

The Formative Process of Post- Revolutionary Iranian Foreign Policy: 1979-1982

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Abstract

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran led to serious differences and disputes between the new revolutionary government on the one hand and major world powers as well as countries in the region on the other. Many analysts have, attributed this to the idealism of Iran's revolutionary leaders and their attempts to export the revolution. Often in these works, without paying attention to the events of the years after the revolution, the roots of this aggressive foreign policy are sought in the thoughts and actions of the new revolutionary leaders. This paper, while criticizing this approach, will seek to confirm the hypothesis that the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran was molded principally by actions and reactions that took place between 1980 and 1983 between Iran and the aforementioned nations. In other words, the new foreign policy was not created to be inherently aggressive, but a series of interactive communications, in the outlined time period, have influenced the contours of this new identity.

Keywords: Islamic Republic Of Iran, Foreign Policy, Big Powers, Revolutionary Governments, Process of Interaction

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Introduction

With more than three decades having passed since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, this old question can still be important: Why was Iran brought into conflict and confrontation with major powers and some countries in the region in the first few years following the Revolution? The study of this issue continues to be important as those confrontations have continued to influence the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards those countries throughout the ensuing years.

Some analysts hold that the reasons for these tensions – and in a way, the development of a confrontational foreign policy in Iran – are above all the combativeness of political Islam (Cottam, 2001: 197-235) and the efforts of the new Islamic government to export its revolution to other countries in the region (Rajaei, 2004: 87-92). The involvement of the Islamic Republic in rhetoric and ideology (Ehteshami, 2002: 126) and departure from the Bazargan foreign policy of non-aligned nationalism in favor of an idealistic foreign policy in the aftermath of the takeover of the U.S. Embassy on November 4th 1979 (Ramazani, 2010: 64), are also among the factors cited to explain the tensions between Iran and the major world powers as well as some nations in the region. These studies clearly attribute all the tensions to ideological tendencies by the new Iranian leadership, and despite occasionally mentioning situational considerations and the nature of the conduct of others, effectively underestimate their role in the development of Iran's confrontational foreign policy, as they put it.



Undoubtedly, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 brought Iran a “new foreign policy,” but one question which is often neglected is: how did the “new foreign policy” come about from the events of the first few years following the revolution? Is it, as many analysts of Iran’s foreign policy insist, that the new foreign policy is exclusively the result of the ideological beliefs of revolutionary leaders, or should the new foreign policy be considered a product of the sum total of Iran’s interactions with other countries?

The analyses regarding Iranian foreign policy in the aftermath of the revolution are based on several significant assumptions. First, they assume ideological agendas for specific foreign policy measures to precede Iran’s foreign policy developments, second, they underestimate the role of the conduct of others in the formation of new combative characteristics, and third, they assume that the new combative characteristic (of the revolutionary government) is part of a closed and predetermined identity.

In this article, we posit that the body of the new Iranian foreign policy is not wholly derived from the idealism of revolutionary leaders, but rather from the reality of international events, especially in the years following the revolution, and in reaction to outside surroundings. In this article, with emphasis on the point that the new Iranian foreign policy was not at once imported into Iran along with Imam Khomeini in February of 1979, we will examine the development – or in our cadence birth– of the new Iranian foreign policy between the years of 1979 and 1963, meaning from the revolution to slightly after the liberation of Khorramshahr during the Iran Iraq war.

In this paper, after first examining works relating to the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, we will discuss in the theoretical part, the reasons, importance and implications of the concept of the birth of foreign policy, as well as the way in which international environment helped mold the policies. We will also outline the standing of issues related to foreign policy in the process



of revolution and the conduct of revolutionary leaders. In the second section, we will address the question of how the mindsets of the revolutionaries, in particular their fear of American meddling and supporting anti-revolution elements, in addition to objective evidence to this effect, exacerbated tensions between the new government and major Western powers during the years of 1979 and 1980. Finally, we will examine how Iran's management of domestic and foreign crises, despite the full support of conservative regimes in the region and major world powers of Iraq, reinforced the self-confidence of Iranian leaders and consolidated the identity of the Iranian foreign policy.

I - Islamic Revolution and Foreign Policy

A critical question in the field of social sciences is always to what extent we can attach changing circumstances to static concepts. In other words, to what extent does the purpose of categorizing issues allow us to explain "happenings" in the framework of "existing conditions?" Conceptualizations exist to facilitate our access to truths, but it seems in some circumstances those conceptualizations could themselves obstruct our view of these truths. In studying analyses of Iranian foreign policy in the years after the revolution, most authors tend to be beholden to certain theories that guide their results in certain directions. Rouhollah Ramazani, in his book *An Analytic Framework for Examining the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran* without contemplating the special circumstances that Iran was faced with in the wake of the revolution, cites the notion that Mr. Bazargan, Prime Minister of the Interim Government, wanted Islam for Iran, but Imam Khomeini wanted Iran for Islam (Ramezani, 2010: 60) and creates certain suppositions that have since been employed in the works of many other scholars. By defining concepts of Iranianism and Islamism as two different sources of allegiances, Ramazani creates a setting where every episode in Iranian foreign policy is viewed by other analysts through the prism of one of the two. Though the importance of studying these concepts is undeniable,



