

Bartosz Bojarski

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The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies nr 1 (3), 45-57

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Bartosz Bojarczyk

University of Maria Curie-Skłodowska in Lublin, Poland

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been facing several important challenges to its security. Advanced nuclear programme, which is a source of conflict with Western powers, and rapid regional developments (Iraq, Egypt, Afghanistan and mainly Syria) have put that state into a very fragile or even dangerous position. International economic isolation (US, European and the United Nations' sanctions lately) brought Iran to the edge of economic surveillance. Deep, structural economic crisis that was worsened by international sanctions is devastating the daily life of the Iranians and may serve as a good pretext for social unrests. Tehran has limited its room for manoeuvre with regard to the sanctions and it urgently needs to implement radical changes into its economy. On the political level, the election of new president – Hassan Rouhani ended the conflict between the main political figures and groups in Iran, but the status quo is still very fragile and in the near future we may expect new developments inside the Iranian decision-making centre.

Key words

Iran, crisis, security, Middle East, conflict

1. Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran is on the crossroads, both internally and externally. In domestic arena, Iran faces few very serious challenges that may undermine the security of the fragile socio-political and economic systems, or even may result in deep and fundamental changes of its primary outlook. The most crucial issues are related to the economic situation of Iran. The oil sanctions that were imposed by the Western countries (mainly the USA, the EU, and their allies) have already took effect and caused considerable problems for Iran. Its economy was already in difficult position and the latest sanctions have hit it quite badly. The combination of oil, financial, and banking sanctions drove Iran into terrible

condition and there is no noticeable hope for the economic resurrection. However, the economic challenge is now directly related to the international position of Iran, but there is an urgent need for fundamental and long term, as well as very costly and painful (for the society) reforms. Economic situation, or rather the further economic decline, may result in social unrests that would easily turn into state-wide turbulence. Breaking out of economic isolation or the economic containment imposed by the Western powers may be only achieved through political dialogue, mainly on the nuclear programme.

On the international level, Iran is under direct threat of military intervention aimed at stopping or slowing down its nuclear programme. It looks like the near future may bring final developments in the ongoing conflict with the Western powers, mainly the USA and their regional ally – Israel. Washington has to deal with the Iranian issue quickly and military action is promoted not only by Israel, but also by influential parts of the American establishment. Therefore, the top figures of the Iranian regime need to decide how they want to resolve that conflict and what conditions need to be fulfilled in order to bring it to the negotiation table. The Western powers are quite tired of the Iranian ducking game and will push into final solution whatever it may be. Regional developments, like the two regime changes in Egypt, the ongoing war in Afghanistan, the very fragile Iraqi securitization processes, revolts in Arab states, and, most importantly, the civil war in Syria, make Iran more powerful in the short-time perspective, but each of them may easily become very dangerous for Iran's security. The conflict with the USA and their allies plays an important role in shaping and cementing Iranian domestic system, it but can not be used forever to that purpose. Moreover, it looks like the limit has been already reached, and new developments will follow with all the consequences. The main question for today is what will be the future of Iran if Syria fell apart under foreign intervention combined with internal struggle (the Libya scenario).

2. Internal Dimensions

The Iranian political system, described by its founding fathers as an Islamic Republic, is very awkward and complicated in its unique nature. Iran is the only state where the clergymen (in this case the Shia ones) has so much impact, or rather play a crucial role within it. Political Shiism, the doctrine of which was shaped by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, became a base for Iranian socio-political system and until now that state is the only theocratic republic in the world. In

practice, the constitution adopted in 1980 legitimised centralisation of most religious, political, and economical powers in the hands of the Supreme Leader¹. However, the newly established republican system divided the powers among three fundamental branches and found political bodies like the parliament, the government, the president, the guardian council, and others, but, in practice, it was Khomeini, who, with his inner circle, was responsible for the structure and policies of the state. The situation changed in late 1989, when the constitution was revised and later developments resulting from Khomeini's death. His close associates had to reorganize the system and divide the powers among themselves to keep the achievements of revolution and sustain the stability and security of the system. Thus, this very fragile and interdependent system (among key regime figures) came into being in late 1980-s and continues to exist. According to K. M. Polack, the Iranian regime is one of the most fragmented governments in the world². The existence of overlapping institutions and the informal system, parallel to the constitutional one and based on key personalities, bring a lot of misunderstandings and uncommonness to the analysis of the Iranian decision-making processes. "The system is a composite of key personalities, their informal networks and relationship with other individuals and power centers, and the institutions with which these personalities are associated."³ Iran's political system is a mixture of republicanism and theocracy, where institutions, personalities, and family connections alternate on political and economical levels.

