



# Ambassador Mousavian on Iranian Foreign Policy and Its Challenges

November 12, 2015 • Interviews

Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian is a Research Scholar at the Program on Science and Global Security at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He is a former senior diplomat who served as Iran's Ambassador to Germany as well as head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council. He was also spokesman for nuclear negotiations between Iran and the international community in the early 2000's.

Other previous posts held by Ambassador Mousavian include senior foreign policy advisor to Iran's Supreme National Security Council and Vice President at the Center for Strategic Research in International Affairs. He is the author of *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir*, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and most recently of *Iran and the United States: An Insider's*

*View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace*, published by Bloomsbury Academic. Ambassador Mousavian spoke to Reza Akhlaghi about Iran's relations with regional states and

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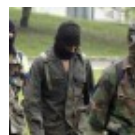
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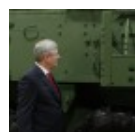
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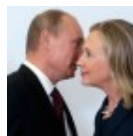
**Devising foreign policy in the Middle East today largely involves taking into consideration sectarian politics. What were the key dynamics that led to the current sectarian politics in the region?**

In order to trace down the current state of affairs in the Middle East—where a whole host of menaces ranging from terrorism, civil wars, and unrepresentative regimes are hallmarks of its politics—we need to have a thorough observation of the historical intricacies that have brought about this situation.

To understand the root causes of sectarianism in the Middle East, I believe we need to consider the politics that were conducive to the development of a fertile ground for sectarian mindset in the region. The disintegration of the Levant region under the auspices of the “Sykes-Picot Agreement”, the illegal occupation of Palestine by Israel backed by western powers and the whole Israel-Palestine conflict, western support of unrepresentative and corrupt regimes in many Arab states, and the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan in more recent years have all led to the current sectarian quagmire that we are facing in the Middle East.

The occupation of Palestine, in my opinion, lies in the heart of a vast majority of the problems in the region. The West’s unconditional support of Israel, in particular that of the United States, has led to a feeling of discontent and dehumanization in the general psyche of the people in the Muslim World. In the backdrop of this, the general population in the Arab World finds itself subject to corrupt dictators that are head-to-toe supported by Western powers. In some these countries the West has for many years consistently supported regimes that represent a minority in their countries such as in Bahrain, and Iraq under the reign of Saddam Hussain.

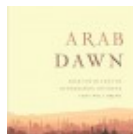
Therefore, it is not hard to envisage that the accumulation of discontent and disenfranchisement amongst different societal tiers yield in the creation of radicalism and sectarian savagery and violence that are justified under the guise of Islam. Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and ISIS are clear illustrations of these policies exercised by these regimes, and as the saying goes, the Frankenstein has ultimately come to hunt its



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saying good, and Islamism has ultimately come to harm its creators. So many of these countries that provoked sectarian policies are now the target of these terrorist groups.

**You have recently asserted that there are two competing coalitions against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Based on your assertion, the first coalition is made of Iran, Russia, Iraq, Hezbollah, and Syria's Assad; and the other is the United States and its allies largely made of Arab states plus Turkey. What do you think led to the emergence of these two competing coalitions?**

If we look at the position that these coalitions have held vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis since the outset of the conflict in 2011, it's safe to say that the position of Iran and its allies in the region plus Russia are very realistic and sober. This position envisions a plan that calls for an immediate ceasefire between the government and opposition groups, establishment of a comprehensive national dialogue encompassing the entire Syrian political spectrum followed by national reconciliation.

If exercised successfully, this plan of action envisaged by the Iranians and the Russians will lead to the formation of a transitional government based on a consensus whose main role would be to prepare the mechanisms for presidential and parliamentary elections. Then the fight to rid the country of ISIS and Al Nusra Front would certainly be more effective since there would be a national determination focused on confronting terrorism.

