has set a dangerous precedent for states that are considering pursuit of a nuclear arsenal. With nuclear hedging, a state remains close to the threshold of nuclear capabilities but does not cross the line that would incur reprisal from the international community for violating the non-proliferation regime.¹⁷

Iranian domestic politics are very complex and formed by coalitions of similar ideologies, some of which drive Iran’s perceived desire to acquire nuclear weapons capability.¹⁸ Although President Rouhani is the face of the new Iranian regime, Supreme Leader Khamenei is the decision-maker, with the final say in all matters. As Wyn Bowen and Matthew Moran remark, “a number of administrations have come and gone since the nuclear crisis began, but the Supreme Leader has remained the constant presence at the top of the regime.”¹⁹ By examining the domestic politics and ideologies of the ruling political authorities of Iran and their responses to international coercive diplomacy efforts, one can discern a plausible explanation of the regime’s actions that have since been disregarded. The past policies targeting the Iranian regime failed because they did not address the domestic dynamics influencing nuclear policy. Moving forward, the recognition of domestic factors, particularly of threat perception, allows for Canadian policy-makers to better understand Iranian behaviour, and presents the opportunity for new economic and strategic possibilities in Iran and the Middle East.



CANADA, IRAN, AND THE CONTROLLED ENGAGEMENT POLICY

For the past two decades, Canada has maintained a “controlled engagement” policy with Iran, which was further limited in 2003 to the discussion of human rights abuses, the nuclear program, and Iran’s regional role²⁰ following the murder of Iranian-Canadian journalist Zahra Kazemi in Iran.²¹ After the election of Prime Minister Harper in 2006, bilateral ties between Canada and Iran deteriorated as the government adopted an “aggressive stance,”²² before they were severed in 2012, with the Conservative government stating that Iran is the “greatest threat to international peace and security in the world today.”²³ Prime Minister Stephen Harper did not hide his disdain for the Iranian authorities, blaming the breakdown of bilateral relations on the regime’s brutish behaviour.²⁴

Under the Harper government’s “marginalized approach” towards Iran, Canada ultimately forfeited its ability to influence and engage with the country following the signing of the nuclear deal.²⁵ Thomas Juneau remarks that the Conservative government’s approach to Iran was “based on a flawed premise...had a marginal impact, and...resulted in few measurable benefits.”²⁶ The Canadian government pursued an outdated posture based on an assumption of the regime’s irrationality, based on remarks and behaviours that took place during Ahmadinejad’s tenure. However, the current moderate Iranian president Rouhani, who is known as the “sheikh of diplomacy”²⁷ for his pivotal role as Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator from 2003 to 2005, is well equipped for cooperation with the international community and has announced numerous times that he is interested in a partnership with the West.²⁸

On 16 January 2016, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran has complied with the nuclear deal, causing sanctions by the United Nations, United States, and the European Union to be lifted.²⁹ In so doing, Iran was welcomed back into the global economy. Following the IAEA’s confirmation of compliance, Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion remarked that unilateral sanctions targeting Iran would be removed “in a speedy fashion” and that Canada would work to reopen the embassy in Tehran.³⁰ As Minister Dion remarked, the previous approach “is not good for the people of Iran, it is not good for the promotion of human rights, it is not good for our strategic interests in the region, it is not good for Israel. It is good for nobody. We will change this policy.”³¹ The actions under the new Liberal government signal a thawing in relations and a recognition on the importance of diplomatic ties with an “important player” in the Middle East.

It is commonly argued that Iran was pursuing a nuclear weapons capability for the purpose of deterrence, due to the Middle East’s threat environment and the nuclear arsenals of Iran’s potential adversaries, such as the United States and Israel. However, a timeline of the Iranian nuclear program does not hold up to the expectations under the security hypothesis as the program “waxed and waned.”³² The regime is



focused on survival and is rational, but not in the Western sense of rational.³³ The complexity of the domestic politics of the regime, combined with its guiding Islamic principle and its position as the sole theocracy surrounded by unfriendly neighbours, causes Iran to view the world through a significantly different lens. Domestic factors, especially threat perception, significantly influence the Iranian regime's reaction to external policy and actions.

