

The Middle East and North Africa

Perspectives on Public Affairs, Policy, and Economic Development

Alexander Dawoody
Editor



This book includes 30 chapters that examine various aspect of public policy and development issues in the region of the Middle East. The core of the analysis is a series of case studies that explore major aspects of policy development either in the region as broadly defined, or in a particular country such as Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

The main themes include policy and economic development, rights and civil society, regulatory governance, reforms and transformational process, ICT, and conflict resolution.

The book differs from other books on issues of public policy and development in the Middle East and North Africa because of its in-depth perspectives and analysis, comprehensive approach to important themes in policy making process. All the themes in the book will be anchored within historic, social, political, and economic contexts.

The book examines public policy and development issues in the Middle East by assessing efforts to implement policy reform and services across the region, providing in-depth country case studies written by leading experts. The themes include policy and economic development, rights and civil society, regulatory governance, reforms and transformational processes, ICT, and conflict resolution. The analysis are developed by experts from the region, with each study exploring major aspects of governance in the region of the Middle East and North Africa, or in a particular country in the region. The book will appeal to students and scholars of public policy, public administration and governance, as well as those interested in the Middle East more generally.

Keywords: Conflict, Development, Migration, Middle East, North Africa, Policy, Reform, Sustainability.

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An Overview of the Iranian Multi-level Governance Model

Understanding the Role of Supra-Governmental Councils in Achieving Policy Consistency and Stability

Seyed Mohamad Sadegh Emamian

AmirKabir University of Technology (AUT), Iran.

Email: Seyed.Emamian@Sharif.edu.

Abstract

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the various governance systems and policymaking models in Middle Eastern countries. Considering the importance of Iran in the region as a big country representing a traditional civilization, this chapter contributes well to the book's overall aim by providing a contextual understanding of the Iranian political system and its policymaking machinery. Having reviewed the main public departments and political institutions there, the chapter focuses on some distinctive features of the Iranian governance model representing its unique political system and arguably complex policymaking process. In particular, it sheds light on the specific role of four supra-governmental Councils in providing policy consistency amongst various public departments, including the Government, the Parliament, and the independent Judiciary System. They are also expected to enhance policy stability throughout successive Governments and Parliaments by drafting long-term strategies, called "Macro-Policies"; framing their policies and political strategies. Altogether the chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the Iranian Multi-level Governance Model, in which public policies are practically derived from a complex process and multilayered institutional design.

Keywords: Multi-level Governance, Policy Consistency, Policy Stability, Supra-Governmental Supreme Councils.

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the various governance systems and policymaking models in Middle Eastern countries. Considering the importance of Iran in the region as a big country representing a traditional civilization, this chapter contributes well to the book's overall aim by providing a contextual understanding of the Iranian political system and its policymaking machinery. Having reviewed the main public departments and political institutions there, the chapter focuses on some distinctive features of the Iranian governance model representing its unique political system and arguably complex policymaking process. In particular, it sheds light on the specific role of four supra-governmental Councils in providing policy consistency amongst various public departments, including the Government, the Parliament, and the independent Judiciary System. They are also expected to enhance policy stability throughout successive Governments and Parliaments by drafting long-term strategies, called "Macro-Policies," framing their policies and political strategies. Altogether the chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the Iranian Multi-level Governance Model, in which public policies are practically derived from a complex process and multilayered institutional design.

The Iranian Socio-Political Context: A Distinctive Public Policymaking Process

Iran has long represented a complex mix of Persian civilization and Islamic tradition. Considering the Islamic Revolution in 1979 as the birthdate of the most recent political system expecting to represent such a mixed identity, this introductory section provides a brief understanding of a few

socio-political characteristics that frame the whole policymaking process in post-revolutionary Iran.

1- The Very Central Tradition of the Public Sector

In Iran, like most developing countries, the government has been traditionally seen as the sole responsible for public service delivery, the early decades of modern government history in Iran coincided with the post-WWII years and the rise of the welfare state idea across the world. Inspired by this, Iran was seen as one of the early defensive borders against aggressive communism. So the western-oriented Iranian kingdom was obliged to provide a high-level standard of public service in order to safeguard the society against the infiltration of socialist policies and leftist political ideologies.

