

The foreign policy of Islamic Republic of Iran: Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran

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Abstract

In this article Iran's foreign policy is investigated both ideologically and in respect of its pragmatic motivations. It is argued that, since the revolution especially the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran has proved itself to be a rational, pragmatic active actor in foreign policy, even though actions and rhetorical outbursts from parts of the country have at times suggested otherwise. It is also suggested that a dialogue between Iran and the West could very well turn out to be effective for peace in the Middle East. Finally In spite of Iran reputation for religious fanaticism, since the end of the Iran-Iraq war the Islamic Republic of Iran has proved itself to be a rational actor in foreign policy since 9/11, 2001, and particularly since 2003, the commitment between Iran and the West, which might bring Iran out of international isolation and brightening its economic future, has seemed impossible. The combination of economic sanctions and threats of military intervention against Iran has been shown to have had little or no effect other than further alienation.

Keywords: Foreign policy, Ideology, Pragmatism, Revolution.

Introduction

Since the Islamic Revolution and during the war against Iraq, western media have associated Iran with eclipsed and irrational religious fundamentalism. However, many incidents has happened in the Islamic Republic since its founder and leader died in 1989, and even though the ideological teachings of the Revolution remain a central point of reference, Iran today faces great challenges, nationally, regionally and internationally, which require solutions.

Iran is the second largest exporter of oil in the world, and it has the largest population in the Middle East, so Iran cannot be ignored easily either regionally or internationally. Iran's geopolitical position at the Gulf Region and Central Asia has made the country a crucial actor in modern times in regional and international aspects. For these reasons, Iran is deeply dependent on its foreign relations. This article offers a short outline of Iranian foreign policy after revolution and how it has shaped and been shaped by the country's national, regional and international relations, and discusses the foreign policy has been motivated by rational or ideological issues. In this context, special attention is paid to the development of Iran's relations with the West – especially the United States – which has shown itself to be decisive for the course of Iranian foreign policy.

When applying terms like 'pragmatism' and 'rationality' in a foreign policy context, it is important to point out that what might seem rational or pragmatic in relation to one actor can have the opposite effect in relation to another. Rationality and pragmatism are not absolute qualities. In this article, acts of rationality or pragmatism are defined even though inconsistent with the ideological teachings of the Islamic Revolution and employed in order to ensure Iran a beneficial outcome. In order to conduct the analyses, it is necessary to understand the basic implications of Iran politics since the Islamic revolution.

Iran politics since the Revolution

Political Structure

The political system in Iran after the revolution reflects traits of the many different factions that took part in the overthrow of the Shah. Large parts of the constitution of the Islamic Republic are inspired by the political systems of Western countries which the revolutionary rhetoric scorned, rather than Islamic law. The result is complex and confusing system, positioned between theocracy and democracy: while the Supreme Leader does have the decisive, absolute power, governance is divided between elected and clerical (i.e. non-elected) councils, assemblies and offices, each of which has different areas of influence and responsibility, with numerous rights to veto the others. During the years of the Islamic Republic, political change in Iran has shown itself to be practically impossible within the framework of this system.

Political Development

In the years during and after the Islamic Revolution, it was the dream of exporting the new ideology at any cost which governed Khomeini's confrontational foreign policy. Within a few years, he managed both to isolate Iran from the international communities and to involve the country in a long and devastating war against its neighbour, Iraq, which being supported by the West and most regional powers. At the end of the war and Khomeini's death, Iran economy was devastated. Naturally, under the presidency of Rafsanjani, economic prosperity became the focal point. In order to attain this, a commitment to better international relations rather than Islamic Puritanism was required.

During presidency of Rafsanjani – some Iranian named him Ronald Reagan – managed to put the Iranian economy back on track, but his economic reforms also made him unpopular among the many working-class families during the Islamic Revolution especially the first years of the war, Khomeini had asked Iranian women to supply their country with an 'army of twenty millions', as a result of which the birth rate had boomed. In the late 1990s these children came to adulthood, many of them with higher education, but with the still fragile economy completely unable to absorb them on to the labor market.

Among these young people – who had no memories of Iran before the revolution – dissatisfaction with the limitations of the Islamic republic grew, and by the presidential elections of 1997, Iran was ripe for political and social reform. To the surprise of the right wing of Iranian politics, the reformist Khatami won the election.