Canada and Israel

In 2012, Canada's then Minister of Foreign Affairs John Baird stated that "Israel has no greater friend in the world today than Canada. ... Our strong support for Israel is not about politics at home, and certainly not about winning popularity contests at the United Nations."³⁴ In January 2015, Canada reiterated its friendship with Israel with the signing of the Joint Declaration of Solidarity and Friendship, signaling the government's commitment to strengthen bilateral ties.³⁵ Driven by its values-based foreign policy and Israel's democratic values,³⁶ the Conservative government unequivocally supported the existence of Israel and championed its right to "live in peace and security." Israel held the place of honour at the "core of the [Canadian] Middle East policy,"³⁷ much to the disgruntlement of its Arab neighbours.

The Harper government displayed "moral leadership" in its support of Israel,³⁸ regardless of the fact that Canada's pro-Israel stance discredited its influence on the world stage and its activity in multilateral institution, such as the UN, with Harper blaming the loss of the Security Council seat in 2010 on Canada's support of Israel.³⁹ However, the stark manner that the government portrayed its stance with Israel as the "centerpiece" of foreign policy affected its influence, especially at a time when its allies criticized the country.⁴⁰ Canada's special friendship with Israel was one of the major reasons that the Conservative government ended diplomatic relations with Iran in 2012, particularly the Iranian regime's continued threats to Israel.⁴¹

However, Stephen Harper is no longer Prime Minister, signalling a potential change in Canada's behaviour towards the Middle East. Prime Minister Trudeau spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu following the Canadian election, and told him that "there would be a shift in tone, but Canada would continue to be a friend of Israel's." However, Canada's lifting of sanctions and re-establishing diplomatic ties with Iran may be a thorn in bilateral relations.⁴² Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has openly expressed his distrust of the Iranian regime and the "stunning historic mistake" of the nuclear deal.⁴³

Notwithstanding the fact that Iran is an adversary of Israel, it is common knowledge that Israel has a monopoly of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. Although Israel has never confirmed its arsenal and it



is not a signatory of the NPT, it is estimated that through a clandestine program Israel possesses around eighty nuclear weapons.⁴⁴ While Israel claims that a nuclear Iran would threaten the existence of Israel and the stability of the Middle East, this threat is unfounded based on the lack of economic capacity and nuclear infrastructure in other Middle Eastern states, to say nothing of Israel's purported second-strike capability owing to its submarine fleet.⁴⁵

President Rouhani's plan to "reintegrate Iran with the international community" allows Canada the chance to establish dialogue with Iran as the Iranian political environment changes.⁴⁶ The change in the political atmosphere of Iran following the election of Rouhani offers an opportunity for the Canadian government to grasp the moment of change as Iran looks to halt impending domestic unrest. In June 2015, just before the JCPOA was signed, Justin Trudeau stated that he would repair relations with Iran.⁴⁷ Canada is now aligning with its allies as it lifts sanctions and prepares to re-engage diplomatically with Iran.⁴⁸ Engaging in dialogue with Iran and repairing diplomatic ties is not a signal of political support; it offers channels for communication to engage with Iran on other significant issues, such as its human rights records and role in the Middle East.⁴⁹

Policy Recommendations

Moving forward, it is important for Canadian policy-makers to understand the regime's behaviour and actions rather than forming opinions based on Western assumptions and remarks made by Iran's adversaries. With a plan to open the Canadian embassy in Tehran, Trudeau has recognized Iran's crucial role in the Middle East and the benefits presented by a partnership with the country. Iran's role in combatting ISIS, its relationship with Bashar al-Assad and influence in Syria, its affiliations with terrorist groups, and Iran's part in the stability of the Middle East have important strategic implications for Canada.⁵⁰ These shared interests between Canada and Iran requires negotiations on "equal footing" to ensure constructive dialogue and mutual gains.⁵¹

Although the Iranian regime has a history of deceit about their nuclear program, the Iranian threat has been grossly exaggerated. Iran's economy and infrastructure have been handicapped from thirty years of sanctions and hostilities in the region, resulting in their reactive security posture and desire for defensive measures.⁵² Furthermore, in the past couple years, Iran has made no move to violate negotiations of its nuclear program. It appears that under Rouhani's leadership, the regime is attempting to turn over a new leaf. However, Western governments view Iranian actions through a liberal democratic lens and are quick to dismiss their own history of suspect actions, casting Iran as a nefarious regime. The Conservative government, referring to its moral responsibilities, maintained a values-based approach to justify its policy against the Iranian regime, citing its record of human rights abuses and lack of democratic principles.