Experiencing the sharp rise in oil prices in the 1970s reinforced the legacy of an oil-based economy, which dates back to the first years of oil discovery within the Iranian territory almost a century ago. It then led to a form of rentier state model manifested in a paternalistic and centralized state tradition with a constant increase in size and the scale of the public sector in Iran (Sarzaie, 2020; Karimi & Nili, 2022).

Considering the then substantially non-democratic political system led by the authoritative and ambitious King, such a complex mix of a welfare-state style of public service and the classical rentier-state model of public expenditure resulted in “an excessive centralization” of public sectors and a vast service delivery machinery. The central mode of government was also persistent even in the post-1979 Islamic revolution years. The Iran-Iraq war and, subsequently, the economic recovery and development era in the 1990s also reinforced the philosophy behind a large-scale government model (Mokhtari & Shafiei, 2019). Having overviewed a long history of socio-political and economic context leading to a centralized public sector, this has locked in the Iranian public policy process into less flexible and traditional bureaucratic machinery.

2- A Substantially Islamic Society and Emerging Religious Political Institutions: A Prospect of an Islamic Governance Model

Based on recent studies (Emamian et al. 2023), Iranian society has been overall a religious society, with a majority supporting the Islamic²⁸⁴ way of administrating the country. Furthermore, the post-revolutionary constitution has aimed to officially institutionalize the then-perceived “Islamic political system” by proposing several public institutions and specific legal procedures and frameworks. Having understood Iranian society and politics as overwhelmingly influenced by Islamic values and tradition, the process of policymaking and public administration is also primarily influenced by a set of policy institutions and actors who represent, albeit an Iranian interpretation of, the Islamic points of view. The process of certification of Parliamentary rules by the Guardian Council, the relatively strong influence of religious interest groups across different levels of policymaking inside and outside government, and the constitutional principles framing several policy domains, including banking, media, education policy as well as politics, in general, are of those characteristics representing policymaking in Iran as a comparatively unique and interesting case for empirical studies.

²⁸⁴ Amongst various Islamic sects, the Shi'a school of thought is dominant within Iranian society and is officially mentioned by the constitution.

However, in practice, there is still an ongoing controversy around the exact characteristics of the “Islamic model of governance” and its distinctive practical consequences. The Iranian public policymaking process has long been expected to provide the institutional capacity to preserve Islamic values and norms throughout the whole process and develop and implement the Islamic governance model.

3- The Lack of Political Institutionalization: The Policymaking Machinery in Flux and Ambivalence

Established as a relatively young political system, the lack of a well-institutionalized tradition of party political system has led to an unstable and fluctuating mode of policymaking in successive governments (Ashtarian, 2017). At the absence of professional and competitive political machinery manifested by unique political ideas and well-thought policy proposals, Iran has experienced a form of policy ambivalence even amongst politically aligned governments.

Moving from a wartime government associated with socialist economic ideas and a “securitized” policymaking model towards the economic development administration era dedicated to infrastructure development and economic recovery until the late-1990s, there was an “inherited reluctance” against the classical party political system. It was widely perceived as damaging to social cohesion and threatening the so-called “unity” required during such a specific period of time. In contrast, the seventh and eighth governments, led by President Khatami, prioritized “political reform” at the heart of their policies, leading to the “excessive politicization” of policymaking institutions. However, the emergence of a plethora of political crises the country had never experienced before hugely revived the already-mentioned party politics skepticism of the early post-revolutionary years.

As a direct social backlash, the President Ahmadinejad administration in the mid-2000s was widely accused by critics of the “populism era” due to its anti-politics approach. He personally was constantly attacking political parties as self-interest-seeking institutions at the expense of “people” in general. In 2013 a tiny electoral victory of the “moderate government” led by President Rouhani was predominantly conceived as a “technocratic era.” Inspired by President Hashemi’s legacy and support, the then administrations downgraded internal politics in favor of their main strategy of reaching an international nuclear deal as a miraculous policy proposal.