Ramazani provides no specific case to validate this division and does not explain its effects on the new foreign policy. At the very least, one cannot deny that especially in the first few years after the foundation of the Islamic Republic, and in assessing Iranian foreign policy in these years, the aforementioned analytic framework ignores many critical factors regarding Iran's surroundings. Of course Ramazani in a separate article, and borrowing Waltzian concepts of socialization, does express the viewpoint that though Imam Khomeini was himself a super idealist, due to the actions of the international community, he behaved in a pragmatic manner and therefore pioneered in adapting Iran's idealistic worldview with existing international requirements. Nonetheless, Ramazani, in this article, first only considers the effects of outside world on Iranian foreign policy from a realist perspective, and secondly only sees these effects as having "brought it to its sense," and generally rejects the possibility of the international environment being influential on Iranian foreign policy taking on aggressive characteristics, especially in the first years after the revolution (Ramazani, 2010).

In the following years, the division of Iranianism and Islamism as two distinct sources of allegiance in Iranian foreign policy was reconstructed as national interests versus ideological interests. Many analyses are marked by an evident or hidden assumption that Iranian foreign policy is composed of a simultaneous quest for both national and ideological interests. Nagibzadeh, Professor at the school of law and politics of the University of Tehran, in the book "Process of Decision Making in Iranian Foreign Policy," holds as an organizing principle of nearly all of his arguments, that Iranian foreign policy in these years is caught in conflict between values and realities. In this book, Nagibzadeh tries to take a critical approach and highlight the turmoil in the mindset of foreign policy decision makers. Mohammad Reza Tajik, Professor at Shahid Beheshti University, also in his book "Foreign Policy; Absence of Decisions and Prudence," mainly attends to the dysfunctional dialogue in the arena of decision making in



Iranian foreign policy while disregarding external conditions.

The dissection of idealism versus pragmatism is yet another division commonly seen in many works regarding Iranian foreign policy. Ramazani, saifzadeh, Nagibzadeh, Sari-al-Ghalam, and Ehteshami are of the many scholars that utilize this division to gain an understanding of the various periods of the Iranian foreign policy. Sayyed Jalal Dehghani in his book, "Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," distinguishes between the liberal nationalist and Islamist super discourses in Iranian foreign policy and emphasizes the discourses of Ummah-oriented idealism, center-oriented expediency, Islamic realism, democratic pacifism, justice-oriented principlism, and focuses his efforts on describing and analyzing these discourses, while neglecting to comment on the making of these discourses especially in the process of interaction with the outside world.

In total, most examinations of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran are either entirely consumed with domestic policy debates and conditions and negate the critical role of the regional environment and international circumstances or have overlooked the role of other countries on the Iranian foreign policy, especially in the few years following the revolution-- years that, in our opinion, had a key and defining role in the establishment of Iranian foreign policy.

One theoretical and basic question is whether or not speaking about the birth of Iran's foreign policy is meaningful, scientific and useful in itself? Many could object by arguing that essentially speaking of the formation of a foreign policy is futile, and that we can only concern ourselves with the output of foreign policy and its consequences. Seeking the origin of foreign policy is neither possible nor productive. It is impossible because often finding a point of origin for the foreign policy of a country is unachievable and it is not productive because it contributes little to our knowledge base of the subject. Even under revolutionary circumstances, Governments continue to operate based on established procedures, and at the very least, use already-defined tools and establishments of old. It is for this



reason that we observe that the foreign policy of many revolutionary governments over time slip back into their pre-revolutionary modes. After the French revolution of 1789, despite the freedom aspirations in French society, the French government continued to maintain its colonial posture regarding its colonies (Whiteman, 2003). The revolutionaries in Russia as well returned to Tsarist policies with the elevation of Stalin, despite initially injecting their revolutionary principles in their foreign policy (like forgiving all of Iran's debt and relinquishing the benefits of colonialism) (Adams, 1994).

The fact that Iran, as Ramazani said, turned its foreign policy 180 degrees, and even set aside its foreign policy traditions, principles, and experiences, makes the previous two objections immaterial to the subject matter of this article. After the victory of the revolution, a new team took charge of the nation's foreign policy that had no role therein before. It took a new approach towards the regional issues and the world, and more importantly, a new approach towards the identity of Iran. The Islamic revolution of 1979 fundamentally changed the terms that had for more than two centuries defined Iranian foreign policy, especially towards major world powers. These new terms made it possible for Iran to abandon its passive position towards major world powers and the region and discard all prior presumptions of friendship and enmity on both regional and international levels for the first time in two centuries. The most important of these changes at the international level was the Iranian-American relationship, based on the dependence of the regime of the Shah on the US (Gasirowski, 1991) was immediately replaced with a relationship based on confrontation. Regionally, this change could be seen in the Iranian-Israeli relationship and Iran's relationship with the conservative regional countries, once more or less congenial, became unstable and was defined by suspicion and mistrust following the revolution (Ramazni, 2010: 68).

A preliminary conclusion would be that the Iranian revolutionaries learned how to swim by falling in the water. This



challenge, in the late twentieth century, could have been troublesome and painful for a strong nation like Iran with its special strategic position. If we accept the first conclusion, the next question that deserves study would be what factors in this learning process have been more influential to the development of the Iranian foreign policy and the establishment of its identity? Ramazani speaks of dynamic tripartite interactions between the three arenas of domestic politics, foreign policy, and international order when assessing Iranian foreign policy during different periods, and is of the opinion that this method is appropriate for both unit and system analysis (Ramazani, 2010: 19). Even with this, Ramazani, first, does not indicate how these three levels interact and, second, he explains how this dynamic self-generated following the Islamic revolution when everything began anew.

