

Interview - Ali G. Scotten

Written by E-International Relations

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Ali G. Scotten is the founder of Scotten Consulting, LLC, a company specializing in geopolitical and sociocultural analysis of the Middle East. He is also an Adjunct with the RAND Corporation. Ali holds a M.A. in anthropology from the University of Chicago and a M.S. in international relations from Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. While an Associate at the consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton, Ali served as a senior Middle East analyst and Persian language interpreter, managing projects for a variety of clients. He has briefed senior government officials, and his findings have been cited in U.S. Congressional testimony. A Truman Security Fellow, Ali's commentary on the Middle East has been featured in numerous outlets, including *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *National Interest*, and *AI-Monitor*. In addition to his work as an international affairs analyst, Ali has participated in archaeological excavations throughout the Middle East and Southwest United States.

What are your thoughts on Rouhani's allies facing a tough challenge in the run-up to the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections?

The extremely high number of disqualified parliamentary candidates reflected Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's level of commitment to reining in President Hassan Rouhani and his supporters following the administration's historic success in negotiating a deal with world powers over Iran's nuclear program. Each election, Khamenei must weigh his desire to defend the Islamic Republic's claim to represent the people's will against his need to ensure that the balance of power within the system remains in his favor. This time around, he chose to sacrifice some legitimacy by having the Guardian Council disqualify 99 percent of the 3,000 reformists who signed up to run.

Khamenei is right to be concerned. The election could very well prove to be a turning point in the history of the Islamic Republic. The supreme leader's staunch loyalists are especially worried that Rouhani will try to use the political momentum he has gained from the nuclear deal to pursue reforms that could dilute their political and economic influence.

The president and his pragmatic conservative and reformist allies differ greatly with hardliners over how to ensure the Islamic Republic's survival. Rouhani sees economic development as the primary way to maintain public support for the system and to protect Iran from foreign domination. He believes that to develop, Iran must integrate into the global economy and attract foreign investment—and if, in doing so, Iran must pursue solutions that are mutually beneficial for Iran and Western powers, so be it. Furthermore, Iran must also fight corruption in order to attract foreign investors, and enact a modicum of political reform to sustain the public's support for the president. On the other side, Khamenei and the hardliners believe the Islamic Republic can survive only so long as the Iranian people remain perpetually mobilized against Western imperialism. Rather than gaining strength through global integration, Iran can only protect itself through self-sufficiency that can keep out “westoxicating” products and ideas.

But despite the hardliners' best efforts, Rouhani and his allies were able to increase their presence in the next parliament. This is because—prompted, ironically by the hardliners' attempts to demoralize the moderates—a wide swathe of conservative candidates and reformist political strategists made the pragmatic decision to form a united front. Also, reformist activists on social media were influential in convincing many to hold their nose and vote for “less bad” conservatives in order to oust the president's most extreme opponents.

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The result of the election was a slap in the face to the supreme leader and his hardline allies. In the elections for Tehran's representatives, who tend to be the most influential in shaping the debate around national political and social issues, Rouhani's allies won all the seats. They even ousted the supreme leader's son in law, who had used his seat in parliament to be an outspoken critic of the president. The exact factional balance within the parliament is unclear because we have to wait for a run-off election for 60 seats where no candidate received the minimum required 25 percent of the vote. But it's likely that Rouhani's allies will have a little over one third of the seats. What this means is that the parliament will be less likely to obstruct the president's moves going forward, again especially because he has the influential Tehran seats on his side.

What are your thoughts on Iranian clerics urging the faithful to elect candidates loyal to the Islamic revolution and hostile to the United States?

Loyalty to the Islamic revolution and support for velayat-e faqih (leadership by an Islamic jurist) have been prerequisites for all candidates since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. However, what this means is open to interpretation. Just as in the U.S. political system, there are politicians of various stripes claiming to be following in the footsteps of the nation's founding fathers, Iranian candidates from most political factions claim to be the true inheritors of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's legacy. For some, including the current supreme leader, this means being staunchly anti-American and socially conservative. For others, such as Khomeini's grandson Ayatollah Hassan Khomeini, this means being pragmatic and listening to the will of the people.

What impact will the outcome of the Assembly of Experts election have on the future of the Islamic Republic?

This really is the trillion-rial question, and it's one that I don't have a clear answer to. According to the constitution, the assembly is tasked with selecting a new supreme leader once the sitting one becomes incapacitated. However, the only precedent we have is the succession following Ayatollah Khomeini's death. At that time, the establishment's unflinching loyalty to the Islamic Republic's founder meant that Khomeini could designate Ali Khamenei as his successor and—with some wheeling and dealing by Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, a close Khomeini confidante in the assembly—the Assembly of Experts vote in favor was a mere formality.