In reviewing post-revolutionary political history it is clear that there is no sign of well-institutionalized party politics in different administrations. Almost none of the presidents was elected based on their political party support and tradition. Such an immature configuration of political institutions has led to ambivalence in the public policymaking process and exacerbated the challenge of policy instability and incoherency, which will be elaborated on later. Furthermore, in the absence of prominent political parties, the Iranian policy process is overwhelmingly influenced by a wide range of policy actors, from interest-based or ideational pressure groups to policy institutions like think tanks and lobbying groups competing to dominate the process of policymaking within the Government, the Parliament, and other public departments.

4- A Predominantly Crisis-Oriented Political Context: Policymaking and Constant Uncertainty

Iranian public policymaking is predominantly framed by the specific socio-political context it represents and the international context it surrounds. Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, both domestic and international contexts have constantly been faced with a plethora of destabilizing crises. The revolution itself, the imposed Iraq war, the rise of radicalism and terrorism, the chain of economic sanctions, the emerging periodical social unrests, the international particularity, and the inevitable securitization of the public domain have overall created a specific socio-political context framing a crisis-oriented policymaking process.

Besides an inherited policy instability imposed by such a context, the Iranian public policy machinery has adapted to these contextual characteristics. It is well-equipped with a high level of institutional flexibility, has learned how to consider increasing uncertainty, and is fairly competent in proposing innovative policy scenarios. However, as a result of such a crisis-based context, Iranian policymaking has long suffered from a lack of policy stability and consistency.

5- An International Particularity: Policymaking Under Sanctions and International Skepticism

Having been inspired by the political independence idea²⁸⁵ of the 1979 revolution leaders, the Iranian political system has always been, more or less, characterized by an "international skepticism" tradition (Afshani & Emamian, 2022; Khajesarvi, 2011). Apart from infrequent periods of internationally constructive policies like JCPOA²⁸⁶ in 2015, it has been well-evident by the US-led western sanctions, the then Soviet-Union support of Iraq during the war, Israel's direct involvement in security operations inside the country, and the regional conflict with GCC. Such an internationally isolative approach has not only affected its foreign policy and diplomatic administration but also framed overall public policy machinery by containing policy learning, constraining the exchange of expertise and technology, and challenging Iran's active engagement in international organizations and multilateral treaties.

Such international conservatism has recently even been exacerbated due to the growing risk of surveillance and data security concerns derived from the digitalization of the public sector. Altogether, they have shifted the Iranian policymaking process towards an inward and rather securitized approach resulting in a very particular institutional design and governance model. In the last few years, the emerging public controversy in a few policy domains affected by mandatory transnational initiatives like FATF²⁸⁷ in financial policy, UNESCO's²⁸⁸ 2030 Agenda in cultural policy, and the Paris Agreement in climate and environmental policy have reflected the extent of public skepticism and political sensitivity against the growing influence of international regulations and treaties.

²⁸⁵ There was a symbolic sentence during the revolution: "no western, no eastern, only Islamic Republic."

²⁸⁶ The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

²⁸⁷ Financial Action Task Force.

²⁸⁸ The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

6- The Emergence of a Semi-Privatized Techno-Economy: Towards a Regulatory Governance

Following the amendment of the 44th principle of the Iranian constitution in 2005, the Iranian economy was supposed to conduct a comprehensive and substantial privatization process in almost all economic sectors. However, the process has constantly been challenged by an increasing political and philosophical disputation over the appropriateness of large-scale privatization for the Iranian economy and its consistency with the “revolutionary values and principles.” Furthermore, it has also been practically deviated by the emergence of semi-privatized corporations that were still ultimately indirectly owned by public departments. Altogether, Iran’s economy has since suffered from an aborted and inconsistent privatization process.

Nevertheless, this incomplete process of privatization has fundamentally altered the Iranian tradition of governmental institutions, the role of the state, and the extent of government intervention there. In particular, instead of large-scale public departments responsible for providing public services, several either statutory or independent regulatory institutions began to emerge as parts of the new Iranian governance landscape. They were expected to protect a wide range of public interests, including, but by no means limited to, competition, and to ensure the implementation of public policies by private actors through exercising regulatory policies and instruments. Most recently, the gradual proliferation of regulatory institutions within the public sector has been perceived as a substantial shift in the Iranian governance model from an over-centralized mode towards a form of “regulatory governance” (Emamian et al., 2018; Emamian et al., 2022).