During the 1980s, under the supervision of Ayatollah Khomeini two factions were shaping Iranian system – the traditional conservatives and the Islamic leftists. After his death, the revolutionary figures like Khamanei, Rafsanjani, Mahdavi-Kani, Karrubi, Yazdi, Jannati, and many others constructed the system where none of the factions was able to obtain a dominant position. Such an informal system of checks and balances worked pretty well, where formal and informal relations were aimed to secure the system and conduct day-to-day politics. The end of a longstanding war with Iraq brought an urgent need for economical reconstruction and stabilization of its international position. The revolutionary approach to the external environment has mostly failed and Iran

¹ L. Jensen, *Explaining Foreign Policy*, Englewood Cliffs 1982, p. 99.

² K.M. Polack, *Iran: Three Alternative Futures*, "Middle East Review of International Affairs" 2006, No. 2, p. 75.

³ *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonayads. An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, D.E. Thaler, A. Nader, S. Chubin, J.D. Green, Ch. Lynch, F. Wehrey (eds.), RAND-National Defense Research Institute 2010, p. XIII.

needed to reorient its strategy and put emphasis on more moderate policies. In 1989, Khamanei became the Supreme Leader and Rafsanjani took the president's office. That brought balance to the system and was advantageous for the stability of the state. During the period of normalisation (of external relations) and reconstruction (of economy) in the years 1989–1997, the old revolutionary guards served as a main faction and shared the responsibility to maintain the system in an acceptable shape. Pragmatism and national interests have overwhelmed the revolutionary rhetoric and the current fragmented system has been established at that time⁴.

The election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 was widely perceived as a signal of opening and democratization of Iran. New strategy of détente in international relations and more moderate domestic policies have raised a lot of hopes for the possible evolution of the system. New parties like the Islamic Participation Party of Iran, the Servants of Reconstruction, and the 2nd Khordad Movement were the main bases for ongoing reforms. Leftist orientation aimed for gradual evolution of closed system was slowly changing the Iranian realities. A limited liberalism was applied at the social, political, and economic levels and full reconciliation with the regional and international players was taking place. During the first term of office of President Khatami, Iran shifted to a very moderate stance and it looked like the final rapprochement would be possible. Unfortunately, regional and global developments, especially related to the war on terror (after 9/11), active penetration of the Middle East system by the USA, collapse of peace process, war in Afghanistan, and occupation of Iraq have resulted in a dramatic shift in the Iranian internal affairs. New challenges to the security of Iran caused radicalisation on the domestic level. The ongoing changes have been aborted and the so called hardliners once again came to power.

External developments, once again, have brought the conservative (radical) faction into power. They were able to win the parliamentary election in 2004 and their candidate Mahmood Ahmadinejad has won the presidential election in 2005. That radicalisation of the Iranian political scene was a direct answer for the growing external insecurity, mainly connected with the US military offensive in the surrounding regions. The US confrontational attitude towards Iran under the administration of President G. Bush completely ruined the possibility of normalization in the bilateral relations. Iran has stiffened its position and moved into very harsh regional activities. Of course, both states resolved some issues

⁴ H. Hassan-Yari, *Iranian Foreign Policy in the Postwar Era* [in:] *Iranian Perspectives on the Iran–Iraq War*, F. Rajaei (ed.), Gainesville 1997.

thanks to informal cooperation (Afghanistan and Iraq), but the conflict raised even more, and the case of Iran's nuclear programme as well as its support for the radical Islamic organizations (Hezbollah and Hamas) became primary sources of conflict. Between 2004 and 2009, the so called opposition movement was cracked down in Iran and the final battle took place after the controversial presidential election in 2009. The "Green movement" led by Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mahdi Karroubi, and the Khatami brothers was not able to extort fair results from the regime, which led to street violence and civil unrest. The hopes for peaceful evolution were lost and the regime emphasised its own surveillance rather than acceptance of the people's will.

