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Fanuli, Federica

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OPINION | The Italian-Persian relations, Before and After the Nuclear Deal

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By Federica Fanuli

Editor-at-Large, IndraStra Global



Image Attribute: File photo of Italian PM Matteo Renzi, meeting Supreme Leader of Iran - Ali Khamenei in Tehran with Iranian President Rouhani on April 12, 2016 / Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#)

The relations between the Islamic Republic and Italy enjoy an important historical and cultural past. It is not a coincidence, in fact, that after the signing of the historic agreement reached in Vienna on the nuclear issue and the subsequent release of the sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic, the President Rouhani has chosen Italy as the first Western country where travel to visit, as is a coincidence either that the Italian Premier Renzi was the first European Head of government to have been welcomed in Tehran.

Political relations between Iran and Italy date back to the period Parthian Empire, a major political and cultural powers of ancient Persia when Ctesiphon and Rome were the capitals of two universal powers. The Fall of the Roman Empire and the end of the Sasanian dynasty have undermined relations between the two civilizations determining a momentary stalemate, passed during the rise of the Safavids. The relationship has persisted through the centuries and, following the declaration of Independence and the proclamation of the Unification of Italy in 1862, the two countries have signed the Treaty of Friendship and in 1873 a commercial agreement.

During the Second World War and after Iran's occupation by the American Allies, relations between Tehran and Rome and the other aligned countries were interrupted and then resumed to normal at the end of the conflict. It was December 15, 1977, when the then President of the Italian Republic Giovanni Leone traveled to Tehran, heading a political-economic delegation of high rank to stabilize relations between the two countries, especially in the economic sphere, then in spite of 1978-1979, in the years of the rise of Khomeini politics and power of the theocratic Iranian, the Islamic revolution brought about a series of political and social upheavals that engulfed the entire country [1].

During the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the Italian public opinion and, in particular, the left parties had sided with Iran's favor, however, with the intensification of the tensions in Iran's relations with the United States, Italy has aligned to the American positions and approved the decisions of the Western powers to impose economic sanctions against Iran. At the time of the Gulf War, which lasted eight years and saw Iran deployed against the regime of Saddam Hussein, while sharing numerous development projects with Tehran and a large trade with Iraq, Italy declared its neutrality. It is no coincidence that the Italian airline in those years, Alitalia, has continued to fly out of Tehran, despite the Iraqi bombing of the Iranian capital. Things improved after the war, and especially after the election of the reformist Mohammed Khatami as President of the Islamic Republic.

In 1999, Khatami visited Rome. It was the first visit of an Iranian leader since the revolution abroad, an institutional meeting that signed the beginning of a new phase of reconstruction in which the Italian company attempted to acquire satisfactory roles in infrastructure projects and construction, energy, and technology, and it was during this period that he recorded a surge in commercial and economic cooperation between the two countries [2].

In the years of the conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), diplomatic relations with Italy cooled without never stop, because Italy is still considered today as the major Western friends of Iran. In the Tehran offices of the NIOC, Iran's state oil company, it is still hanging a large picture of Enrico Mattei, founder of ENI in the Fifties who ended an oil deal with Iran in favor of the Iranian government, distancing ENI from the "seven sisters", the cartel of seven great oil companies at the time [3].

In late November 2015, after the conclusion of the agreement on Iran's nuclear but before its implementation, a large Italian delegation representing 180 small and medium-sized enterprises and 12 banks arrived in Iran. The delegation was led by Carlo Calenda, Deputy Minister of Economic Development, and included leaders of Confindustria and the ICE, the Agency for the promotion abroad and the internationalization of Italian companies [4]. The goal was to prepare for the removal of sanctions imposed on Iran since 2006, the year of the first sanctions on nuclear power, over Iran's nuclear program. Italy is the most important European trade partner since 2006 until 2012 [5].

