

# Decision Making in Iran's Foreign Policy: A Heuristic Approach

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*The Islamic Republic of Iran has recently constructed a unique administrative apparatus that blends parallel lines of deliberation from both its religious hierarchy and its parliamentary democracy. For foreign policy and international relations, the decision-making process brings to bear the most important administrative bodies of both the government and the religious hierarchy. These different bodies help to comprise a system of checks and balances for some of the more pivotal levels in the deliberative process, i.e. the Foreign Ministry, the High Council for National Security (HCNS), the Presidency, and the Supreme Leader. We also see individual decision makers as agent-centered factionalism, which is an informal, though important part of the process.*

## **I. Introduction**

The general nature of the power structure in the Islamic Republic of Iran is clear, but the intricacies are difficult to comprehend. On the one hand, part of the Iran's philosophy of governance has much in common with that of other nations. Iran does have legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government. On the other hand, political processes in Iran have a different hierarchical structure, and this is what the current paper will expand upon.

## **II. Formal Structure of a Theocratic Democracy**

In Iran's parliamentary democracy, 290 representatives of Parliament are elected for four-year terms. The President is elected by the people every four years, and is restricted to no more than two terms in office. As chief executive, the President is responsible for the day-to-day running of the country. The President also nominates 22 ministers, who need to be confirmed by the Parliament, and who are directly responsible to the Parliament.

What is different and unique about Iran's system of governance is the theocratic overlay. 86 Clerics are elected by the people as Members of the Expert Assembly for eight years. In turn, this body selects the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, and also monitors the Leader's performance. The Supreme Leader appoints the Head of the Judiciary, who oversees ordinary (for the citizenry), revolutionary, and military courts. Finally, the Supreme Leader also commands the armed forces.

Apart from the Supreme Leader and Expert Assembly, there is also the Guardian Council, which evaluates the compatibility of legislative acts of Parliament with the laws of Islam. It also interprets the constitution, and monitors the presidential, parliamentary and the Expert Assembly elections.

The Expediency Council was created under a new supplementary constitution that was ratified in 1988. All 38 members of this body, from different Iranian political

factions and parties,<sup>1</sup> are appointed by the Supreme Leader.<sup>2</sup> The responsibilities of the Council include (1) breaking stalemates between Parliament and the Guardian Council, (2) advising the Supreme Leader, and (3) proposing guidelines for the overall policy of the Islamic Republic.

The High Council for National Security (HCNS) was also created under the 1988 supplementary constitution. The Iranian President heads the HCNS, which integrates the institutions of power. The HCNS brings together (1) two representatives from the Supreme Leadership, (2) the heads of the three branches of government (the Speaker of Parliament, the Head of the Judiciary, and the President) and (3) the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Intelligence, Defence, and the Commanders of the Regular and Revolutionary Military sections. The HCNS formulates the foreign, military, and security policies of Iran. All actions of the HCNS that are confirmed by the Iranian Leader will be carried into effect. Diagram 1 shows major parts of Iran's Islamic Republic system.

