

The Principles and Practice of Iran's Post-Revolutionary Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the ideological versus pragmatic dichotomy which is often used as a paradigm in policy discussions regarding Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy. The paper describes three important themes in Iran's revolutionary discourse and argues that Iran's foreign policy has been and continues to be revolutionary, which does not preclude its leadership from adopting pragmatic tactics to fulfill its ideological goals. The paper then dissects Iran's revolutionary foreign policy rhetoric of the Ahmadinejad era and contrasts it with the more nuanced revolutionary tactics during the Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies. Iran's recent history has shown it will tactically retreat on ideology if the Regime perceives its survival is at risk. However, these tactical retreats should not be confused with a reorientation of the regime's strategy. Iran's quest for absolute security and its rejection of the Western led international order suggests that its foreign policy remains strategically revolutionary, yet tactically pragmatic.

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BRANDON FRIEDMAN

Introduction

Western scholars and statesmen working on issues related to Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy continuously address the question of whether Iran acts pragmatically or ideologically. The question is often expressed or phrased in several variations: Does Iran act based on its interests or religious dogma? Is Iran pragmatic or fanatical? Does the Regime make its decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis? Does the Iranian Regime recognize the imperatives of *realpolitik* or is it an ideological regime? This essay will modestly challenge the utility of this simple either/or proposition, and instead argue that the Regime's foreign policy has been and continues to be both pragmatic and revolutionary. Further, Iran's 1979 revolution has not ended,¹ and over the past thirty years Iran's foreign policy has been a primary battleground for the ruling elites of Iran to assert their vision of the state's revolutionary identity.² This, in part, explains the more provocative approach of current President Ahmadinejad, in contrast to his predecessors 'Ali Akbar Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005).

R.K. Ramazani, a leading scholar of Iranian foreign policy, has written that the "balance of ideology and pragmatism in the making of Iranian foreign policy decisions has been one of the most persistent, intricate, and difficult issues in all Iranian history..."³ So what, exactly do scholars mean when they begin talking about Iran's pragmatism? Is everyone talking about the same thing? According to the Western liberal canon of political philosophy, John Stuart Mill has described the flexibility behind the pragmatist's view of action: "It can be experimental because it trusts the grand direction of the underlying pattern of change."⁴ In contrast to Western liberal thought, an Iranian scholar has characterized the "Islamic Shiite pragmatism" of Iran as capable of being "experimental because it teleologically trusts the grand direction of the underlying pattern of values."⁵ This suggests that the post-Khomeini leadership in Iran has derived its pragmatism from what it perceives as a dynamic ideology. And this definition of pragmatism is conceptually different from the Western definition of pragmatism. In other words, Western scholars and statesmen and Iranian diplomats and elected officials may be using the same terms but referring to different concepts.

A leading scholar based in the Islamic Republic, Kaveh Afrasiabi, argues that the conventional Western assumption of a "pragmatic / fundamentalist" dichotomy fails to account for the pragmatic qualities and ethos of Islamic fundamentalism, and that what is considered pragmatic action occurs on the basis of submerged values.⁶ That is to say, for Iran, pragmatic behavior can also be value-driven, or ideological behavior. For Iranian officials pragmatism and ideology are not mutually exclusive. Ideological goals and material and strategic interests can be pursued in parallel, where one is mutually reinforcing the other, and it is not an either/or zero-sum proposition as Ramazani and others suggest.

This clarification of concepts is important because when Western statesmen and scholars perceive Iran's behavior as pragmatic,⁷ then there may be a temptation to conclude that

¹ Said Arjomand, "Has Iran's Islamic Revolution Ended?," *Radical History Review*, Issue 105 (Fall 2009), pp. 132-138.

² Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, "Islamic Utopian Romanticism and the Foreign Policy Culture of Iran," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Fall 2005), pp. 265-292.

³ R.K. Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Autumn 2004), p. 549.

⁴ K. L. Afrasiabi, *After Khomeini: New Directions in Iran's Foreign Policy* (Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), p. 11.

⁵ Afrasiabi, p. 11.

⁶ Afrasiabi, p. 11.

⁷ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle Eastern States* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2002), Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Eds., pp. 283-309.

Iran's Regime has reoriented itself and is no longer strictly adhering to its revolutionary identity or ideological principles. This conclusion is problematic because it presupposes a previous phase of behavior which was not pragmatic and based entirely on ideological reasoning, and does not differentiate between changes in means and changes in ends.⁸

As a result of this misconception, there is a tendency to mistake Iran's tactical concessions for Regime reorientation,⁹ and therefore to conclude that the Regime is moderating its objectives rather than applying different tactical maneuvers, or means, to the same revolutionary goals. The shift from using subversive military plots in the 1980s to advancing instruments of soft power – financial, religio-political and cultural influences – in the late 1990s and first decade of the twenty-first century to spread its revolutionary ideals exemplify Iran's change in tactical means rather than ends.

The danger of confusing a change in means for a change in ends also has the potential to lead to confusion regarding how the Islamic Republic of Iran perceives its interests. There may be some in the West who assume there is an inverse relationship between national interests and revolutionary Islamic values. In contrast, post-revolutionary Iran conceives religio-cultural norms and values as a constitutive component of national interests and not independent of them.¹⁰

Most Western observers of Iran tend to conceive of rationality [often used euphemistically with pragmatism in the West] as behavior based on national interests defined in terms of military, territorial, geographic, demographic, and economic strength. Or, in other words, interests are defined in material terms and viewed as distinct and super-ordinate to ideology. In light of this conception of interests, Western observers conventionally conceive of Iran's ideological behavior as either irrational or cynically instrumental and serving the ends of material interests.

