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The ‘Special Liaison’ between
Italy and Iran:
economic, cultural and
political affinities

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MA Thesis: Modern Middle East Studies

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I would like to thank you all the interviewees and every person that gave me important advices, points of view, suggestions and help in elaborating my work. Without the information provided by them, part of this work could not have been done.

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Introduction

“Discourse is snatched from the law of development and established in a discontinuous atemporality”
(Foucault 1972: 166).

Relations between Italy and Iran seem to escape common conceptual definitions commonly used by international relations (IR) scholars. The two countries are not allied. They belong to different international blocs and diverge on a number foreign policy issues. They have different preferences and goals. Yet, their relations have been connoted by consistent mutual empathy. The fact that Italy is a “Western” country – being one of the founders of United Europe and a member of NATO – has never jeopardised its relations with Tehran, even when an anti-Western attitude was strategically preferred by Iran for both domestic and international purposes. Not even Khomeini’s revolution and the international sanctions did completely stop their relations, and Italy has long been Iran’s main trading partner.

We can say that two thousand years of history and cultural traditions make the two countries closer than it may superficially appear and are the basis for a deep political discourse. In my analysis I will examine how the two countries have managed to safeguard their respective interests within a reciprocal relationship that has remained constant despite the arising of internal ideologically antithetical situations, e.g. in Italy the opposition between DC and PCI¹ during the cold war, and in Iran the transition from the Pahlavi regime to Khomeini’s theocracy. The interests, the will to keep commercial and business channels in general open have been the winning cards that can make us say today that the ‘special liaison’ exists, is factual and can be fully analysed in the IR field.

What explains the mutual preference in Italy-Iran relations?

¹ Democrazia Cristiana (DC) and Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), the two largest political parties in Italy from WWII until the beginning of the 1990s. PCI was the strongest Marxist-communist party in Europe.

The theme examined is based on the existence of privileged relations, which I define ‘special liaison’, between Italy and Iran since at least seventy years. This question will be answered via an in-depth analysis of such relations, that go far beyond mere business interests as they draw on often-unconscious aspects of commonality and shared worldview. The answer will be supported by the analysis of interchanges historical and quantitative data, and the opinions of authoritative interviewees who all confirmed the existence of a positive discourse strengthening the cultural link and influencing political and economic relations. A first example is represented in figure 1, which shows the constant Italian leadership in being the most important and privileged European trade partner with Iran.

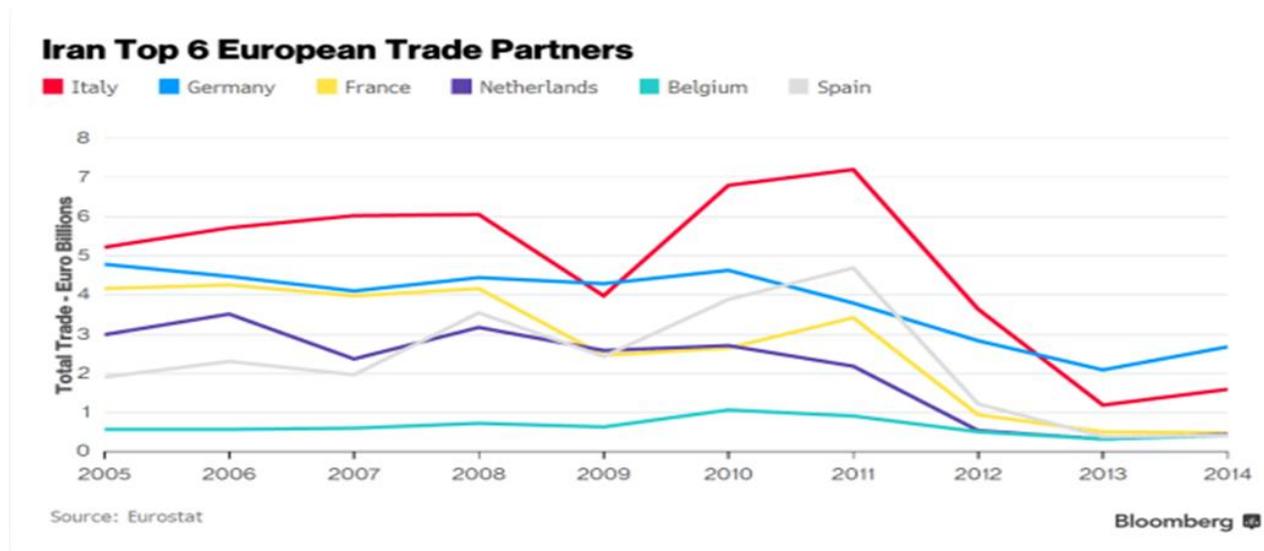


Figure 1 Eurostat: Iran top 6 EU trade partners.

In this chapter I will first contextualise my analysis in the already available literature. Second, I will discuss how social identities can be constructed and shape the IR discourse. Third, I will introduce and explain my personal theoretical framework, the ‘Special Liaison’, developed to explain the different kind of relations existing between Italy and Iran. Finally, I will explore the methodology and the methods used to collect all the data and the information required to support my argument.

Literature Review

There is limited analysis available on Italy-Iran relations; therefore, it is difficult to expose a detailed review of how their relations have been considered by scholars. Three notable examples are Coliaei (2008), Coltorti (2013) and Vittori (2014), who have depicted the relationship between these two countries as harmonic and based on reciprocal respect and consistently positive historical connections. Building on this scholarship, this thesis will try to theorize the relationships between Rome and Tehran in terms of ‘special liaison’ and connect it to the general literature on the foreign policies of these two countries.

Starting with Iran – three main approaches appear to drive Iranian foreign policy (FP): idealist, realist and constructivist. However, according to Soltani, Amiri (2010) and Azghandi (2002), Iranian FP can be classified in relation with the different ruling presidents and historical periods and should therefore be examined following four standpoints: realist, ideological, pragmatist and reformist.

Khalaji (2008) states that the main driver of Iranian FP is religious ideology. In his opinion all decisions are taken under an idealist perspective in line with the Shia Islam and with the precepts given by Khomeini. As Warnaar affirms, many works “describe the Iranian regime as primarily guided by ideological considerations, particularly a political interpretation of Shi’a Islam” (2013: 11).

Other scholars claim that the Iranian FP is driven by *Realpolitik*. Barzegar states that “Iran’s foreign policy is based on achieving strategic aims” (2008: 47) and that “the roots are defensive, mainly pragmatic, and [...] state-oriented” (Ibid.). Ehteshami maintains that “[r]evolutionary Iran has always been a ‘rational actor’ in the classic Realist mold. Even some of its excesses can be seen as calculated risks or opportunity responses to difficult situations” (2002: 284) and Akbarzadeh claims

that “Iran’s foreign policies promote Iranian national interests in a rather harsh international setting. And survival is the primary goal” (2014: 65). Shaffer (2006:220-1) mentions several important reasons that collocate Iran’s behaviour under realist perspectives, and critics the idealist connotations – this means that ideological proclaims are one thing, and concrete actions in FP are quite another, not even Iran does escape this rule and uses Islam for its material interests. A possible example supporting this thesis is Central Asian Republics’ (CARs) independence and how Iran has reacted to new opportunities and “culture serves the material interest of the Iranian state as opposed to being a factor shaping the policies of the state” (2006: 224).

Barzegar also insists that Iran’s FP is driven by the intention to secure a regional and transregional balance of power, particularly after the invasion of Iraq. Balance of security is the most appropriate word: “the establishment of a system based on ‘balance of security’ among major regional and transregional actors is a more appropriate approach to the maintenance of stability and security in the region” (Barzegar 2010: 74). Security and stability, as well as a better control over the Persian Gulf, are among the most relevant Iranian goals. Following Takeyh and Perthes (2010), Iranian FP is based on “three circles”: the Persian Gulf, the Arab East and the Eurasia region (Takeyh 2008: 4-22). Iran has changed “into a pragmatic and rational state that bases its foreign policy on calculations of national interest” (Takeyh 2002: 23).

Constructivism has also found many supporters among scholars: Maloney is the first to apply this theory to the study of Iranian behaviour in IR. In contraposition to Shaffer, Maloney claims that identity in Iran is important and is funded on its Islamic, Persian and Anti-Western character (2002: 88-90). She argues that the change in regime from the Pahlavi era to Khomeini revolution and the consequent change of feeling towards the US are of high relevance in Iran’s FP:

“[g]iven the constructivist supposition that identity is chosen, rather than innate, any revolutionary transition offers a uniquely opportune interval and a forceful political imperative through which to reconfigure assumptions and institutions that underlay national interest. A careful assessment of the interplay between Iranian identity and foreign policy since 1979 demonstrates the complexity of the dynamics between the two” (Maloney 2002: 89-90).

Warnaar insists that regarding “the Iran-Iraq War and the rivalry between Iran and Israel, constructivism has theoretical leverage because it treats foreign policy as tied up with perceptions of geopolitics, friends and foes, and regional roles” (2013: 23). Nia states that “Iran comes into international interaction with its previously constructed identity; and then this identity determines who is ‘friend’ and who is ‘enemy’” (2012: 33). Moreover, the approach used by Warnaar is close to my ‘special liaison’ theory. In fact, in her argumentation, ideas, ideology and perceptions are “constitutive of [Iranian] foreign policy. In other words, ideology is not considered one explanatory variable among others, but rather the primary context within which foreign policy gets shape” (Warnaar 2013: 2-3) and FP ideology has to be treated “as an intersubjective social construct in which a somewhat hybrid group of foreign policy actors engage, and placing foreign policy within this context” (Warnaar 2013: 5). Her argumentation is in perfect line with the ‘special liaison’, in fact, “[f]oreign policy discourse does not develop overnight: it is historically constructed” (Ibid.), a fundamental aspect for my theory underlined several times in my analysis.

Other scholars consider Iranian FP as driven by US FP and interests in the Middle East (ME), e.g. Milani (2009: 47):

“Iranian foreign policy is a U.S.-centric as it was before the 1979 revolution. Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi relied on Washington to secure and expand his power; today, the Islamic Republic exploits anti-Americanism to do the same”.

Barzegar affirms: “Iran’s foreign policy will involve the concepts of ‘rivalry’ and ‘cooperation’ with local players [...], as well as regional and trans-regional players like [...] the United States” (2014: 127). Ostovar, Edelston and Connell (2013: 22) posit that “[t]he primary objective of Iran’s military strategy is to deter an attack by the United States”, be this a military one or more generally

an interference with its interests. Perthes argues that “Iran has overlapping interests with US and NATO” (2010: 98). As to Russia, other scholars show how Iranian FP is both in line and contrast with its regional and global role. According to Alterman (2013: 24)

“Russia, as a global power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is an important Iranian tool in blunting efforts to isolate it. Not only has Russia vetoed UN Security Council resolution seeking to sanction Iran, but the prospect of a Russian veto has shaped efforts to influence Iranian behaviour”.

Abdolmohammadi and Cama (2015) argue that Russia, above all after Khomeini’s revolution, has looked at Iran as both a strategic partner and a possible competitor mostly for its energetic resources.

Regarding Italy, from the works of the major scholars of Italian FP, a conceptual and theoretical scenario emerges not easy to place within a single theory, though the realist one appears to be the most suitable. Since the fifties Italian FP has followed some fundamental guidelines: Atlanticism, Europeanism and Mediterraneism. In its relations with the US, Italy has moved between Atlanticism and Europeanism – alternatives which generally are “mutually exclusive” (Crocì 2007: 120) – favouring national interests by having both policies coexist. During the cold war years, it opted for the so-called “double delegation”² (Panebianco, 1993): “On the one hand there was an Atlantic and European orthodox FP, embodied by the external delegation; on the other, the Italian FP was heterodox (i.e. Third-Worldist and Neutralist) through the activation of internal delegates” (Bettiza 1997 in Fossati 1999: 26). A further example of Italy’s realist approach is its opposition to making Germany a permanent member of the UN Security Council because this “[...] would have relegated Italy to a totally marginal position within and outside the UN” (Pedrazzi 2007: 187).

All Italian governments, independently of their political belonging, have aimed at defending national interests even in situations of objective weakness. As expressed by Panebianco, Chabod and Santoro:

² All quotes from either interviews or sources in Italian are my translation.

“the constant factors of Italian FP have been identified (i) in an unresolved geopolitical tension between Europe (modernization) and Mediterranean (anomalous delay) and (ii) in the consequent gap between the country’s apparently recognized rank and its actually played role as a medium power” (in Diodato 2014: 1).

During the cold war, the actions of Italian governments were emblematic of a realist approach; despite being a US ally, Italy acted as USSR’s best enemy and exploiting the action of traders, the commercial exchanges between Italian and Soviet companies were facilitated (Romano 2010: 3). In this way, Italy did not jeopardise its Atlantic loyalty, and could deal with the USSR in good autonomy, benefiting also from a sort of “concession” by the US.

Italian FP “wavering” trend during the Second Republic can be traced back to a different model, defined as “strategic-relationship” (Brighi 2013). As in Diodato (2014: 12) “[i]n this type of model, ideas or cultural orientations are important only because they represent the mediation point between mutually co-extensive areas or levels, both domestic and international”. According to other authors Italian FP has followed specific reference models: “a. The asymmetric alliance, b. Bilateral autonomy and c. Active multilateralism”. Asymmetric alliance implies an alliance between a weak country, Italy, with a strong partner, US; bilateral autonomy refers to the space of action that a weaker partner succeeds in obtaining by a stronger partner; active or proactive multilateralism is “not simply a matter of confirming one’s presence in the multilateral organizations [...]. In fact, [...], it is a matter of identifying the possible themes and coalitions to strengthen certain multilateral policies” (Bonvicini et al. 2014: 21-2). These models – despite being interpreted by some scholars as “a Levantine approach to FP: a term [...] widely used to describe [...] our diplomacy [...] accused of low level Machiavellianism or even of mere commercial greed” (Bonvicini et al. 2014: 19) – well represent Italian actions aimed at finding a balance between two cumbersome partners – US and Russia – particularly in the Mediterranean area. The end of the cold war marked a change, with: “[...] increasing levels of tension between the traditional internationalist approach, originating from the post-war experience, and the re-nationalization of Italian FP, which inherently places more

emphasis on the concept of national interests” (Aliboni, Greco 1996 in Quaglia 2007: 144), and the implementation of a “foreign policy in the Middle East, labelled ‘*equidistanza*’ and traditionally characterised by caution, moderation and neutrality” (Del Sarto, Tocci 2008: 138).