Likewise, having been privileged by a high level of technical expertise and investment, the Iranian economy has recently witnessed the rise of technology-based, mainly digitalized, private corporations. It has led to an increasing digital economy share of the whole country’s GDP during the last decade (UNDP, 2020). However, the growing share of the private sector from the whole Iranian economy, along with the shifting mode of government intervention towards regulatory policies, have led to a more complex and multi-layered policymaking process involving many policy actors inside and outside the government.

7- The Challenge of Policy Consistency and Stability: Policy Stalemate and Political Short-Termism

In post-revolutionary Iran, public policymaking has long been affected by institutional challenges. First, there has always been evident an apparent lack of policy integration and consistency amongst the Government, Parliament, and the Judiciary Power. Based on the constitution, the governance structure in Iran is based on the division of power between the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches. While a certain level of policy consistency is required for many issues clearly within the domain of authority of one of these branches, it is even more necessary for many other issues that are unclear which branch has the final say.

Apart from the legal root of the challenge in the “excessive separation of power” presented in the Iranian constitution, it also suffers from the lack of political institutions and well-established political parties, as mentioned above. Without such an integrative policy, political initiatives, and

agents, the lack of policy cohesion has been easily deepening due to different institutions' bureaucratic lock-in and structural biases and preferences. It has even been exacerbated by the increasing institutional complexity in the Iranian polity due to the establishment of several post-revolutionary public departments that are neither within the territory of the Government nor accountable to the Parliament²⁸⁹. In several cases, such a policy inconsistency has been publicized in different forms of policy challenges and controversies. Even in the worst cases, it has created some forms of policy stalemate and political crisis²⁹⁰.

Secondly, the Iranian policy process has also suffered from the lack of policy stability and strategic direction required for achieving long-term strategies and policy objectives on issues of particular importance to the country. Besides the growing institutional complexity mentioned above, such a long-term policy commitment has also been challenged by policy divergence amongst subsequent democratically elected governments and parliaments. So, there is an institutional requirement to ensure that with the change in leadership and composition of any single branch of the constitutional powers, the overarching policies of IRI in those specific areas will not be subject to immediate change. Likewise, such a stability challenge is mainly derived from the weakness of the party political system in the country, leading to a form of "political short-termism."

Altogether, reaching the points of policy conflict and stalemate, as well as the predominance of political short-termism, have characterized the Iranian public policy process as inconsistent and unstable.

Towards A Multi-Level Governance Model: Supra-Governmental Supreme Councils as Institutional Innovations

To encounter the institutional challenges that the post-revolutionary Iranian policy process has long faced, as of those briefly reviewed in the previous section, the amended Constitution in 1989 has proposed a set of institutional innovations, including several "Supreme Councils" at the highest level of the Iranian political system. These councils are designed as supra-governmental entities consisting of the President, the chair of Parliament, and the head of the Judiciary system as three independent constitutional powers within the Iranian polity. Furthermore, those councils include other relevant official positions as legal members and personal members from professional experts, academics, societal representatives, and political figures.

Apart from their particular policy domain, the councils are generally in charge of policy coordination and conflict resolution amongst various constitutional powers and public departments. More importantly, those councils enjoy the authority of proposing overarching and long-term policies, the so-called "Macro Policies" by the Iranian legal terminology, to frame and sustain the overall direction of sectorial and executive policies beyond regular political cycles. This section will provide an overview of the main supreme councils, the institutional design they are characterized with, the policy capacities and instruments they are equipped with, and the policy challenges they are tackling with.

²⁸⁹ While most of those organizations have been primarily established as transitional and temporary organizations, they were then institutionalized either by the constitutional amendment in 1989 or by acts passed by the Parliament.

²⁹⁰ In a historical case, there was a challenge around the Labor Act in 1987, leading to the resignation of the then-head of the Guardian Council.

