



Summary

This is a brief English version of a Danish DIIS Report on the foreign policy of Iran. In the Report, Iran's foreign policy is investigated both ideologically and in respect of its pragmatic motivations.

It is argued that, since the revolution, and especially since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran has shown itself to be a rational, pragmatic actor in foreign policy, even though actions and rhetorical outbursts from parts of the country's leadership have at times suggested otherwise.

It is also suggested that a dialogue between Iran and the West – and with the United States in particular – could very well turn out to be a prerequisite for peace in the Middle East.

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The Foreign Policy of Iran

Ideology and pragmatism in the Islamic Republic

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and especially during the war that followed against Iraq, the media of the Western world have associated Iran mainly with eclipsed and irrational religious fundamentalism. However, a lot has happened in the Islamic Republic since its charismatic 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 pragmatic solutions that are not always in accordance with these teachings.

Being the world's second largest exporter of oil, and having by far the largest population and population density in the geographical Middle East, Iran simply cannot be ignored, either regionally or internationally. Iran's geopolitical position at the crossroads of the Middle East, the Gulf Region, the Caucasus and Central Asia has made the country a key actor historically as well as in modern times, and both regionally and internationally. For the same reasons, Iran is deeply dependent on its foreign relations. On the basis of the DIIS report in Danish on Iran's foreign policy drawn up by the present author, this brief offers a short outline of how Iranian post-revolutionary foreign policy has shaped and been shaped by the country's national, regional and international relations, and discusses whether this foreign policy has been motivated primarily 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 employing terms like 'pragmatism' and 'rationality' in a foreign policy context, it is of course 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 thus obviously not absolute qualities. In the report which this brief outlines, acts of rationality or pragmatism are defined as those which, although inconsistent with

the ideological teachings of the Islamic Revolution, are employed in order to ensure Iran a beneficial outcome.

In order to conduct the above analyses, it is first necessary to understand the basic implications of Iranian politics since the revolution.

IRANIAN POLITICS SINCE THE REVOLUTION

Political Structure

The political system which was institutionalised in Iran after the revolution clearly reflects traits of the many different factions that took part in the overthrow of the Shah. Thus large parts of the constitution of the Islamic Republic are inspired by the political systems of Western countries which the revolutionary rhetoric so harshly scorned, rather than Islamic law. The result is a rather complex and even confusing system, positioned somewhere between theocracy and democracy: while the Supreme Leader does have the decisive, absolute power, governance is otherwise divided between a long series of popularly 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. Thus, during the nearly thirty years of the Islamic Republic, any major, rapid 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 apparently the dream of exporting the new ruling ideology at any cost which governed Khomeini's confrontational foreign policy. Within a few years, he managed both to isolate Iran from the international community and to involve the country in an extremely long and devastating war

against its neighbour, Iraq, the latter being supported by the West and most regional powers. At the end of the war and Khomeini's death, the Iranian economy was devastated. Naturally, under the presidency of the pragmatist 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 his eight years as president (two terms, which is the constitutional limit), Rafsanjani – nicknamed the Iranian 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 who were affected by them. Many young people in particular were unemployed: during the Islamic Revolution and the first years of the war, Khomeini had asked the women of Iran to supply him with an 'army of twenty millions', as a result of which the birth rate had boomed. In the late 1990s these children stood on the brink of adulthood, many pursuing higher education, but with the still fragile economy completely unable to absorb them on to the labour market.

Among the frustrated young people – who had no memory 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 traditionalist right wing of Iranian politics, the reformist Khatami won a landslide victory.

Yet, even though he was backed by a now also predominantly reformist parliament, Khatami stood powerless against the veto rights of the conservative majority in the key non-elected clerical councils and of the traditionalist Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. During Khatami's two terms in office, a political theatre was played out in Iran, where the reformists would, for instance, allow increased freedom of the press, while the traditionalist conservatives would close down newspapers and arrest over-enthusiastic critics. And

where Khatami would push for detente with the West and visit European leaders to strengthen Iran's international relations, prominent right-wing conservatives would condemn the United States and its allies in the national and international media. This play of 'one step forward, two steps back' discouraged both the Iranian public and the international community, and the reformists' lack of success led to declining public support.

