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## THE IMPACT OF THE IRANIAN PRESIDENTS ON TEHRAN'S NUCLEAR POLICY

**Defining the problem.** The presidential elections of 2021 in Iran raised a question about the role of the Iranian presidents in Tehran's foreign policy and their influence on Tehran's decision-making process regarding the nuclear program. It is well known that the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is the real head of state in Iran during the last three decades, and he defines the guidelines of the Iranian nuclear policy. Nevertheless, taking into account the efforts of President Hassan Rouhani and his government in negotiating the nuclear deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, one should admit that the Iranian presidents also influence Iran's nuclear policy. This statement could be also confirmed by the fact that the change of presidents in Iran often led to the change of the Iranian nuclear policy. Thus, it is important to study the impact of the Iranian presidents on the nuclear decision making process in Iran to try to understand what impact on Tehran's nuclear policy could have the presidential elections in Iran in June 2021.

The problem of defining the role of the Iranian presidents in developing Iran's nuclear program is connected with the following research **tasks**:

- Analyse the level of dependence or autonomy of the Iranian presidents from the supreme leaders in conducting nuclear and foreign policy;
- Study the cases of different Iranian presidents and compare their nuclear policy;
- Assess the possible impact of the new Iranian president on the future Iran's nuclear policy.

The **objective** of this article is to define the role of the Iranian presidents in development of the Iranian nuclear program and negotiations about it with the international community.

The research **methods** of content analysis, comparative analysis, and system analysis were used in this article.

**Analysis of the recent publications.** The Iranian nuclear policy and the role of Iran's presidents is studied in numerous publications. For example, the Atlantic Council published a series of analytical articles devoted to the 2021 presidential elections in Iran and their potential impact on Iran's nuclear policy. Among these publications, it is worth to mention the article of Borzou Daragahi who came to conclusion that the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei seeks to reduce the impact of the president and other elected institutions on Iran's foreign and nuclear policy (Daragahi, 2021). Other analysts, Ali Fatholla-Nejad and Amin Naeni consider the traditional struggle between the Iranian moderate and hardliner politicians for the presidency and the outcomes of this political struggle for the Iranian foreign and nuclear policy (Fatholla-Nejad & Naeni, 2021). The US researcher M. Fitzpatrick analyzes the potential influence of killing the Iranian nuclear scientist M. Fakhrizade on the outcomes of the Iranian presidential elections in 2021 (Fitzpatrick, 2020).

Ellie Geranmayeh and Julien Barnes-Dancey are European analysts who study the implications of the Iranian internal political struggle for nuclear program's development and consider the role of the Iranian President and Supreme Leader in implementing Iran's nuclear policy (Barnes-Dacey & Geranmayeh, 2021). The Iranian nuclear policy was also analysed in the publications of the Ukrainian researchers Yaryna Zavada (Zavada, 2018), Polina Sinovets and Valeria Gergiieva (Sinovets & Gergiieva, 2019).

The previously published research papers and other publications give a detailed analysis of the technical and political aspects of the Iranian nuclear programs, but they do not focus on the role of the Iranian presidents in implementing Iran's nuclear policy. This article will seek to fill this gap in the research of Iran's nuclear development.

**The main part of the article.** The first two Iranian presidents, Abolhaqssan Bani Sadr (1980–1981) and Mohammad Ali Rajai (1981), ruled during a very short period and did not play an important role in conducting the Iranian foreign policy (Milani, 1993, p. 83). The third president, Ali Khamenei (1981 – 1989), who now is the Iranian Supreme Leader, also did not have a lot of power and influence on the Iranian foreign and nuclear policy during his presidency (Iran: How Ayatollah Khamenei, 2020). The then Supreme Leader Ayatollah Rukholla Khomeini decided to temporarily suspend the Iranian nuclear program in 1979 and then to resume it in the mid-1980s (Azodi, 2021), and it seems that President Khamenei did not influence those decisions.