The position of this article is that at least prior to the liberation of Khoramshahr in 1983 during the Iran-Iraq war, Iran's new foreign policy took shape in a continuous process of action and reaction and, despite Iranian leaders viewing the international order negatively as a result of ideology, revolutionary mindsets, and the perception of it as oppressive and based on colonial relationship, it was molded by the events and the circumstances in the region and the world. Of course, this article does not seek to deny that the new leaders entered the fray with certain already established beliefs and tenets, but rather its main purpose is to display the ways in which these tenets took shape in interacting with the outside environment as the country navigated its surroundings during the covered period.

II- International Environment and Foreign Policy

Many theorists have tried to bring foreign policy out of decision making rooms and place it in a more open environment for analysis. In their opinion, relegating foreign policy to the process of decision making is not enough to understand the entirety of the matter. Harold and Margaret Sprout are among the pioneers in positing that



assessment of conditions and environment of foreign affairs are critical to understanding foreign policy. They believe that to understand the outcomes of foreign policy, one must understand the actions or assumptions behind the actions, and that these actions themselves must be understood within the context of the Psycho-milieu of the individuals and group that are making foreign policy decisions. In this view, Psycho-milieu is defined by the perceptions and interpretations of the decision makers of the state of international affairs (Hudson, 2005: 5-7).

James Rosenau is also a scholar of foreign policy, who places tremendous importance on the interaction between the actor and the international environment, assesses the process of foreign policy decision making and implementation through a three-stage method. The first stage is composed of those actions, conditions, and influences that propel the national actor to react in order to adjust the environment. The second stage is the implementation stage, where the actions, conditions, and influences, which convert the aforementioned aspirations into concrete actions and aim at modifying the environment. The third stage, which is referred to as the reaction stage, involves the issues, actions, conditions, and influences that are in response to the modified environment and circumstances (Rosenau, 1994: 37). Rosenau considers foreign policy a dependent variant on five sets of individual, role, gubernatorial or bureaucratic, social or national and international or systemic sources, with each having numerous and different variables of its own.

Theoretical approaches in a behavioral framework that have a systemic view of foreign policy accept that environmental conditions can determine the limits of government actions; and even if they cannot have an impact on the initial shape of a government's foreign policy, they can have a central role in determining the success or failure of the policy. They are however silent on the process by which the agents communicate with one another and with the system structure. This matter can be of tremendous importance when we



speak of the birth of a foreign policy. Kenneth Waltz, in the theoretical framework of structural neo-realism, explains this relationship through the two processes of competition and socialization. The competition process utilizes tools of reward and incentive to affect the behavior of individuals, while in the socialization process, the actors can be made to demonstrate more or less similar behavior by establishing rules, norms and behavior patterns (Waltz, 1979: 74-77).

The approach of Waltz regarding the process of influence between agent and structure, though an improvement in comparison to that of classical realism, is yet very clearly one sided (one sided in terms of the effect of structure on agent) and, as Wendt notes, due to Waltz's material and anti-social perspective towards the concept of socialization (for Wendt, 2006: 146-149), it loses a major part of its importance. The concept of socialization as outlined by Waltz also leaves no space or chance to behaviors contrary to practices and structural rules. In the opinion of Waltz, such attitudes are eliminated quickly through the structural discipline.

Alexander Wendt writings on Waltz's socialization put forth his concept of "cultural choice" that involves two processes of imitation and social learning. Imitation implies the repeating of actions of an actor who is considered successful. But social learning points to a more complicated concept in which participants partake in an interactive process that gives shape to both self-identity and the identity of another. In the opinion of Wendt, the actor can enter the engagement with his initial impressions of his own identity serving as a starting point for interactions with others. "The self" [first actor] takes on a unique identity based on role, while molding the "other" [second actor] in counteracting role that gives meaning to self (Wendt, 2006: 481). In the next stage, the "other" assesses the meaning of the actions of "self." In this stage, many different interpretations can occur, for they do not necessarily share the same understanding or interpretation of events, and the conduct of the



“self” alone is not inherently enlightening to the “other”. Finally, the “other” may take additional actions, based on a new understanding of the situation that would then lead to interpretations and reactions from the “self.” According to Wendt, the “self” and the “other,” will continue this dynamic until they reach either what they would consider the end of the interaction or a type of common understanding (Wendt, 2006: 481-483).

In Wendt’s theory, the power balance has an important role in setting the direction. For the success of this interaction, i.e., the actors developing sufficiently similar understandings in the sense that they can play a unique game and each one works to make the other see things as he does. Each side will incentivize behaviors that reflect their view of the situation and punish behavior that does not. “Power” is the foundation of such reward and punishment, but what is considered as power depends on the definition of the situation (Wendt, 2006: 483). “The basic idea is that the identities and the corresponding benefits are to be learned, and then reinforced in response to how others deal with the actor” (Wendt, 2006: 478). From the perspective of this article, even though the process of reproducing identity and learning is continuous; however in the period of birth or serious and fundamental revision, the process of social learning occurs with particular speed and depth. For this reason, our assumption in this article is that the period of birth of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, was a defining time for its developmental process.