We can agree with Del Sarto and Tocci (2014: 150): “foreign policy in Italy has been and remains a domain in which politics prevails over policy, and in which the logic of domestic political competition overrides the priority of devising coherent and substantive strategies”.

As the literature review conclusion, in Iranian and Italian FPs there are points of contact and similar patterns that go well beyond differences. Both countries have had, though at different times, a problem of identity and reaffirmation in the international scenario: this happened to Italy in the 50s in the effort to overcome the heavy fascist heritage, and to post-Khomeini-revolution Iran, wishing to establish itself as an Islamic, theocratic, strong state and a reference point in the ME. Both have had to accept alliances with hegemonic powers and succeeded in carving out spaces of autonomy through a realistic approach. Both geo-politically insist on the Mediterranean area and the alliances, they are now part of, do not jeopardise their dialogue.

Most scholars have analysed Italian FP following the realist theory. Similarly, the realist or idealist approach has been adopted regarding Iranian FP till the opening of the constructivist perspective, which I assert might also be applied to Italian FP because as for Iran the realist approach is not enough to examine all the different aspects of Italian FP. Considering the two countries’ many similarities, my work aims at giving a contribution to the academic world by both developing a theory for their special relationship and by arguing a different interpretation angle for the Italian FP, capable of giving it a more coherent image.

The concept of constructivism is one of the main themes of my work because it contributes to the construction of both the internal image, always conveyed by the elite in power, and the external

image, namely: on the one hand, how the country perceives itself in the international community, and on the other, how it is perceived by other countries and how these mutual perceptions determine the overall vision of a country. In this sense, the perception of Iran and Italy is based on the (constructed) vision of an identity that has many elements of commonality contributing to generate a favourable discourse resulting in a ‘special liaison’, that is my interpretative contribution to the analysis of their relations. Furthermore, according to Warnaar (2013: 5) “ruling elites operate within a discursive context”, I also use the role of the elites, as it will be explained below in the contextualization of the ‘special liaison’ and later in Chapter 3, because it shapes and characterizes the ‘special liaison’ itself:

“groups with more power to shape the discourse are able to use discourse to shape meaning, understanding, and behaviour. [...] one can both identify ways in which existing meaning is recreated, drawing on available discourse, and merely changing emphasis, while at the same time discourse is used more actively to support a [...] socio-political order, as ‘speech acts’ through which the discourse itself shapes the world around it” (Warnaar 2013: 6).

Finally, constructivism is the starting point for my theoretical contextualization and the ‘special liaison’ on which all my work is based.

Constructed social identities and discourse in international relations

“[A]ll theories of international relations are based on social theories of the relationship between agency, process, and social structure. Social theories do not determine the content of our international theorizing, but they do not structure the questions we ask about world politics and our approaches to answering those questions” (Wendt 1992: 422).

As Wendt stated, “[a]narchy is what states make of it” (1992: 395). Otherwise, the relations among states are like the relations among human beings. The constructivist approach is based on this affinity. The reasons for this affinity are many: a state is composed by individuals whose interests and identities are represented by the state itself as a collection of people. States’ identities and interests are built on the relevance of their interactions. According to Wendt genetic or domestic

factors are more important than systemic factors to create state identities and, I would add, perception and consideration by other states. Wendt further posits:

“[c]onstructivism is a structural theory of the international system that makes the following core claims: (1) states are the principal units of analysis for international political theory; (2) the key structures in the states system are intersubjective, rather than material; and (3) state identities and interests are in important part constructed by these social structures, rather than given exogenously to the system by human nature or domestic politics” (1994: 385).

States are not passive subjects, as they are influenced by the population’s and governments’ perceptions of other countries. One of constructivists’ most important assumptions is Blumer’s “symbolic interactionism”. Blumer (1969: 2) states there are three premises to this concept – first, “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them”; second, “the meaning of such thing is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one fellow’s” and third, “these meanings are handled in, and modified through, and interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters”. Relations among states follow basically the same rules, “institutionalisation is a process of internalizing new identities and interests, not something occurring outside them and affecting only behaviour; socialization is a cognitive process, not just a behavioural one” (Wendt 1992: 399).

Wendt explains that a country’s perception of another state impacts on the way of thinking and behaviour of that state. In other words, this perception creates a “discourse” which is embraced by states to justify their relations. The concept of discourse has been analysed by Michel Foucault in several works, one of the most important being *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972). Discourse is a semantic concept:

“[i]n analysing a painting, one can reconstitute the latent discourse of the painter; one can try to recapture the murmur of his intentions, which are not transcribed into words, but into lines, surfaces, and colours” (Foucault 1972: 193)

and, a social process that historical *époques* pass on from one to the other.

Iara Lessa further explains Foucault's concept as:

“systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak. He traces the role of discourses in wider social processes of legitimation and power, emphasizing the constitution of current truths, how they are maintained and what power relations they carry with them” (Lessa 2006: 285).

By building on Wendt and Foucault, in this thesis I wish to explain Iran-Italy mutual perceptions to show how the ‘partner’ discursive framing has contributed to build trust, which has continued even in periods of cohesive Western ostracism toward Iran. Discourse is a process which identifies social relations between two populations. According to Gill (1995: 402) the discourse is “a set of ideas and practices with particular conditions of existence, which are more or less institutionalised, but which may only be partially understood by those that they encompass”.

Gill's definition of discourse is related to Adler-Nissen's concept of stigma in IR. It funds on the assumption that discourse is composed by “ideas and practices”, i.e. stigmas, real signs of visible and intrinsic characteristics of states. Goffman first elaborated and applied the concept to the social field, taking it from the Greek tradition: “[s]ociety establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories” (1963: 11). Adler-Nissen transferred this concept to a state level, “stigmatized states cope strategically with their stigma and may, in some cases, challenge and even transform a dominant moral discourse” (2014: 143). In her view everything can be stigmatized, and “stigmatization shapes state identities” (2014: 153), stigmas are the consequence of specific historical deeply rooted interplay. Therefore, a positive view of another people or another country can also affect IR between states. As for Iran-Italy relation, the specific characteristics that have passed on unaltered since the past are still relevant in shaping today's economic, political, commercial and cultural relations. For both countries discourses about their own ancient identities and ways of thinking and behaving have a great influence on their reciprocal perception.

The 'Special Liaison' between Iran and Italy

Building on a conception of IR as essentially informed by social identities, I define Iran-Italy's mutual strategic position in terms of 'special liaison'. I claim that they have structured their relationship as 'informally preferential' – namely they have a 'special' relationship, though not openly exhibited. It is a silent, flexible alignment that can be easily denied if necessary. A 'special liaison' cannot be defined in terms of alliance or alignment but rather a silent collaboration among states, based more on mutual trust and commonality of interests than on a shared political vision or belonging to international alliances. In fact, Walt defined an alliance:

“a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states. This definition assumes some level of commitment and an exchange of benefits for both parties” (Walt 1987: 1).

An alliance is formalized by an agreement/treaty setting targets, limits and interests, and extending over a period with renewal/exit clauses. Similarly, “alignments in political, economic, military, and cultural spheres present a multifaceted sculpture of national and supranational postures” (Ward 1982: 7). My model of 'special liaison' differs because it focuses on a plurality of elements that contribute to define it and at the same time on the absence of underlying legal or structural constraints, its success depending precisely on flexibility and the absence of limits set by predetermined obligations.

I define 'special liaison' a relationship among countries, which is durable, yet not formalized or defined *ex ante* by agreements or treaties. As the international law does not foresee this form of collaboration, it has no specific connotation and classification and is consequently less binding. It assumes a commonality of objectives and interests, especially of economic and commercial nature. In the case of Italy and Iran, it is informed and justified by the discourse of similar historical cultural roots.

It can also be the result of a mutual positive vision, an ability to understand and share common interests. Italy-Iran's case is emblematic and constitutes an interpretative model of IR, which escapes rigid theoretical interpretations. Rome-Tehran relations must be examined taking simultaneously into account historical facts, political developments, geographical positions and finally their cultural 'affinity'. My interpretation model, considering all these variables, allows for an unconventional though equally effective analysis of the facts. A 'special liaison' – as a silent alignment – can gradually be institutionalized and give rise to either a real alliance, or the formalization of common positions and regulation of trade exchanges. It does not imply belonging to the same political group or the a-priori sharing of similar cultural values; a common *Weltanschauung* is not necessary. In the case under study: Italy is founded on the principles of liberal democracy, while Iran is a theocratic system basically rejecting liberalism. Italy is Catholic, Iran Islamic. Italy, as a member of the European Union (EU), must follow directives that may go against other non-EU partners' interests. Iran, orbiting today in Russia's sphere of influence, must find a balance in its position vis-à-vis of the emerging CARs and its goal to keep a strong role in Central Asia. Finally, Iran's ties to a Western country go against one of the pillars of Khomeini's vision of the Iranian state – the hatred towards the US and the West in general. Yet, although strategically framed, a 'special liaison' is not just a matter of mere selfish convenience or similarities – it operates in a grey area maintaining the *status quo*, a less structured way to satisfy common interests bypassing ideological and instrumental restrictions.

A 'special liaison' is therefore a strategic connection, where the parties pursue shared objectives and mutually support each other, especially in difficult times. Difficulties arise when external third parties' actions interfere with the special liaison. In such cases one of the parties may give its indirect diplomatic support and use its indirect influence to overcome or at least mitigate the *impasse* suffered by the other. The 'special liaison' transcends common political views. It is based

on the sharing of complementary goals with the aim of achieving a better status: e.g. Italy imports crude oil for its industries, Iran imports infrastructure for its internal development. Finally, the two partners can independently look for the support of third parties consistent with their common objectives. Actions occur continuously, even in difficult times, and this continuity cannot be explained only in terms of mere economic interests. An alignment can arise both in case of affinity or political contiguity and in presence of apparent differences: in this case, as alliances or coalitions would unbalance a geopolitical area, the ‘special liaison’ becomes the most practicable option. However, I want to stress here that this works only if there is an existing discourse between the parties. As per Foucault, discourse is a convenient narrative to support interaction between states and individuals. This narrative is indeed emotionally embraced by businessmen and diplomats in Italy and Iran, as the consequence of the influence of both countries’ elites. This discourse or ‘positive narrative’, that is at the base of the ‘special liaison’, becomes an instrument of trust building between the two countries and the two political communities. A ‘special liaison’ overcomes possible structural barriers which would hinder the conclusion of alliances or agreements. An alignment is ‘special’ when, in addition to the relevance of its objectives, it takes its *raison d’être* also from behaviours which are not rigidly codified and are put in place for reciprocal fairness and not just mere convenience. The model considers a plurality of variables and allows to analyse other ‘atypical’ relations among states. A ‘special liaison’ lasts over time, while international alliances are created for specific reasons and follow a fixed scheme that allows easy analysis regardless of their type. As already indicated, alliances can be offensive/defensive (political-military alliances), or merely commercial with the object of satisfying mutual economic interests. The concept of alliance is better applied to political-military fields, while economic-commercial alliances are more correctly referred to as agreements and conventions. The basic peculiarity of the ‘special liaison’ is not the quest for a ‘particular’ interest, as per Machiavelli (*The*

Prince), nor is the desire to impose a world's vision on the other partners. On the contrary it is based on psychological feelings and perceptions (discourse), that, by tradition, history and culture, give rise to a commonality of intentions and mutual respect despite belonging, as it is the case of Italy and Iran, to opposing blocs. The 'special liaison' proves to be a valid interpretative model as it can be applied whenever the usual schemes fail, and the relations between two countries seem otherwise inexplicable. The relations between Iran and Italy have in fact remained positive and constant, despite changes in both domestic and international political situations. The time factor is another element which characterizes the 'special liaison' as, unlike covenants, treaties and conventions, it has no starting date nor a defined end or goal, but it lasts over time without written codification. Written forms are merely contingent to commercial and similar specific agreements. The 'special liaison' can be represented as a river, whereby agreements and conventions are the ships sailing from one port to the other. Finally, the 'special liaison' considers the so-called feeling of sympathy which can be explained as a shared world vision, including a similarity of analysis and problem-solving approach in mutual respect. In this sense trust plays a fundamental role. The special liaison is therefore a model that can integrate other models as it can fill voids and inexplicability areas, thanks to its flexibility.

Today it seems difficult to classify these forms of collaboration and mutual support only in terms of alliances or coalitions. The analysis of further significant cases will form a repertoire that, with the necessary improvements, will validate the proposed model and give a contribution to the study of IR. In conclusion, with this model, it has been easier for me to understand the complex network of relationships woven over the years – at least since the end of World War II – by Rome and Tehran.

Methodology

As defined later in primary and secondary sources, I used discourse and stigma in an instrumental way to verify how much the collected data were congruent to explain and support my thesis. These elements were useful to filter a huge mass of data and to logically and coherently connect them, especially when their link and their consequentiality were not immediately evident. The concept of discourse was fundamental to understand why Italy/Iran relationships – at all levels: interpersonal, country and governments – have never substantially changed and, even in periods of crisis, institutional and/or diplomatic channels have been kept open. Finally, the concept of stigma served to better clarify the various symbols of the two populations. The results allowed to outline my new approach, the ‘special liaison’ which aims at explaining the reasons for the origination and the maintenance of a favourable climate; the combination of the above perspectives and the new approach avoided being bound to the prescriptions of a single theory, that would have made a theoretical systematization easier, but would not have allowed a 360° understanding of the phenomenon. The only disadvantage in using this method was the necessarily limited number of respondents, who, although authoritative and significant, may have overlooked some aspects listed as important in the interviews. Certainly, a wider field survey would have been a guarantee of better objectivity. However, the sample of the interviewees is significant to illustrate and support the objective of my thesis.

As primary sources I have used a series of interviews with authoritative Iranian and Italian interlocutors to compare the opinions of both parts and reach the maximum possible objectivity. I will focus on the interviews to businessmen, entrepreneurs, experts in the banking and finance system and commercial and trade agents. Thanks to Marina Mira d’Ercole’s invitation, I could

assist to the “High Level Financial Round Table” organised by The European House Ambrosetti³, attended by highly important investment and trading companies, the representatives of two influential think-tanks⁴ and a representative of EU External Action Service.