After Khomeini's death in 1989, the role of the Iranian presidents in conducting foreign policy slightly increased. The fourth Iranian president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997), contributed to improving Iran's relations with China, Russia, Latin American countries, and European countries. During 1990s, the Iranian nuclear program had mostly clandestine character, and Rafsanjani's role in its development is not very clear. However, this president's efforts to improve relations with other countries helped Iran to obtain the nuclear technologies from China, Russia, and Argentina (Koch & Wolf, 1997, p. 130). For example, in 1995, Russia agreed to build the Buser nuclear power plant and was even discussing building a uranium enrichment plant in Iran. However, under the US pressure, Russia refused from delivering sensitive enrichment technologies to Iran and focused on building Buser nuclear power reactor only (Parrish & Wehling, 1998).

The next president, Mohammed Khatami (1997 – 2005), was the most liberal among the Iranian presidents and sought to improve Iran's relations with the West. Mohammed Khatami authored a book "The Dialogue Among Civilizations", in which he criticized Sam Huntington's famous ideas about the inevitable conflict between Islamic and Christian civilizations and stated that the dialogue between different cultures and civilizations is possible (Petito, 2004, p. 27).

Under Khatami's presidency, the Iranian nuclear program became an issue of the serious international concern, because in 2002, the Iranian opposition provided the data that confirmed that Iran had a secret nuclear weapons program (U.S.: Iran, 2002). However, President Khatami tried to reduce these concerns and agreed to negotiate with the western countries on the nuclear matters. In 2003–2004 Iran made important concessions in the nuclear field: suspended uranium enrichment and signed the Additional Protocol to the Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (Iran Signs Additional Protocol, 2003), which made the Iranian nuclear program much more transparent and controlled. According to the later assessments, in 2003, Iran also stopped its work on the nuclear weapons design (U.S. Report, 2007). In 2004, Iran signed an agreement with E3 (France, Germany, and United Kingdom), which limited its nuclear program (Communication, 2004). President Khatami and his government also tried to improve relations with the United States and sent the corresponding signals to Washington through the swiss diplomats (Kessler, 2013). However, the George W. Bush administration continued to include Iran to the so called "axis of evil" (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007, c. 421). The United States refused to join to the nuclear deal with Iran in early 2000s because until 2006, Washington did not want to recognize Tehran's right even for a limited uranium enrichment (Rodgers, 2015).

President Khatami's efforts to improve Iran's relations with the West were criticized by the Iranian hardliner politicians who pointed out that the United States continued to sanction Iran despite Tehran's concessions in the nuclear field. The hardliners also stated that Khatami's policy of improving relations with the West did not solve Iran's economic problems (Sahimi, 2011). As a result of a successful hardliner's propaganda, a conservative politician Mahmood Ahmadinejad won the presidential elections in 2005.

The change of presidents in Iran was followed by the change of its foreign and nuclear policy. In 2006, Ahmadinejad's government refused from Khatami's nuclear concessions, and Iran stopped to fulfill the Additional Protocol (Iran Orders End to Un Inspections, 2006) and resumed uranium enrichment (Iran Resumes Uranium Enrichment, 2006). The international community started to worry again about Iran's secret nuclear weapons program, and in 2006, the Iran's nuclear issue was discussed by the United Nations Security Council (UN SC) for the first time. Between 2006 and 2010, the UN Security Council issued several resolutions that condemned Iran's nuclear and missile programs. The 2010 UN SC resolution imposed economic sanctions on Iran (Resolution

1929, 2010), and by the 2012, the United States and the European Union imposed even more strict sanctions against Tehran (U.N. – EU Sanctions, 2019). Such intensive international pressure was done on Iran due to highly provocative nuclear and foreign policy of the Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who continued to develop the uranium enrichment program and missile tests and refused from any concessions in this field.

Thus, between 1997 and 2013, the Iranian government was headed by two presidents who conducted completely different nuclear and foreign policy, although both of them had to fulfill the orders of the same Supreme Leader – Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has been ruling Iran since 1989.

The cases of Ahmadinejad's and Khatami's different nuclear policies raise a question of the scale of autonomy of the Iranian presidents from the Supreme Leader. On the one hand, one could suppose that the cases of presidents Khatami and Ahmadinejad show that the Iranian president can influence Iran's nuclear and foreign policy. On the other hand, Khamenei's approval of the different policy of these two presidents could be explained by the changing dynamic of the international policy at the beginning of the XXI century. In 2003, shortly after quick collapse of the Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and after Libya's refusal from the secret programs of production of weapons of mass destruction, the Iranian leaders could feel that they had to give up the clandestine nuclear activities too in order to avoid the US invasion. For this reason, Ayatollah Khamenei might have approved President Khatami's policy of making nuclear concessions and trying to improve relations with the West.