There were no dramatic changes within the system and the surveillance of it was not shaken. We have to understand that "opposition" leaders are the long time servants of revolution and they were not proposing serious changes in the Iran's socio-political system. The developments of 2009 resulted from the regime's internal struggle between the opposing factions. It was the struggle between the leftists and conservatives; the latter were directly supported by the Supreme Leader, which was crucial for their victory. It seems that the opposition movement, connected with liberalization of internal and foreign policies, was decisively crushed down and their leaders were put into house arrest. The shift on the domestic scene, from rivalry between the leftist and conservatives into internal struggle on the right side of Iranian political scene, drove into very dangerous situation. During the 1980s and 1990s the factional balance system was composed of the Organization of Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution and the Militant Clergy Association (and the earlier mentioned supporters of Khatami) on the one hand, and the Militant Clergy Association and the Coalition of Islamic Associations on the other⁵. In the 21st century, the leftists lost their power and the system was overwhelmed by the conservative or radical right factions. It has shaken the equilibrium of the Iranian "republican" system and new conflicts grew up in connection to the domination of the conservatives.

The main shift in the top political circle began between 2004 and 2005, when conservatives took Majlis (2004) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became President. Neoconservatives, or principalists, as they were later called, came to the top structures as a result of the declining position of reformists. They are a new generation politicians, fairly religious, supported by the Supreme Leader,

⁵ W. Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*, Washington 2000, Chapter 1 and 2.

and often with background in the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps⁶. They were perceived by the Khamanei as the answer to the international challenges and they served as great supporters of Iran's confrontational position. They were able to unite and organise themselves in the begging of the century and for ten years they have played a dominant role in the formal/constitutional institutions. That faction, with the praise from the Supreme Leader, practically disabled the reformist movement and only the former president Hashemi Rafsanjani defended some of his power. Lately, his three children were arrested, which may be understood as a harsh attack not only on him, but also on his supporters⁷. Other leaders of the leftist/reformist factions are under house arrest, like Karrubi and Mousavi, or kept away from governmental or influential positions. However, the principalists did not remain cohesive, and soon after monopolisation of the power, there was a split between them. Ahmadinejad, with the support of top military and intelligence commanders, started to implement a modified vision of the state. The fact that he sought independency and his international activity were seen as very dangerous and brought Khamanai's disappointment. The great economic crisis that hit Iran (sanctions) complicated his position even more. Since early 2010 (when his close associates were accused of corruption), Ahmadinejad's powers were declining up to the election in 2013, which he lost in a rather humiliating manner. Different approach to Iranian polity, seeking an independent role, and economic difficulties broke his power and he was left out.

The other group of neoconservatives are the circle of the chosen "youngsters" close to the Supreme Leader. The most prominent is the Larijani family, of which one of two brothers is the Chief Justice and the second is the Speaker of Parliament. But, also Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel (Khamanei's son in law), Saeed Jalili, and many others form that "power keeping" party are directly chosen and secured by the Supreme Leader. Together with the old revolutionary guards they keep the Islamic Republic in traditional ways, shaping state's policies, and managing the economy. Khamanei controls the Parliament, the judiciary, the Guardian Council, and most of the military and paramilitary forces (existing independently to the IRGC) what makes his associates very strong, not only politically. Huge wealth located in religious foundations (bonayads) and family connected businesses gives them power over the existing and possible opposition.

⁶ *Mullahs...*, op.cit., pp. 40–46.

⁷ N. Bozorgmehr, *Rafsanjani's Son Released on Bail in Iran*, "Financial Times" December 17, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/2a44a440-484e-11e2-8aae-00144feab49a.html>.

The presidential election of 2013, won by Hassan Rouhani might be seen by the international community as a sign of Iran's moderation, but not much has happened in the internal affairs as yet. New president is a longstanding associate of Ayatollah Khamanei, he even served as chief negotiator with the Western powers. In his inauguration speech, he called for moderation and wisdom, he promised economic reparation program and called for transparency in nuclear negotiations⁸. It looks like the Supreme Leader has chosen Rouhani to manage economic crisis and to negotiate with international community because of his clean history of public service. The need for internal changes, mainly on the economic level, and promises of political reconciliation gave Rouhani victory. He was also supported by the old reformists and his cabinet is fairly multi-factional. He appointed Eshaq Jahangiri as First Vice-President, and Bijan Zanganeh as the Minister of Petroleum (both were close allies of Mohammad Khatami), but mainly invited conservatives and technocrats to form the government⁹. The new president meets difficult challenges at the beginning of his term, with the Syrian civil war, the upcoming US-led military conflict, the economic crisis, and the international nuclear conflict on top of them.