1- The Expediency Discernment Council of the System (EDC): The Challenge of Policy Implementation and Political Compliance

The EDC was created in 1988 to resolve legislative disputes and disagreements between Parliament and the Guardian Council. Having included the most high-ranking official institutions alongside independent political figures appointed by the Supreme Leader²⁹¹, it was officially legalized by the constitution amendment in 1989. Its conflict resolution function has since been expanded to settle policy challenges between all three branches of the constitutional powers. This power is the main policy instrument of EDC to preserve policy consistency and integration across the whole branches of powers and the public sector.

The EDC also plays the national policy adviser to the Supreme Leader. This means EDC is responsible for proposing national “macro policies” to be endorsed by the Supreme Leader. Those policies are characterized by their strategic importance, long-term perspective, contextually distinctive nature²⁹², and supra-governmental and overarching scope. In some extreme cases, EDC’s policies has even revised constitutional principles. In other words, EDC functions as the council with the authority to propose “constitutional revisions and governmental ordinances” (Ghaibi, 2019a). As such, macro policies are the main EDC’s power to frame public policymaking of all public departments and guarantee policy stability and continuity throughout subsequent elected governments and parliaments with different political directions.

The national supervisory authority is the most recent constitutional power delegated to the EDC by the Supreme Leader. By this, the EDC has gained the highest-ranking supervisory power to overview the overall directions of all public departments concerning national macro policies. As such, the EDC established the Supreme Supervisory Authority five years ago. As the first step, it has begun to approve that the Parliamentary acts are not in contradiction with enacted macro policies. The authority is also looking for new initiatives to extend its supervisory scope beyond Parliament and towards administrative and judiciary powers. While this power is still passively implemented through a policy veto power²⁹³, it has elevated the EDC’s institutional capacity to preserve policy consistency across the whole governance system based on already enacted macro policies.

Besides its high-ranking political position, the EDC has long been criticized for the lack of policy implementation measures. Amongst 34 macro policies enacted by the Council, very few have been explicitly supported by the Parliamentary acts or a dedicated institution. In particular, regarding the Government, there is no such actual accountability measure on the ground, apart from the membership of the President and relevant ministers in the EDC. Having been positioned as a supra-governmental council, it has always been politically undermined by the then-in-power governments. Such an institutional challenge has politically emerged, particularly since its second term that the Council was no longer led by the President per se.

²⁹¹ The EDC includes heads of the three branches of power, the clerical members of the Guardian Council, the director of NSS, the chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces, and various other members appointed by the supreme leader for five-year terms. Cabinet members and parliamentary leaders also serve as temporary members when issues under their jurisdictions are under review.

²⁹² As such, very few macro policies are expected to be contextually Iran-specific or related to the revolutionary identical. They will not be normal policies that are of traditional functions of governments.

²⁹³ Its official procedure still evaluates the merely noncontradictory status of parliamentary acts. The EDC is expected to supervise the implementation of macro policies too actively.

In sum, while the EDC has come into the Iranian political scene as an institutional innovation to unlock policy stalemates and resolve political and legislative disputes as framed by some critics as the “state of exception” (Ghaibi, 2019b), it has then expanded its constitutional power to play the role of a national assembly proposing overarching macro policies and supervising all branches of power and related public departments regarding the level of their commitment to and consistency with those policies. However, it still lacks an effective set of institutional instruments guaranteeing the implementation of macro policies as well as the political compliance of various governments and parliaments to the EDC’s decisions.

2- The National Security Supreme Council (NSS): Regulatory Compliance and Over-Securitization

The National Security Supreme Council (NSS) came into existence in the second decade after the Revolution in 1989 to frame national security policies and to enhance coordination amongst security-related public departments. Having been overwhelmingly securitized, analyzing its internal procedures is difficult. However, based on its policy impact, the NSS has been one of Iran's most effective and operational supreme councils. Unlike other supreme councils that have been deliberately away from the daily running of the country, it has always been at the forefront of Iran's security and, for some periods of time, foreign policy issues. Most notably, until 2013, nuclear negotiations were directed and conducted by the NSS as one of the most complicated and sensitive issues in the history of Iranian foreign policy.