I have grouped the interviews into four categories: i. academics, ii. entrepreneurs and managers, iii. specialists, and iv. officials of governmental and business organizations. They were presented with: general questions on the focus of the interviews and the common theme of Italy-Iran relations; specific questions for each of the four categories of interviewees, and finally a series of questions customised on each individual interviewee’s experience and specific professional skills. At the request of many respondents, I have preliminarily provided an exhaustive outline of the focus of the interview and of the themes touched by the individual questions.

I have investigated different sectors of Italy-Iran economic-commercial relations. I have also focused on the experiences and activities of governmental and business institutions, and finally I have acquired authoritative opinions of trade and business experts. Despite their common basis, each interview resulted to be a specific case as everyone faced it differently; so sometimes the interviewee preferred a general conversation touching the different topics without a predefined order; on other occasions answers would consider more than one question. The use of the interviews as primary sources to support and verify my research question has been fundamental because there is very little significant literature on the topic. Furthermore, I argue that the personal contact with high-level professionals in different sectors was fundamental to get a comprehensive scenario, based on direct experiences without further mediation.

³ Ambrosetti was founded in 1965 and is now one of Italian most important Think-Tanks. It organized two Italy-Iran Summits, in Tehran and Rome respectively in 2016 and 2017 to demonstrate the deep relations of the two business communities.

⁴ Geico, Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture, Islamic Republic of Iran, Bourse & Bazaar, Serkland Invest, Simic, Consindustria, Azimut Holding, Tenova, ABB, Bell Holding A.S., Irasco, Dentons, Sacmi Imola, Italferr, Emabassy of Tehran in Milan, Ansaldo Energia, Amin Investment Bank, IDA Capital Ltd, RODL & Partner and others, the International Crisis Group and the Institute for Global Studies.

I have used academic sources, think-tanks, newspapers, and books as secondary sources, choosing, as elements of sure reference, reliability and professional accuracy, important Italian, Iranian, English, French and American authors, who have published the most up-to-date texts and have got the unanimous consent of the scientific community. Some of the secondary sources emerged during the interviews, often suggested by the interviewees. This enabled me to broaden the contents of the interviews into a well determined and precise framework.

During Ambrosetti's round table – which was focused on identifying solutions to American sanctions – I could learn, directly from the interested parties, the different points of view – political, economic, commercial, and financial – on the current state of Italy-Iran relations. On that occasion I acquired interesting opinions from the participants and some of them accepted the invitation for an interview.

I have personally met most of the interviewees, what allowed me to establish less formal and more direct relationships. When personal meetings were not possible, I have reached interviewees via audio-visual systems (Skype). In all cases I have directly interacted with them. The collected material has been subsequently rearranged and elaborated in a way congruent to my thesis and further discussed with the interviewees, many of whom have agreed to be mentioned in the body of my thesis.

Thesis Overview

My thesis is divided into three main chapters. Chapter 1 traces the history of Italy and Iran from antiquity to the present day, highlighting their historical, cultural and political similarities. It is focused on their relations development from the '50s until today, examining both the political and

the economic reasons for their mutual relations. The core is the analysis of the existing favourable discourse, which originates from a similar historical past, a religious conception based on similar patterns, and a shared natural feeling of sympathy. A special attention is given to Enrico Mattei's action in the early '60s which has become a precious legacy for the relations of the two countries beyond mere business.

Chapter 2 examines, through a discourse perspective, some aspects – common to both countries – not easily identifiable at an initial analysis. Despite the obvious differences, the two countries share common elements, such as international autonomy, a pre-eminent regional role and political division. Although neither of them can realistically aspire to a superpower role, both have worked and are working to become a regional political reference and a bridge between the West and the East.

Chapter 3, with the contribution of numerous qualified interviews, analyses commercial, industrial and financial interchanges over the last few years, particularly before, during and after sanctions. All contributions made by Italian and Iranian representatives in the most diverse sectors of business and international politics are aimed at affirming the mutual will to co-operate. The results show that the fairness of Italian and Iranian entrepreneurs is highly appreciated as well as the help they receive from their institutions to facilitate interactions and overcome possible problems not directly attributable to either of the two countries.

Chapter 1 – History of a particular “harmony”: Italy-Iran relations

“Iran is both antagonistic toward the West and philosophically intimate with it” (Ansari 2003: 57)

Introduction

This chapter will deal with Italy-Iran relations from antiquity to present days, focusing on the events occurred from the early 1950s until today. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight how relations between Italy and Iran have existed ever since the Persian and Roman empires. This means that in the economy of my thesis the ‘special liaison’ and the favourable discourse are not merely related to recent facts, and probably their distant origin is one of the fundamental elements of their today’s existence. A specific focus is put on the period following the end of WWII, because the effects of the actions undertaken since the 1950s are still visible and are crucial for today’s relationships.

Iran-Italy relations have stratified during a very long span of time and have led to a sort of affinity with established historical, political, religious, social and cultural traditions. Persia’s geographical position was strategic, and the Ancient Silk Road (ASR) is one significant example. Today Italy may be a bridge between Tehran and Europe. I maintain that the fact that Iran has never considered Italy a colonialist country nor a leading power totally aligned with US foreign policy has facilitated their relations. When examining the contemporary scenario, it becomes evident that, apart from the dark parenthesis of the first ten years of the Islamic regime, the two countries have always had a special interest in working together, even in growing together. Both are trans-regionalist and aspire to an important role in their geopolitical area. This is one of the elements that make their alignment special, useful to explain the favourable discourse and the permanence of mutual relations over time.

Historically Italy and Iran are two of the oldest world populations characterized by significant long-term contacts. They first met around 92 BC during the Parthian empire, when Rome was a republic; these relations lasted until the end of the Western Roman Empire (476 AD). The diffusion of Mithraism – Roman legions’ official religion – and Zoroastrianism in Persia contributed to create cultural affinity. This remains today a reason of cultural closeness because on some religious themes Iran and Italy substantially share a similar vision. Clearly the relations between the two empires have experienced moments of peace and fruitful commercial and cultural exchanges as well as moments of political tension and conflicts.

Roman and Persian empires were connected by the ASR. The Sasanian Empire stood exactly in the middle between West and East, and at the time it represented the natural channel through which Rome and China could communicate and trade. Today’s New Silk Roads (NSRs) project is intended to play the same linking role. Italian/Iranian relations were not just limited to trade and politics but extended to culture as well. Culturally Iran’s society has always been highly sophisticated compared to the rest of the Arab world: it suffices to think of the many intellectuals who stood out over the centuries – including writers, playwrights and musicians. Iranians’ rooted love for poetry, novel, art and architecture is represented by the city of Isfahan: “if you have not visited Isfahan you have not visited half of the world”, says an ancient aphorism; for its outstanding beauty, the city was once called ‘Isfahan nasf-e jahan’ – literally ‘Isfahan is half the world’. Today it is almost entirely included in UNESCO World Heritage Sites and is twinned with Florence since 1998.

On the other hand, Roman superiority in military science and war tactics influenced Persian’s army organization: “[b]y the second half of the 6th Century the armies of both empires were quite similar and evenly matched” (Encyclopaedia Iranica 2012: 1). Furthermore, while Romans influenced Persians on natural sciences, both influenced each other in the fields of literature and language and

even in coinage. Another example is the *Šāh-nāma*, maybe the most important epic poem of ancient Iran, showing appreciation for several Roman-Byzantine aspects, such as luxury objects and army equipment.

During the Middle Ages Italy was formed by several states, mostly single cities. Amalfi, Pisa, Genoa and Venice were renowned as the four maritime republics. In 1264 and 1280 Genoa and Venice settled their consulates in Tabriz, which Marco Polo (1975: 17) defined as the centre of trade where merchants could find goods coming from the region and from the far East. Persia became the gateway for the two maritime republics to the Trans-Asiatic Mongol Empire, and their role became more and more important: e.g. Genoese Buscarello di Ghisofili was sent by Il-khan Arḡun as ambassador to the King of France and to the Pope to discuss a possible alliance against Mamluks' Egypt.

Religious, political and overall economic interests were the main motivations for the Italian presence in Persia. Political reasons were related to the common enemy – the Ottomans – and the desire to create an alliance against it. The economic reasons aimed at the use of the ASR to trade silk, spices and other exotic luxury products highly demanded in Europe. The Catholic Church aimed at diffusing Christianity and taking control of Jerusalem and the Holy Land – a goal strongly pursued by the two most important Catholic orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans.

In those years papacy also had an interest in establishing political and commercial relations with the sultanates and the Persian empire. Many of the so-called missionaries were in fact pope's ambassadors. As an example, an archbishopric – the forerunners of today's Vatican embassies – was established in 1318 in Soltani (*Solṭāniya*) and constituted a stable base for official relations with Persia (Encyclopaedia Iranica 2012: 1). One of the reasons for Vatican's permanent interest in relations with Persia and now Iran is that Catholicism and Shiism have quite similar structures.

Today Vatican is one of Tehran's main allies and this fact strongly supports Italy-Iran's friendly relationships.

Shah Ismail (1501-1524), the leader of the Safavid Empire, first pushed for an alliance with the Italian states. In 1603, during the reign of Shah Abbas I the Great (1587-1629), an embassy in Venice was settled and in 1609 a Persian delegation visited Pope Paulus V. The relations between Vatican and Persia are represented in a fresco at the Palazzo del Quirinale, Rome, portraying the ambassadors of Shah Abbas I (Encyclopaedia Iranica 2012: 1).

The 17th century was characterised by a halt in the relations due to the Safavid decay and Italian internal battles that ended with the state unification in 1861. During 19th century first half, the reign of Piedmont and Sardinia tried to establish relations with Persia through Romualdo Tecco⁵. In 1857, during the empire of Nasir al-Din Shah, the Kingdom of Italy and the Persian Empire signed a treaty in Paris and the Persian delegate travelled to Turin where he met Minister Cavour and King Vittorio Emanuele II. This was an important period for Italian-Iranian relations, as proved by the correspondence between the Shah, Pope Pius IX and the King, as well as the many Italian scientific, industrial and military expeditions to Iran. Nasir al-Din Shah granted Italy the permission to trade the very expensive Gilan silkworms, what had been refused to France and Russia (Gusso 2017: 230). Italy and Iran exchanged their *chargés d'affaires* in 1886 and 1896 and during the fights between England and Russia for the domination of Iran, Italy remained neutral. Not only did Italy ever try to militarily occupy the country as UK and Czarist Russia did, but in 19th century second half it sent its military experts as instructors for the Persian army. An important role was played by

⁵ Romualdo Tecco (1802-1867), diplomatic, politician and senator of the Kingdom of Italy.

General Andreini⁶ who became the link between the Persian and Italian governments (Piemontese 1969)⁷.

This co-operation continued in the following century: in the decade 1926-1936 the “Italian Royal Army contributed to the creation of the first nucleus of modern Persian Navy” (Encyclopaedia Iranica 2012:1). During Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) relations remained stable: Italy was interested in having a significant presence in the Persian Gulf, while Iran was looking for allies in Europe different from UK. The outbreak of WWII stopped Italy-Iran relations. Due to his pro-German feelings, Reza Khan Shah (1878-1944) was obliged to abdicate in favour of his son Mohammed Reza Shah (1919-1980) who started the so-called “White Revolution” (1963-1978) with the aim of expanding “the three pillars that held up his state: the military, the bureaucracy, and the court patronage system” (Abrahamian 2008: 123).

In 1951 Mossadeq – leader of *Jabhe e Melli* (National Front), composed by Liberals, Labours, Nationalists, Republicans, and supported by Ayatollah Kashani – became Prime Minister (PM). His first and most important act was the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company into the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). Consequently, UK launched a commercial embargo, which prevented oil companies to work and trade with Iran. In this scenario, the case of the small Italian company SUPOR, founded by the Russian exile Nikolai Soubotian, is significant. SUPOR’s ships dared to force the English block on the Persian Gulf several times: when SUPOR’s ship *Miriella* forced the blockade and docked at the port of Abadan there was “a memorable party attended by

⁶ Enrico Andreini (1828-1894) became the agent of King Vittorio Emanuele II in Persia.

⁷ For a deeper understanding of this period see Piemontese, A. 1969. “An Italian Source for the History of Qajar Persia: The Reports of the General Enrico Andreini (1871–1886)”, *East and West* 19, 147–75.

Mossadeq and Nikolai Soubotian himself, arrived by plane. Mazzeo (Captain of the *Miriella*) began to tell the crowd the story of his crossing⁸ [...]” (Casertano 2009: 15).

An important role in Italy/Iran relations was played by Enrico Cuccia⁹ and Leo Valiani¹⁰. In the 1950s, investment bank Mediobanca was very interested in Iran. It could act independently from any political pressure and wished to expand abroad to diversify its financial instruments and markets: especially in the years 1954-55 Iran became its first foreign objective (Coltorti 2013: 602). Following the nationalization of oil wells, the world’s major oil companies formed a consortium for the extraction and export of crude oil from Iran based on a more equitable distribution of profits (50-50 rule). ENI, the Italian National Hydrocarbons Authority, was not allowed to participate in the Consortium, mainly for political reasons. ENI chairman Enrico Mattei¹¹, having a much clearer vision of world oil situation than the Italian government, realized that he would have to start separate negotiations with Iran. As reported by Frankel (1966: 23)

“[t]he greatest coup of all, however, was [...] the idea that the enterprise belonging to the government of an oil-consuming country was to make common cause with oil-producing country governments in establishing joint ventures designed to replace the old-style ‘colonialist’ type of oil concessions as they were hitherto granted to private-enterprise foreign oil companies”.

Mattei’s vision went beyond the 50-50 rule; when in 1957 the Italian-Iranian company SIRIP was founded, with Agip Mineraria paying for research expenses and SIRIP for the costs of development and exploitation of oil sources, Mattei had the famous clause introduced, by which 50% of the profits would go to the Iranian State and 50% would be divided between AGIP and NIOC, thus

⁸ English cruisers intercepted Mazzeo twice. The first time he gave the ship name and denied the destination. The second time, when entering the Persian Gulf and spotting the English cruiser, he ordered to turn by 180° giving the impression they were leaving the Gulf. When the English ship was out of sight, he reversed course again and reached Abadan.