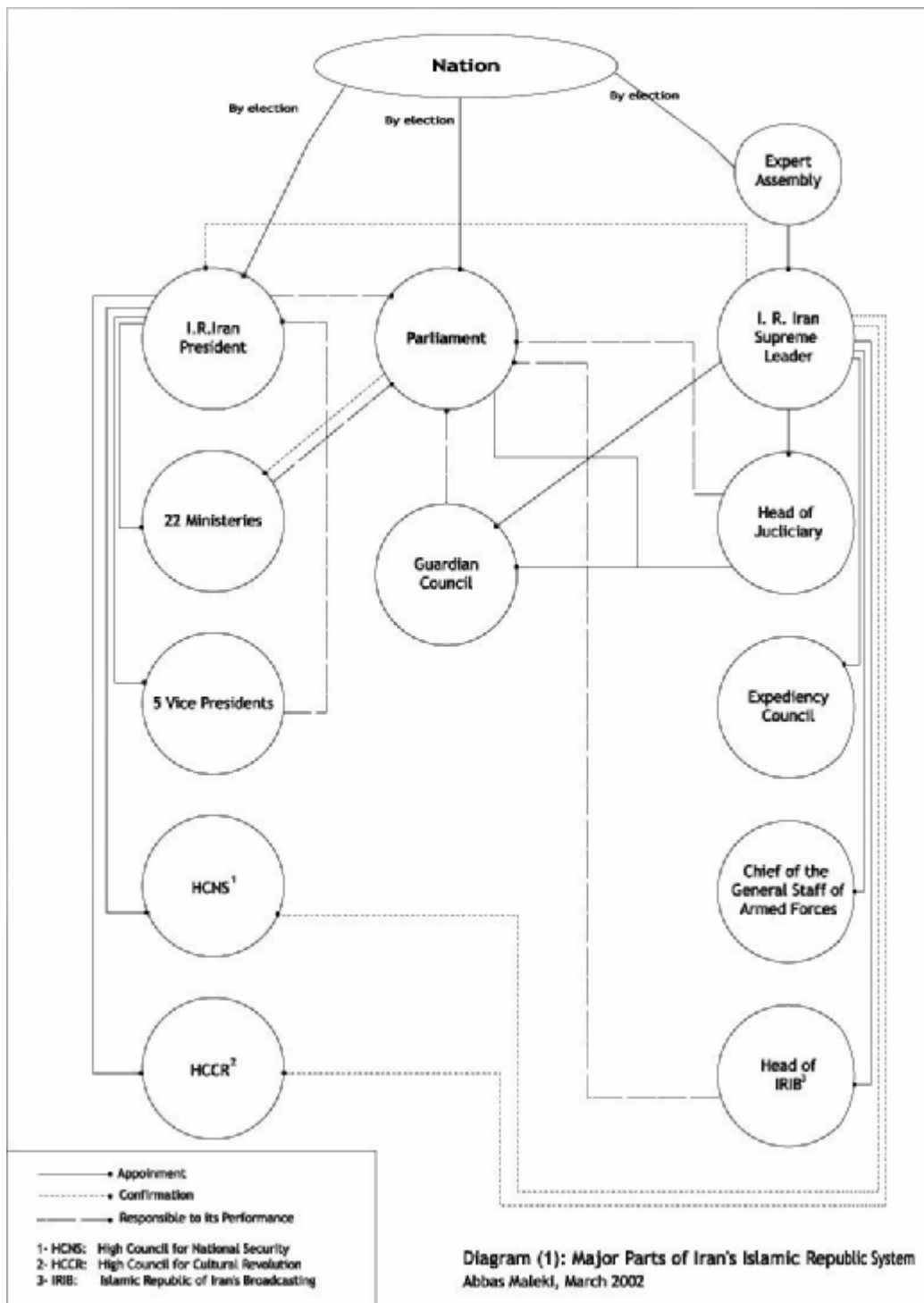
### **III. Iran's Foreign Policy**

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic makes clear Iran's preferences in foreign policy. Four groups of countries are ranked in preference: (1) Iran's neighbours; (2) Muslim countries; (3) Third World countries; and (4) countries that furnish political, economic, social and/or military needs of Iran.

Geographically, Iran straddles countries in energy rich Middle East and countries of the Central Asia-Caucasus region. In the post Cold War milieu, Iran has emerged as an important power broker, and while external geo-strategic considerations matter, Iran determines its own strategies in both regions. On a general level, Iran's policies have stressed each region's economic and security needs. In this regard, there have been parallel and overlapping bilateral and multilateral initiatives to secure Iran's interests in both regions. To illustrate, Iran's interactions with the GCC states have been of a bilateral nature (e.g., with Qatar and Saudi Arabia). In Central Asia, on the other hand, Iran has preferred multilateral cooperation through the Economic Cooperation Council (ECO). Moreover, while Iran has entered cooperative security relations with certain GCC states, its ECO policy remains economically driven.<sup>3</sup>

### **IV. Competing Models of Foreign Policy Decision Making**

Political analysis has traditionally focused on how a decision maker chooses one policy from among alternatives.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, I discuss three foreign policy decision-making models, which have been widely debated in recent years. First discussed is the work of Graham Allison, who divides the rational model<sup>5</sup> into organizational process and government bargaining (or bureaucratic political) aspects.<sup>6</sup> In a second model, the cybernetics of bounded rationality are analysed by Herbert