One could point to the hierarchical and well-organized nature of the security sector and its relevant public departments to provide an institutional analysis of its effectiveness and operability compared to other counterparts. It also might relate to its limited membership, including, constitutional powers aside, only two representatives of the Supreme Leader alongside a handful of security and military departments. Furthermore, its decisions have the most significant policy influence as the Supreme Leader must sign off the NSS's decisions for them to become enforceable.

In general, given its security and secrecy environment and its effectiveness in protecting Iran's national security and sovereignty amid one of the most unstable regions of the world, NSS enjoys a remarkable level of public legitimacy and regulatory compliance. However, there are still some levels of institutional complexity and structural overlap derived from the NSS's supra-governmentality design and over-securitization.

3- The Cultural Revolution Supreme Council (CRS): An Interventionist Ambition and Institutional Complexity

The Cultural Revolution Supreme Council (CRS) has historical roots and has been substantially part of the revolution from the very beginning. The origins of CRS can be traced back to 1980 to restructure the Iranian academia and instill the Islamic and revolutionary values therein. It has since become the highest-ranking public policymaking body in cultural and academic issues. The Council’s authority has then expanded in setting and enforcing macro policies related to broader cultural, scientific, and technological issues. Its 29 members include the heads of the three power branches and several relevant ministers and public departments. The rest are well-respected

cultural and scientific figures appointed by the Supreme Leader, and its decisions as such can only be overruled exclusively by that position.

Besides macro policymaking, the CRS has also moved towards playing the role of the national regulatory body in cultural as well as scientific and technological issues setting specific regulations and supervising the activity of other ministries and public departments. Even in particular instances, the Council has centrally intervened in administrative issues. Such a functional ambition and centralization have complicated the CRS's institutional characteristics as a supra-governmental multi-functional public body. As such, some critics argue that the CRS suffers from a lack of institutional integrity and cohesion. They point to a distinctive set of institutional capacities that any policymaking, regulatory, and administrative bodies are expected to be equipped with. As such, the CRS's ambitious multi-functionality has led to institutional ambiguity and incompetency.

Moreover, it has been long challenged by relevant public departments for its direct intervention at the administrative level leading to structural overlaps and policy conflicts. While such a conflicting challenge is more or less evident for all supra-governmental councils, it is even more challenging for the CRS due to its multi-functionality and institutional complexity. Administration aside, several instances of legislative divergence and inconsistency between the CRS and the Parliament have also been recorded during the last few years. Altogether, the CRS's institutional incompetency and structural conflicts have undermined the Council's public legitimacy and policy effectiveness.

4- The Cyber Space Supreme Council (CSS): Digital Convergence and Regulatory System

Taking into account the universal pattern of digitalization in almost all aspects of modern societies, the Cyber Space Supreme Council (CSS) was established in 2010 as the most recent and technical supreme council. Besides the heads of three constitutional powers, its membership includes digitally more relevant public departments and a handful of academics and professionals with varied expertise in digital policy. The CSS is expected to play the role of an overarching body framing national digital policies and strategic directions throughout the whole public service. It has moved beyond sectoral and departmental borders representing the digitalized societies' convergence.

As a relatively emerging policy domain, the CSS is also aimed to bring about the required level of institutional development. This means that passing digital macro policies, drafting relevant laws and regulations, and proposing structural development plans are at the heart of the CSS's tasks. By this, the CSS not only initiates the establishment of digital-specific institutions and departments, but it also aims to redefine and reform the existing institutions to meet the digital era requirements.

Creating a comprehensive digital regulatory system has long been at the top of the CSS's institutional policy. Like almost all countries, an appropriate cyber security arrangement has also been prioritized. As a very Iran-specific issue, the CSS has also aimed a particular institutional design to combat, mainly US-based, unilateral sanctions. For instance, the CSS has also been

expected to provide a dedicated inter-departmental arrangement for conducting cyber diplomacy and international digital treaties.