Supreme Leader Khamenei doesn't enjoy the same level of loyalty as his predecessor, and he governs over a more factionalized system. Major decisions in today's Islamic Republic are greatly impacted by competition that occurs "behind the curtain" amongst an informal and opaque complex of political, familial, security, and patronage networks that makes up the power structure. Only once a sizeable enough portion of the system arrives at a consensus can Khamenei move forward without fearing destabilization.

And so, the configuration of alliances throughout the entire system—more so than the individual preferences of the 88 assembly members—at the time of succession will play a determinative role in who is selected as the next supreme leader.

If, as you say, the Assembly of Experts vote may be a mere formality, then why do you think the Guardian Council risked alienating so many people by disqualifying the popular, reform-minded Ayatollah Hassan Khomeini from running?

Because in a political system like Iran's, where the lack of a free press and well-defined political parties means that it's difficult for people—even those within the system—to ascertain the precise balance of power, certain individuals' ability to attain high-profile posts can serve as signposts indicating what direction the political winds are blowing. As a well-respected, relatively young reformist cleric, Hassan Khomeini's election to such a position not only would have enhanced his stature, but also served as a symbol of reformist resilience in the face of harsh pushback from the hardliners. From the standpoint of the hardline conservatives, this would have boosted the expectation among the masses that the assembly would pick a moderate successor. And to see the consequences of dashing high expectations, we need not look further than the mass unrest following Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reelection in 2009, in which millions of reformist supporters protested what they saw as a stolen election. That popular uprising proved to

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be the biggest threat Khamenei had ever faced.

Nevertheless, the reelection to the assembly of the powerful pragmatic conservative Ayatollah Hashemi-Rafsanjani, as well as Rouhani's election to that body have also increased public expectations of moderation in the assembly. And the stunning failure of two staunch Khamenei supporters—Ayatollahs Mohammad Taghi-Mesbah Yazdi and Mohammad Yazdi—to get reelected may help shift the center of gravity toward moderates.

How successful do you think Iran will be in seeking \$45 billion in foreign investment following the implementation of the landmark nuclear deal with world powers?

I have little doubt that Iran ultimately will succeed in attracting the foreign investment it desperately needs in order to develop, among other things, its infrastructure and energy sector. The opportunities in the Iranian market are just too great for foreign investors to pass up.

But it remains to be seen whether your average Iranian will begin to feel the economic benefits of sanctions removal prior to the 2017 presidential election. If Rouhani's opponents have their way, foreign investment will flow into Iran at a slow pace. They want the president's base of supporters to be disillusioned by a lack of substantial progress, and they're concerned that a rapid influx of Western business activity in the country will translate into Western political influence and spark an uncontrollable push for social reforms among the populace. Meanwhile, many foreign firms will be concerned about making long-term investments in Iran until they are confident that the nuclear agreement will hold and sanctions won't be put back in place.

What are your thoughts on the Iranian endorsement of a plan by Saudi Arabia to stabilize global oil prices?

My understanding is that the Iranians continue to reject Saudi Arabia's plan.

How do you think the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia will change as a result of the thaw in U.S.-Iranian relations?

I don't foresee much of a change in the short term. Most of the current U.S. presidential candidates (with the possible exceptions of Bernie Sanders—whose foreign policy stance has yet to be fully articulated—and the wild card that is Donald Trump) likely will seek to maintain close ties with the Saudis. They most probably will double down on the decades-old U.S. strategy of bolstering Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council countries as a means of containing Iran. In today's political climate, it still pays to look tough on Iran. And there's a fear of looking weak if you're not unconditionally supporting traditional allies. In Washington's formulation, allies are thought of as family, where you feel obligated to stick with them regardless of their behavior. But geopolitics is serious business. And just as in a business partnership, an alliance should only be seen as valuable as long as you're profiting from it and it's not against your interests. Once that ceases to be the case, it's time to reassess.