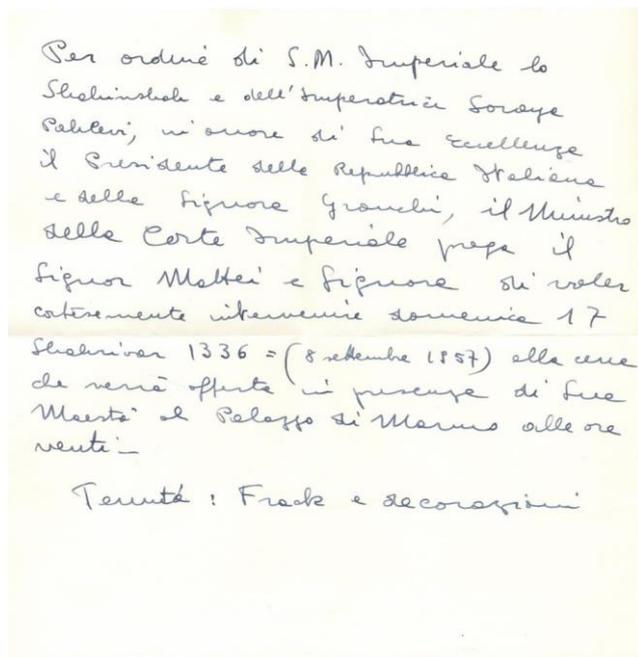
⁹ Enrico Cuccia (1907-2000), one of the most important Italian bankers, worked with Bank of Italy, IRI, Banca Commerciale and Mediobanca, of which he became CEO.

¹⁰ Leo Valiani (1909-1999), historian of socialism and contemporary Italy. Appointed senator for life in 1980.

¹¹ Enrico Mattei (1906-1962) was appointed liquidator of AGIP (the Italian Oil Company) in 1945. He turned it into the multinational company ENI (National Hydrocarbons Authority), founded in 1952. Mattei, as the CEO of ENI, undertook an aggressive international policy for the procurement of crude oil. He died mysteriously in a plane crash at Bascapé in 1962.

giving the producing country about 75% of the profits. This was the first time the producing country was actively involved in the processes of research, extraction and exploitation of oil wells. The *formula Mattei* gave great dignity to Iran because not only did it share penalties in a less unfair way but also offered Iran the participation in the exploratory and technological part.

Due to the strong opposition of the Consortium, the Iranian parliament was reluctant to ratify the agreement, which was unblocked after the two speeches delivered by the Shah before the Islamic Consultative Assembly (*Majles-e Showrā-ye Eslāmī*). The Petroleum Act was ratified on September 8, 1957 after the official visit of Italian President Gronchi to Tehran, accompanied by Mattei. His initiative to revitalize the role of oil-producing countries created a positive vision of Italy. Mattei's



initiative typically has the character of a ‘special liaison’ act because it strengthened relations

Figure 2 Shah's Invitation to Gronchi and Mattei, September 8, 1957. In Alfieri. "Mattei l'apripista". Alfieri Marco, "Mattei l'Apripista", Eni Archives.

between the two countries, giving them equal dignity and importance. As reported by Accorinti (2013: 136) “Agip was not perceived by governments and peoples of emerging countries as the company of a former colonialist country”.

After Mattei's death the relations between Italy and Iran continued under the new ENI's CEO Cefis¹². ENI concentrated its extraction activities in the North Sea and Iran (Milano 2013: 41-2). As reported in the extraction survey of that period: “[i]n Iran AGIP extracted about a million and a half tons of oil, of which 1.4 ml.t. (about 28 barrels per day) came from SIRIP field at Barghan Sar and

¹² Eugenio Cefis (1921-2004), president of ENI (1967-71) and Montedison (1971-77).

only 0.123 ml.t. from the “Rostam” deposit of Iranian Marine International Oil” (Milano 2013: 51). In those years the Italian governments, too, started bilateral relations. The Shah visited Rome in 1964 and met Gronchi, the Head of the Government Moro¹³ and the Foreign Minister (FM) Saragat¹⁴, who then returned the visit. In 1970, Italian FM Moro and his Iranian counterpart Zahedi signed an agreement committing Italy to support Iranian development.

By this agreement, some important Italian companies, such as GIE, Impregilo, SAE, Sauti¹⁵, could settle in Iran. Italy also established an important cultural presence both through the Italian Cultural Institute and ISMEO, active in archaeological excavations, which developed important co-operations with Iranian universities, providing specialists in urban planning and architecture. Italian archaeological missions were and are highly important – Persepolis was completely managed by the Italian excavation groups, and Isfahan’s most important monuments, such as the *Āli Qāpu*¹⁶ palace were restored by Italians. As underlined by Coliaei (2008: 211) “[o]ne result of the agreement signed in 1970 [...] was the project for the construction of the Italian Centres of Technological Information proposed by the Polytechnic University of Turin, launched in 1974-75”. Also, the commitment of the centre-left parties for the development of ME countries with a special interest on Iran (Coliaei 2008: 211) should not be forgotten. The cultural collaboration, a typical element of the ‘special liaison’, has led to the creation of a substratum of relationships, vicinity and similarities that favours a positive discourse of the Italian population.

The contacts with Iran continued: President of the Republic Leone visited it in 1974, followed by FM Forlani in 1978. At that time, Iran was Italy’s fourth oil supplier, and significant contracts for

¹³ Aldo Moro (1916-78), Italian politician, academic and jurist, political secretary and president of the Christian Democrats (DC). Five times president of the Council of Ministers. Murdered by the Red Brigades after a long seizure.

¹⁴ Giuseppe Saragat (1898-1988), fifth president of the Italian Republic.

¹⁵ GIE: Electrical Installations, built Isfahan power plant; Impregilo: civil engineering and infrastructure, built the dam on the river Dez; SAE: electrical plants, realised the electrification of Khuzestan; Sauti: infrastructure, built Zahedan and Bandar Abbas airports, and connected Dez dam to the Persian Gulf.

¹⁶ The ancient Persian Shahs’ palace- In Persian (عالی قاپو) means “The Door of Ali”.

the development of Iranian infrastructures were signed by several Italian companies: Snam, Italstrade, Saipem, Sadelmi, IpiSystem, Pirelli and Gruppo Bugnone¹⁷. Both countries were indeed essential to one another to maintain international balances. Italy was the “bridge” between East and West and Iran was the link with the Far East. This concept is still relevant nowadays, both countries are considered medium powers – Italy has not the same characteristics as US or France and Iran is isolated internationally – and want to be the real bridges for two areas in the world. This again contributes to the ‘special liaison’ concept: two countries, members of opposite political blocs, overtake their positions and manage to have relations useful to reach their goals.

The years 1978-79 were dramatically important for Italian-Iranian relations. On one side Moro’s assassination deprived Italy of the political reference favourable to Iran. In Iran the “Khomeini’s Revolution” broke out, which established the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), and blocked relations to and from Iran for about a decade. The reason for this stop was Western strong mistrust in Iranian theocratic regime and the uncertainty about the country’s real political intentions. In this dramatic situation Italian governments showed their consideration for Arab populations, and the Left party ideologically flanked Palestinians (Alcaro 2010: 133). With the IRI demonizing the West and strenuously opposing Israel, Italy was seen, precisely for the ‘special liaison’, as an interlocutor open to better understanding the situation in the region.

Khomeini’s continuing stance against the Western world, the violation of human rights and the religious extremism were the causes that discouraged Italy and other Western countries from continuing relations with Iran. The war against Iraq also contributed to freeze international relations. It began with the invasion of Iran by Saddam Hussein who aimed at conquering

¹⁷ Snam S.p.a. (Società Nazionale Metanodotti) active in the transportation, storage and regasification of methane; Italstrade S.p.A. used to operate in the field of engineering and construction of civil infrastructures; Saipem S.p.A. – “Società Anonima Italiana Perforazioni E Montaggi” operates in the oil sector and specializes in the construction of infrastructures and services; SADELM I is specialized in engineering and construction of plants for energy production with installations in almost every country of the world; PIRELLI & C. S.p.A. operates in the automotive sector as a manufacturer of tires.

Khuzestan and Iranian Kurdistan. Italy declared itself neutral – apart from some general condemnations for the use of chemical weapons by Iraqi troops – leaving official political statements to EU representatives. The ‘special liaison’ explains this fact because it has neither hindered nor interrupted Italy-Iran relations.

The resumption of Iran’s relations with Europe passed through the action of the German FM Kinkel and the beginning of the so-called “Critical Dialogue” on fundamental issues such as the violation of human rights. A new crisis between EU and Iran followed the political assassinations of Iranian dissidents in Europe of which the Iranian government was accused. The most striking cases happened in France, Germany, Switzerland and, in Buenos Aires against the Jewish Center AMIA on July 18, 1994. The assassination of Iranian Kurds in “Mykonos” restaurant in Berlin (September 17, 1992) caused a further cooling of German and generally European relations with Iran.

With reformist Khatami coming to power in 1997 and the new government declaring itself openly against terrorism, the relations between Europe and Iran resumed. The “Comprehensive Dialogue” started: EU and Iran state undersecretaries would meet twice a year to deal mainly with human rights and nuclear non-proliferation. On these bases the Italian diplomacy stepped in favour of the reconciliation between Europe and Iran. Italian FM, Dini, who had so far expressed little trust in Iran on the issue of terrorism, visited the country. In Tehran Dini and Kharranzi examined important international issues (La Repubblica 1998: 1). Dini said among other things:

“[I]taly respects the political system that Iran has given itself, an Islamic system that even in its backwardness cannot be evaluated by Western standards. Civil rights are granted, in Iran they vote democratically, and, as we have seen, there are a president, and a parliament voted by the people” (Ibid.).

After Dini, Italian PM Prodi was the first premier of a European Country officially visiting Iran after the establishment of IRI (Redaelli 2004: 108). On the occasion Prodi declared:

“[b]ig errors were made on both sides, by the Mullahs’ regime as well as by the West. On this we must reflect and see on what basis we can build dialogue and collaboration [...] the great season of misunderstandings is perhaps going to end” (La Repubblica 1998: 1).

Khatami replied, “there are points of common interest, and Prodi has helped to improve the status of these relationships” (Ibid.), while Vice-President Habibi recalled ENI’s role in breaking Iranian marginalization. The relations between the two countries re-started, and the orders to Italian companies boosted with the opening of a 400-million-dollar credit line for Bandar Abbas port. One year later Khatami returned Prodi’s visit. Italy was indeed the first European country to be visited by IRI Head of State. In 1998, the Italian Chamber of Deputies and the Islamic Consultative Assembly signed in Rome a Protocol of Cooperation, followed in 2000 by the signature in Tehran of a Memorandum for the formation of a parliamentary collaboration group, which would meet to discuss topics of mutual interest. Further forms of cooperation at the parliamentary commissions level and between the Administrations of the two Assemblies were subsequently included in the Protocol (Camera dei Deputati 2018: 1).

Despite not being a member of EU triumvirate (E3 - France, Germany and England) managing the Iranian nuclear issue at the European level, Italy tried to dissipate “international concerns that Iran’s nuclear programme [...] had a secret military purpose” (Alcaro, Trabrizi 2014: 14). This exclusion prevented Italy from having an influence on E3’s decisions and made E3’s adherence to US positions easier. Iran favoured Italian participation to E3 because Rome was considered as not completely aligned with Bush’s administration. This is a further element supporting the ‘special liaison’ theory and explaining the two countries’ lasting favourable discourse. The Italian absence from E3 deserves consideration because Italy held at the time the EU presidency. PM Silvio Berlusconi – under the influence of Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ experts concerned that the Iranian nuclear issue might result in a second transatlantic crisis, like Iraqi still unsolved affair – decided that Italy would not push to enter the triumvirate in order to relieve the European presidency from any direct involvement in a possible transatlantic crisis. Iran asked Italy several times to enter the E3 group, but Rome always refused. In the following years, this choice turned out to be a damage for Italian

image at the international level and for Europe-Iran relationships: its E3 membership would have been functional to both maintain Italy's status within EU and protect its investments in Iran. On the other hand, Iran needed to maintain an open channel; such a role could only be granted by Italy, which had always shown a favourable and supportive approach vs Iran.

An important event occurred in 2006 when the UN imposed financial sanctions on Iran until it would stop the nuclear program launched by President Ahmadinejad. The sanctions were implemented by EU in 2007 (Redaelli 2013: 38). Italian FMs of the time, D'Alema and Frattini, "who on several occasions had stigmatised the perspective of Iran in possession of nuclear devices as unacceptable" (Vittori 2014: 6), aligned with this position. The embargo was exacerbated at EU level in 2010, and eventually led to the most critical phase of 2012 with Iran's reluctance to stop its nuclear program.

Italy's attempts to act as a mediator between Iran and EU were doomed to failure because of the E3 stance preventing all kinds of relations with Iran. Emblematic was Frattini's forced renunciation to visit Tehran with the purpose of exploring Iranian government's real position, a topic that, according to E3, pertained exclusively to the High Commissioner for European Foreign Affairs. In this scenario Italy suffered significant damage. According to SACE¹⁸ (2014: 1)

"[t]he sanctions applied since 2006 on Iran by the United States, the United Nations and the European Union (EU) have had unavoidable consequences on the commercial activity of the country. [...] since 2006 there has been a loss of over 15 billion euros in exports, of which over 60% in correspondence with the second wave of sanctions. [...] In the three-year period (2014-2016) Italy's exports to Iran would amount to just 3 billion, vs an estimate of 19 that might have been registered in the absence of the sanction regime".

¹⁸ SACE (Società Assicurazioni Crediti all'Esportazione): insurance company for export credits and investment protection.

