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The Enigmas of Iran

On 30 June, FRIDE, in association with the Barcelona Centre of Contemporary Culture (CCCB), organised "The Enigmas of Iran", an event in which six international experts analysed the current situation in Iran both internally and internationally. Two films were shown on the first day ("Iran, a Revolution Betrayed" and "Gilaneh") which served as an introduction to the debate on the second day.

In an international context dominated by concern over Iran's nuclear activity, the seminar addressed the need for in-depth and exhaustive information about the reality of Iran since such knowledge is currently lacking, in part owing to the opacity of the Iranian system, but also to stereotyped views of the country as seen from abroad.

International opposition

From the point of view of international relations, one of the main characteristics of Iran's incorporation into the international arena is the high level of hostility against it. This polarisation dates from Iran's modern history and one of its main components is the rift between Iran and the United States which began after the Islamic Revolution.

Rosemary Hollis, Director of the Olive Tree Israeli-Palestinian Programme at City University London and former Director of Research at the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House, London, outlined a chronology of Iranian-American relations and identified the main landmarks that have characterised this bilateral relationship during the second half of the 20th century. She referred in particular to Western involvement (the United States and the United Kingdom) in the coup d'état in 1953 against prime minister Mohammed Mosaddeq, and the taking of hostages at the US Embassy after the Revolution in 1979.

Mutual distrust, along with past and present contradictions, have served to focus attention on two areas of interest: on the one hand, the differences between the Iranian government and society in their perceptions of the West and, and on the other, the lack of understanding in Western countries about internal trends in Iranian society.

Iranian society

When considering the Iranian domestic situation, several participants stressed that the difference between the government and society must be taken into account. Iranian society has a largely positive perception of the West, while some sectors of the government use an anti-Western rhetoric that combines populist, nationalist and religious elements.

Iranian nationalism has become a central element of Iranian political discourse, going beyond the essentially religious character of the early years of the Revolution. Several speakers highlighted the long-term effects of Iran's regional and international isolation after the Revolution, and the Iranian government's acute awareness of the fragility of their diplomatic and strategic alliances, for example with China and Russia.

Post-9/11 relations between Iran and Western countries have highlighted several paradoxes: the Iranian people may be well-disposed towards the West from a cultural and social point of view, but Western countries do not pay enough attention to Iranian domestic politics. For example, Ali Ansari (Director of the Institute of Iranian Studies at the University of St. Andrews, United Kingdom) pointed out that an analysis of debates in the Iranian Parliament after President Bush's inclusion of Iran within the "axis of evil" revealed that the main focus of reactions was on identifying what political errors had led to that situation and not, as might have been expected, on violent reactions against Western countries.

Taking into account all these considerations, Ali Ansari was pessimistic regarding the future of Iran-US relations given that, in his view, both political classes have made mistakes by leading their states to confrontation instead of promoting dialogue.

The best way to understand Iran's conduct in the international arena is to pay attention to the internal dynamics of Iranian society, rather than trying to analyse everything from an external point of view. This latter approach was, for example, one of the main mistakes made by the United States during the Islamic Revolution: the American government and society could not understand that a revolution aimed at introducing a process of modernisation was not inspired by secularising tendencies.

The Revolution provoked huge social changes, though it should not be forgotten that it did not constitute a complete rupture. Baqer Moin (former head of BBC services in Central Asia and author of Khomeini's biography, *The Life of the Ayatollah)*, noted that the Revolution should be understood as a continuation of the Iranian search for its own identity.

The Revolution had an enormous impact on Iranian culture and society. For the first time, the inhabitants of villages were directly involved in Iranian political life and this created a new dimension that transcended the former elites. In this sense, the revolutionary process created a new level of social cohesion, which was strengthened by the Iran-Iraq war.

Another of the social consequences of the Revolution outlined by Moin was that the mosques lost their central role as places of worship and became bureaucratic centres due to their new role as post-revolution government delegations and social welfare offices. Popular religiousness thus did not necessarily benefit from the Islamic government.

The current process of technological modernisation will generate social changes that could undermine the ideology of the system. This is inevitable not only because of the passing of time, but also because of the role that new technology has in such a predominantly young population (60 percent of Iranians were born after the Revolution).