Simon.<sup>7</sup> A third model, poliheurism, draws on heuristics in experimental cognitive psychology.<sup>8</sup>

We may distinguish between the two dominant approaches to foreign policy decision making, rational choice and cognitive psychology, and contrast them with a poliheuristic approach, which integrates the two. Poliheurism accounts for the process and the outcome of decisions, and effectively brings together the various levels of analysis (individual, dyad, and group).<sup>9</sup> The issues involved are whether the actual decision-making process by political leaders is one that (1) maximizes or satisfy utility, (2) engages in a holistic search, (3) makes detailed calculations, or (4) consists of simplifying heuristics bound by framing effects.<sup>10</sup>

In order to address these issues, the decision-making of policy makers must consider the particular “routes” with “signs” along the way. These are addressed as:

- a) no decision is possible without following a defining rule;
- b) rules and strategies affect choice; the use of different decision rules (analytic, cybernetic, or cognitive) or “mixed” strategies (such as analytic–cybernetic) influences the outcome;
- c) the way issues are “framed” and “counterframed” to the public by the political leader or opposition are also likely to affect the choices;
- d) rules for how individual preferences are aggregated into collective opinion affect choices;
- e) the comprehensiveness of the information available affects the choices; and,
- f) the order in which information is processed affects the outcome.

The rational actor model assumes optimisation within a global sphere of interaction—with the assumptions of market economics driving the society/polity. In utility theory, decision makers anticipate the outcomes “that could result from the available choices as well as the chances of those outcomes occurring, and then choose the alternative that seems in some rough way to offer the best potential.”<sup>11</sup> Many disciplines have debated the rationality model. Not surprisingly, each views the debate through its own disciplinary lens. To illustrate,

- cognitive psychologists focus on how normative behaviours are chosen by individuals;
- sociologists focus on social structures, values, and norms;
- anthropologists debate formalist economics (rationality) versus substantive economics (where religious values and social considerations outweigh economic and political gain);
- political scientists focus on the predominance of political factors and political institutions in decision making;
- economists focus on maximizing wealth while subject to various constraints;
- finance theorists focus on the imperfect behaviour of markets and the capacity to profit during market perturbations; and,
- marketing strategists “frame” consumer choices that lead to rational behaviour choices.

The rational, expected utility model of behaviour is challenged by cognitive psychologists.<sup>12</sup> Laboratory results show that people simply do not make decisions in the manner prescribed by the theoretical model of rationality. Rather than maximizing utility, people frequently frame effects; they seldom engage in what I term holistic search. And they refrain from complex calculations because of limitations as to how cognition operates.<sup>13</sup> Are these limitations the same as those assumed in the analysis of bounded rationality? The ability of people to calculate and deduce is limited. Therefore, bounded rationality is rarely defined precisely. When spelled out explicitly, bounded rationality would predict the same normative behaviour as some rational choice models.<sup>14</sup> When social actors assess search costs, they select the first acceptable alternative. Many cognitivists, therefore, see expected utility theory as normative and prescriptive. That is, utility theory is an ideal, but it does not actually describe the process of decision making. Another model, prospect theory, emerges as an alternative. In these days of destructionism, it is almost fashionable in cognitive psychology to “bash” rational choice, and to unquestionably accept its limited applicability. However, expected utility theory does not deal with framing the problem or developing alternatives. According to this line of reasoning, instead of choosing the schemata that are most profitable, people choose the ones that are most available. This of course is merely an alternative perspective from cognitive psychology.

Finally, let us consider that sociologists such as James Coleman and Amitai Etzioni argue that cultural and social factors explain variations in decision making. Etzioni notes that decision making is not an individualistic event (i.e., “free willism”) that takes place independent of its context. An explanation of decision making needs to take into account its cultural context and recognize the impact of the following:

1. social factors; e.g. factional alliances.<sup>15</sup>
2. social organization (also called “social structure” in functionalist sociology);
3. moral commitments and values of specific ideologies; and
4. emotions of individual personalities.