This raises the question of the values that actually influenced Canadian foreign policies under the previous administration, considering relations with countries that are on par with Iran for poor human rights records, such as China and Saudi Arabia.⁵³

Even though change in Iran will be gradual, Canada only stands to benefit from new relations with Iran, both strategically and economically.⁵⁴ The lifting of sanctions by the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States will allow the Iranian economy to grow significantly and will be attractive to international companies for future development and investment.⁵⁵ The Iranian government is interested in growing the economy after three decades of crippling sanctions to stave off domestic unrest and public dissatisfaction with the regime.⁵⁶ The Iranian economy offers numerous economic opportunities to Canadian businesses in various sectors, such as oil, aerospace, and medical technologies that are able to utilize Iran's nuclear energy for medical purposes.⁵⁷

Even though Canadians do not need Iranian oil, which will flood the market following the lifting of sanctions against the regime, Iranian oil will have a significant impact on Canadian domestic oil production and exports. In 2014, Iran produced 3.4 million barrels of oil per day, compared to Canada's production of 4.3 million barrels. However, the sanctions of 2012 decreased Iranian oil output by 1 million barrels a day. Just the potential for the lifting of sanctions caused oil prices to plummet in late 2015, directly affecting Canada's oil-dependent economy, and will continue to do so once Iran's oil production increases.⁵⁸

Conclusion

In order to be able to craft relevant policy and appropriate responses, it is imperative that the Canadian government look to the domestic environment of Iran to better understand what drives the regime's behaviour and actions. Domestic and international factors are not the same and have dramatically different outcomes. When designing diplomatic tools for Iran, Canadian policy-makers will need to focus on domestic factors to create relevant policy; the recognition of domestic factors will prepare the Canadian government for any Iranian actions of non-compliance in the future and the ability to stave it off. Similar to Canada, the Iranian government is driven by threat perception, whether it is threats to territorial assets or the regime, the population, or prestige on the international stage. Iran has faced crippling sanctions for decades that have hindered its infrastructure and development and has the potential for extreme domestic unrest if the situation is not remedied.

Although the nuclear deal is not perfect, the nuclear agreement between the P5+1, the EU, and Iran provides support for the path of compliance that Iran has been on under the guidance of President Rouhani. The deal has demonstrated the value of negotiations and that for diplomacy to be effective, compromises



must be made. The concessions that Iran has made in this deal demonstrate its willingness to forfeit nuclear weapons capabilities, if such were its ambition, and to only maintain the uranium enrichment capabilities that could support an energy program. By imposing strict guidelines for inspections by the IAEA and repercussions for any act of non-compliance, the deal addresses fears of the international community of Iran's nuclear ambitions by preventing it from reaching nuclear weapons capabilities for at least another decade.⁵⁹

Even though the international community must wait to see how the implementation of nuclear agreement plays out in the next decade, Canada's ending of sanctions and restoring relations with Iran is an admirable start.⁶⁰ Canada should seize the opportunity presented by the nuclear deal to engage with Iran before the chance is gone, whether by working with allies and decreasing hostility between Iran and the West, or recognizing the importance of Iran's role in the Middle East and engaging bilaterally. With this deal, Rouhani has placed Iran's future in the palms of the international system as any act of non-compliance would result in severe repercussions that would further isolate the regime. Moving forward, it is a two-way street for future engagement strategies that depends on Canadian actions as much as Iran. It is essential that the two countries work on establishing a level of trust and respect, regardless of the differences between Canada and Iran.

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