Khatami stood powerless against the veto rights of the majority in the key non-elected clerical councils and of the traditionalist Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. During Khatami's presidency, a political theatre was played out in the country, where the reformists allow increased freedom of the press, while the traditionalist conservatives close down newspapers and arrest many critics. Khatami push for detente with the West and visit European leaders to improve Iran's international relations, right-wing conservatives condemn the United States and its allies in the national and international media.

During Khatami's presidency, amelioration in relations with the West took place. After 9/11 opened American eyes to the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism. When in 2003 the Bush named Iran part of the 'Axis of Evil', the positive development in Iran's relations with the West came to a halt, and in Iran a feeling of insecurity was created. This feeling of insecurity was only increased by presence of American troops in neighbor countries of Iran, (Mohammadi 2007) and political support for the Tehran hawks preaching fear and security was the logical outcome. As a consequence, since the parliament elections of 2004 and the election of Ahmadinejad as president in 2005, Iranian politics has been decided by conservative hard-liners. Although both elections were perceived by many Iranians to have involved fraud because a large number of reformist candidates were rejected for no reason, the protests were so moderate.

But even the conservatives cannot ignore the social freedom that Iranians gained under Khatami. So while the conservative leadership stands firm on the ideals of the Islamic Revolution, they are aware that they cannot afford to alienate the vast numbers of young Iranians, who defy these ideals in their everyday lives, if they want to remain in power and avoid a second revolution. Also the leadership is well aware that Iran needs to have better international relations with some economically and politically powerful countries – if they want to improve the enemy to support population in the future.

Since the end of the war (Zabih 1982) against Iraq in 1988, and especially since Khomeini's death in 1989, Iranian politics in both national and international aspects have been defeated. The revolutionary dream of national and regional leadership and the desire to eliminate Western and non-Muslim influence in the region is confronted by tendencies which seek to strengthen the country's economic development through increased international cooperation, including with Western trade partners.

Iran foreign policy: An ideology or a rational matter?

Hence, in spite of its reputation since the end of the war against Iraq, and especially since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran has proved to be a well-institutionalized, rational actor, which has put its strategic interests before its ideological ones in questions of foreign policy.

Iran's foreign policy unlike other states in the Middle East can be viewed as shaped by pressure from three distinct environments that often pull against one another: (1) the national environment; (2) the regional environment; and (3) the global environment.

In the case of Iran, the pressure from the regional and global environments has increased since the terrorist attacks in the United States of 9/11 2001 and the subsequent US-led invasions of Iran's two neighbors, Afghanistan and Iraq.

During the presidency of George W. Bush, three questions have been important in relations between Iran and the international community: (1) the role of Iran in the Israel-Palestine conflict; (2) the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and (3) Iran's nuclear activities.

In respect of the two first points, the purpose of and justification for Iran's nuclear program have been topics of heated discussion (Mottaki 2007) both within and outside the framework of the United Nations Security Council, reviving the question of whether the Islamic Republic of Iran can be viewed as a rational actor in its foreign policy or not?

The neoconservatives who have come to power in Iran have not changed the degree of rationality in the country's foreign policy. Only where ideological interests appear to coincide with strategic ones. A good example of this is the contrast between Ahmadinejad's denunciations of Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people (Eftekhari 2007) on the one side and the Islamic regime's silence vis-à-vis Russian persecution of Muslims in Chechnya and Chinese persecution of them in Xinjiang province on the other side. While criticising Israel is a risk at a time when a deterioration in relations between Iran on the one hand and Israel and the US on the other hands seems almost impossible, the urge to defend the rights of Muslims abroad disappears when important strategic and economic relations are at stake. Iran's extensive cooperation with countries like Russia, China and India bears witness to pragmatism taking precedence over ideology in the country's foreign relations.

Yet during periods of tension and international pressure on Iran, as in the 1980s or from 2001 onwards, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic has been characterized by ad hoc strategies and the obvious absence of a long-term strategic foreign-policy plan.

Since 9/11, 2001, and especially since the launch of the 'Axis of Evil' paradigm in 2003, Iran and the United States have both been fighting with the security issue at its core on both sides. In this regard, one can rightfully claim that the Bush (Sadeghi 2001) and Ahmadinejad administrations have needed each other.