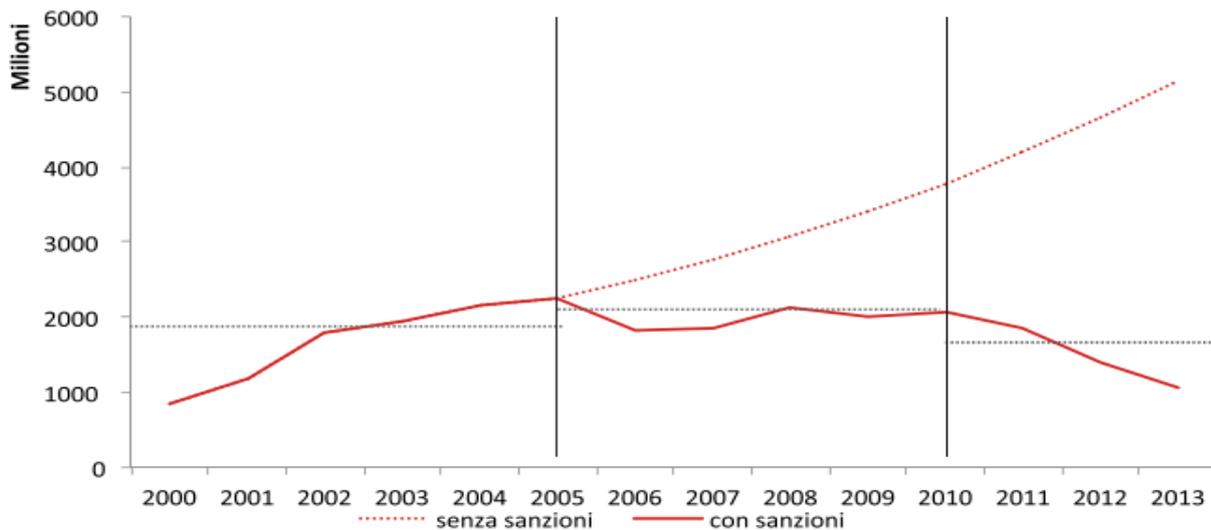


Figure 3 ESPORTAZIONI ITALIANE IN IRAN (IN MLN €) – ELABORAZIONI SACE SU DATI ISTAT (2013) - Research Paper, "Le relazioni tra Italia e Iran in una prospettiva storica, (25), October 2014.

Italy, while respecting European political decisions, tried to carve out an area of autonomy to maintain profitable bilateral contacts as much as possible. In 2013 moderate Rouhani was elected and immediately started a program of contacts to revitalize Iran's IR. In 2013 Deputy FM Pistelli visited Iran, followed by FM Bonino: they were the first representatives of a European country to establish direct contacts with the new Iranian government. With these two visits, the softening of sanctions and the signature of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Italy started new important political relations with Iran. The JCPOA signature was followed by around 15 missions at the ministers' and PM's level. In 2014 Mogherini was appointed High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. This assured greater importance to Italy at the European level even if this role must remain *superpartes*. In her previous position as Italian FM, Mogherini had favourably expressed for an opening towards Iran.

The JCPOA was ratified by the P5 + 1 (US, France, England, China, Russia, Germany) on July 14, 2015, preceded by a preliminary agreement in 2013. Its ratification set the Italian trade delegations in motion with the aim of reactivating former agreements/contracts and creating new business

opportunities. EU sanctions were withdrawn in January 2016. The JCPOA marked a fundamental turning point for Italian/Iranian relations: at the regulatory level it guarantees nuclear non-proliferation agreements; at the economic-energetic level it reopens the international trade to Iran and at the security level it guarantees greater dialogue on ME regional issues.

Among the major recent events that have marked Italy-Iran relations, one deserves mentioning, i.e. the creation of the E4/EU group in charge of dealing with the political situation of the ME region. Italy participates in this group together with France, Germany and England. The first meeting took place in Munich on February 17, 2018, gathering the Directors General for Political Affairs of the four countries' Foreign Ministries, the Secretary General of the European External Action Service (EEAS) Schmidt¹⁹ and Iran.

Italy has striven, through Invitalia²⁰, to develop financial instruments useful to increase its commercial exchanges with Iran, such as the New Master Credit Agreement signed by Italian and Iranian credit institutions. This is a further demonstration of the mutual interest in keeping political, economic and commercial channels open, considering also Iran's growing position as an exporting country.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the most significant characteristics of Iran-Italy relations: they are more than just political and/or commercial as they are rooted in both countries' cultural traditions. Italy is Iran's first commercial partner and has given a strong contribution to its development by acting as a partner and not as a colonialist. I argue that, given Italian well-known diplomatic and

¹⁹ Head of Iran Task Force and Deputy European Secretary.

²⁰ Italian National Agency for investments and business development

mediation skills, its participation to E4 may favour the dialogue with Tehran. Italy can positively channel certain Iranian requests, thus encouraging and consolidating bilateral relations in other non-strictly political sectors. In conclusion, Rome and Tehran have established a sort of political and cultural “axis”, whereby, as a counterpart to Italian help to its internationalization process and end of isolation, Iran is required to keep a moderate approach on security and human rights.

Chapter 2 – Italian and Iranian foreign policy: more similarities than differences

“[f]oreign policy exists always on the cusp between choice and constraint” (Hill 2016: 303).
“[c]hoice must be perceived as effective in promoting the country’s national interests and does not therefore depend only on ideological preferences” (Croci 2007: 118).

Introduction

As stated by Morgenthau (1954) to analyse and understand the international policy of a state both the structural and the conjunctural aspects must be considered. Structural aspects are represented by the country’s geopolitical connotations, power and its general distribution in the international arena. The conjunctural factors relate to the country itself and its organisation, viz. the kind of regime and form of government and its perception in the international arena.

Through a historical excursus, this chapter intends to highlight Iran/Italy similarities, that might not emerge from a quick analysis. The main elements are – search for own international political autonomy, the alternation of governments with different international political visions and the search for a more assertive regional role. They are the background for the ‘special liaison’ theory showing the many reasons why Italy and Iran consider each other ‘special partners’. Being a special partner means sharing the same will of autonomy, maintaining contacts despite the alternation of governments with different and often conflicting ideologies, and aiming at acquiring in one’s respective areas a similar role of pre-eminence and influence as a transregional actor.

Iran and Italy have set up autonomous spheres of action in relation to superpowers’ or international organizations’ directives. The succession of heterogeneous governments, either conservative or liberal and moderate-reformist, has changed the international image of the two countries. The

search for autonomy is fundamental to understand and compare Iran and Italy, as it has influenced governments' actions as well as society, culture, and economy.

Autonomy and International Image

After WWII Italy's road to affirm its international role has not been easy. At the end of '45 Italy was a defeated nation, accepted as UN member only in 1954, after five *vetoes* by the USSR. This remote and barely remembered episode is representative of the international prejudices vs Italy. Nevertheless, Italy has always tried to play an international role and improve its image, often acting with greater balance and less ideology than other more respected international partners. Both when acting independently and as a member of EU or other international alliances such as NATO, Italy hardly ever takes extremist positions.

In the late 1950s, during the Suez Crisis and the war in Algeria, a new generation of political leaders and diplomats emerged "who were partially inspired by a vision of foreign policy that took the name of 'neo-Atlanticism'" (Varsori 2001: 24), which implied being loyal to NATO while seeking greater areas of autonomy within other international alliances. In the 60s Italy enjoyed a certain freedom of action because the international attention was focused on Berlin and the US-USSR clash, and

"[s]ome initiatives by Gronchi (towards the USSR) and Fanfani (concerning Vietnam or the Middle East) may have momentarily annoyed Washington, but they fell within the space of freedom or permission of "waltz turns" that the United States were ready to grant Italy" (Maccotta 2001: 94-95).

During the Yom Kippur war, Italy seized the opportunity to play an important international role by requesting "the summoning of the Security Council in order to stop hostilities and immediately resume peace negotiations, and in this regard once again it called for a unitary contribution from Europe" (Tosi 2001: 188). In more recent times Italy participated in 1982/83 peace missions in

Lebanon, keeping an autonomous vision of the Palestinian problem, and showing interest in some theses expressed by the PLO (Varsori 2001: 35).

Thanks to its behaviour during the many peace missions, Italy has acquired, at least since 2006, a greater international credibility: it has honoured the commitments with its allies while showing an open mind towards the need of the populations involved in the conflicts. As Calculli (2014: 8) reminds “[m]emories of Italian troops in Lebanon between 1982 and 1984 have lingered on not only among the Palestinian populations in the refugee camps, but also in the general consciousness of the Lebanese people”. The same happened with Italian missions in former Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya. Italian soldiers are committed to the pacification goal much more than the mere control of the territory. As stated by Carbone (2007: 97) “[s]ince the end of the cold war, Italy has become more active in the international arena, not least by participating in a number of military and humanitarian missions, in some cases even with a leading role”. I agree with Bindi’s statement (2009: 1):

“[i]n recent years Italy has been playing a positive role in international relations, in very different areas and ways: from missions to Lebanon and Afghanistan, to the contribution provided to the revival of relations with Russia and Iran, including the Georgian crisis [...]. An action [...] positively recognised by international partners”.

I argue that Italy has consolidated a role of reliable interlocutor, capable of mediation, flexibility and conflict resolution in compliance with the international commitments. An example is the policy of *equivicinanza* applied regarding Israel and the Palestinians, whereby Italy is “equally close to the cause of the Palestinians and Israelis” (*Il Sole 24 Ore* in Carbone, Coraluzzo 2009: 429). I assert that the absence of a “colonialist” past plays in its favour, leaving space for a positive *Weltanschauung*, alien from stereotypes and attitudes of misunderstood superiority. This is particularly significant for Italy’s efforts to reinforce its role in the Mediterranean geopolitical area.

Nowadays does Italy have a positive international discourse? I agree with Cucchi (2015: 1)

“[i]n absence of particularly close collective ties, which NATO has failed to maintain, the European Union to make it grow and the UN to impose, the world has become a chessboard in which alliances and alignments of the various protagonists are at all times determined by the vision that each country has of its own national interest”.

Italy has shown that problems can be faced with an approach respectful of local realities and of the counterparts' reasons.

Another interesting aspect of Italian FP is its “humanistic” vocation, inheritance of a distant though ineluctable past. As stated by Parsi (2009: 1) “[t]he heritage of one hundred and fifty years of national history, despite certain drifts, was built around a humanistic view of Italy’s role because Italian ancient traditions became a unitary political history”. Nowadays, an “Italian model” is recognized both in international relations and in peace/humanitarian missions. A model based on deep preparation, cultural insight and a real open mind in problem-solving. This exclusive Italian cultural approach, I argue, is the best demonstration of a humanistic vocation and should not be underestimated by Italian politicians taken in the wake of mere convenience.

Considering now Iran, its international image and desire for autonomy, I will analyse how the succession of several governments with different ideologies has shaped the country’s image. Both during the Pahlavis’ era and the religious regime one element remained constant – the fear of the ex-colonial powers (England, Russia) and the US, after WWII. The two monarchs tried to modernize the country and strengthen Persian connotations. Reza Shah’s decision to side with Germany and take distance from England and Russia brought to his destitution because the Allies could not accept to have a Nazi supporter in the ME. In 1941, the Allies unseated Reza in favour of his son, under whose government Iran became one of the most important US allies in the ME (Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2015: 237). The White Revolution is a clear example of modernization, leading, in the Shah’s vision, to internal and international growth. In that period US and Iran developed friendly relations and CIA supported the Shah against Mossadeq’s *coup d’état* in 1953. During the 70s the Shah distanced from the US to acquire greater autonomy, what led the US to

stiffen its attitude towards Iran (Ibid.). The economic development pushed Iran to seek greater political emancipation, trying to loosen as much as possible those ties with one block or the other, which had previously been sealed for reasons of mere expediency.

I assume that Iranian politics fluctuated in search of alliances to be used instrumentally, as lasting bonds would remind of the country's colonial past, something which Iran still struggles to get rid of. The episode of the US embassy hostages (1980) taken by the "Javanan-e Khat-e Imam" and the strengthening of the alliance with China and Russia show the change in Iranian FP. In that period, it became evident that the steps taken by Tehran were aimed at getting the chance to play on different tables in the international arena. I argue that Khomeini's theocratic approach has in the medium-long term weakened Iran, marginalizing it internationally, limiting its internal development and building the image of an extremist and unreliable country, above all in the Western imaginary.

Rafsanjani (1989-1997) tried to implement the pragmatist approach and reopen the relations with the Americans though "always in an ambiguous and unclear way and therefore without functional outcome for the improvement of the relations between the two countries" (Abdolmohammadi, Cama 2015: 238). After the Iran-Iraq war, Iran needed reconstruction and to "normalize its relations with other countries" (Soltani, Amiri 2010: 200). In other words, Rafsanjani's "[...] foreign policy was based on geopolitical necessities and paid less attention to ideological assumptions" (Ibid.). He tried to promote development with the so-called "era of reconstruction" (Ansari 2007: 11) but the religious factions still played an important role, that separated Iran from EU. Emblematic are the cases of Rushdie's "Satanic Verses" (1988), banned by the religious establishment, and the "Mykonos" restaurant assassinations, that led to the so-called "Ambassador Crisis" with Europe. On one hand, as I see it, the "Ambassador Crisis" and the killing of political dissidents in Germany clearly show that Iran was not interested in following a different political approach. On the other hand, opening relations with other countries opposing the West (USSR), further demonstrates that

Iran is driven by its ideological and individual interests, which can be modified from time to time according to the specific moment's necessities. Although Iranian political ideology is clearly inspired by Political Shiism, it can change and conform to specific interests or momentary conveniences. I argue that until today Iran has chosen to privilege exclusively its ideological theocratic vision of state and IR: despite appearing to be flexible, they cannot breach theological precepts and therefore some international relations cannot be practiced today. A healthy relational pragmatism drives IR, which cannot exceed certain limits, Iran's primary goal being its independence. The most striking example is Iran's relation with Israel where even cautious openings are never immune from the ideological vision. Khatami's reformist government (1997-2005) was open to better understand Israeli position regarding the Palestinian issue. The real matter was not the presence of Israel but its nature, which Tehran defined as hegemonic, racist and violent (Redaelli 2004: 103). On the other hand, during the war in Afghanistan Iran helped the US acting as a mediator in 2001 Bonn Conference. I mentioned these two aspects to highlight how the Iranian government's rhetoric can thoroughly change: the Iranian help to Washington in Afghanistan is a clear example of pragmatism tended to acquire consensus and role at the international level without changing the ideological opposition to Washington.

With Rouhani's government of (2013-), "Iran has got a new face" (Fanuli 2016: 945). His government was favourable to reopening talks with the US, Saudi Arabia and Israel while maintaining its relations with Hezbollah, Syria and Iraq. The most important event was JCPOA signature, although US exit (May 8, 2018) may weaken Rouhani's moderate-pragmatic position. It is still to be understood whether US exit is a manoeuvre to get greater status in the ME chessboard or it is a test of Iran's and Rouhani's government's stability.

Amid these two reformist-moderate governments Iran experienced Ahmadinejad's totally conservative administration (2005-2013). During his mandate he reaffirmed Islamic principles as

the first element of IRI and strengthened the relations with Asian countries while the US became again a major enemy. As Warnaar (2013: 113) states

“the Ahmadinejad administration ‘has sought a new approach in Iran’s standing with the Western world based on the teaching of the Islamic Revolutions [...]’. Part of this new approach was a focus on regionalism, while another was concerned with global developments”.