On the other hand, the position of Arab states plus Turkey has been based on Assad's ouster and not terrorists. This policy, however, does not withstand the fact that the party or the entity that has fought terrorism in Syria for the past number of years has been the Syrian army directed by president Assad. Furthermore, setting preconditions on the destiny of Syria by these countries—which do not envision

any role for the Syrian people to participate in the future of their country— would certainly have potentially long-term repercussions since the Syrian people are precluded to take part in the election of their president.

We can now see that the West's Arab allies plus Turkey are gravitating more closely toward the proposed Iranian-Russian policy and diverging from their initial position that relied on the removal of Assad as a precondition for any

peace plan.

Moreover, the policies of these two competing coalitions run counter to each other from a practical point of view. Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Turkey—through their financial, logistical, and military support—have been key factors that led ISIS and other terrorist groups to become the monsters that they are today. We have witnessed that even the United States raised its dissatisfaction with this policy when US Vice President Joe Biden in his speech at Harvard University last year criticized Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE for fixating their policies on removing Assad from power and pouring hundreds of million of dollars and throwing tens of thousands of tons of weapons at anyone who would fight against Assad.

The above dynamics in policy differences, then, can be viewed as diverging points separating the Iran-Russia camp from the Saudi-Turkey-UAE-Qatar camp.

**Among the mix of players and influencers involved in the Syrian war, who do you think seek to maintain Syria's territorial integrity and consider this to be a strategic imperative for them?**

As I clarified in the previous question, the policy of Iran and its allies plus Russia—which has garnered more support from Western countries recently after the US and Britain tacitly stepped away from their previous policy of ousting Assad as a precondition for any peace talks—bears more realism and practicality. Russian-Iranian persistence on the right and the role of the Syrian people for the future of their country will certainly ensure the territorial integrity of Syria. Syria's territorial integrity is essential for the stability of Syria, the region, and the world.

**How would you rate the current state of Turkish-Iranian relations? Is it fair to suggest that Ankara views Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as a strategic asset used to advance certain foreign policy goals?**

The bilateral relationship between Iran and Turkey has generally been good especially in terms of economic and cultural exchanges. The trade volume between Iran and Turkey is more than \$13 billion, which could potentially climb up to more than \$30 billion in the wake of the Iran nuclear deal and the removal of the international sanctions against Iran. Furthermore, there is a high number of tourist

exchanges between the two countries that further indicate the importance of a generally good neighborly relations between Tehran and Ankara.

On some regional issues, however, the two countries differ. With the onset of the "Arab Spring" in 2010, Turkey attempted to play a leadership role in these events. Upon the ouster of Bin Ali from power in Tunisia, then Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, convened a meeting with Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of En-Nehda Movement, in the Turkish embassy in Tunisia. Furthermore, following the removal of Gaddafi from power in Libya, Turkey hosted the head of Libya's provisional government in Turkey with a \$300 million aid package, a large portion of which was given to the Justice and Development party in Libya. Turkey also attempted to strengthen its regional position after the unrests in the Arab World by committing itself to an almost unconditional support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt after Mubarak was toppled. Turkey hosted Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood—who had by then been elected president in Egypt—and promised a \$2 billion investment package to Egypt. However, with the military coup in Egypt that removed Morsi from power and the chaos and anarchy that have been the dominant state of affairs in Libya, these policies resulted in serious repercussions for Turkey.

Syria is perhaps Turkey's most important regional challenge that has led to a divergence with Iran. In the beginning of the unrest in Syria in 2011, Turkey supported President Assad in controlling the unrest. However, a few months later, Turkey's

policy towards Syria underwent a drastic change by Turkish recognition of opposition groups in Syria, which effectively positioned Turkey against Assad.

The Turks concentrated on a policy of arming the opposition groups and equipping whomever who would fight against the government with the hope of removing Assad from power in a short span of time. This policy resulted in a fundamental shift in Turkey's policy of "Zero Problem with our Neighbors", which has so far led to serious negative reverberations for the Turkey and the region.