The Bush administration has rejected any form of commitment between the two countries without Iran giving up all its nuclear activities. Instead the United States has been the active leader of a Western policy towards Iran that combines economic sanctions and threats of military intervention in an attempt to influence Iran's national and foreign policy. This strategy has not had the effect. This strategy seems only to have served to further isolate and radicalize the now neo-conservative leadership of the Islamic Republic (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 2001). And Iran remains isolated from the West, it is difficult to imagine a more homogenous and long-term 'Western-minded' foreign policy emerging from the leadership in Tehran.

Conclusion

After the Iranian Revolution of 1979 brought the Ayatollah Khomeini to power some events coincidentally happened such as Muslim countries rebuffed and restrained Islamic fundamentalists, Muslim countries also accepted sharia law, Muslim countries turned to terrorism to further Muslim interests and Sunni

Muslims refused sharia law, because most Iranians are Shia. The author who eventually formulated the ideology of the revolution while, was the man who governed the revolution itself—the Ayatollah Khomeini. He preached that defection, and especially martyrdom, against injustice and dictatorship was part of Shia Islam, that preachers should mobilize and surpass their flocks into action, not just to advise them. He rejected the influence of both Soviet and American world power in Iran. Perhaps the most important of the different ideological interpretation of Islam within the grand agreement that led to the 1979 revolution were traditional clerical mysticism, Khomeinism, Ali Shariati's ideology, and Mehdi Bazargan's liberal-democratic Islam. Less powerful were the socialist guerrilla groups of Islamic and secular branches, and the secular constitutionalism in socialist and nationalist forms. Revolutionaries criticize harshly against corruption, indulgence and autocratic nature of Pahlavi rule; policies that helped the rich at the payment of the poor; and the economic and cultural domination of Iran by non-Muslim foreigners—particularly Americans. But even more essentially he developed the ideology of who would run the Islamic Republic, what form of government it would take. Khomeini believed that Islam demanded the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, be applied to government, i.e. that Muslims, in fact everyone, required "guardianship," in the form of rule by the leading Islamic jurists—such as Khomeini himself. This was necessary because Islam needs submissiveness to regular Islamic sharia law alone. Following this law was not only the Islamically right thing to do, it would keep poverty, injustice, and the plundering of Muslim land by foreign unbelievers from continuing. But for all this to happen, sharia had to be shielded from novelty and change, and this required putting Islamic jurists in control of government. Establishing and conforming this Islamic government was so important it was "precisely an explanation of obedience to God," ultimately "more necessary even than prayer and fasting" for Islam because without it real Islam will not endure. It was a universal law, not one enclosed to Iran. The entire world needed and deserved true Islamic government, and Khomeini "regarded the exportation of the Islamic revolution as compulsory." However regarding "export of revolution" he mentioned: it "does not mean interpreting in other nation's affairs", but "answering their questions about knowing God".

This revolutionary eyesight of theocratic government was in absolute contrast to the Shiism that called for retraction from political life. And groundless to say it was in disagreement with the hopes and plans of Iran's democratic secularists and Islamic leftists. At the same time Khomeini knew an extensive revolutionary base was necessary and did not ponder to entice these forces to ally with his supporters to defeat the Shah. Therefore, the ideology of the revolution was known for its "imprecision" or "ambiguous character" earlier to its victory, with the particular character of *velayat-e faqih*/theocratic waiting to be made public when the time was right. Khomeini believed the antagonism to *velayat-e faqih*/theocratic government by the other revolutionaries was the outcome of propaganda campaign by foreign imperialists ambitious to avert Islam from putting a stop to their ravage. This propaganda was so sneaky it had pierced even Islamic seminaries and made it necessary to "observe the principles of *taqiyya*" (i.e. concealment of the truth in armament of Islam), when talking about (or not talking about) Islamic government. This difference between the general and the specific components of the revolution's ideology unavoidably broke down the unity of the revolution as Khomeini deserted *taqiyya* and worked decidedly to establish a government led by Islamic preachers, while opponents of theocracy resisted. In the end the break was not deadly. The opposition was defeated and the revolutionary ideology dominated.