Applying Wendt’s research regarding the identification and mutual understanding of “self” and “other” to analyze the developmental process of the new foreign policy of Iran in the first few years after the success of the revolution requires inquiry into three questions: 1. How did the new actor, who entered into international relations in 1979, initially define “self” in relation to “other”, i.e., big powers and regional countries? 2. How did the reactions of “other”, who was influenced by its initial perceptions of



the identity of the new actor, contribute to the new actor's redefinition of self? 3. At what point did this process of interactive learning reach relative stability with the two sides developing a common understanding of one another?

In the history of the world it is rare that one nation at once relinquishes all of its foreign policy experience and takes on an entirely new direction and view point regarding the outside world. This condition is usually caused by a great revolution. In revolutionary circumstances, nations set aside many of their political orientations and purposes, and develop entirely new and innovative patterns for managing the country. Foreign policy becomes critical in regards to this revolutionary change, as foreign policy can play an important role both in the consolidation of the new government and also in the reflection of the government's new identity. Revolutionary governments express their beliefs and ideals in a hyperbolic manner and even engage in adventurism as to display their discontent for the previous government. Unavoidably, revolutions also have a volcano like effect on the entirety of their surroundings. For this reason, regardless of the extent to which the foreign policy of post-revolutionary governments are adventurist and tension inducing, other governments react to it by being positively or negatively influenced. Governments whose interests have been affected negatively by the revolutions often engage in conflict with the revolutionary governments, and governments that are concerned about the spreading of revolutionary atmosphere to their countries will also take a confrontational approach, even by taking preemptive measures.⁽⁹⁾

If we also add the inexperience of the revolutionary governments to the above, we develop a better understanding of the tragic condition of these governments in the arena of foreign policy. In these countries, the ministries of foreign affairs along with the armies are the two institutions that experience the greatest change during revolutionary periods. For this reason, a clear inexperience and



instability prevail in foreign policy apparatus of new ruling governments in the aftermath of revolutions. This has been especially the case in the revolutions of Iran and France. The revolutionaries of America, due to historic and geographic reasons, experienced fewer such complications (Reuter, 2001). In Russia as well, after a five month period, Lenin's comrade Leon Trotsky relinquished the position of Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs in favor of Georgy Chicherin, who had foreign policy experience from the Tsarist reign and was fluent in many languages (Adams, 1994). In France, however, during the initial ten years of the revolution from 1789 to 1799, the Foreign Ministry experienced overhauls in its highest executive offices sixteen times (Howe, 2008). Similarly in Iran, in the days following the revolution, almost the entire cadre of the Foreign Ministry was removed and only a few experts who had indicated their support for the Islamic Revolution were allowed to remain (the author's interview with several Foreign Ministry diplomats). This is to say that the institution of the Foreign Ministry, the main source of foreign policy, under the most sensitive circumstances had lost the experience of its diplomatic operators. In the months and years to come the ranks of the Ministry were filled with young individuals of 24 to 27 years old, whose main experience with international affairs came from their academic careers outside the country. The fact that the first resignation after the revolution was that of Karim Sanjabi, the first Foreign Minister, seem to indicate that the problems inside the Foreign Ministry were likely greater than what an older and browbeaten individual like Sanjabi could confront (for information about the dreadful conditions inside the Foreign Ministry in the years following the revolution look to Sanjabi, 1990, 348-357). From the February 11th of 1979 to August of 1982, when Ali Akbar Velayati took charge of the Foreign Ministry, the Minister was replaced six (by some accounts seven) times. It is also important to note that most of these Ministers⁽²⁾ were in later years put in the ranks of those who had been disinvited to the roundtable of the new political order. This also



shows that at least on an official level, the apparatus of foreign policy lacked the cohesion and identity that many analysts of the Iranian foreign policy attribute thereto.

An even more important and distressing issue is that at the same time, the revolutionary government of Iran much like its predecessors in America, France, and Russia – even for certain reasons perhaps even more than them – was concerned with its security and survival. In America, after the end of the revolutionary war, the new government consolidated power and therefore had the opportunity to proceed in future years to manage its domestic policy with ease of mind (Reuter, 2001). In France, due to the presence of a strong army, when the revolutionaries were informed of the readiness of Austria to attack their country, they preemptively attacked the Austrian forces (Howe, 1994, 18). In Russia the revolutionary government in order to maintain stability in its domestic affairs, signed the humiliating Treaty of Brest Litovsk, handing over important parts of the Russian homeland to the Germans, which was later reversed following the defeat of Germany during the First World War. The problem in Iran was that the new leaders were truly the inheritors of a third world country. The army and the armed forces quickly disintegrated along with their dependant economic institutions, prohibiting the revolutionaries from attending to domestic issues quickly. In addition, two other issues contributed to the security concerns of the government. First, due to Iran's geostrategic and geo-economic position, it could be unavoidably placed in the midst of international and regional events, and for this reason, any domestic happenings in Iran could affect numerous actors. Therefore, any minor action or statement made by the country's new leaders could reverberate in and provoke reactions from the foreign policy apparatuses of numerous countries, ones as powerful as the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as others like Israel, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other regional nations. The second issue related to domestic developments. After the revolution, many



different political movements began to operate in the domestic political arena of Iran; many of them even had ties to countries like the Soviet Union and China. At least for the first year and a half following the revolution, several of these groups managed to create tensions in different parts of the country.⁽⁹⁾ As would it could be expected, this intensified suspicions in conspiracies by alien forces against the new system of government.