Later, in fact, the implementation of new commercial and financial sanctions imposed by the Union European weighed on the commercial exchange between Iran and Italy and, since then, the main trading partner is Germany. With the removal of sanctions, Italian companies should improve again investments. Many of the major Italian enterprises have a stable presence in Iran for many years: it is the case for example of Alitalia, the national airline of the Italian flag; the SAIPEM, a subsidiary of ENI, and Ansaldo Energia, a Finmeccanica group among the first at the world known for the production of power plants.

In 2013, the current President of Iran Hassan Rouhani has called our country "the door for relations between Iran and Europe", and before the Security Council of the United Nations imposed sanctions on Iran linked to the enrichment of the uranium program, Tehran provided for the 90% of Italian oil needs [6]. This is the reason why, during the visit of President Rouhani, last January, have been signed contracts for billions of euro and initiated around 17 agreements to boost cooperation in areas such

as energy, mining, and infrastructure. The resumption of trade relations between Italy and Iran could bring to our country nearly 3 billion Euros by 2018. These could be the profits from exports to Tehran in various sectors, energy, petrochemical, transport, and construction, until the fashion industry [7]. The commercial romance between Iran and Italy is, however, considerable resistance on the part of lenders, because the Italian and European banks have concerned that Tehran may violate the agreement with Washington after the imposition of sanctions in 2006. It will, therefore, be crucial in this direction, the support of Italian banks to take advantage of the economic operations [8].

The cooperation between Italy and Iran does not end on the economic and commercial level, but it inevitably has a political-diplomatic and cultural result. Premier Renzi, on the occasion of the Italy-Iran business forum in Tehran, has declared that "there is a belief that Iran's geopolitical role is strategic". The Italian Prime Minister refers to Syria, where there is an extreme need of strong political action that Tehran may exercise intervening on wire components Shiite country, as well as in Yemen and Libya. In fact, one of the fundamental points of Iran's foreign policy is the projection of its power in the Middle East. Behind the combating Caliphate, Iran is fighting a war to expand and defend their spheres of influence against the Saudi Arabia, Persian historic opponent on the Middle East chessboard.

A contrast that exploits the intra-religious conflict between Sunnis and Shiites, exploded with particular violence after the collapse of the fragile order emerged following the Arab Spring and involving primarily Syria, where Iran supports the Alawite regime of Assad (Alawism is a minority of Shiism) providing economic and military aid, including through the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, against the moderate Sunni insurgents, as al Qaeda and DAESH. Tehran has extended its influence in Iraq as well, where on the contrary DAESH has the support of the Sunni tribes, hostile to the central Shiite power. Then, Iran supports the Houthi Shi'ite rebels in Yemen against pro-government Riyadh, Bahrain and, more indirectly, now, Lebanon. In all these scenarios a placing huge economic resources from the Persian side could seriously prejudice the position of the Sunnis, led by Riyadh. Such as the Saudi Arabia, Israel is also worried by the political and economic revival of Tehran. It is in this direction that must be interpreted the visiting of the former general Saudi Anwar Eshki, currently president of the think tank based in Jeddah, the Middle East Centre for Strategic and Legal Studies.

The attempt of Riyadh and Jerusalem to join forces to respond to the rise of Iran in the Middle East region because if Iran would use the resources to fund Hamas and Hezbollah, the risk for the national security of its enemies could be high. However, the extreme complexity of the scenario, where even Turkey, Russia, and Egypt play their game, does not allow to venture reliable forecasts. At the moment, what is certain is that Iran could become a decisive actor with which to build a balance of peace for the future of the Middle East.[9] [10]

About the Author:

Federica Fanuli (Thomson Reuters RID: [M-9093-2015](#)) is the Editor-at-Large at IndraStra Global. She has graduated cum laude in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Salento, where she has taken the course with honors. Later, also completed her Master Degree in Political Science, Communitarian and International Relations from the same university. Twitter ID: [@seipolpette](#)

Endnotes:

[1] Italian Analyst - Italy eyes growing economic and security with post-sanctions Iran
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[3] Italia-Iran storia d'amore e d'interesse http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/mondo/2015-04-04/italia-iran-storia-d-amore-e-d-interesse-105915.shtml?uuid=ABdXIVKD&refresh_ce=1

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