Furthermore, Etzioni also believes that individuals have multiple utility functions because they have multiple goals, and that these functions “are not tied together into some overarching utility function.”<sup>16</sup> Rather, political actors participate in overlapping networks of persons who share the goals of the moment for a single purpose. Factions are informal groups that come and go, aside from the formal institutional structure of government, which is one principal focus in the current paper. Brumfield and Fox term the manoeuvring of specific individuals with multifaceted goals as “agent-centred action.”<sup>17</sup>

In spite of all the points that are described above, foreign policy decisions are typically explained by either the rational actor or cognitive psychology models. Political psychologists tend to dichotomise and study either elite or mass political behaviour. In other words, in their focus they restrict themselves to “players/brokers” at the top of the political hierarchy, or concentrate on delineating general attitudes and dispositions of the wider populace.<sup>18</sup> Anthropologists call this the ideographic “great man of history” perspective, as contrasted to the nomothetic “culturalological” perspective. (Nomothetics also relate to the broader patterns that the social sciences

delineate and explain.)<sup>19</sup> It is not the rational or the cognitive models that best explain the creation of foreign policy in Iran or elsewhere. A more accurate description is that decision makers mix choice strategies (analytic, cybernetic, cognitive) en route to a decision, and that they often switch strategies during the decision process itself.<sup>20</sup> This is analogous to chaos and complexity theory in the social and physical sciences.

## **V. Process in Iran's Foreign Policy Decisions**

Foreign policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran results from complex, multifaceted interactions among numerous governmental and non-governmental participants. These actors Pursue different and often conflicting goals. Yet, the process of foreign policy decision making is sufficiently transparent to delineate. These two groups promote a bundle of aims relating to the Islamic identity of the government and its interaction with Iranian identity.

The first group discusses the main identity of the Islamic Revolution, and the return to Islamic values. At the Dawn of the Iranian Revolution, social layers were not pressed by poverty, malnutrition, insecurity and ethnic conflict. The people were motivated to move to the streets out of ignorance of Islamic culture and traditions of inequality among the social classes, and the injustice in international relations (lead by the Shah's close ally, the United States).

They propose that the most viable ways to establish permanence for the Islamic Republic are (1) to retain the Muslim masses as faithful allies; (2) to create close relations with Islamic countries, and (3) to refrain from rapprochement with the United States, as the leader of the power bloc most responsible for the humiliations of the Islamic Ummah. The position of the second group is that Iran is a nation-state and must play a key role in international events. It is better for Iran to play in the "international court," like other nation-states and political blocs. They emphasize that international trade and political ties are major tools in safeguarding Iranian national interests.

Some would see no conflict between Islamic values and Iranian national interests. They believe that Islamic identity is also part of Iran's national interests.<sup>21</sup> However, it must be recognized that in the arena of foreign policy decision-making, goal conflicts can create undecided votes and fluctuating posturing by the individual administrative units. The potential lack of sufficient coherence could impair the effectiveness of Iran's foreign policy.

One overriding issue remains unresolved. Namely, how should appropriate relations be developed between Iran and the United States? For this issue in particular, goals promoted by anonymous units in the decision-making chain-of-command might simultaneously oppose one another. As a case in point of the multifaceted dimensions of decision making, consider resistance to U.S. policy as it relates to President Bush's "Axis of Evil" viewpoint, which might be contrasted with President Khatami's "Dialogue of Civilizations." Despite a convergence of views among Iranian officials, substantive differences remain on several critical issues. An early example occurred when Iran and the United States severed relations in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution (which toppled the U.S.-backed Shah), when Islamic students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took fifty-two Americans hostage (and held them until

January 1981). More currently, Ayatollah Khamenei, who has the final say on foreign policy, stated that “America is basically opposed to the Islamic Republic and if it makes a move, it is tactical and deceitful ... so do negotiations have any meaning?” It is to be noted, however, that reformists allied to President Mohammad Khatami have sought to mend ties with Washington, although it is additionally true that the more conservative members of HCNS and Expediency Council argue that relations with the U.S. would betray tenets of the twenty-three year old Islamic Revolution.<sup>22</sup>

As another more general example, suppose that there is an opportunity to be seized or a threat outside of Iran to be thwarted. Below, we will consider the manner in which information from abroad is processed for Iran’s foreign policy. Before that is done, however, it is helpful to first consider the various sources of such information.