II – Confrontation in Foreign Policy

Despite the fact that the Islamic revolution was a very consequential and significant event to the region and the world and as the French thinker Raymond Aron noted, shook the Arab world and worried Western Europe (Aron, 2006: 19), however, it was not yet subject to any specific mode of operation in foreign affairs. The fact is that the revolutionary theorists of Iran had yet to engage in broader conversations about the region and the world and the conduct of their desired government in those matters before the revolution (or even in the few months after). None of the thinkers that had been credited as the main theorists and thought leaders of the Islamic revolution, like Dr. Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Motahari, Mehdi Bazargan, Ayatollah Taleghani, Ayatollah Beheshti, Abul-Hassan Banisadr, and others, were political scholars or theorists, and as such were not capable of that kind of analysis of global affairs and developing of a unique worldview. Even Iman Khomeini, who took leadership of the revolution in 1963, never concerned himself with political theory in the shepherding and development of the revolution. Up until the victory of the Islamic revolution, Imam Khomeini was, due to the religious obligations that he had taken on, mainly attendant to the issues that distressed the Islamic world (like the issue of Palestine), but not in the sense of assessing and developing political theories regarding the region and the world. Even clearer is that for Imam Khomeini, conduct was to be dictated by Islamic assignments directed towards all Muslims, and clerics in particular, rather than by



his own political perceptions of the world. The subtle but important difference between the two is that for a political thinker or theorist it is important to be able to address all the important political issues in context of a single thought framework, but a religious leader or scholar only concerns himself with those issues that religious assignments have declared important. Lenin, who was at once a political theorist as well as the leader of Russia's Marxist revolution, spent at least a quarter of a century, before the success of the revolution of 1917, studying and developing concepts and viewpoints regarding world affairs along with a sizable number of likeminded people through organizational activity in the context of the Social Democratic Workers' Party as well as composing articles in multiple publications and periodicals.⁴⁹ One reason for the lack of attention to this issue was likely that in the opinion of the religious leadership of the Islamic revolution, Islam has already provided an outline for policy. Imam Khomeini, a few months before the Islamic revolution, in response to the inquiry regarding the details of the Islamic government from a reporter from the Times of London, gave this general response that Islamic government is a government that is reliant on the rules and decrees of Islam (Sahifeh Noor, 2nd ed.: 475).

Until after the Islamic revolution, the views of the revolutionary thinkers and leaders were largely preoccupied with three main issues:

Emphasis on Westoxification that thinkers like Jalal Al-Ahmad, Dariush Shayegon, Ali Shariati, and several others had developed and discussed. Discourse of westernization in Iran involved many approaches, from "blaming the West," to "lamenting self - alienation in the face of the West" and finally, after the revolution, "combating the West (Boroujerdi, 2009: 39-66)."

America's colonial role in modern Iranian history, which was mainly emphasized in the year 1964 by Imam Khomeini and some traditional and likeminded clerics and also some leftwing movements. At least prior to 1979, America was not despised as "world devouring," "dominant," and "imperialist" in the discourse of the



Islamist forces in Iran. America was only mentioned as trying to “steal Iran’s natural resources (Sahifeh Noor, 1st Ed.: 340),” “protects and prop up Israel and its supporters” (Sahifeh Noor, 1st Ed.: 151) and “meddles in the affairs of the Muslims (Ibid).” In the opinion of Imam Khomeini in 1965, the US was one of the most hated countries by the people of Iran.⁶ In actuality, Imam Khomeini’s view towards America was not based on philosophy or ideology, but rather on realities.

The insistence on the illicit nature of the Israeli regime and the suffering of the Palestinians by Imam Khomeini and a wider range of clerics, who supported the revolution and even some who did not, was an important factor to consider. On this issue, many leftwing forces and the Mojahedin-e-Khalq, based on their own ideologies, aligned themselves with the religious forces. The issue of Israel was undoubtedly the most important and most sensitive foreign policy matter to Imam Khomeini and the religious currents aligned with him. The publication of the book on the history of Palestine written by Akram Zaiter and translated by Hujjat al-Islam Hashemi Rafsanjani in 1964, which in a way was considered an unusual undertaking among clerics at the time, and also the tremendous impact of the events in Palestine, and the Palestinians and Egyptians’ war against the Israeli Army in the course of the six day war (1967), which was even considered Jihad in the most important publication of the Qom seminary in the 1950s, Maktab-e Islam demonstrates the importance of the Palestinian issue and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to the religious movements at the time.