The political situation in Iran is in gridlock, and the conservative faction mostly related to the Supreme Leader is the most powerful one. On the political level, it looks like the need of counterbalancing the leftist/reformist faction was again realized by Khamanei and his supporters; perhaps a new wave of moderate politicians will approach top institutions in the near future. The other power is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps which grew in military and economic importance in the last decade. They would like to enter the decision-making process, not only in advisory and limited character, and they have been securing their growing interests through legal institutions not related to military issues¹⁰. So, for today we may recognise at least four main factions within the Iranian politics, but the whole system is controlled by the office of the Supreme Leader. We may see some fundamental changes only when Khamanei leaves politics,

⁸ *Rouhani Calls for Moderation in First Speech as President-Elect*, BBC, August 4, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23565996>.

⁹ S.K. Dehghan, *Iran's Parliament Approves 15 of Hassan Rouhani's 18 Cabinet Ministers*, "The Guardian" August 15, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/15/iran-middleeast>; *Iran's Rouhani Appoints Reformist as Top Deputy*, "The Big Story" August 5, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/irans-rouhani-appoints-reformist-top-deputy>.

¹⁰ B. Hourcade, *The Rise to Power of Iran's 'Guardians of the Revolution'*, "Middle East Policy" 2009, No. 3, pp. 61–63.

but it would mean his death. On the other hand, the internal situation of Iran is influenced by external developments, mainly arising from conflicts with the Western powers over its nuclear programme (up to the level of open military confrontation) and from insecurity or conflicts of regional neighbours. Further isolation or active containment of Iran may only worsen its internal situation, which most probably will lead to radicalization of the Iranian politics.

3. External Variables

Like it was already stated, right now Iran is in a very difficult international position. The long term (political, ideological, religious, and strategic in its essence) conflict with the United States reached the level of a possible military intervention in Iran. Washington accuses Tehran of supporting terrorist organizations and, what is the most important, of working on nuclear weapons development. There are also other concerns, like violation of human and citizen rights, spreading the radical Shia ideology and the anti-American propaganda, and more, but the first two are the most prominent accusations. External Iranian difficulties became even more complicated when the Arab Spring shaken the Middle East. The regime changes in Egypt, the evolution of Israeli position, the revolt in Bahrain, the civil conflict in Syria, the permanent Iraqi insecurity, the ongoing war in Afghanistan, and the Yemeni conflict are just a few major concerns that the Iranian regime must react to. The regional position of Iran is contained and actively opposed by the US (and its allies), which hold a dominant position in regional security system. As A. Ehteshami said, the 9/11 attacks gave the USA a perfect pretext to extend its influence over the Middle East to a dominant or even hegemonic position¹¹. Such an active US involvement naturally hurts Iranian interests and serves as a source of constant conflict for the Ayatollahs.

The main reason of Iran's international problems is its nuclear programme. Because of advanced uranium enrichment capabilities and accusation of building a nuclear bomb, Iran became the target of the US, its allies' and international sanctions. They are not only political, but lately a set of economic sanctions hurt Iran a lot. The embargo on oil and shipment, isolating its financial, insurance, and energy sectors, as well as basically banning transfer of new technologies were the main ones imposed on Iran in the 21st century. The most serious sanctions

¹¹ A. Ehteshami, *Globalization and Geopolitics in the Middle East. Old Games, New Rules*, London–New York 2009, pp. 69–70.

were adopted together with the US allies after 2010, when the Western powers finally decided to support US policy of active containment toward Iran¹². Tehran probably works on building a nuclear bomb, which is quite rational for many analysts, considering the dominant and aggressive US attitude towards Iran over the last three decades. Obtaining a nuclear weapon fits into the *resistance doctrine* adopted in the 21st century, shaped under the rule of neoconservatives as an answer to a growing isolation and insecurity of Iran, mainly related to the US regional activity¹³. Moreover, Despite the fact that Iran denies these accusations and the Supreme Leader stated many times that Iran would not build and use nuclear weapons, the international community is quite aware of Iran's growing nuclear capabilities. It is the reason why the USA and its coalitionist try to stop Iran from breaking the NPT regime, which would jeopardize Western interests in the region and naturally increase Tehran's power and security. The set of the latest economic sanctions deeply damages Iranian economy and jeopardize its daily life. As it was stated in August 2013 by the Iranian Expediency Council Chairman (and former president) Hashemi Rafsanjani: "We are besieged, under sanctions and boycott. We cannot use our resources, we cannot sell our oil, and if we do sell it, we cannot get the money transferred to us. If we buy anything, we must pay extra. We must pay extra in order to have the money transferred to us"¹⁴. There is still a chance that Iran's new president would reach the USA