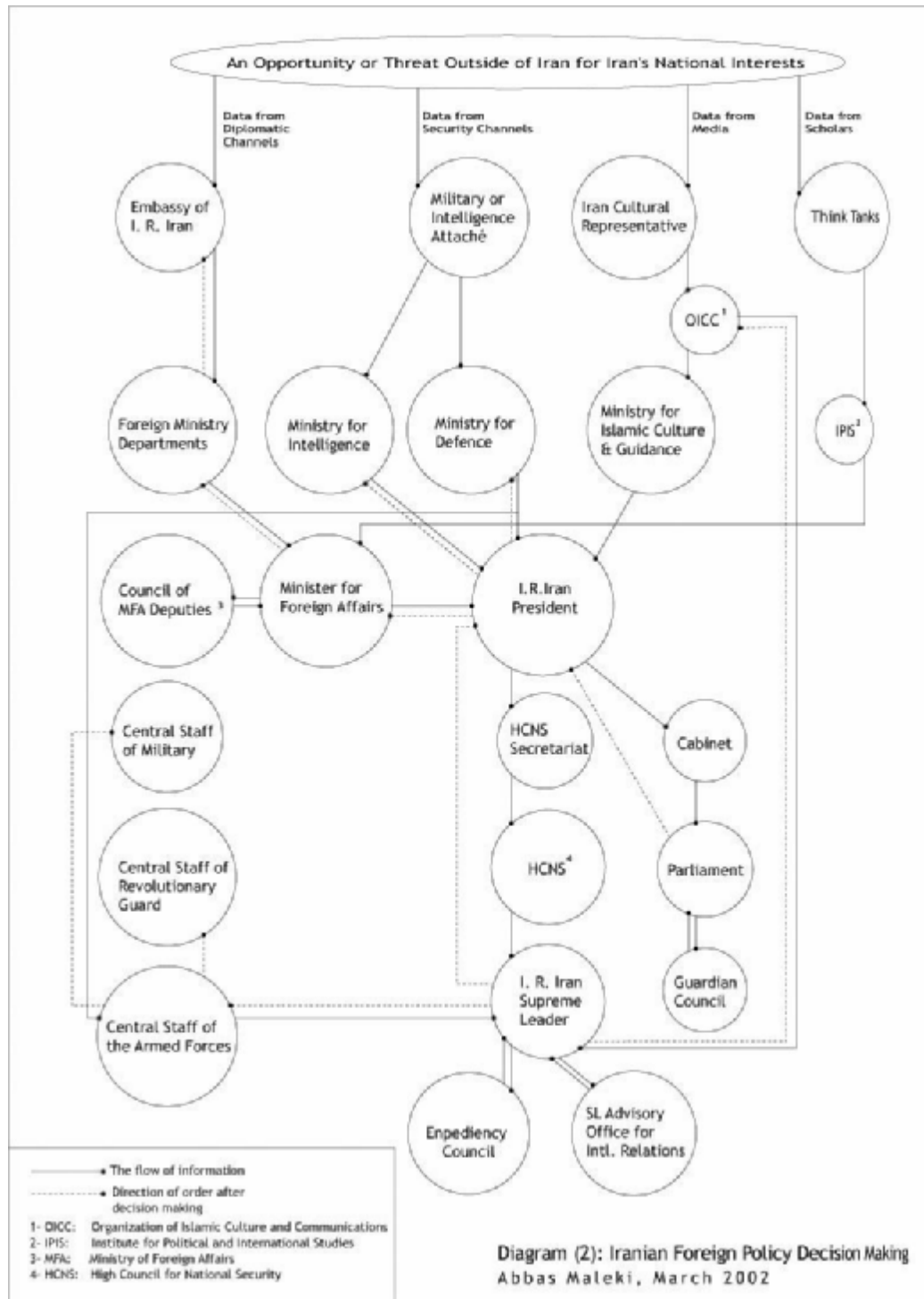
One extremely important source is from diplomatic channels via Iranian embassies. Ambassadorial analysis comes via Iran’s Foreign Ministry. The Director Generals of various departments also send reports to the Deputies and Minister for Foreign Affairs. Input also is obtained through security agents, from miscellaneous media sources, from libraries abroad, from individual citizens of one country or another, and from think tanks and scholarly authorities in germane subject areas. Regarding the last, cultural attachés are part of the Organization for Islamic Culture and Communications (OICC), which is an independent body within the government.