The importance of the Palestinian issue was such that the first foreign policy developments after the revolution involved Palestine. Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), was the first foreign official to travel to Tehran and the Israeli Embassy was the first to close. The first negative reaction to the revolution was also from Israeli officials. Moshe Dayan, the Israeli Foreign Minister, said immediately after the revolution that these



events will have a considerable impact on Iran's relationship with other countries and Israel's relationship with the Arab world, due to Imam Khomeini's open support for the Arabs and in particular the PLO (Kayhan Newspaper, 14 Feb. 1979, P. 8, according to Hashemi Rafsanjani, 2005: 212). This back and forth between the two sides made it clear that the relationship between them was in peril even before the birth of the new government. In other words, the new Iranian government was born anti-Israel. But America was in a somewhat different position, even though as previously explained, Imam Khomeini's view of America was largely negative, the first contact between America and the leader of the Islamic revolution occurred during the Guadalupe Conference in January of 1979, in which leaders of some major world powers, being American, France, England, and Germany, came to the conclusion that the Shah could not hold onto power. After this conference, then US President Carter sent Imam Khomeini a message through the French that could be considered the first communication between America and Iran's future leaders. Despite this message containing an admission that America will have no choice but to accept the new changes in Iran and Imam Khomeini's position as the leader of those changes in Iran, it nonetheless was distressing and alarming to revolutionary leaders causing an increased level of suspicion towards the US (Hashemi Rafsanjani, 1985: 147). Ibrahim Yazdi, who was present when the message was received, said, "a few days after the Guadalupe Conference, Carter sent a message to the Imam, and in the height of obscenity and shamelessness, and contrary to the norms of international relations, announced directly that the Bakhtiar government was under American protection and requested that the Imam protect him as well. He then threatened that if the Ayatollah disagreed, Bakhtiar would definitely face a military coup and that the Ayatollah should likely not hasten his return to Tehran" (Yazdi, 1990: 91). Imam's response to this message carried some advice for the US President and even some counter threats: "we warn America that if



there is a coup we will see it as you're doing... if there is a military coup, there will be an order for holy war (Jihad) ... I encourage you to avoid this bloodshed" (Yazdi, 1990: 94). Almost from before the victory of the Islamic revolution, it was clear to Imam Khomeini and those close to him, that America was continuously conspiring against Iran (Yazdi, 1990: 91), but were likely unclear as to seriousness, dimension, and shape of these efforts.

It is important to recognize that at this stage and even for years to come a unified perception of the West as the enemy did not exist. Imam Khomeini told a representative from the French government that "I would like to thank the [French] President who challenged Carter over his support for the Shah (Yazdi, 1990: 95)." Almost two months before, Imam Khomeini entertained questions from a West German reporter about what all this would entail for Western European countries and West Germany in particular. He responded that "there won't be any negative consequences; we will treat with respect whatever country treats us with respect." Though Imam Khomeini said in response to a different question by the same reporter that, "we will not tolerate Americans who are bad for our interests, but those who aren't can live there like many other foreigners (Sahifeh Noor, 2 Ed.: 279)."

After the victory of the Islamic revolution, the exchange of negative messages between Iran and the US took on an operational dimension. Harold Brown, then US Secretary of Defense, while touring countries in the region at the time of the revolution, made an unprecedented statement to the extent that the US would, if necessary, use its military to guarantee the continuity of petroleum production in the Persian Gulf (Ramazani, 2010: 63). A few months after the revolution, the passage of a resolution against human rights conditions in Iran angered Imam Khomeini (Sahifeh noor, 6th edition: 174) and concerned those close to him. But the greater and more serious tension between the two countries takes place when the US allows the Shah to come to the United States and seek medical



treatment for cancer (Abrahamian, 2011: 298). This exacerbated anti Americanism in Iran and culminated in the student takeover of the US Embassy on November 4th 1979. The US Embassy occupation's reasons and methods are complex and require extensive debate, but the point must be made that Imam Khomeini's support for the students was based on the fact that all the information that had been presented to him, brought him to the conclusion that the US embassy was the base from which all the conspiracies that the young government had confronted over its short life had been designed (Sahifeh Noor, 10th edition: 139-143). Concern over a repeat of the 13 August coup d'état would be spoken of repeatedly by Imam Khomeini and those close to him demonstrating the level of concern many of them had and the strong sense of anxiety that could have rationalized any revolutionary action against America. In addition, it is likely relevant that at the same time as the occupation of the US embassy began, many of the clerics most influential with the government like Hujjat-al Islam Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ayatollah Khomeini, Hassan Rouhani, and several others were coincidentally off in Mecca performing the Hajj.

The takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran is none the less a critical stage in the process of the two sides developing a mutual understanding and the shaping of the image of the "enemy" for both sides (of course especially for Iran), which brings them closer to the final stage. Further cementing this image was Iraq's war against Iran, which Iranian officials believed occurred with the support and persuasion of America (Rafsanjani, 2006: 222).

America and Israel excluded, the Iranian foreign policy in the aftermath of the revolution generally involved more local issues: some of Arab countries in the region became concerned about the prospect of Iran's revolutionary atmosphere spreading to their countries. This issue, the matter of exporting the revolution, itself became one of the greatest causes of controversy associated with the Islamic revolution.

The scholars that explore the basis and dimensions of the



foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran usually emphasize two issues from the beginning: the idealism of the new government and the exportation of the revolution. Farhang Rajaei, takes the position that all revolutions, at least officially, take on an idealist image... Revolutionaries see neither utopia nor dystopia as imaginary notions, they see them as feasible concepts...In the Islamic revolution, and there is a greater gravitation to dystopia and fantasy for two reasons: Influence of Islamic Mysticism and idealistic qualities of social and political thought in Iran over the past three decades (Rajaei, 2004: 79). Rajaei also reaches the conclusion that if a revolution considers itself Islamic, exporting of the revolution is not only a revolutionary act but a religious obligation (Rajaei, 2004: 81). Gary Sick, a member of the United States National Security Council at the time of revolution, who is now a scholar at the Middle East Institute at Columbia University, writes that it is the common experience of revolution to begin to redefine the world based on their own vision. It is only through tough lessons that they learn that the world is not so easily at their command (Sick, 2002: 356).

