

Bureaucrats, ayatollahs, and Persian politics: explaining the shift in Iranian nuclear policy.

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Abstract

Defying a 2003 agreement to halt its nuclear program, Iran resumed its nuclear activities in 2005 despite the sanctions of a concerned international community. Theoretical frameworks in international relations use the strategic environment, regime type, and international institutions as key variables to explain foreign policy. In this article, it is argued that nuclear decision-making in Tehran cannot be understood through a "unitary rational actor" that would assume Iran to be a unitary rational actor that knows its capabilities, interests, and wants. This article investigates the changes in the domestic decision-making and bargaining process through a bureaucratic perspective. Although some point out hardliner President Ahmadinejad as the sole decision-maker, we argue that no individual could not have changed the course of the entire country; there were coalitions and struggling actors within the regime. Analyzing two different eras within the case of Iran, we argue that the shift in foreign policy coalitions among the Supreme Leader, the President, the Revolutionary Guards, the Atomic Energy Organization, and the Supreme National Security Council explains the shift in Iranian foreign policy. In our conclusion, we discuss the implications of this argument for the scholarly literature and offer policy-prescriptive advice.

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