However, after Ahmadinejad's victory in 2005, it became clear that the United States unlikely would attack Iran because they had enough problems with their military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, Ali Khamenei could approve Mahmud Ahmadinejad's efforts to resume the provocative nuclear program despite the international pressure.

A more detailed analysis of Ahmadinejad's and Khatami's policy shows that both presidents had rather limited impact on the Iranian nuclear policy. Until 2002, when the clandestine nuclear program of Iran became known, President Khatami most likely had a very limited influence on the Iranian nuclear program that was conducted by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) under a supervision of the Supreme Leader and without a direct involvement of the president and other government officials (Tabatabai, 2015). President Khatami likely started to be involved into the nuclear policy of Iran when it seemed to be necessary to reduce the international tension around the Iranian nuclear program by negotiating with the West and making some nuclear concessions.

Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy presents another case of limitations of the presidential power in Iran. Mahmud Ahmadinejad tried to overcome these limitations and even initiated an almost open conflict with the Supreme Leader during his second presidential term in 2009–2013. For example, Mahmud Ahmadinejad tried to use his constitutional right to appoint the Intelligence Minister and ignore the usual practice that this minister is always appointed by the Supreme Leader. However, Ahmadinejad's attempt to dismiss Heydar Moslehi, the Intelligence Minister appointed by Khamenei, was not successful in 2011 (Esfandiary & Rahimkhani, 2011). It seems that President Ahmadinejad tried to use the active development of the nuclear program to gain support of the IRGC in his conflict with Ayatollah Khamenei because IRGC generally advocates more provocative nuclear policy despite the international pressure (IRGC, 1998), and some most radical representatives of the IRGC even support the idea of obtaining nuclear weapons by Iran (Rubin, 2021). Nevertheless, Mahmud Ahmadinejad lost his struggle with Ali Khamenei and failed to extend the presidential power. As a result, Ahmadinejad's supporters were not allowed to take part in the presidential elections in 2013 (Cameron, 2013), which Ahmadinejad himself had to skip because he did two consecutive presidential terms. During next presidential elections in 2017 (Iran Election, 2017) and 2021 (Seven Candidates, 2021), when M. Ahmadinejad could apply to be a candidate again, he was not qualified to participate in these elections by the Guardian Council, which decides who is eligible to run for the Iranian presidency.

A similar ban to participate in the next presidential elections also experienced other former Iranian presidents. For example, in 2013, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani applied to participate in his third presidential elections but was refused by the Guardian Council. Another former President Mohammed Khatami is not even mentioned by the state media since 2009, because he supported

the so-called Green Movement of mass protests against doubtful victory of Mahmud Ahmadinejad during the presidential elections in 2009. It remains to be seen what expects President Hassan Rouhani who is also criticized for his mostly failed attempts to establish better relations with the West. Among all the previous presidents, only Ali Khamenei had successful career after his presidency because he became a Supreme Leader. Other Iranian presidents were far less lucky. The first Iranian president had to escape from the country and live in exile, the second was killed, the fourth, fifth, and sixth presidents were sidelined from the ruling elite after their presidency. This trend proves that the Iranian presidents do not have a real power in Iran, including in conducting foreign and nuclear policy (Milani, 2021). It seems that the Iranian presidents' role was limited by proclaiming the Iran's position regarding the nuclear program on the international arena, and the presidents did not actively participate in the nuclear decision making process.

It seems that the main role of President Hassan Rouhani who was elected in 2013, was also limited to negotiating about the Iranian nuclear program, but the decision to conduct these negotiations was done by Ayatollah Khamenei, not by the president. The increased international pressure could make Ayatollah Khamenei to reconsider the provocative nuclear policy, which was approved by him during M. Ahmadinejad's presidency. By 2013, Iran suffered from strict economic sanctions and severe economic crisis (Vaez, 2013), and perhaps this forced the Supreme Leader to approve the efforts of President Hassan Rouhani and his government to achieve a nuclear deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was concluded in 2015.