Two characteristics of idealism and the exportation of revolution have been so often mentioned in literature regarding Iranian foreign policy that authors no longer see a reason to provide evidence for their claims. Neither Rajaei nor Sick, nor any other writer provides a basis for making this claim. Rajaei only points to section 154 of the Constitution that demands support for the righteous and oppressed against the oppressors. Based on this reasoning, the American revolutionaries should be taken to task for attempting to spread their revolution through the Declaration of Independence. Of course, Rajaei overlooks the fact that at the beginning of that very article, interfering in the domestic affairs of other countries is strictly forbidden. Gary Sick also does not provide grounds for his claim.

Anoushiravan Ehteshami in his book "After [Imam] Khomeini," while insisting that Iran did not have a significant



opportunity to export the revolution until the summer of 1982 (Ehteshami, 2002: 132), he however goes on to argue without evidence that in 1980, it seemed Iran inflicted obvious harm on the conservative governments of the Persian Gulf region, meaning Iraq and moderate Arab countries. He then contends, citing Shahrom Chubin, that the two factors namely exporting of the revolution and the “not east not west” policy, was naturally enough to sound alarms amongst countries in the region and Iran’s Persian Gulf neighbors (Ehteshami, 2002: 130).

Almost no evidence has been provided in any way to display the Islamic Republic of Iran’s push or institutional effort at exporting the revolution in the years immediately following the revolution. All the evidence demonstrating Iranian support for liberation movements and revolutionary organizations in Arab countries involve the years following the Iraqi invasion, and more specifically when the support of the Arab states for Saddam Hussein was discovered. Of course, there is no doubt that during the politically turbulent years of 1979 to 1982 many comments and actions by individuals or groups caused concern among other countries (for example the efforts of Muhammad Montazeri to deploy troops to Syria for the purpose of confrontation with Israel), but there was never serious consideration of these proposals and there was strident opposition to them internally. Hashemi Rafsanjani, writing on the presence of Abd ul-salam Jalud, Deputy to Libyan leader Ghadafi, in Tehran in 1979 said that many expressed discontent and criticized the late Muhammad Montazeri – who mainly facilitated the trip – and wished for him to be confronted on the matter (Rafsanjani, 2006: 273).

The subject of exporting the revolution impacted the relationship between Iran and Iraq more than any other. After engaging in numerous territorial disputes throughout the 1970s that brought the two nations to the brink of war many time, the official pretext of Iran interfering in Iraq’s domestic affairs was clearly an excuse for war that even the international community would not



accept. Though, there is no doubt that Iraq, more than any other country, was concerned about the effect of the Islamic revolution on its mostly Shiite population. In fact, due to the deep bonds between the clergy in Najaf, like Ayatollah Muhammad Bagher Sadr's relationship with Imam Khomeini, they clearly wanted a repeat of the Islamic revolution in Iraq and even held many protests against the Bathist government in the wake of the revolution. But this is a domestic matter in Iraq and there would have been no need for Iran to stage such demonstrations. Regardless, these protests were met with severe repression and Ayatollah Sadr along with his sister were arrested and subsequently killed by Iraqi security forces.

Though, Iraq has always been an important factor in Iranian foreign policy and has had, and will continue to have, a deciding role in Iran's foreign policy towards the region, its position in defining Iran's new foreign policy involves much more than just the bilateral relationship. The Iran-Iraq War became the vehicle through which nations positioned themselves into camps for and against Iran. In other words, Iran's allies and enemies were set by this war. Even the PLO and Yasser Arafat gradually went from friendship with Iran to being an opponent (Ehteshami, 2002:133). In addition, the extensive support of some nations such as France, Germany, and even the Soviet Union for Iraq changed the perception of Iranian leaders towards these countries in a very negative way (Takeyh, 2009: 85). Not that long before, at least France had been looked upon positively due to their hospitality of Imam Khomeini.⁶ Although regarding the Soviet Union, the perception of Iranian leaders towards that nation had already been tarred by their invasion of Afghanistan which was roundly criticized by Muslim countries including Iran.

The liberation of Khoramshahr in May 1982, which occurred despite all the support provided to Iraq, enhanced the confidence of Iranian leaders on a regional and international level and caused Iranian foreign policy to come out of its passive stance and instead take on an active and in some cases aggressive posture. The rejecting



of international mediation schemes due to their failure to recognize Iraq as the initiator of hostilities, as well as the deployment of Iranian troops to Syria and Lebanon to combat the Israeli invasion in less than a month following the liberation of Khoramshahr, demonstrates that at that point, without concern over domestic unrest, Iran had become a power seeking to influence the region.