His approach aimed at disclaiming the importance of international organizations, rejecting all nuclear impositions, reducing the discrepancy between Northern and Southern states, taking an anti-Israeli behaviour and weakening the formers’ continuous influence in the ME. According to Ansari (2007:46):

“a central pillar of their [Ahmadinejad administration] worldview is the idea that Iran and its Islamic revolution are inherently incompatible with the notion of international integrations and collaboration, because these can only dilute the purity of the revolution”.

I argue that the change in governments’ ideological approaches is the key to understanding Iran’s FP since at least 1979. This puts Iran in a situation of ambiguity which entails a lack of trust by the international community. The most striking element of Ahmadinejad’s FP was the nuclear issue. If under Khatami the dialogue between Iran and the West had restarted with Iran trying to demonstrate that the nuclear program would only address civilian needs with no military implications, under Ahmadinejad the situation changed thoroughly. He considered the nuclear program a growth chance and Western opposition was regarded as an obstacle to any emergent country’s nuclear development. I assume that this conflicting attitude with the West was instrumental to the strengthening of his internal political power. In other words, he leveraged Iranians’ national feelings to convince the population that the country’s interests should be safeguarded at all costs, no matter whether this implied losing ground internationally or, even worse, a reinforcement of Sanctions. Indeed, Ahmadinejad challenged the international powers without understanding that the only way to survive in a global arena is to collaborate or at least pretend to collaborate.

Different political vision

Although the two countries are very different and have gone through non-assimilable political phases, in analysing the positions in the international field we can perceive similarities in their behaviours based on the alternation of different political attitudes. I am not saying that the Italian centre-left and centre-right governments are comparable to Iranian conservative or moderate-reformist governments. However, it is worth noting how the two countries' approach to FP has substantially conformed to each and any internal political change.

Italian governments have over time expressed two main political visions – centre-right and centre-left – characterised respectively by “Atlanticist” and “Europeanist” positions. Each government has acted without considering predecessors' initiatives. As posited by Croci (2007: 130)

“while the centre-left attacked Berlusconi's government for abandoning Europeanism in favour of his personal relationship with President Bush [Atlanticism], today the centre-right attacks Prodi's government for ‘winking at Hezbollah’, aligning itself with Spain and France [Europeanism] in pursuing an anti-American policy and building a Euro-Arab Alliance”.

In Italian political system, centre-right and centre-left are usually in opposition – “the two coalitions do not share similar views in foreign policy. The centre right coalition favours a unilateral approach, which is based on the pursuit of pragmatic bilateral relationships with powerful states, the US *in primis*” (Carbone 2007: 907).

On the Iranian side, the change in international politics was determined by Khomeini's revolution that shaped the fundamental paradigms of Iranian vision in the international field. The new revolutionary ideology was based on writings of important Iranian thinkers such as Al-e Ahmad, Shariati and Khomeini himself. Ideologically speaking IRI is based on Political Shiism, is highly

conservative and its strong anti-American and anti-Israeli feelings are summarised in the famous slogans *marg bar Amrica* and *marg bar Israel*²¹.

At Khomeini's death, the state was neither consolidated nor organized. It was dominated by the religious power bearing a strong influence on political leaders. No equally strong secular succession had been prepared. According to Soltani and Amiri (2010: 199) “[I]slamic Principles have dominated on foreign policy of Iran but different conditions made the government to change its priorities of foreign policy”. This is fundamental to understand how deep Iranian different governments' policies are related to religion. As said, Iran is dominated by four main political orientations – idealist, realist-pragmatic, moderate-reformist and conservative. Idealists believe that Islamic principles should drive foreign policy goals; this approach informed politics immediately after the revolution until Khomeini's death. On the contrary, according to the realist-pragmatic approach – followed by Barzagan – national interests should overtake the religious ones, though this was not applicable.

As to the reformist approach, Khatami adopted it first, “[t]he goal of the new president was to preserve the international structure of the Islamic republic, modifying however the most oppressive and annoying aspects for individual citizens” (Redaelli 2004: 98) whereas foreign relations were based upon the so-called “Dialogue of Civilizations” and the “reciprocal tolerance among populations and religions” (Ibid.). One of Khatami's first actions was to re-establish relations with EU thanks to an important work of underground diplomacy led by Italy.

Since 2013 Rouhani is leading the government which should more properly be defined as moderate and pragmatic though keeping to the reformist course. Since the beginning Rouhani has moved in

²¹ “Death to America” and “Death to Israel”.

an opposite direction compared to Ahmadinejad. In fact, his goals were²² basically: reopen to the world and reach an agreement with the West about the nuclear issue and the related economic sanctions to promote the country's growth. Rouhani's plans were innovative and, again, showed how rapidly Tehran can change its FP positions. Even Ayatollah Khamenei stated that Iran's guidelines were foreign relations flexibility and internal cooperation (Fanuli 2016: 943). The alternation between reformists and conservatives is a strong element supporting my opinion that the nature of the different governments and the internal fights make it difficult to predict evolutions and that Iran is basically never definitely aligned with one part or the other.

As analysed above, over time Iran and Italy have expressed very different forms of government and yet – a characteristic of the 'special liaison' – the favourable discourse has never failed. This means that the peculiarity of the 'special liaison' is precisely that of lasting regardless of domestic politics ups and downs, as it is based on fundamental values not merely linked to contingent political events.

Regional Role

Both Italy and Iran, in their FP actions, have tried to act as the leading country in their geopolitical area, respectively the Mediterranean for Italy, and the ME and CARs for Iran. In view of this, the 'special liaison' approach is again highly useful to understand their positions. In their goal to be leaders in their respective regions, they explicitly admit they need each other's help. Italy needs Iran to enter the ME market. On the other hand, Iran's access to the EU is crucial considering that Iranians prefer European products, despite Asian products being cheaper and easier to get. As the EU market is vital for Iran, good relations with Italy can represent the gateway to Europe. This kind

²² "were" because recent Trump's decision not to ratify the JCPOA and the burning of US flag in Iranian parliament may influence Iranian future FP.

of alignment is convenient because it sets neither duties nor rules. The ‘special liaison’ gives the two countries more freedom than other kinds of agreement or coalition. Italian membership to NATO also falls within my theory of ‘special liaison’. Obviously, Italy cannot go against NATO and openly line up with Iran. However, it was the first country to enter relationships with Iran and even during sanctions many Italian companies kept their presence there. Their ‘special liaison’ can exist over other more powerful alliances and organizations, and it allows the two actors to remain connected even if they belong to two different blocs.

Over the years Italy seemed to oscillate between Atlanticism and the Mediterraneanism. In the 1980-1990 decade the pro-Arab policy of some of its leaders, notably Andreotti and Craxi, was aimed at making Italy become the MENA-EU bridge, and the leading country in the Mediterranean through a network of political and economic alliances. Once that internal political season waned, and the international political situation changed, Italy found itself confined to a “regional” role, obliged to redefine its priorities, as Bindi (2009: 1) states: “[i]t should be noted that, in recent years, the definition of the actual Italian priorities has begun to take shape: the Mediterranean, the Balkans, Russia, Europe, peacekeeping and peace-enforcing are some examples”.

Italy “must act in an international environment where it is increasingly ‘out of scale’, so, if it was difficult to carve out a place in the European arena, it is basically impossible in the global world” (Parsi 2009: 1). The most obvious example of this situation is the action taken by France to overthrow Ghaddafi’s government for fear of its excessive influence in North Africa, with no regard for the Italian interests in Libya (Cucchi 2009: 1). In the absence of a unitary and authoritative European FP, national interests prevail, even at the expense of the supposed alliances. Europeans set greater obstacles to Europe than Americans, who still hope, as Bindi (2009: 1) states, “that the Lisbon Treaty might lead to a more credible united player”. I argue that the regional role for Italy

should not be understood as a *diminutio* at the international level, but rather the possibility of playing an important role in the evolution of the political situation in the coming years.

As for Iran, the scenario is made complex by the simultaneous presence of different major powers (US, Russia, China), by the emerging of the CARs and the antagonism with Saudi Arabia and Israel. This complexity makes it difficult for Iran to take a unique position vis-à-vis the EU and I argue it is one of the reasons why the so-called “Critical Dialogue” failed to reopen relations with EU with the other option being, as Redaelli stated (2004: 97), the opening of relations with Russia and CARs. With a view to acquire a regional status, Tehran has started tying relations with many regional and international countries (e.g. China, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan) and tried to secure new friendly contacts with Saudi Arabia and Iraq. According to Warnaar (2016: 3) “Iran’s foreign policies since 2013 have become more assertive, particularly where its role in the region is concerned”.

It should be noted that the JCPOA is highly relevant for US and EU to maintain stability in the region because of Iran’s strong links with China and Russia. Tehran is both engaged in China-Pakistan corridor allowing China to have an open door to the Persian Gulf and in the construction of the International North-South Transport Corridor that will connect India to Russia via Iran and CARs. China needs energetic resources and with the NSRs it is trying to break US supremacy. Iran’s link with Russia goes also through the alliance and military support to Syria, this being the outlet to central Mediterranean for both. Since Daesh birth and the outbreak of Syrian Civil War, Tehran has played an autonomous role influencing the Syrian scenario by involving many non-governmental actors, such as Hamas or the *Jaysh al-Mahdī*. However, Iran’s growing influence in the Syrian conflict and, therefore in the area, cannot be easily accepted by the other regional powers, namely Saudi Arabia and Israel. Similarly, though for apparently different reasons – defence of human rights, Iran’s siding with Bashar al-Assad and its support to ‘terrorist’

organizations – EU does not favour Iran’s emergence in the region. Regarding terrorists’ financing, Saudi Arabia’s involvement should not be forgotten, though being it an important US ally, the issue is hardly ever raised.

To sum up this section it is noteworthy that Iran’s real goal is to become more and more autonomous and to position as ME leading country. Its assertive policies aim at demonstrating it can be trusted by the international community. At the same time, it is pursuing its independent path to become a strong actor in the region and at the international level.

Conclusion

This historical background is important to understand the rationale of international political actions, but also the reciprocal relations which are based on an undeclared though existing assumption of similarity and role-play in their regions. The analysis serves to highlight how two countries are apparently different; it is however less useful if conducted following stereotypes, political slogans and other parties’ visions. Italy/Iran relations are not limited to attitudes of convenience in domestic/international politics – they can be explained under the light of the ‘special liaison’, which considers all values and attitudes deeply connoting the two countries’ experience both at the individual and the collective level.

Italy has undoubtedly gained international trust by respecting commitments, both in the military and in the political-diplomatic field. Certainly, its weight cannot be compared to other European partners such as France, Germany and UK. It is equally true that despite its medium size Italy may strive to become a “great medium power” (Bindi 2009: 1), and actions in the international cooperation with ME partners benefit from this realistic vision. With a bit of ‘healthy’ pragmatism

we can say that this role is already established, and Italy-Iran relations show that, if well managed, they can represent a favourable sounding board in the MENA-EU scenario.

If compared to Italy, Iran's image is at the same time different and similar. Because of the attitude of its various governments Iran is considered as not completely reliable and a risk for possible international stability. The pro-Islamic revolution governments have always been unpredictable; in contrast reformist and pragmatic governments have tried to show the other face of this "Janus-faced" country. Their efforts however have not led to satisfactory results. For this reason, the IRI has developed relations with other countries than the West, leveraging on its geopolitical and geostrategic position in the ME.

To sum up, I claim that a limit of Italian and Iranian FP has been a certain provincialism. For both countries this was probably due to the lack, in certain moments, of political leaders capable of thinking – paraphrasing a statement by James Freeman Clarke – of the next generations and not merely of the next elections.

Chapter 3 – Italy-Iran interchange: the opinions of the protagonists

“Italy stands in the position of Iran’s biggest trade partner in Europe and today we should also be able to remove the problems facing the expansion of our relations and enhance the level of these ties to the status that they deserve” (Rouhani 2014: 1).

Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyse the interviews conducted with businessmen, entrepreneurs, commercial and trade agents. I argue that it is important to show, through their words, how fundamental economic data give substance to Italy-Iran relations. But, it is equally important to highlight how the actors have incorporated a certain ‘discourse’ constructed and instilled by the elites. In fact, constructivism acts at two different levels: elite and rest of society. Non-state actors, in this case the business and commercial community, have a fundamental role in reproducing this ‘special liaison’ because they either consciously or unconsciously have interiorised it. An actor defines one’s actions according to this discourse; this is another reason why other countries do not trust Iran and *vice versa* why Iran does not trust other stronger and globally more important countries. It is striking to see how a specific narrative has shaped the people’s identity without modifying the status quo at the state level and without compromising Tehran’s and Rome’s most relevant identity aspects, respectively their Islamic and Western character. Rather, it has allowed the establishment and the consolidation of the ‘special liaison’ between the two countries both at the public and at the private level.

Italy has been for many years Iran’s first commercial partner and one of the most important importers of raw materials. The continuity of the commercial exchanges between the two countries is considered fundamental by Italian and Iranian exponents of all economic-commercial sectors.

This is also an expression of the ‘special liaison’, which is such because the intention to co-operate has never failed and rests on both economic aspects and on the positive discourse between the two countries. During the High-Level Financial Round Table, I realised that entrepreneurs’ and governmental institutions’ strongest concern is that changes of political conditions might undermine co-operation and development. The interviews will highlight how two main elements play in favour of the discourse, one being Italy’s reliability and the quality of its products, the other being the ability of its businessmen, entrepreneurs and organizations to always find alternative effective solutions safeguarding the interests of both parties. Finally, it will be clear that the actions taken by Italy, including Italian government’s attitude during the sanctions, have created an overall favourable vision of Italy in the Iranian population and *vice versa*. The position of Rome during the sanctions, which managed to keep the dialogue with Tehran open, greatly contributed to keep the positive narrative on both sides. As known, the strong action of an elite reverberates within a state, directly or indirectly influencing the social classes.

As a starting point it is necessary to analyse data regarding the exchanges before, during and after the Sanctions. As said, historically Italy has always been a strategic partner for Iran,

“[f]rom 1995 to sanctions enforcement in 2011, Italy has been the first European trade partner of Tehran, with a cumulated trade value of 70€ billion. Between 2011 and 2015, however, total Iran-Italy trade value dropped from 7.2€ bln. to 1.7€ bln., and only recently has returned to growth” (Ambrosetti 2017: 5).