In addition to the institutional development policy, conducting, facilitating, and steering national super-projects has also been important within the CSS list of priorities. The National Infrastructure Network (NIN) is of the few super-projects that CSS has actively initiated. A portfolio of Iranian digital platforms and social networks is another instance of the council's digital super-project policy.

Compared to other Supreme Councils, the CSS is relatively young, modern, and growing in its mandates and objectives, leaving the future of this council and its effectiveness and role in Iran's governance structure interesting for further studies.

Supra-Governmental Councils: Still a Challenging Institutional Perspective

As explained above, having positioned supra-governmental councils at the highest level of the Iranian public policymaking machinery, they have created a form of a multi-level governance model. By this, those councils provide overarching frameworks through conducting macro-policies for all public departments across the whole public sector. Inspired by the origin of the multi-level governance model in Europe (Thomann, E. & Sager, F. 2017; Poplier et al. 2019; Gollata, J. & Newig, J. 2017), the councils' macro-policies could be conceptually compared with Directives adopted at the EU level, framing following national policies and regulations by the member states.

As a result, they aim to enhance policy stability and continuity in national strategic issues beyond political and electoral cycles. They also have generally mitigated policy inconsistency by conducting conflict resolution initiatives. Furthermore, they have been expected to compensate for the political gap derived from the absence of a well-institutionalized political system through their somewhat representative membership reflecting political diversity. Likewise, they hope to open up the centralized public sector by framing their policies from a higher level intervention by supreme councils.

However, such an institutional innovation by no means has been institutionalized within the overarching Iranian governance landscape unchallenged. Firstly, almost all macro-policies passed by the councils are practically challenged once they reach the implementation level. Coming out of such high-level supra-governmental entities, no one is conceived as ultimately responsible for implementing adopted policies. Secondly, an inherited institutional conflict and overlap have also been evident as a constant challenge for, more or less, all supreme councils. The Government aside, there is always a risk of legislative conflict between Parliament and the Councils. Remarkably, the lack of a specific publicly accepted definition of macro-policy, in contrast to both sectoral policies adopted by the Government and its ministries and customary laws enacted by the Parliament, has exacerbated the probability of institutional conflict.

Furthermore, some forms of administrative over-ambition have led to the councils' more direct involvement beyond framing macro-policymaking towards regulatory intervention and even service provision. Such multi-functionality has resulted in the increasing institutional complexity

of supreme councils and their possible conflicts and overlaps with other regulatory and administrative public departments. Fourthly the NSS aside, the process of policymaking in other supreme councils has inherently suffered from the lack of transparency and public participation. Regarding the high-level membership and an over-securitized and conservative tradition of the Iranian policymaking model, the councils are almost perceived as behind-the-scenes entities. Consequently, their decisions generally lack the required level of public acceptability and social support. Likewise, they have also been challenged for their democratic legitimacy and accountability. Notwithstanding their constitutional mandate and the membership of democratically elected Government and Parliament, the challenge is raised mainly once they come to deal with politically sensitive and controversial issues.

Altogether, the supreme councils and their role in pushing toward an Iranian multi-level governance model are almost understudied. This introductory chapter aims to provide an overview of such an interesting case for further analytical scrutiny and contextual analysis.

About the Author

Dr. Seyed Emamian is an assistant professor in public policy at AmirKabir University of Technology (AUT), Tehran, Iran. He is also the Founding-Partner of the Governance and Policy Thinktank (GPTT). Seyed obtained his PhD in Public Policy from Edinburgh University, UK in 2014. He then conducted an Elite-Foundation funded postdoc at Sharif University of Technology, Tehran, Iran, where he then co-founded GPTT, as a university-affiliated think tank which has been highly respected and influential in Iranian Public policy making. Since then, he has been very much at the heart of public policymaking process in Iran through providing evidence-based policy analysis and advice for different public departments. Academically Seyed not only has taught in different universities in Iran, he also has published several peer-reviewed papers as well as policy briefs in public newspapers and media outlets. Seyed is an active member of International Public Policy Association (IPPA) as well as the Asian and Middle East Public Policy Association. Email: Seyed.Emamian@Sharif.edu.

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