President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the JCPOA in 2018 severely weakened the positions of President Rouhani and other moderate and reformist politicians (Geranmayeh, 2020). The Iranian hardliners criticize the reformists' attempts to revive the nuclear deal, and that could complicate Iran's return to the compliance with the JCPOA even despite President Joe Biden's efforts to restore this deal (Toosi, 2021). The hardliners won the parliament elections in 2020 (Motevalli, 2020) and secured their win at the presidential elections in June 2021, after all the influential reformist and moderate candidates were not allowed to participate in those elections (Motamedi, 2021).

It should be noted that the hardliners' win at elections in Iran does not mean their popularity. For example, only 42% of voters participated in the 2020 parliamentary elections that were successful for the Iranian hardliners (Iran Elections, 2020). Shortly before these elections in November 2019, Iran experienced mass protests of people who were disappointed by both reformists and hardliners and demanded to change the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) completely (Iran Protests, 2020). Although these protests were brutally suppressed and hardliners consolidated their power, it looks like the Islamic Republic's elected institutions lose the public support and legality. However, the Iranian leadership could try to follow the experience of other autocratic regimes on the Middle East, which managed to survive during decades despite the lack of public support.

In 2021, Hassan Rouhani has to leave the presidential office after two consecutive presidential terms, and this raises concerns that the next Iranian president would abandon his policy of negotiating about the JCPOA (Nuclear Issue, 2021), which limits the Iranian nuclear program. However, it should be taken into account that the decision to conduct nuclear negotiations in Vienna in April and May 2021 was most likely made by Ayatollah Khamenei, not by President Rouhani. Therefore, the Supreme Leader, and not Rouhani's successor, will also decide whether Iran will limit its nuclear program or abandon JCPOA in the future.

It seems that the 2021 presidential campaign showed that despite all the limitations, the presidents in Iran still exerted some influence on Iran's foreign and nuclear policy, but the Iranian religious leadership decided to further decrease this influence. After the Guardian Council did not allow to participate in the presidential elections to all prominent moderate and reformist candidates, many analysts concluded that the Supreme Leader and his team made everything possible to prevent the win of a liberal candidate (Motevalli, 2020) like it happened in 1997, when reformist Khatami's victory was not desirable for the ruling regime (Moderate Clinches Victory, 1997). Thus, if the previous Iranian presidents had some limited impact on Iran's nuclear policy, we could expect that the next Iranian president would have even less power and would just implement the Supreme Leader's orders related to the foreign and nuclear policy.

**Conclusion.** According to the objective of this article, it can be concluded that the Iranian presidents played a rather limited role in Iran's nuclear and foreign policy, but the 2021 presidential campaign showed that the Iranian religious leadership wants to decrease this role further. The first three presidents that ruled before the death of the first Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini in 1989 (Abolhaqssan Bani Sadr, Mohammad Ali Rajai, and Ali Khamenei) played a symbolic role, and the impact on the foreign and nuclear policy of the next four presidents (Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammed Khatami, Mahmud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani) slightly increased. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was the Supreme Leader during the presidency of these four presidents, avoided the open conflicts with them, but it seems that all these four presidents had complicated relations with the Supreme Leader, and perhaps for this reason, the prominent moderate and reformist candidates, who are not loyal enough to Ayatollah Khamenei, were not allowed to participate in 2021 presidential elections. Thus, it can be expected that the next Iranian president would have even less impact on Iran's nuclear and foreign policy and would depend more on the Supreme Leader.

The future research papers, related to the topic of this article, could further analyse the evolution of the Iranian presidential institution after 2021 elections and also study the impact of elected authorities in Iran on its nuclear policy.

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## Summary

**Cheban O. Ya. The impact of the Iranian presidents on tehran's nuclear policy.** – Article.

The article discusses the relevant issue of the presidential elections in Iran and the possible impact of the new Iranian president on Iran's nuclear policy. The nuclear policy of the previous Iranian presidents was also analysed to define the level of autonomy of the president from the Iranian Supreme Leader. The article considers the research tasks related to analysis of the relations between the Iranian presidents and supreme



leaders, comparing the nuclear policy of the different Iranian presidents and assessing the possible outcome of the 2021 presidential elections for the future development of the Iranian nuclear policy. It is mentioned that the objective of the article is to define the role of the Iranian presidents in development of the Iranian nuclear program and negotiations about it with the international community. The research methods of content analysis, comparative analysis, and system analysis were used in the article.