¹² *New Sanctions on Iran*, U.S. Department of State, November 21, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/11/177609.htm>; *United States Welcomes European Union Sanctions on Iran*, U.S. Department of State, January 23, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/01/182350.htm>; *Increasing Sanctions against Iran*, U.S. Department of State, July 12, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/07/194924.htm>; *Deal Struck to Tighten Sanctions against Iran*, "The New York Times" July 31, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com>, [access: 31.07.2012]. For deep analysis of sanctions that were imposed on Iran see: K. Katzman, *Iran Sanctions. Congressional Research Service Report for Congress July 16, 2012*, Congressional Research Service, <http://www.crs.gov>.

¹³ M. Eisenstadt, *Religious Ideologies, Political Doctrines, and Iran's Nuclear Decisionmaking* [in:] *Nuclear Fatwa. Religion and Politics in Iran's Proliferation Strategy*, M. Eisenstadt, M. Khalaji (eds.), "Policy Focus" 2011, No. 115, pp. 5–8, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus115.pdf> [access: 14.05.2013].

¹⁴ Y. Mansharof, E. Kharrazi, *The Struggle between Khamenei and Rafsanjani over the Iranian Leadership – Part III*, "Inquiry & Analysis Series Report" 2013, No. 1014, p. 1, The Middle East Media Research Institute, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/print7389.htm> [access: 03.09.2013].

and open new chapter in negotiations, but the situation would be clearer after Washington decides on actions against Syria.

Iran's international stance is greatly affected by unstable situation in neighbour and regional states and is mainly shaped in opposition to the US dominance in the Middle East. Tehran is surrounded by a circle of instability just outside its borders. Close attention is paid to the situation in Iraq, where, after the withdrawal of US forces, situation is still very tense and a full-scale civil conflict may occur anytime. Right now, Iran is probably the most influential external power in Iraq¹⁵. During long stabilisation process in Iraq, Tehran was able to build its influences not only on the political level, but also on the social and economic ones. Security, territorial integrity, and material development of Iraq are supported by the Iranian leaders, but they would like to maintain their significant influence over the Iraqi polity and daily life. With the ongoing nation-building process in Iraq, the position of Iran is somewhat declining, but it still has the power to destabilise it by activating the Shia militias¹⁶. The best example of Iranian power and influence was shown lately, when Tehran sent arms to Syria using Iraqi airspace and no one could do anything about it¹⁷. To maintain a stable, but a pro-Iran oriented Iraq is in the interest of Ayatollahs, but if under attack or under harmful international pressure, they may use their influence to jeopardize the security of that state.

The longstanding conflict in Afghanistan, additionally decreased the level of Iranian external security. On one hand, Iran supports NATO military struggle because the Taliban are the bitter enemy of Tehran, but on the other hand, it would like to see the USA to be humiliated in that conflict, like it was the case with the USSR. The position of Iran in Afghanistan is growing, especially in the central and western provinces, where Iran trough huge money transfers is

¹⁵ E. Sky, *Iran Has Strong Influence in Iraq*, "The New York Times" March 20, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/03/19/the-iraq-war-was-it-worth-it/ten-years-after-the-iraq-war-irans-influence-is-strong> [access: 17.07.2013].

¹⁶ M.R. Gordon, A.W. Lehen, *Leaked Reports Detail Iran's Aid for Iraqi Militias*, "The New York Times" October 22, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/23/world/middleeast/23iran.html> [access: 23.10.2012]; K. Katzman, *Iran's Activities and Influence in Iraq. Congressional Research Service Report for Congress June 4, 2009*, Congressional Research Service, <http://www.crs.gov>, pp. 6–8.

¹⁷ M.R. Gordon, *Iran Supplying Syria Military via Iraqi Airspace*, The New York Times September 4, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/world/middleeast/iran-supplying-syrian-military-via-iraq-airspace.html> [access: 05.09.2012].

trying to buy influence over the Afghani polity and decrease the position of the USA and its allies¹⁸. However, if NATO would withdraw from Afghanistan, most probably that state will fell down once again to the Taliban and that would end the current Iranian influences.