The role that women play in Iranian society has increased in recent years, owing fundamentally to greater access to education. After the Revolution, the regime supported women who wanted to go to university, because it was not a question of going to "lay universities", as they had been during the Shah's time, but rather "Islamic universities". Thanks to this, 70 percent of university students are now women.

This improvement in education has led many women to campaign for the recognition of their rights. These women's groups are fully aware that, throughout Iranian history, there has been a tradition of respecting human rights. An example of this is the city of Persepolis, built by men and women who were paid the same salary for the work they did.

In light of this tradition, when mention is made of human and women's rights, Iranians "are more likely to look back to their past than to the West", as was noted by Haleh Afshar, professor of Politics and Women's Studies at York University.

This speaker also maintained that Khomeini's reading of Islam tends to be the root cause of the infringement of women's rights. The problem, she argued, lies in the interpretation of Islam, not in the Islamic laws themselves.

The political system

Another area of discussion dealt with the complexity of the Iranian decision-making system, in which elective institutions (President and Parliament) and non-elective institutions (the Supreme Leader, for example) coexist in an interplay of influences and counterbalances. This means that several tendencies can coexist, and discrepancies in foreign policy serve to reveal the different constituents of internal power.

The political system can be divided into two parts. One of these is dynamic, in that it is made up of institutions that are elected (President, Parliament and the Assembly of Experts); and the other is permanent, since it is formed by institutions that are not directly elected by the Iranian people (as is the case of the Supreme Leader).

The lack of organically constituted political parties, the changing shape of electoral alliances, and the power of veto held by the Guardian Council over the choice of candidates, leads to a political dynamic in which "all political leanings participate, but the centre (the non-elective clerical and military class) is maintained", according to Luciano Zaccara (Director of the Electoral Observatory of Arab-Islamic countries at the Autonomous University of Madrid).

Europe and Iran

When considering Iran's position at the international level, all participants agreed on Iran's growing importance not only in the regional context, but also internationally.

As Iran's regional influence grows, Europe's foreign policy towards Iran also becomes more relevant. The main issues in this relationship are: the Iranian nuclear programme, Iran's regional ambitions and, lastly, the dilemma between dialogue and negotiation on the one hand, and the preventive use of force on the other.

From the point of view of the international community in general, and the European Union in particular, attention was drawn to the need for a foreign policy based on diplomacy and for a peaceful solution to conflicts.

European foreign policy towards Iran does not only involve a bilateral relationship. From the European point of view, the so-called "transatlantic relationship" with the United States is also important, as is Israel's position. Therefore, European policy towards Iran includes two other actors and it should be analysed in this context.

Regarding the Iranian nuclear programme, Johannes Reissner (Head of the Research Division on the Middle East and Africa at the German Institute for International Affairs and Security in Berlin) commented that sanctions are not a substitute for diplomacy and that proponents of an escalation in the conflict should consider possible Iranian responses and reactions. One of the main consequences of a possible attack on Iran would be to further de-stabilise an area that is already unstable.

For this reason, it is essential to maintain channels of dialogue and generate a diplomatic response. From the European point of view, there is no place for the unilateral attacks that some sectors have proposed.

The regional dimension of the problem should be based on an understanding that neither the US nor Europe can create a regional order in the Middle East without taking into consideration the interests of the actors in the area and giving priority to regional stability.

Therefore, it must be accepted that Iran's regional importance has grown since the Iraq War started in 2003, given that the new Iraqi government is largely made up of Shiite politicians who spent part of their exile in Iran.

The participants agreed that the Iranian regime is not going to change its conduct in the short term and that Iraq will be Iran's ally in the region irrespective of the preferences of actors outside the region.

Conclusion

All the experts agreed that the Iranian political system and its society are highly complex and that religious rhetoric is one of the constitutive elements of Iran's national identity, in which there is also a place for ancient traditions, nationalist elements and Iran's self-image as a great regional power.

Understanding this diversity lends even more weight to the idea that negotiation is the best way to tackle the country's problems, leaving aside Manichean and stereotyped views.

According to Hollis, one of the most important points when analysing the reality of the Middle East is to consider whether the actors involved wish to maintain the current status quo or not, instead of making a distinction between states that want peace and states that want war. Some actors consider that their relative position could thus be improved and, for this reason, they may try to change the current balance of power, even if this means risking an armed conflict.

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