It is mentioned in the article that most Iranian presidents were side-lined from the ruling elite after the end of their presidential terms, and this is one of the cases that demonstrates the limited character of the presidential power in Iran. The article reminds that only President Ali Khamenei managed to successfully continue his political career after his presidency because he became the Supreme Leader after the death of Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini in 1989. The article concludes that the first three Iranian presidents (A. Bani Sadr, M. Ali Rajai, and A. Khamenei) had very limited power, and the next four presidents (A. Hashemi Rafsanjani, M. Khatami, M. Ahmadinejad, and H. Rouhani) had bigger impact on Iran's nuclear policy although their power remained limited. The article supposes that the current Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had complicated relations with the Iranian presidents, and for this reason he might have decided to further limit the impact of the next Iranian president on Iran's nuclear policy; and this could be a main reason why most prominent reformist and moderate candidates were not allowed to participate in 2021 presidential elections, which guarantees a victory of the hardliner who is loyal to the Supreme Leader. The article concludes that despite the internal and external political tensions around the Iranian 2021 presidential elections, the next Iranian president would not have a significant impact on Iran's nuclear policy, which would continue to be defined by the Supreme Leader.

*Key words:* Iran's presidents, the Supreme Leader, nuclear policy, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear weapons program.

#### **Анотація**

**Чебан О. Я. Вплив іранських президентів на ядерну політику Тегерану. – Стаття.**

У статті обговорюється актуальне питання президентських виборів в Ірані та можливий вплив нового іранського президента на ядерну політику Ірану. Ядерна політика попередніх іранських президентів також була проаналізована для визначення рівня залежності президента від іранського верховного лідера. У статті розглядаються дослідницькі завдання, пов'язані з аналізом відносин між іранськими президентами та верховними лідерами, порівнянням ядерної політики різних іранських президентів та оцінкою можливого результату президентських виборів 2021 року для майбутнього розвитку іранської ядерної політики. Зазначається, що метою дослідження є визначення ролі іранських президентів у розвитку іранської ядерної програми та переговорах щодо неї з міжнародним співтовариством. У роботі використані такі методи дослідження, як контент-аналіз, порівняльний аналіз та системний аналіз.

У статті згадується, що більшість іранських президентів були відсторонені від правлячої еліти після закінчення президентських термінів, і це один із випадків, який демонструє обмеженість президентської влади в Ірані. Стаття нагадує, що лише президенту Алі Хаменеї вдалося успішно продовжити свою політичну кар'єру після свого президентства, оскільки він став Верховним лідером після смерті аятоли Рухолли Хомейні в 1989 році. У статті зроблено висновок, що перші три іранських президенти (А. Банісадр, М. Алі Раджаї та А. Хаменеї) мали дуже обмежену владу, а наступні чотири президенти (А. Хашемі Рафсанджані, М. Хатамі, М. Ахмадінежад та Х. Рухані) мали більший вплив на ядерну політику Ірану, хоча їхня влада залишалася обмеженою. Зроблено припущення, що нинішній верховний лідер Ірану аятола Алі Хаменеї мав складні стосунки з іранськими президентами, і з цієї причини він міг вирішити ще більше обмежити вплив наступного іранського президента на ядерну політику Ірану; і це може бути основною причиною того, чому більшість видатних реформістських і поміркованих кандидатів не мали права брати участь у президентських виборах 2021 року, що гарантує перемогу консервативного і лояльного до Верховного лідера політика. У статті зроблено висновок, що, незважаючи на внутрішню та зовнішню політичну напруженість навколо іранських президентських виборів 2021 року, наступний президент Ірану не матиме значного впливу на ядерну політику Ірану, яку надалі визначатиме Верховний лідер.

*Ключові слова:* президенти Ірану, верховний лідер, ядерна політика, Спільний всеосяжний план дій (СВПД), програма виробництва ядерної зброї.