The Iranian Foreign Policy in the Persian Gulf Region
Under the Rule of President Hassan Rouhani: Continuity or Change?

Abstract

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 theocratic 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). 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 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. The analysis is based on Deshiri’s concept of waves of idealism and realism in the Iranian foreign policy (Deshiri, 2010: 19-55).

Sources


1 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).