Yet during Khatami's presidency, an incipient amelioration in relations with the West did take place. However, after 9/11 opened American eyes to the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism – by default viewing the Shia-Muslim state of Iran as a natural partner in crime for Sunni-extremist (though Shia-denouncing) Al-Qaeda and Taliban – the situation changed. When in 2003 the Bush administration named Iran part of the 'Axis of Evil', the positive development in Iran's relations with the West almost immediately came to a halt, and in Iran a feeling of insecurity was created overnight. This feeling of insecurity was only increased by the massive presence of American troops in countries neighbouring Iran, 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 mostly been decided by conservative hard-liners. Even though both elections were perceived by many Iranians to have involved fraud because a large number of reformist candidates were rejected for no obvious reason, the protests were very moderate.

But even the conservatives cannot completely ignore the increases in social freedom that Iranians gained under Khatami. So while the conservative leadership does try to stand firm on the ideals of the Islamic Revolution, they are well aware that they cannot afford to alienate completely the vast numbers of young Iranians, who in many ways 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 sound international relations – at

least with some economically and politically powerful countries – if the Iranian economy is to improve, which again is mandatory for Iran to support its population in the future.

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

IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY: IDEOLOGY OR RATIONALITY?

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-institutionalised, rational actor, which has mainly put its strategic interests before its ideological ones in questions of foreign policy.

As with other states in the Middle East, Iran's foreign policy 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, as described above, the pressure from the two latter environments has increased considerably since the terrorist attacks in the United States of 9/11 2001 and the subsequent US-led invasions of Iran's two neighbours, Afghanistan and Iraq.

During the presidency of George W. Bush, three questions have been central 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, for years, and especially since 2006, the purpose of and justification for Iran's nuclear programme have been topics of heated discussion both within and outside the framework of the United Nations Security Council, reviving internationally the question of whether the Islamic Republic of Iran can be viewed as a rational actor in its foreign policy.

But even though the latter may appear to be the case judging from the escalation in anti-Western and anti-Israeli rhetoric, in reality the neo-conservatives who have come to power in Iran have not changed the degree of rationality in the country's foreign policy all that much. Only where ideological interests appear to coincide with strategic interests, or where the latter are not very important, are the former allowed to prevail. A good example of this is the contrast between Ahmadinejad's denunciations of Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people on the one hand (Israel being an American proxy in this context) 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. While criticising Israel is fairly risk-free at a time when a further deterioration in relations between Iran on the one hand and Israel and the US on the other seems almost impossible, the urge to defend the rights of Muslims abroad disappears when important strategic and economic relations are at stake. Hence Iran's extensive cooperation with countries like Russia, China and India clearly bears witness to pragmatism taking precedence over ideology in the country's foreign relations.

Yet especially during periods of increased tension and international pressure on Iran, as in the 1980s or from 2001 onwards, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic *has* been characterised by *ad hoc* strategies and the apparent 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 a form of trench warfare, with the security issue at its core on both sides. In this regard, one can rightfully claim that the Bush and Ahmadinejad administrations have needed each other.

The Bush administration has repeatedly rejected any form of dialogue between the two countries without Iran unconditionally 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. Yet this strategy has not had the effect intended: while it has been successful in further crippling the Iranian economy, rather than softening the country's policy towards the West, this strategy seems only to have served to further isolate and radicalise the now neo-conservative leadership of the Islamic Republic. And as long as 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

In spite of its reputation for religious fanaticism, at least since the end of the Iran-Iraq war the Islamic Republic of Iran has shown itself to be a rational actor in foreign policy overall. Yet since 9/11, 2001, and particularly since 2003, the dialogue be-

tween Iran and the West, which will be crucial in bringing Iran out of international isolation and thus brightening its economic future, has seemed increasingly impossible. The combination of economic sanctions and threats of military intervention against Iran, launched to promote political reforms, has been shown to have had little or no effect other than further alienation.

The interplay of harsh mutual rhetorical outbursts and retorts and threats of military action of recent years have not only marred relations between the Iran and the United States (and the West), but also the prospect of stability in the Middle East and Western Asia, a process in which Iran is a key actor.

However, as with the Soviet Union in the 1980s, initiating a precondition-free dialogue between Iran and the West, rather than continuing on the current course of mutual confrontation, remains the only way to turn this negative situation around. With a newly elected, and apparently dialogue seeking President Barack Obama in the White House, and with an Iranian presidential election coming up in 2009, it remains to be seen whether such dialogue will, after all, prove possible.

Please refer to the full DIIS Report 2009:06, [*Irans Udenrigspolitik: Ideologi og pragmatisme i den islamiske republik*](#) (in Danish) for bibliography and references.

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