The spillover of the Syrian conflict into Iraq and its impact throughout the region have effectively made Turkey, Saudi and its GCC allies unable to control the situation. Therefore,

Turkey's policy of "no problem with our neighbors" ranging from Iran to Israel initiated in 2008 has so far turned into Turkey's becoming an ally of extremist Sunni actors such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

There is a growing belief that Erdogan's embrace of the harsh policies of Saudi Arabia towards Syria might be reflective of his conservative Sunni constituencies that prioritize their religious affinity with their Sunni brethren in Syria above their strategic national interests.

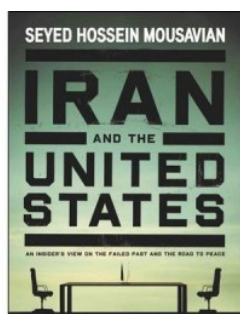
Nevertheless, I believe that sooner or later Turkey will start to distance itself from Saudi interventionist policies—which has become more and more overt since the new King Salman came into power.

Further prolongation of the conflict in Syria would further complicate Turkey's security and regional position. Turkey is now facing serious challenges on three fronts. First is ISIS, which recently claimed responsibility for a series of terrorist attacks on Turkish soil. Second is the threat that Turkey faces from its Kurdish dominated regions.

In Syria, the Kurds (PYD) refrained from colliding with the opposition in the fight against Assad forces, which in turn gave an autonomous role to these Kurdish areas after the withdrawal of government forces. However, after ISIS attacks on the Kurdish dominated city of Kobani near the Turkish border and the inaction of the Turkish government, there was

a wave of international criticism of Turkey. The latter development led to the recent break in the ceasefire between PKK and the Turkish government and the subsequent clashes between the two. And the third threat facing Turkey comes from the displaced people of Syria who seek refuge inside Turkey.

Therefore, to answer your question, the status quo does not suggest that ISIS has been a strategic asset to Turkey's regional policy.



Since the signing of the Iran Nuclear Deal, China—a member of the P5+1 countries that negotiated the nuclear deal—has



**expressed interest  
in deepening ties**

**with Iran including in military sphere. Do you see the deepening of the ties between the two countries moving toward the eventual inclusion of Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)?**

The bilateral relationship between China and Iran is of utmost strategic importance to both countries. For Iran, China has been its most important trading partner with annual trade volume exceeding \$50 billion. China is Iran's largest oil costumer and has been active in Iran's infrastructural projects. As a result, I believe that economics ties between the two countries at the heart of Iran-China strategic relationship.

Moreover, like China, Iran has for years resisted Western hegemony and weathered serious attempts by western countries—in particular the United States and some of its European and Middle Eastern allies—to bring down the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The West's support for Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980, exclusion of Iran from many international, political and economic platforms, and various forms of unilateral and multilateral sanctions levied on Iran are a good testament to the types of pressures

that the Islamic Republic has withstood in the past few decades.

However, with changes in Iran's regional and international stance in the wake of the nuclear deal—in which Iran essentially received the recognition by all major powers in the world of its nuclear program and by extension of the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic— I believe Iran is a strategic asset to many international organizations.

SCO is one such organization whose importance to Iran is very evident. Any strengthening of Iran's economic and political ties with the BRICS countries and the member states of the SCO can certainly be of utmost strategic benefit to Tehran. Iran can use this platform to raise its voice vis-à-vis regional and international issues. Furthermore, since almost all the member states of the SCO and the BRICS fit into the definition of a developing-country with rising energy needs, Iran can certainly play a significant role in meeting their energy needs. There are also other benefits such as using Iran's geographical location as a trade corridor between the

East and the West, which can further elevate Iran's economic and political position on the international stage.

**In light of the development of China's One-Belt One-Road grand Eurasian strategy and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union and their cordial ties with Iran, does Iran need to coordinate with Russia and China how it conducts its foreign policy in Central Asia?**

The technicalities of how Iran can conduct policy vis-à-vis the SCO were described in the previous question. But as to how Iran should maneuver its policies in Central Asia and whether it needs to coordinate with Russia, China, I believe that Iran has proven that it believes in multilateralism. For Iran to play an effective role in Central Asia, it needs to engage in a multilateral endeavor with all the countries in the area including Russia, India and China, which are three key countries in that region.