Let us now consider how such information from abroad becomes input in the decision-making process for Iran’s foreign policy. Different elements in decision-making may be identified as stepping-stones in the decision-making process. The sequence of steps to arrive at the most appropriate decision involve:

1. defining the problem;
2. classifying the problem;
3. specifying answers to the problem;
4. deciding what is right under Islam, rather than what is acceptable, in order to ascertain the boundary conditions;
5. delineating a course of action to resolve the problem; and,
6. testing the effectiveness of the decision, against the probable course of events.<sup>23</sup>

Under the Law of Establishment and Duties of Iran’s Foreign Ministry, the Council of Deputies, which is chaired by the Foreign Minister, is empowered to act on some cases within the broad parameters of Iranian national policy and interests. However, for major events, the Foreign Minister reports directly to the President, who decides whether the case warrants action by the Cabinet of Ministers or by the High Council on National Security (HCNS). When a case has different economic, cultural, political, and social dimensions, the President sends the report to the Cabinet to ascertain the views of different Ministers, with the exception that the purely diplomatic, security and defence cases are sent to the HCNS Secretariat. For the latter types of cases, the Secretary of HCNS would present them in the main session after preparing the background of the cases. After the Council decides on a course of action, then the Iranian President, who is also the head of the HCNS, would send the report to the Iranian Supreme Leader. If the Leader confirms the action, then it would be operationalized and sent to military sections, and to the Foreign Ministry. Diagram 2

shows how data and information flow, and the order in which decisions are rendered among the different parts of the Iran's Islamic Republic.



## **VI. Key Decision Makers In Foreign Policy**

As specified within the Iranian Constitution, four major offices are responsible for foreign policy: the Supreme Leader, the President, the Head of the Expediency Council, and the Foreign Minister. I next describe the foreign policy functions for each of these offices.

**Supreme Leader:** Following Imam Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Revolution, the Council of Experts on 4th June, 1989 unanimously elected Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei to the office of Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution. As already stated, the Supreme Leader approves or disapproves foreign policy initiatives,<sup>24</sup> and his word is final in the more significant matters of foreign affairs.<sup>25</sup> Examples of foreign policy decisions that were directed by the Supreme Leader include the following: (1) Iran's stance of neutrality during the allied attack on Iraq in 1991; (2) the nonintervention in Afghan internal affairs (even after the killing of nine Iranian diplomats in Mazare Sharif by the Taliban in 1998); and (3) the support of the Palestinians in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

**President:** In the May 1997 elections, Mohammad Khatami was elected as the Fifth President of the Islamic Republic and gained almost 70 percent of the votes cast. He aspires to further the development of Iran's regional and international relations. As already mentioned, he has initiated a "Dialogue of Civilizations" for creating better relations between Iran and the West. He also proposes "Détente" between Iran and the Arab States. He was re-elected in 2001 to another four-year term of office.

**Head of Expediency Council:** Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was appointed to the Head of the Expediency Council in 1997. The Council designs the Grand Strategy for the Iranian regime, and proposes guidelines for foreign policy. Ayatollah Rafsanjani was formerly President. He is now also one of Tehran's Friday prayer interim leaders (Imam). (The Friday prayer is a vehicle to convey the views of clerics each week). Within the framework of "Asian Identity," he advocates close ties with Russia, China, and India. He also favors free market exchange within the global economy.

**Foreign Minister:** Kamal Kharrazi, the former ambassador to the United Nations, is active in forming and sustaining bilateral relations with other countries. In 1998 he successfully negotiated with the British Foreign Secretary to normalize ties between Iran and the United Kingdom, and then proceeded to normalize contacts between Iran and the European Union. He also reorganized the Iranian Foreign Ministry by reducing, to fifteen, the number of Iran's representatives in embassies and consulate-generals abroad, from a previous total of one-hundred thirty-six.

## **VII. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have endeavoured to outline how the Islamic Republic of Iran has welded together theocratic dimensions of administration with those of parliamentary democracy. Several foreign scholars discuss the duality present within Iran's government and emphasize the confrontations between factions, rivals, and groups.