The most important factor for the international position of Iran, right now, is the evolution of the Syrian civil conflict. The possible military intervention, which has been lately promoted by the USA after chemical weapons were used on August 21, 2013 in the Syrian war, will directly endanger Iran's position and destroy its only ally state in the Middle East. The close cooperation between Iran and Syria has been gradually built since 1979, but after the fall of Saddam Hussein regime the cooperation speed up to the level of a strategic alliance¹⁹. The main common interests of those two states are: cooperation in Lebanon (support for Hezbollah), containment of Israel and constant support for Palestinians, restraining American and Western influences within the Middle East (e.g. in Iraq), and developing close economic and financial relations²⁰. Syrian civil conflict has surprised the Iranian leaders, but they decided to fully back Assad's regime, by providing military, economic, and political support. But the long term and very bloody war in Syria creates real dilemmas for Tehran. It is rather unlikely that Iran will be able to take a decisive and military action if Syria becomes a victim to the Western (US) military intervention. Iran has no military means to support Syria, and deep economic crisis does not allow Tehran to send sufficient help to the Syrian government. Only the option of activating Hezbollah and Shia militants across the region remain, but Tehran needs to be very careful about inflaming the Middle East territories, because, in the strategic sense, it may decrease its regional position and bring actions from regional powers, as well as from the Western ones. Therefore, Iranian leaders are pushing for a diplomatic solution, opposing any military intervention in Syria,

¹⁸ D. Filkins, *Iran Is Said to Give Top Karzai Aide Cash by the Bagful*, "The New York Times" October 23, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/world/asia/24afghan.html> [access: 24.10.2010].

¹⁹ J.M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment*, "Ortadoğu Etütleri" 2013, No. 2, pp. 46–49, http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/Uploads/Article/Files/201331_makale2.pdf.

²⁰ *Syria i Iran zacieśniają stosunki* [Syria and Iran Strengthen Relations], Onet, October 2, 2010, <http://biznes.onet.pl/syria-i-iran-zaciesniaja-stosunki,0,3709760,onet-wiadomosci-detel> [access: 02.10.2010].

and calling for international negotiations. Iran supports Assad's regime and is backing Russian activities aimed at preventing any attack on Syria²¹.

The Iranian Supreme Leader, as well other politicians and top military commanders, predict that the possible Western intervention in Syria would damage the USA forces, destabilize Israel's security, and may spill over into other hotspots of the Middle East region²².

If the USA and some European states decide to strike Syria, Iran's position would be jeopardized even more. Attack on Syria may be understood as a prelude to a bigger action directed to break Iranian policy and end nuclear conflict. Iranian leaders are in difficult position, because if Syria falls, Iran would be a new possible target of military intervention aimed at democratising Iran, or rather at breaking its confrontational posture.

4. Conclusions

Iran is not cohesive politically and we may observe a gradual decline of the Ayatollah's power over the state. New factions are competing with the old ones for power within the systemic boundaries, but soon those centralised fluctuations may slip out of the old guards' hands. It looks like the political stability of Iran is mainly related to the position of Ali Khamanei as the Supreme Leader and his unilateral decisions of the divine rulership. Taking under consideration the age and rumours about Khamanei's bad health, we may expect harsh and unpredictable struggle for total power after his death. Iran's stability and security is also questioned by the developments on international level. Long term conflict over the nuclear programme, together with rapid changes in the regional security system (Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan) may result in international intervention. It looks like the USA is eager to reorganize the Middle East according to its own vision and Iran is one of the main obstacles on the way. There are just two options for Iran. Either it will find a way to negotiate a "big deal" with international community and moderate its policies, or it will become the place

²¹ E. Benari, *Putin and Rouhani: Intervention in Syria is Unacceptable*, "Israel National News" August 29, 2013, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/171388> [access: 03.09.2013].

²² *Iran: If Syria Is Attacked, It Will Strike U.S., Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Israel, As Well As E.U. Interests, Israel Will Be Destroyed. Special Dispatch No. 5429*, The Middle East Media Research Institute, August 30, 2013, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/7386.htm> [access: 05.09.2013].

of a next military intervention. The longstanding *status quo* of Iran is reaching its limits and Tehran is already badly damaged by international sanctions what makes it already rather worn out. It looks like the confrontational posture has brought great dangers for Iran, but the Iranian leaders may still opt for a peaceful solution by changing their policies and aggressive orientation. The ball is on their side, but the tension is growing and it may result in a great disaster for the Islamic Republic of Iran.