

Debate

Iran

Tehran eyes diplomatic offensive to ease international pressures

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Iranian President Hassan Rohani began his second term in a stronger position at home than either of his predecessors, principlist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and reformist Mohammad Khatami. Rohani's backing from Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at his inauguration was followed by parliament's acceptance of 16 of 17 of his ministerial nominations.

Rohani wants domestic support for a diplomatic offensive designed to ease international problems and attract much-needed investment. During the inauguration, both he and Khamenei spoke of Iran's success in avoiding "isolation." Rohani told parliament Iran would "not start violating" its nuclear agreement with world powers, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and that it should serve as a model for resolving other disputes. For Rohani, the Islamic Republic has taken the moral high ground.

This suggests Iran would seek to maintain the JCPOA alongside other signatories – Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany – even if US President Donald Trump abandons it in October when the US Congress is required to review the deal. Whether Trump maintains the JCPOA or strengthens unilateral sanctions over Tehran's missile programme or support for terrorist groups, Iran might argue it was the injured party. It could then argue it was entitled to further assistance from Russia, China and Europe in achieving economic benefits from the JCPOA.

Tehran's case was strengthened by the quarterly report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) at the end of August confirming Iran's adherence to the JCPOA. IAEA chiefs in Vienna rebutted criticisms from US Ambassador to the United Nations

Nikki Haley over physical inspection of military sites and Iran's missile programme. EU foreign policy High Representative Federica Mogherini could hardly have been stronger in defending the JCPOA as "a matter of international security, international safety and also a matter of credibility of international agreements."

The Qatar file is probably just under the JCPOA in Rohani's in tray. Turkey is sending a variety of goods, including textiles, cleaning materials, milk products and domestic appliances, to replace those kept out by the Saudi-led blockade. As well as netting growing transit charges, Iran is reportedly receiving \$400,000 daily in overflights fees for Qatari aeroplanes diverted from Gulf airspace.

This does not make Tehran's relationship with Doha central to the dispute between Qatar and the Saudi-led coalition. Elana DeLozier, head of research at the Delma Institute in Abu Dhabi, said analysts exaggerated the importance of Qatar paying a \$300 million ransom to Shia militia and "Iranian figures" to free a hunting party, including nine Qatari royals, kidnapped in Iraq. "The Saudi bloc's issue with Qatar is not about one thing, whether Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood or terrorist financing," she said. "From the Gulf's perspective, it's a whole laundry list of things, only a few of which are talked about in the West. Qatar's relationship with Iran, while part of the laundry list, is not the root cause."

Saudi Arabia has greater concern over Iran's role in Iraq, where its own diplomatic offensive has seen Riyadh in recent months host Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, Interior Minister Qasim al-Araji and cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. The Saudis have also announced plans for a consulate in Najaf and for reopening the Jadidah Arar border



Greatest challenge. Iranian President Hassan Rohani (R) meeting with Syrian Prime Minister Imad Khamis in Tehran, last January.

(The office of Iranian President Hassan Rohani)

crossing, closed since 1990.

Sadr's call for disbanding the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), Iraqi Shia militias partly organised by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, once the Islamic State is defeated, challenges Iran. It was quickly dismissed by Abadi but Tehran would be disturbed if, as some expect, pre-eminent Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani rules that the PMF has outlived its mission.

Rohani's greatest diplomatic challenge may be Syria. Superficially, there may be further signs of progress this month with meetings in Kazakhstan in the next stage of the Astana process involving Russia, Iran and Turkey. But "de-escalation zones" reflect the battlefield power of the Russian Air Force, the Syrian Army and Lebanon's Hezbollah: Syria represents a nadir for diplomacy.

Carla Del Ponte resigned from the UN war crimes commission

of inquiry on Syria because of what she called "a disgrace for the international community" in the UN Security Council's failure – due to Russia's veto – to refer to the International Criminal Court evidence reportedly implicating senior Syrian political and military figures. Drawing a contrast to her work in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia, Del Ponte said there was "no possibility of seeking justice for the victims."

Syria has been reshaped with 5 million people, mainly Sunni Muslims, fleeing the country. Their exodus has spread a sense that Syrian President Bashar Assad holds power through unjust violence. As this perception permeates the Sunni Arab world, it makes it increasingly difficult for Saudi Arabia to tolerate Iran's complicity. This deepens the Iran-Saudi rivalry and complicates efforts to find diplomatic solutions for any regional issues.



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Iran's republic of lies

Before the revolution, we Iranians used to drink in public and pray our prayers at home. Now, we do the reverse," runs the joke.

As with most Iranian political jokes, there is great deal of truth in it: 38 years after the revolution of 1979 and establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Iranian society is more than ever entangled in hypocrisy: Outward pretension of devotion and religiosity, but committing sins – big and small – in private.

Worse still, the religiously legitimised government is the most active proponent of hypocrisy, duplicity and lies. This weakens public confidence in the political system, as well as religion.

The latest public embarrassment for the regime was sparked in July as private photos of Azadeh Namdari, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) TV and radio hostess, emerged on the Persian language blogosphere: Multiple photos showed Namdari in Switzerland drinking beer in a male company without wearing a hijab.

The photos are particularly scandalous since the IRIB and the Islamic Republic media at large have for years marketed Namdari as the most prominent proponent of chador, full body-length cloak, and, as such, a role model for Iranian girls.

"Thank God, I wear the chador," was the headline of the January 3, 2015, edition of Vatan-e Emrooz quoting Namdari. In the interview, she said: "[The women in] my family wore chador... so I, too, began to wear it... There is respect for women wearing the chador, respect that I admire and the older I got I felt I should thank God for wearing the chador in a male-dominated work environment.

"Thank God that I work in TV and wear the chador... I'm indebted to it. It's a blessing. Forgive me for saying this but I feel more beautiful with the chador."

Namdari claimed many Iranian women had reached out to her saying her appearance on TV was the inspiration behind them wearing the chador.

In a January 8 TV interview with Iranian actress Niki Karimi, who is generally barred from appearing on Iranian television because of her "insufficient" hijab, Namdari asked: "Can't you just adjust your headdress to cover your hair more, so you can appear on TV?" Karimi said she has not a habit of surrendering her freedom. Namdari was visibly repulsed by Karimi's response.

Against this background, sudden emergence of Namdari's



Political religiosity. An Iranian man prays at the Imam Khomeini Grand Mosque in the capital Tehran.

(AFP)

photos and video footage – without the chador and drinking beer in male company – sent shock waves throughout the Persian-language blogosphere.

Reacting to the scandal, Namdari uploaded a video claiming her chador had – for a moment – fallen off her head when the photos were taken and judiciously kept silent about drinking beer.

Ending her tumultuous Swiss picnic, Namdari returned to Tehran, where she, the Mizan news agency reported, was arrested by the police upon her arrival at Tehran Imam Khomeini International Airport. News of her arrest has been dismissed by other Iranian media but there is no trace of Namdari in the public sphere.

Namdari's little act of hypocrisy is the symptom of a bigger malady in Iranian society: Difference between the private and public face of Iranians, who have no choice but pretend religiosity in the public sphere but do otherwise when at home or abroad, outside the reach of the prying eyes and ears of the moralistic state.

Once a public face of morality, in this case Namdari, is unmasked as a normal woman having a beer in the park, the Iranian public once again screams "duplicity" and "hypocrisy" against the political system and its underlying religious ideology, losing faith both in the polity and religion. This is the peril of mixing religion and state in Iran.



Before the revolution, we Iranians used to drink in public and pray our prayers at home. Now, we do the reverse.
An Iranian joke