Although genuine disputes do exist, there is relative agreement over foreign policy, especially during periods when Iran is threatened. The most recent example of this coming together of Iranian officials occurred when President Bush made his pronouncement that Iran was part of an “Axis of Evil.”

For a revolutionary movement that becomes institutionalised in government, stability requires cooperation and overall common purpose. The Supreme Leader, President, and the Head of Expediency Council have cooperated to maintain the stability of the Islamic Republic in spite of their personal differences. Yet, the lengthy process of decision making in foreign policy needs refining. Especially during times of crisis, when outcomes are critical and time is short, this lengthy process must be expedited. The inherent duality of parliamentary democracy and theocracy present in Iran’s government during the most recent two decades warrants further efforts at perfecting the process.

## Endnotes:

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1. In March 16, 2002, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei appointed new members of the Expediency Council, but they have few differences with their predecessors. In the previous five-year term, the key ministers of former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, such as Foreign Minister Velayati, Interior Minister Abdollah Nouri, and Central Bank Chairman Nourbakhsh, had been members of the Council. Now, instead of the new Foreign Minister Kharrazi, Velayati is still member, and the critical Iravani was replaced instead of Nourbakhsh. The end result is that the foreign and economic policies of President Khatami’s administration have less advocates within the Expediency Council.

2. <http://www.irna.com/en/head/020316230512.ehe.shtml>

3. Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, *After Khomeini* (New York: West View Press, 1994), pp. 34-36.

4. Y. Y. I. Vertzberger, *The World in Their Mind: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

5. J. Von Neumann, and O. Morgenstern, *The Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour* (New York: John Wiley, 1944).

6. Graham T. Allison, “Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crises,” *The American Political Science Review*; Vol. LXIII, No. 3 (September 1969), pp. 689-718.

7. H. Simon, “Theories of Decision-Making in Economics and Behavioural Science,” *American Economic Review*, 49 (1959), pp. 253-283.

8. Alex Mintz and Geva Nehemia, “The Poliheuristic Theory of Foreign Policy Decision Making,” in A. Mintz, and N. Geva (eds), *Decision Making on War and Peace: The Cognitive-Rational Debate* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1997), p. 81.

9. Alex Mintz, *International Cognitive and Rational Theories of Foreign Policy Decision Making* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

10. In the rational choice approach, framing is defined as creating a reference point with approximate parameters. In many simple choice problems, the reference point is largely predetermined by the situation. For example, in a static situation the status quo or normative expectations are likely to serve as the reference point. The reference state usually corresponds to the decision maker's current position, but this is not always the case. Expectations, aspirations, norms, and comparisons may also influence the framing of the reference point. See A. Tversky, and D. Kahneman, "Loss Aversion in Riskless Choice: A Reference-Dependent Model," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 41 (1991), pp. 1046-47.
11. L. R. Beach and T. R. Mitchell, "A Contingency Model for the Selection of Decision Strategies," *Academy of Management Review*, 3 (1978), p. 441.
12. E. Singer and V. Hudson, *Political Psychology and Foreign Policy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).
13. Herbert Simon, *Models of Man* (New York: John Wiley; 1957).
14. James D. Morrow, "Rational Choice Approach to International Conflict," in Mintz, Alex and Geva Neheimia (eds.), *Decision Making on War and Peace: The Cognitive-Rational Debate* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1997), pp. 17-18.
15. Elizabeth B. Brumfiel and John W. Fox, eds., *Factional Competition and Political Development in the New World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
16. N. Geva and A. Mintz (eds), *Decisionmaking on War and Peace: The Cognitive – Rational Debate* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1997), p. 3.
17. Brumfiel and Fox, *Factional Competition...*
18. D. A. Sylvan and Voss, J. F., *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 4.
19. Leslie White, *Science of Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1948).
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22. <http://news1.iwon.com/article/id/37820|politics|03-18-2002::13:18|reuters.html>
23. Peter F. Drucker, "The Effective Decision," *Harvard Business Review on Decision Making* (2001), pp. 1-21.
24. [http://www.dre-mfa.gov.ir/index\\_eng.html](http://www.dre-mfa.gov.ir/index_eng.html)
25. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/middle\\_east/newsid\\_1880000/1880224.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/middle_east/newsid_1880000/1880224.stm)

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