Conclusion

The narrative devised in this paper of the gradual progression by which the new foreign policy identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran was formed in the first few years following the Islamic revolution may cause one to ask why have regional countries as well as major world powers gradually joined the ranks of Iran's opponents, and why, despite Iranian officials', including Imam Khomeini's continuous insistence that Iran desires friendship with Muslim countries in the region, do opponents of Iran continue to highlight some insignificant actions and statements. A more theoretical question would be to ask, why the only messages that resonate, amongst the conflicting messages that Iran sent to other countries, are those that reaffirm hostilities. A general answer to this question would be that first, the changing of regime in Iran endangered the interests of countries like the United States and Israel and was perhaps even a threat to Israel, secondly, that many countries in the region became concerned as to the effect of the revolution on their population, thirdly, the general lack of experience of those who took over the affairs of the country after the revolution, prevented the proper exercise of foresight regarding many world issues. And finally, that some extremism inside the country that is largely unavoidable in the aftermath of a revolution – particularly in the few years thereafter, exacerbated suspicions and mistrusts that some in the region had towards Iran. The complexity of this issue, along with deliberate efforts to create a negative image of Iran, particularly in the media, created a powerful narrative on a political as well as academic level that could be difficult to confront.



For example, analysts generally accept that the concept of exporting the revolution was mainly interpreted culturally in the first years following the revolution, this fact however plays little role in their analysis (for example see Rajaei, 2004).

The purpose of this paper is certainly not to endorse or disapprove of a single approach to Iranian foreign policy; instead the purpose is to examine the process by which this foreign policy was developed based on the realities the nation was confronted with rather than unscientific discourses and illustrations. In the above, we have tried to illuminate the most important aspects of Iran's foreign policy, meaning the shaping and consolidation of the many friendships and enmities. Our assumption was that Iran's foreign policy, at least in those early years that seem most crucial to its development, was not closed or predetermined. Essentially, the turmoil of these years, in particular in the foreign policy decision making structure, did not allow any group to establish a single identity or discourse. Unfortunately, most of the literature scrutinizing Iranian foreign policy quickly bypasses the first few years that we contend were foundational in the development of the new foreign policy.

On the contrary, the position of this paper is that the identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy was crafted in the process of interactions with great powers as well as countries in the region. In the meantime, the prospect of a defeat of the revolutionary government and a repeat of the experience of the 1953 coup – signs for such a possibility include America's acceptance of the Shah, and tribal crises and attempts at overthrowing, and most importantly the initiation of the war by Iraq against Iran with the support of the Arab countries in the region and major world powers creating an unique common cause for the US and the Soviet Union – were the key issues that built the foundation of the new foreign policy. In addition, two important issues also played a key role in shaping the Iranian foreign policy identity: the taking of American Embassy diplomats in Iran as hostages after the revolution and also the beginning of Iranian



victories in the war with Iraq – that reached its apex with the liberation of Khoramshahr. If we understand foreign policy to be a series of actions, reactions, and interactions (Naghizadeh, 2010: 17), the issues of the first category are passive, while those of the second category place Iranian leaders in a more active and assertive posture.

In conclusion, the significance of this paper for the current conditions of Iranian foreign policy is that as demonstrated, foreign policy is matter that is constructed in a historical process. In this sense, first, it must be emphasized that many of the current issues in Iranian foreign policy and the related discourses, are a product of foreign bilateral and multilateral interactions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and other parties and for this reason could be have different under other historic circumstances. Second, it is possible that if a nation enters this process with an active posture, that nation would be able to affect the identity and the foreign policy interests of others.

Notes

1. For example, see confrontation between Great Britain and the American revolutionaries, confrontation between Austria, Prussia, England, and Spain on the one hand and the French revolutionaries on the other, the support of Britain and other powers for Russian anti-revolutionaries (White Russia), and confrontation between America and Iraq with Iranian revolutionaries.
2. Karim Sanjabi, Ibrahim Yazdi, Sadegh Ghatb-zadeh, Abul-Hassan Banisadr.
3. For example, observe the role of the Komalah and the Democrat parties played in the Kurdistan crisis in 1979-80, the role of the Muslim People's Republican Party in the Azerbaijan crisis and the Arab People's Front in the unrest in Khuzestan. Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Revolution and the Record of Victory and Memories of the Years 1979 and 1980*, Tehran: Office of Publishing for Revolution Education, 2004, P. 233
4. For example, Lenin in an article in 1916 reiterated that as soon as we get to power we have to do our best to become close to and ally ourselves with the Mongols, Iranians, Indians, and Egyptians. This work will be out of our interest and our faith; otherwise socialism will be unsustainable in Europe. We aim to provide cultural assistance to those nations that have fallen behind us and are more oppressed than us (quoted by George Cannon, 1966: 200).
5. Imam Khomeini responding to a question from a reporter from *Le Monde* in January 1979 regarding his position on the US, said: "In my declarations and statements during the last fifteen years, I have repeatedly stated my position and opinion on America and other major powers that exploit the wealth of poor countries and impose their agents on them and reinforce the violence that is imposed on the people of the third world. America was the facilitator of the 1953 coup d'état and has returned and maintained the Shah and has not changed its policies, and as long as the current situation persists, my opinion and position regarding America will not be subject to change" (Sahifeh Noor, Second Ed., Online version).
6. While meeting with the first ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to France on 22 April 1979, Imam Khomeini expresses his first grievances towards France thusly "we thank our French friends for the friendly hospitality they afforded to us during our stay in that country ... but we did not expect our French friends to lecture us on human rights just because of a few murderers, thieves, and criminals and ... to criticize us over human rights issues, it's good that you defended human rights when the corrupt Pahlavi regime was abusing them" (Sahifeh Noor, 6th Ed.: P. 64).

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