The eight year long war between Iran and Iraq (September 1980 - August 1988) was the most notable international event for the first decade of the Islamic Republic and possibly for its history. It assisted to enhance the revolution although it sacrifices Iran much in lives and treasure. In spite of its fame for religious fanaticism, since the end of the war the Islamic Republic of Iran has demonstrated itself to be an actor in foreign policy since 9/11, 2001, and particularly since 2003, the resolution between Iran and the West, which might bring Iran out of international segregation and lighten its economic future, has seemed

impossible. The revolution happened because Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini pledged some economic beneficiary in Iranian families. Shortly after the success of the revolution, the leadership in Tehran believed that they would commence a massive Shia uprising across the Middle East and after Iraq's defeat, stride on Israel and destroy it. The amalgamation of economic sanctions and threats of military involvement against Iran has been shown to have had little or no influence other than further isolation.

This is a very important action that Europe and America need to take towards the recognition of the 'dialogue among civilizations' project. Of course this is not a one way proposal.

At the same time, organizing a dialogue with Iran has its own advantages. Iran is in neighborhood with Europe on one side and with Asia on the other. In this manner Iran is the gathering point of Eastern and Western cultures, just as man is the meeting point of the soul's East and the reason's West. The Persian heart and mind are full with a sense of composure, affection and tolerance, and for this reason, Iranians are the promoter of dialogue and supporter to justice and peace. The interaction of rhetorical outbursts, rejoinder and threats of military action of recent years have not only hurt relations between the Iran and the United States (and the West), but also the anticipation of balance in the Middle East and Western Asia.

The affair between Iran the United States has historically seemed conflicting and seemingly irrational, but unconcerned of the specific interaction, it has been primarily driven by ideological systems of belief, rather than by concrete reasons. In the period directly following World War II, Iran and the United States commonly sought affinity with each other to help serve as a safeguard against the rise of pan-Arabism in the Middle East and the advance of communism outside the Soviet Union. President Dwight D. Eisenhower began nominal progress toward real mutual effort through the Iranian "Atoms for Peace" program. President Richard Nixon also sought Iranian assistance for the support of the Shah of Iran to take care of him against the Soviet Union. To obtain the full support of Iran in Persian Gulf security substances, Nixon personally offered all U.S.-made non-nuclear weapons to the Shaw. Less than seven years later, the Iranian Revolution demoted the Shah. Thereafter Iranian students captured the US Embassy in Tehran and held 52 hostages there. For the next 33 years, disagreement, incited by stubborn ideology, has grasped both countries hostage. Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, ideology, stubborn rhetoric and political parading have largely defined the relationship between Iran and the United States. This pattern of public interplay has feed the continuous conflict and has prevented either side from defending significant progress toward cooperation. Presidents from both countries have tried to calm the conflict and they have even made advancement when the methods have been focused on appropriate concrete issues. Advancement, however, has always been finally restrained through an ideological statement or action by one country toward the other. A path toward completion the dispute has been defined for many years, but it relies on American and Iranian leaders deserted their own categorical, ideological denial of the other's position and deciding to focus only on the tangible aspects of the disharmony between them. The Iranian Revolution changed the balance of power in the Middle East and began changing the attitudes and structures that had guided the relationship between Washington and Tehran. Most over, the Iran Iraq war even further divided the United States and Iran. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the two countries had little interaction and their official position toward one other seemed to be pure fortitude. Constructivism's role became clear during the assistance between Clinton and Khatami. When America reacted to the attack on September 11th, they quickly found the need for vital support from one of the oldest enemies of the Taliban: Iran. Despite of continued US dictated economic sanctions, Tehran was amenable to cooperate with Washington to show the refreshed benefits of an Iranian ally in the Middle East. Further demonstrating the adaptable nature of constructivism, Iran was so enthusiastic to forfeit hard feelings to cooperate with the US that they afford admission to their air bases, they offered to

accomplish search and save operations for American pilots as well as to share their experience with fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. History has surely impressed each country's reactions and has often overstated the ideological reaction on both sides. As the world keeps on watch and wait for Iran and the United States next moves, it is necessary to comprehend the situation may continue to struggle in an ideological dilemma.

Disputes have arisen among the international community. Further debates include the fact that enough evidence does not exist to make a fair determination on the existence of nuclear weapon development in Iran, raising questions as to the accreditation of sanctions. However initiating a precondition-free dialogue between Iran and the West, rather than keeping on the current confrontation, remains the only way to turn this negative situation.

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