The sanctions against Iran and Russia cost Italy 1% of its GDP, according to Emad Tabatabaei. Immediately after the JCPOA, Italian presence grew again, with several Italian companies starting to deal with Iran on the base of billion-euro agreements. As mere examples, Danieli²³ was supposed to sign agreements with steel and mining industries for €5.7 billion as well as a 2-billion Euro joint

²³ Danieli: multinational Italian company, among the world leaders in the construction of steel plants.

venture with Persian Metallics²⁴; Saipem won the contract for the construction of a 2 km gas pipeline for an amount of €4-5 billions.

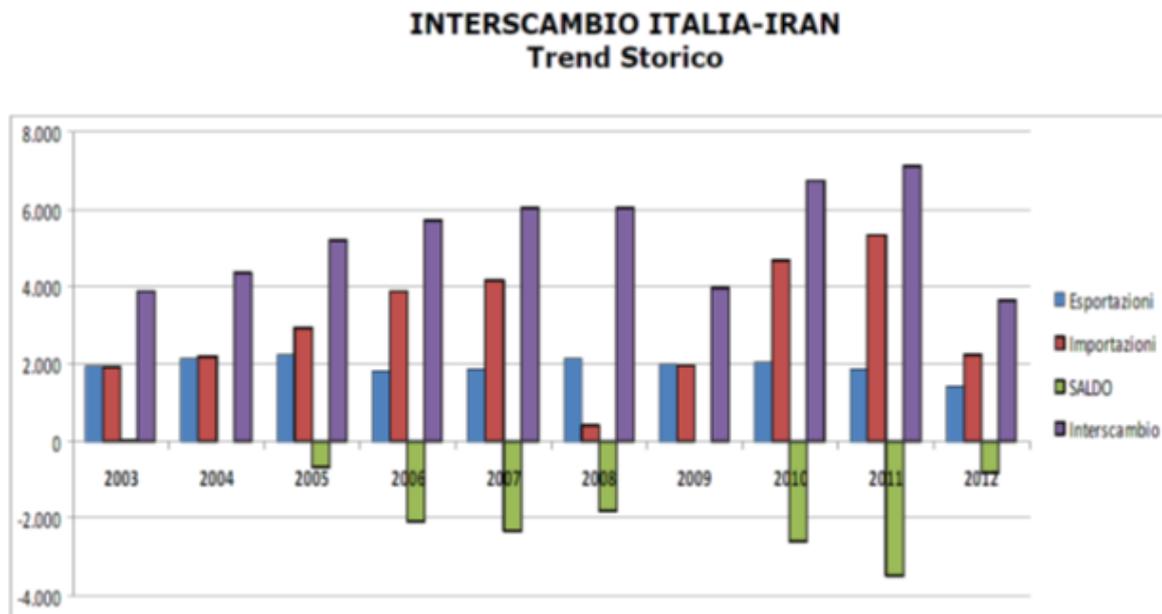


Figure 4 Italy-Iran Exchange 2003-2012. Research Paper, 2014.

Ferrovie dello Stato, through Italferr, is leading the project for the construction of the around 400 km fast railway from Tehran to Isfahan, and the electrification of the Tehran-Mashhad line, about 900 km (Reuters 2016: 1). According to Tehran Times (2016: 1) “[a]lready in January, Iran and Italy concluded 17 deals, worth €17 billion during Rouhani’s visit to the European country”. However, the commercial idyll between Italy and Iran is still founding obstacles because banks, both Italian and European, are not ready to totally resume financial relations with Iran. The sanctions are not completely lifted, and the White House is still applying the banking and finance block on Iran. Banks are not willing to invest for fear of US Black List and the impossibility to work in the States. During my conversation with lawyer Ennio Vitali, he mentioned that due to these pressures several big Italian companies with activities in the USA were obliged to stop trading

²⁴ Joint venture among Iranian investors and international companies.

with Iran. Sebastiano Gattorno confirmed that one of his companies – Interglobo²⁵ – which develops 50% of its turnover in America cannot work with Iran, “If you have one affiliated company in the USA, you cannot invest in Iran”. During a phone call with Giovanni Pontecorvo, we talked about the situation of Ansaldo Energia and he affirmed that Ansaldo has 4/5 defined contracts with Iran for an amount of around €800 million but they are not operative due to Trump’s administration. I assert that this is quite an arbitrary position because if a company is not violating the restrictions related to the nuclear program there is no reason for sanctioning it because of its relations with Iran, “If I sell gas turbines – i.e. not a nuclear-related plant –, I am in line with the agreement, so why am I not supposed to receive a credit line from the banks?” (Giovanni Pontecorvo).

The round table organised by European House Ambrosetti aimed at finding solutions to overtake these situations and it was focused on Invitalia Global Investment and the Master Credit Agreement (MCA). Invitalia Global Investment is a new investment organization created with the aim of financing and investing in Iran, even if the big Italian investment groups and the major banks

How Italian and Iranian companies can finance their projects according to the Master Credit Agreement

The European House
Ambrosetti

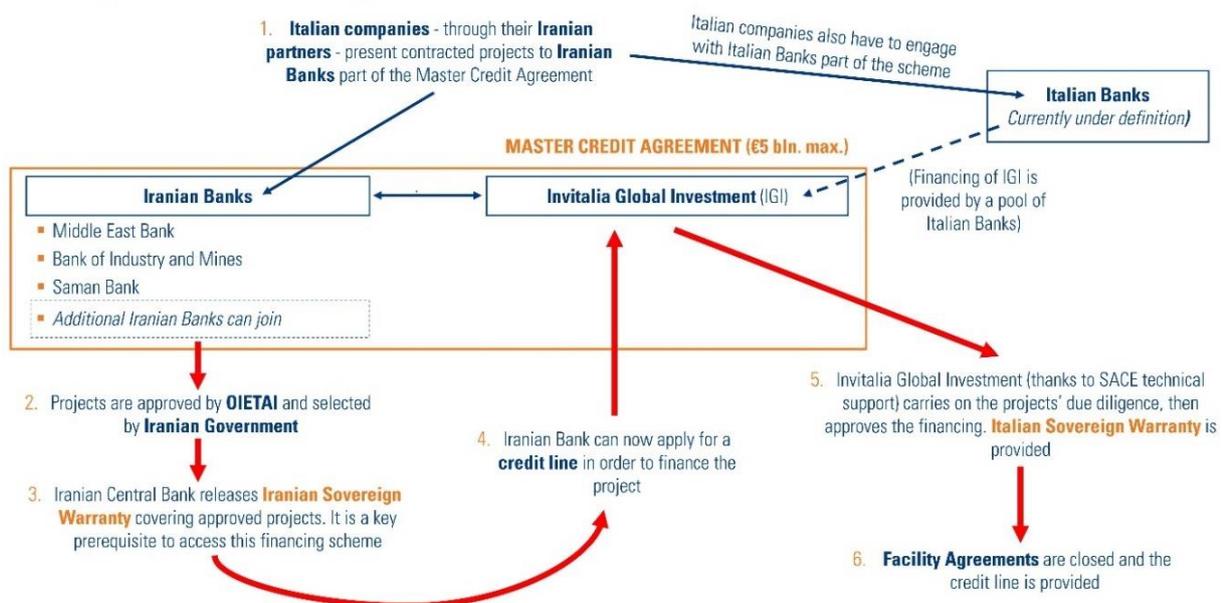


Figure 5 Master Credit Agreement - Invitalia Global Investment. The European House – Ambrosetti, High Level Financial Round Table, Milan, March 13, 2018.

cannot. The way the MCA and other initiatives work is the evidence that both countries are ready to bypass the principles of their own FP and, in the case of Italy, the principles ruling the relations/alliances with the super-powers (e.g. NATO).

The MCA links three of the most important Iranian banks (Middle East Bank, Saman Bank and Bank of Industries and Mines) with Italian banks and as explained in the picture above both parties can finance their projects through Invitalia. The MCA was signed by the Italian Minister of Economy and Finance, Padoan, and the Vice minister for the Economic Affairs and Finance, Khazaer on January 11, 2018,

“[t]he Framework Agreement establishes the terms and general conditions that will govern the individual future Financing Agreements²⁶ (Facility Agreements) concluded between Invitalia Global Investment and the Iranian banks, for a total amount of up to 5,000,000,000 (five billion) euro, and covered by Sovereign guarantee issued by the Iranian Government” (Invitalia 2018: 1).

The limit is however that today only small-medium sized banks, in other words regional banks with no interests in the United States can enter the MCA. Indeed, today the Italian banks working with Iran are Banca Popolare dell'Emilia-Romagna, Banca Popolare di Sondrio, Monte dei Paschi di Siena and CARIGE.

According to Emad Tabatabaei this is the only way to overtake US block and this also explains why Italy can be more competitive than Germany or England. Differently from these two countries, Italy has many small-medium banks (SMB) as well as many small-medium enterprises (SME) that can be strategic for the consolidation of its relationships with Iran. This is an example of how the discourse is both political (public) and financial-economic (private) and, moreover, how Italy continues to challenge Western anti-Iranian obsession. The use of SME and SMB is a strategy that perfectly represents my argument of a grey area of interactions and the influencing role of the

²⁶ “The Financing Agreements will allocate funds for projects and partnerships in Iran, jointly realized by Italian and Iranian companies, in sectors of mutual interest, such as infrastructure and construction, the oil and gas sector, the generation of electricity, the industries chemistry, petrochemistry and metallurgy” (Invitalia 2018: 1).

political elite on the economic-financial sector. According to the “Dossier Iran” developed by the Camera di Commercio e Industria Italo-Iraniana, in 2017 Italy returned to be Iran’s first commercial and economic partner with a total exchange of €5.102.796 vs. €3.794.777 of France, €3.336.916 of Germany, €1.966.840 and €1.829.705 respectively of Spain and The Netherlands (CCII 2018: 1). *De facto*, apart from the years 2012-14, Italy has always been stronger than any other EU country.

Another solution, that came up during the round table, highlighted the possibility of using finance in the transactions and make payments through other countries or in the local currency, the Iranian Riyal. Recently the Russian Minister of energy stated “[t]here is a common understanding on the need to orientate towards the use of national currencies in our settlements. [...] it regards both Turkey and Iran and we are considering paying in national currency with them” (Wall Street Italia 2018: 1). Indeed, one Italian company attending the round table declared they had been approached by an Iranian company proposing to use this system; they were however not inclined to accept this payment method both because being the project Italian the right currency would be the Euro and because the Riyal is not a solid currency. The same feeling was expressed by Rosella Tassara and Sebastiano Gattorno: the Iranian Riyal depreciates easily, what implies that “if the agreement is in Dollars or Euro and are paid in Riyal, you are actually receiving less”.

During the Round Table, Ali Reza Arabnia emphasized a very important similarity between Italian and Iranian populations, “Iranians are very creative, as well as Italians” and he continued supporting the idea that being confident and trusting each other would maintain this strong link. Link that shows how strong is the discourse between them. As Ali Reza Arabnia stated, both Italians and Iranians can work to find the best solutions even when they do not appear evident at first sight. There is a strong mutual respect because reliability is one of the cornerstones of business-making and both Iranians and Italians are faithful to commitments even in the greatest difficulties. Finally, Ali Reza Arabnia asserted that both Italy and Iran will maintain positive relations, not only because

of their ancient roots but also and above all because of their similarities in terms of tradition, history and culture. Again, here it is evident how constructivism applies at two levels – elite and society. At the elite level both countries want to maintain their strong ties; at the society level the discourse based on the ‘special liaison’ is interiorised by the individual actors directly involved in the relations. An important element in favour of the Italian companies is Iranians’ appreciation of “Made in Italy” products, particularly haute couture, luxury cars and cinema. As posited by Ali Djahandideh the “Made in Italy” concept has played a driving role for Italian companies even in less favourable political moments. The political situation should indeed not impact on business as stated by Ahmad Shodjaee: “we should not practice politics in business, we should not care whether Ahmadinejad, or Khatami or Rouhani is the president, we should only take care of our business”. The concept of “confidence” emerged several times during the discussion. Particularly, Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj stated that “the uncertain environment is affecting the economic confidence what in



Figure 6 “Rebuilding Hope”
Batmanghelidj’s Presentation
(Bourse and Bazaar), High Level
Financial Round Table, Milan,
March 13, 2018.

turn is affecting not only the business community but also the Iranian public”. An example of this issue is the cover of one of the leading Iranian newspapers “Rebuilding Hope”²⁷, expressing that in these uncertain times something got lost in terms of commercial and economic confidence. In fact, according to two surveys conducted by Bourse and Bazaar²⁸ (2017) and the University of Maryland (2018), Italy is a little behind France and Germany in terms of attractiveness for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) by the Iranian public. In other words, Italian companies must start to trust more the Iranian solutions and push for the positive application of the MCA.

²⁷ Batmanghelidj’s presentation at the High Level Financial Round Table in Milan, March 13, 2018.

²⁸ Bourse and Bazaar supports business diplomacy with a special focus on the economic Iranian future.