In the Middle East, this belief has contributed to strategic inertia on the part of the U.S., preventing it from evolving to adapt to changing realities. In the midst of the Cold War, the U.S. designated Saudi Arabia as one of its twin pillars in the region—the other being the Shah's Iran—that could help prevent Soviet domination of the oil-rich Persian Gulf. Once the Shah fell in 1979, the Saudis were seen as the only game in town. Well, the Soviet threat ended a while ago. And with the North American shale revolution, Persian Gulf oil is no longer of vital importance to the U.S. So what is the actual benefit of the alliance (besides, of course, the billions of dollars in weapons sales to Riyadh)? We've seen the Obama administration bend over backwards to placate the Saudis following the Iran nuclear deal, providing them with political cover and intelligence in their war in Yemen. It's really unclear to me what interests are being served in helping the Saudis crush the Houthis who, despite Riyadh's assertions, do not appear to be bent on establishing an Iranian beach head on the Arabian peninsula. Meanwhile, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which has repeatedly attempted to attack the U.S., is gaining strength there as most of the attention is focused on fighting the Houthis. This is not to mention the decades-long Saudi export of Wahhabism throughout the world—an extreme brand of Islam that has formed the bedrock of Taliban and Islamic State ideology.

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In the long term, however, if the U.S. is serious about its plan to pivot to Asia, Washington will have to give up its containment strategy and work to establish a new regional security framework that incorporates, rather than excludes, Iran. This will especially be the case once Iran's power increases as a result of the lifting of sanctions, making containment too burdensome for the U.S.

How do you think Iran will change after the Nuclear Deal?

One thing I've learned is that the only thing you can predict about Iranian politics is its unpredictability. But what I can say with confidence is that without a nuclear deal, there would be little chance of political and social change in Iran. The continued pressure from the outside would have ensured a securitized atmosphere in Iran. Continued sanctions would have decimated what remained of the middle class, which tends to be the part of society with the education and financial stability to pursue reform.

With the threat of war on the backburner and sanctions removed, there is now the possibility of economic, political, and social progress in Iran. As we witnessed in the run-up to the elections, conservatives have splintered into multiple factions as they argue over how to move forward in this new post-sanctions era. Many have allied with reformists out of a desire to moderate Iran's international behavior in order to better engage with the global economy.

But we'll have to wait and see whether the entrenched interests—including the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, which increased its control over the economy as Iran's isolation intensified, and large government-affiliated religious foundations that have amassed massive financial holdings over the past several decades—are able to maintain their dominance in the economy. The lack of true privatization means the lack of a sizeable, independent middle class that can push for broader changes in Iranians' lives.

At the same time, the current alliance between pragmatic conservatives and reformists may not hold for the long term, especially as Iran's overall economic situation improves. The pragmatic conservatives want to pursue the "China model," in which economic development is the primary goal and political reform is pursued only to the extent that it prevents social unrest that could scare away foreign investors and hurt the economy. On the other hand, the ultimate objective for the reformists is political and social liberalization.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My background in anthropology has shaped the way I approach international relations. While geography, resource wealth, and military strength relative to others are undoubtedly important factors determining state behavior, culture also shapes what a nation perceives to be in its interest. When I began studying international relations, after completing my studies in anthropology, I was surprised to learn that constructivism is a relatively new perspective in the field, and not one that is taken seriously by all scholars. For me, it had just seemed like a given that a knowledge of the beliefs, ideologies, symbols, etc. that shape a people's understanding of their place in the world is fundamental to explaining their country's foreign policy. After all, nation states are made up of human beings, who are cultural animals.

Take, for example, the way that differing beliefs among Iranian politicians regarding how socially conservative society should be influences their willingness to engage in the global economy. Hardliners want to close off Iran's economy as much as possible in order to prevent Western products and ideas from corrupting the youth. On the other hand, many reformists want to open up economically precisely because they hope it will lead to social liberalization. Pragmatic conservatives, who straddle the middle, control the executive branch and are hoping to gain influence in the legislative branch. How the balance of power stands following the parliamentary election could have a great impact on Iran's level of engagement with the West as well as its behavior in the region.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Throughout your career, be willing to periodically revisit your past judgments and examine the underlying

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assumptions that they're based upon. It's natural to feel like you have a vested interest in defending your past work. But as you continue to expand your knowledge, there's nothing wrong with evolving in your thinking. I have much more faith in the intellectual capacity of those who possess a healthy dose of skepticism regarding their ability to know the world with certainty than I do for those who refuse to examine their shortcomings. Most major foreign policy disasters have been either caused or worsened by policymakers' unwillingness to take an honest look at the flaws in their logic.

Second, I highly encourage international relations scholars to engage with the public. Because what we're dealing with in this field, ultimately, are issues of war and peace, it's incumbent upon us to share our insights with the voting public. An informed populace is less likely to be frightened and manipulated by politicians and the media.

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This interview was conducted by Satgin Hamrah. Satgin is an Editor-at-large with E-IR