**When do you expect Canada and Iran to re-establish ties and reopen embassies in their respective capitals? Do you think Iran would be open to Canadian investment?**

Prior to the sanctions over Iran's nuclear program, Iran and Canada enjoyed normal bilateral relationship with their embassies operating in both countries. However, the conservative government of Stephen Harper, under the influence of some over-zealous individuals with close ties to Israel, abruptly terminated its diplomatic ties with Iran that did not really conform to any realm of logic and strategic reasoning.

However, I believe that with the ascendance of the Liberal Party led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the relationship with Iran will be revised and put back into a normal order. As to whether or not Iran would be open to Canadian investment, I don't think Iran would be opposed to such a scenario in the wake of Canada's potential quest to normalize its bilateral relationship with Iran.

**Certain domestic constituencies in Iran and the United States continue to pose threats to normalization of relations between the two countries. Can you explain what their key concerns are? What are the next likely steps toward normalization of relations?**

The public psyche in Iran for very legitimate reasons is



skeptical of the intention of the United States towards Iran. To put it briefly, the United States has played a very negative role in so many historical junctures in Iran ranging from the coup in 1953, support of the Shah, the shooting down of a civilian airplane in 1988, backing of Saddam Hussein throughout the imposed eight-year war with Iran, its unilateral sanctions against Iran and bullying other countries to follow-suit. Furthermore, I believe it does not require a deep observation to figure out that the United States policies in the Middle East have been very negative and destabilizing.

The invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, propping up Iran's Arab neighbors with massive unreasonable amount of military equipment that are solely predicated to provoke Iran, and the unconditional support to Israel that lies in the heart of many problems that we are now facing in the Middle East. So I believe, there are reasonable concerns from parts of the government in Iran and the public about the United States.

The situation is, however, different in the United States. First of all, media—which is controlled by powerful interest groups — plays an important role in the shaping of foreign policy mindset in the United States. Media in the U.S can turn Russia into a monster from being a strategic partner over night after the Ukrainian conflict.

During a period in the 1980s, Japan's massive economic success pushed the media in the U.S to portray Japan as a threat with daily coverage of how to confront Japan's growing economic power. Therefore, I believe that it is not the constituencies and the public who play the vital role in foreign policy decision-making in the US, but the media, powerful interest groups, and internal competition between the Republicans and Democrats in Congress, Senate, and the executive branch. Unfortunately, it is true that the pro-Israel lobby in the U.S is extremely powerful and possesses enormous leverage over the foreign policy decision making in the U.S.

Back to Iran, unfortunately, years of sanction were a breeding ground for certain groups in Iran to make huge fortunes and take advantage of their special connections and the imperfect economic competition in the country.

I believe that some voices opposing any normalization of relations with the West belong to these groups. Nevertheless, I do recognize the fact that there are many who are

concerned about the real intention of the West and the potentially detrimental effect of opening to the West for Iran's national interests.

But these concerns can be remedied provided that the West and the U.S in particular commit themselves to implementing their parts of the bargain with regard to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA—also known as the Iran nuclear deal). Equally important is the need for the removal of the illegal sanctions against Iran and avoiding interference in the country's internal affairs. These could be good first steps that would precipitate confidence on both sides.

Other areas of cooperation could be fighting terrorism in the region, ensuring stability and security of the Persian Gulf and the safe passage of energy resources through it, transfer of technology and strengthening of economic ties, academic exchanges and easing visa restrictions for tourists for both countries. Finally, I would like to point out that Iran and the United States both have a wide range of disputes and overlapping interests. The question is whether the two countries would be able to resolve their disputes peacefully and cooperate on commonalities.

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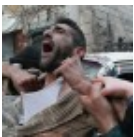
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