Trust is linked to a series of other reasons explained by many interviewees when answering the questions: “Why do Iranians prefer to trade with Italians? What are the reasons behind this choice?”. All interviewees agreed that the first reason is mentality, which is part of the identity developed through traditions and the way society is used to perceive another apparently different community. However, if the discourse is influenced by the elite also mentality is. A certain kind of mentality, based on a positive narrative, shapes the perception of the other community object of the discourse. This process is valid for Italy/Iran relations and can equally be applied to the relations among other countries. Italian mentality is quite similar to the Iranian one, both using the same communication and behavioural tools, which can be summarised with Alessandro Stefanello’s words: “flexibility, problem solving and ability to find solutions in not perfect systems and situations”. When talking about mentality, interviewees were referring to both the normal and the business discourse. According to Ahmad Shodjaee: “Italians and Iranians have the same culture especially in trading and business therefore I suppose that this is something why we prefer to work with Italians”. Going further in answering this question most interviewees explained that to better understand the picture it is necessary to distinguish between private and state-owned sectors. Regarding the public-sector, the Iranian government has a very good recollection of Italian attitude. Privately-owned companies consider that doing business with Italians is easier than with other people, even if Iranian companies sometimes prefer to work with Germany because of the well-known quality of its products. The problem of working with Germans, according to Emad Tabatabaei is that before reaching an agreement with them everything must be double-checked, arranged, and perfectly programmed: too much time is spent in just setting the agreement. A further aspect is related to sanctions: the mere rumour of possible sanctions against Iran would convince German companies to leave the country. This means that they cannot be totally reliable. Reliability is essential in every kind of relation and a fundamental part of the positive narrative. The same

situation occurs with other EU countries. Ahmad Shodjaee stated that French and England companies cannot be trusted so much because it happened several times that after reaching an agreement they have dropped the project and left the country without giving an explanation. On the other hand, Iran can honour payments: as mentioned by Ennio Vitali, at the end of the construction of Bandar Abbas harbour, Tehran's important exposure with SACE was completely refunded. Moreover, working and trading with Iran implies opening to further business chances, as Iran has a lot of influence on the other neighbouring countries such as Syria, Iraq and the CARs, representing a market of around 400 million people. Ahmad Shodjaee mentioned "It is a good opportunity for both to start doing business together [...] and start bringing technologies and know-how to Iran, Syria, Iraq and CARs. We can be of help to acquire interesting projects in this respect". Another aspect is that Italy and Germany, for example, can often supply the same technologies: e.g. Ansaldo Energia's and Siemens' turbines for power plants. As it is not just a matter of buying equipment but bringing "know-how" from Europe and making joint-ventures, Italians are preferable because they are less aggressive in negotiations and more open to win-win situations; indeed, Mattei's path is still followed today by Italian companies. Convenience is mutual because products made in Iran are price-competitive on the European market as well. According to Emad Tabatabaei, the fundamental reason is that differently from Germans and French, Italians do not intend to occupy the market, and this is an element that Iranians businessmen greatly appreciate. Giovanni Pontecorvo supported this vision and mentioned that Iranians have a really great respect for Italian companies and have a great consideration for the Italian technology. He personally met Rouhani during his visit to Rome and found him a very fair-minded person open to understand the Western culture and attitudes. These feelings of openness and inclusiveness are shared by Italian businessmen. Invitalia's project is an example of the Italian efforts to find a solution to existing issues, based on a common business

approach and interests. Other countries in Europe have indeed started to develop similar solutions following the Italian example.

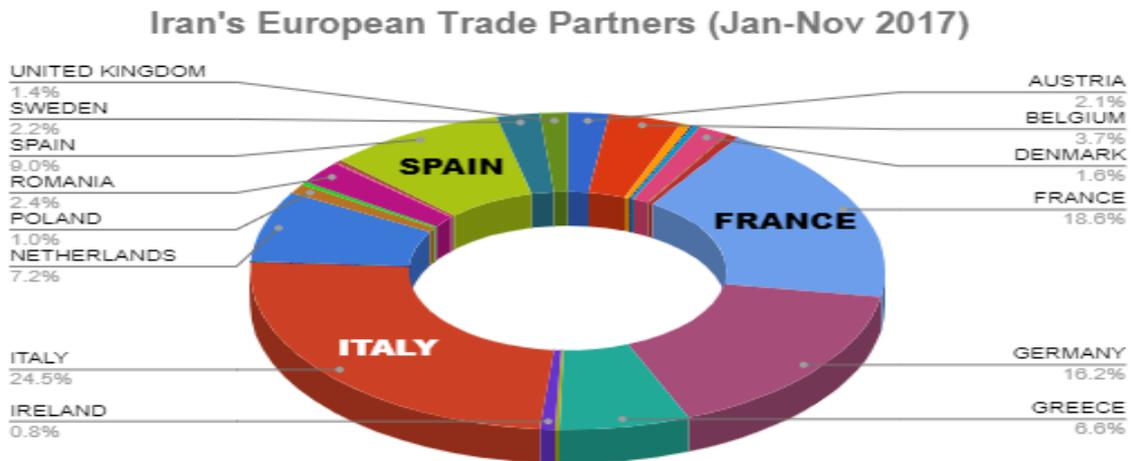


Figure 7 – *Financial Tribune*²⁹.

Alfonso Santilli has been working with Iran for over 30 years, supporting different Italian banks in the management of import/export operations. His consultancy activity has therefore spanned through the easier moments and the difficult times of embargoes and sanctions. He explained that relations and contracts have always been marked by the highest levels of professional practice and transparency. In his opinion transparency is exactly what the Iranian counterpart prefers about Italians. Talking about his personal experience he stated that “the relations between the Italian and Iranian economic and commercial operators are based on correctness and willingness to work together in order to solve natural problems”. This affinity brings them to find satisfactory solutions for both parts. Similarly, conscious of the issues caused by the embargo situation, the relations with the Iranian banking system have been characterized by co-operation and broad-mindedness. According to Santilli Iranians have always been grateful for the efforts Italy has made to facilitate

²⁹ <https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/80472/iran-eu-trade-tops-18b-italy-tops-list-of-partners-jan-nov-2017>

operations in compliance with the rules in force and have shown their appreciation on many occasions. Today's political moment, with the American financial sanctions and their repercussions on Italian companies and the military escalation in Syria, obliges economic operators to a certain caution while waiting to understand the scenario developments. However, on the Italian side, as witnessed by the interviewed professionals and experts, there is a will to continue with the collaboration with Iranian companies. In fact, there have been numerous economic and commercial missions launched by Rome and Tehran state bodies and business organizations. Relationships therefore remain good and very professional as both parties are fully aware they are operating in a context in which international tensions play a very important and conditioning role. Both countries, sometimes partially overtaking the bindings set by sanctions, have worked together in a sort of grey area thanks to the existing discourse and their 'special liaison'. During his interview, Italo Pellegrino underlined that Iranians appreciate both the quality of the Italian products and the credit facilities devised by the Italian credit system. The appreciation for Italian quality was also confirmed by Pier Luigi d'Agata: "the Italian partner allows Iran to have a very specific product of high quality and excellent technological level". As to export financing, SACE has played a fundamental role by guaranteeing Italian exporters the repayment of their credits against possible defaults by the Iranian counterparts. Finally, Italo Pellegrino underlined how the various Iranian governments have always guaranteed that the Iranian system would have honoured debts with Italy: "regardless of who governs the country, the economic system understands that the only way to find solutions to their bans is to maintain their reliability and therefore prove to be serious in the credit commitments". This mutual respect is not just the expression of professional correctness; it finds its deepest explanation in the existence of a lasting positive discourse.

Conclusion

In this chapter I focused my attention on the positive aspects of the economic relations between Italy and Iran, examining both the qualitative-quantitative data of the interchange trends, and analysing the reasons for Italy being a privileged partner of Iran.

I supported my thesis through personal interviews, and data collected during meetings and workshops. It is essential, when analysing the relationships between two countries, to collect and transmit the opinions, feelings and experience of the operators who directly operate in the field. The history of the economic relations between Italy and Iran is, in my opinion, a success story that, since at least the 1950s, has experienced only brief moments of stalemate, which have been overcome by mutual goodwill and the Italian ability to react with promptness and creativity even in the presence of an unfavourable international situation. The fact that Italian companies have always kept faith to their commitments – even in highly difficult times – has contributed to Iran's growing appreciation for Italian correctness and value.

We can now try to outline possible scenarios for the development of the economic and commercial relations between the two countries. Doing business is an activity that develops quite autonomously from the political context because business disregards the alternation of governments and internal/international political scenarios unless these are not drastically binding. To this regard it is worth recalling the situation of the economic relations during the first phase of the Islamic revolution. As soon as the political constraints eased, the companies of the two countries re-started contacts and co-operation. Italy still enjoys considerable prestige today because it has never sought an ideological clash and has always found a way to do business without renouncing its membership to the Western bloc. As emerged from the speakers at Ambrosetti's Round Table, the Italian institutions are constantly working to overcome existing difficulties. At the level of small-medium

banks there is a willingness to keep channels open with Iranian state and individual entrepreneurs. As it turns out from the interviews, Italian and Iranian import-export protagonists are on the lookout for the continuation of their business relations. I argue we can envisage a sufficiently positive scenario that can only be undermined by dramatic international political situations, such a new crisis in the ME. However, the similarity between the two countries and the declared desire to continue their economic and commercial exchanges seem to me to be the main condition for keeping channels open – the perception of professional reliability, the technical skills, the flexibility in reasoning and dealing with unforeseen situations are fundamental, and open-minded solutions, capable of taking into account both partners’ reasons are at the basis of the “friendship” between Iran and Italy, both at state institutions and individual entrepreneurs level. The solidity of their relationships rests on the positive vision built by the elite and adequately internalized by the economic actors. In support of my argument, the existence of the positive discourse and the ‘special liaison’ emerged from all contacts, expressed as mutual sympathy, respect and consideration.

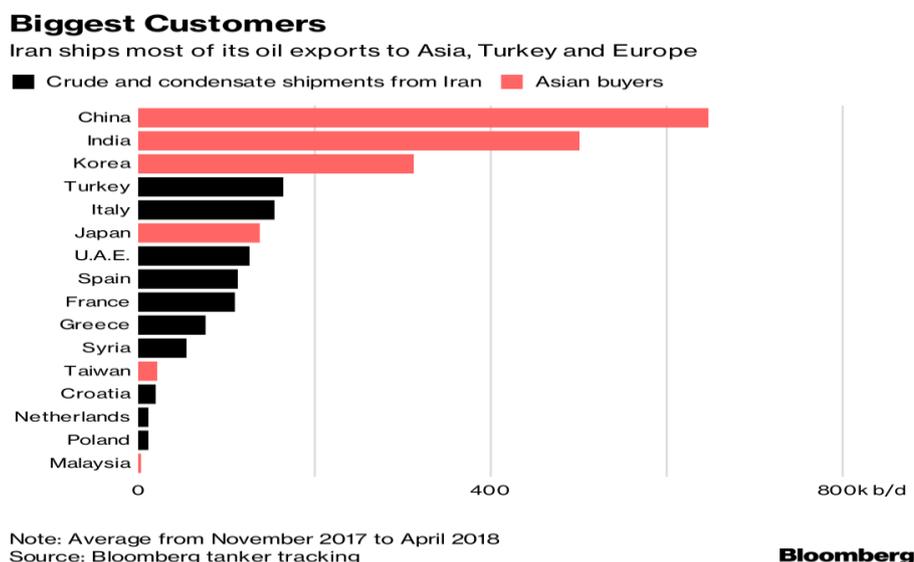


Figure 8 Bloomberg tanker tracking

Conclusion

“Mattei’s dream has turned into reality. [...] Rouhani’s choice of Italy as the first stopover of his visit to Europe is the recognition of the perseverance with which Italy has always bet on Iran”
(Gentiloni in Ansa 2016: 1)

In this thesis I have analysed the discourse between Italy and Iran to show to what extent this has been the main feature of their relations at least since the end of WWII. To answer the research question “What explains the mutual preference in Italy-Iran relations?” I have preliminarily drawn a theoretical framework using Foucault’s and Wendt’s contributions, respectively regarding the concept of discourse and constructivism theoretical approach – the latter was useful to support the concept of perception between the two populations – and finally the concept of stigma developed by Adler-Nissen that connects and further develops the two previous notions. In the theoretical framework I inserted my interpretative model, defined as a ‘special liaison’, partially derived from these three authors, that allows an analysis of the relations between the two countries, keeping under control a series of variables such as traditions, history, culture, politics, time-frame characteristics, absence of framework agreements and specific differences including their belonging to opposing blocs. This model has allowed me to understand why, despite their apparent differences, Italy and Iran have always maintained positive relationships.

To introduce the research question, I have briefly analysed the historical evolution of the two countries, focusing particularly on the post-war period and, regarding Iran, on the events occurred since Khomeini’s revolution. I have examined their international relations, highlighting a common fundamental feature, i.e. their will to guarantee, despite respecting the obligations of international alliances or geopolitical belonging, a specific autonomy of manoeuvre. Over time, the two countries have had the opportunity to establish non-official political relations, starting from economic and

commercial interchanges. Trying to get free of constraints is the main attitude that has allowed the two countries to continue their relations without falling into ideological traps or in the sometimes too narrow limits of their respective international alliances. The positive discourse is the key element that has allowed them to go beyond barriers and political differences, maintaining mutual trust and respect. As a further proof of the existence of the discourse between them, I argue it is important to remember the last events in international politics with the reciprocal visits of Italian Premier Gentiloni to Tehran and Rouhani to Rome. It must not be overlooked that Rouhani's choice to visit Rome as the first European capital of his journey arises precisely from this discourse, i.e. from the two countries' mutual positive perception. The core of my thesis is made by the interviews conducted with Italian and Iranian entrepreneurs, businessmen, academics and experts. I preferred this approach because, when dealing with favourable perceptions facilitating trade exchanges, it is fundamental to collect the opinions, experiences and world-visions of people who work directly on the field. All the interviewees confirmed the existence of a favourable discourse; for example, they have stressed that Italy is not considered an ex-colonial power with all related entailments, and how much its seriousness in maintaining commitments and its ability in always finding the best solutions for the benefit of both parties are appreciated. Certainly, there have been difficult times when the obligations set by the international alliances have made it difficult for Italy and Iran to maintain their relations, but even on those occasions the dialogue has never completely stopped.

Italy has respected the sanctions imposed on Iran, though without ever taking an extreme position, seeking instead mediation and avoiding confrontation. My research question finds therefore a wide and positive answer not only in historical data on economic and business relations but above all in the interviews which outlined the mutual empathy as a real feature of the two countries' relations, which cannot draw, for obvious international political reasons, on the classical instruments such as alliances, agreements or treaties, and find in the 'special liaison' a mutually beneficial and

congruent way to reach objectives. How long this will last in the future is not easy to foresee today. I agree however that the ‘special liaison’ theory, thanks to its flexibility, creativity and adaptability, is a tool that can be applied to all those situations of atypical international relations that escape a traditional analysis and can be an important contribution to the IR field. I like to end these conclusions by directly reporting Rouhani’s statements during an interview given to the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*:

“I’m pleased that my first visit abroad after signing the nuclear agreement is to Italy, because it’s a country with which Iran has long had good relationships economically, culturally and politically. For a while, Italy was our number one trading partner. As to international and political issues, the Italian leaders have always taken a moderate stance on us. We consider your country as a partner and a friend in Europe. I hope my trip will start a new phase in our relationships” (Rouhani in Mazza, Valentino 2015: 1).

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