Meanwhile, in contrast to the way some Westerners perceive Iran's interests, some scholars and statesmen in Islamic Republic argue that there is a "religio-cultural" dimension to national interests, as well as "politico-religious" and "communicative" interests that focus on cultural authenticity and national pride.¹¹

In other words, strategic interests in the Islamic Republic of Iran are framed in terms of both the Imam Khomeini's revolutionary objectives and material interests. In short, Iran post-revolutionary foreign policy has maintained a consistent revolutionary identity since 1979, with changing means, which has both served and defined its strategic goals since 1979. These goals, derived from Khomeini's ideology and the 1979 Constitution, have four central components: First, social justice in tandem with economic growth and development (material interests often described in terms of the revolutionary objective of social justice); second, preserving national sovereignty and territorial integrity (strategic material interest); third, defending the rights of Muslims and supporting liberation movements (oppressed peoples) and confrontation with Israel and the U.S. (revolutionary objective); and, fourth, the establishment of an Islamic polity based on Shi'i principles (revolutionary objective).¹² There is a co-existence and reinforcement between revolutionary and material interests in the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy; they are not mutually exclusive of one another, where one can be set at odds against the other.

In order to better understand the context for Iran's foreign policy under President Ahmadinejad, particularly his antagonistic and provocative statements toward Israel and about the Holocaust, it is important to understand the over-arching themes in Iran's revolutionary discourse and its influence on how the current Iranian Regime perceives and expresses its interests.

⁸ Afrasiabi, p. 12.

⁹ For example, see: Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 143-145. Ehteshami hedges his analysis with a broad disclaimer on p. 142.

¹⁰ Afrasiabi, p. 12.

¹¹ Afrasiabi, p. 12.

¹² Afrasiabi, p. 12.

Themes In Iran's Revolutionary Discourse

Iran's foreign policy discourse and behavior was aggressive and revolutionary during the first decade after the Islamic Revolution, a period during which Iran was fighting a long and bloody war with Iraq and struggling to consolidate control over state institutions. In the late 1980s, following the death of Imam Khomeini and the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the executive branch of the Iranian government was strengthened by constitutional reforms.

The new President, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), inherited an economic crisis and attempted to soften Iran's image in the international community in order to rebuild the state's decimated economic and military capabilities.

This effort reached its peak in the late 1990s under former President Khatami (1997-2005). Both Rafsanjani and Khatami focused much of their efforts on a diplomatic offensive that attempted to improve Iran's relations with the community of states through confidence-building statements, strengthen relationships with international organizations such as the IMF and World Bank, and present the Islamic Republic of Iran as a rule-abiding actor in the international system.¹³

These efforts were offset by Iran's steadfast opposition to the any progress in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process beginning in October 1991. Iran actively offered financial and logistical support for militant activity carried out by Hizbullah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other groups throughout the 1990s, and began to develop its undeclared nuclear program during the period of Rafsanjani and Khatami's presidencies. In the 1990s, it was the tension between Iran's relatively moderate presidential statements and subversive military and financial support for militant non-state actors beyond its borders that made analyzing Iran's foreign policy a challenge.¹⁴

In contrast to the 1990s, one of the central themes of Iran's third revolution, as the Ahmadinejad period (2005-to the present) has come to be known, has been its relentless public attacks on the international system. Henry Kissinger, in his book *A World Restored* (1964), observed that, "whenever there exists a power which considers the international order or the manner of legitimizing it oppressive, relations between it and other powers will be revolutionary." In these cases, Kissinger noted, "it is not the adjustment of differences within a given system which will be at issue, but the system itself."¹⁵ Iran's current Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki authored an article in the spring 2007 entitled "What is a Just Global Order," in which he stated that "the order in the context of [the] international system is a discriminative and, hence not functional any more." Mottaki also argued that, "the order in the international society is a combination of imposed concepts which defines structure of the same international system based on power without principle and justice."¹⁶ Later, in the same article, Mottaki claims that, "A multicultural global order controlled by one pole, in which the relation between this pole and the world remains to be ethnocentric, is not acceptable."¹⁷ Mottaki, who may be said to represent the President as one part of a complex decision making consensus in Iranian foreign policy, is clearly attacking the system itself and not the differences within the system.

The Ahmadinejad opposition to the current international system is rooted in Iran's revolutionary discourse, which has three main elements: resistance, justice, and

¹³ Homeira Moshirzadeh, "Discursive Foundations of Iran's Nuclear Policy," *Security Dialogue*, vol. 38, no. 4, December 2007, p. 527.

¹⁴ Joseph Kostiner, *Conflict and Cooperation in the Gulf Region* (Wiesbaden, Germany: VS Verlag Fur Sozialwissenschaften, 2009), p. 173.

¹⁵ Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Europe after Napoleon: The Politics of Conservatism in a Revolutionary Age* (1964), pp. 1-3.

¹⁶ Manouchehr Mottaki, "What is a Just Global Order," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. XIX, No. 2: 1-7, spring 2007.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

independence.¹⁸ Despite the Imam Khomeini's historical denunciation of the Western notion of nationalism,¹⁹ Iran's emphasis on independence is often interpreted in the West as 'Iranian Nationalism,'²⁰ because Iran's emphasis on independence has been a consistent element of Iran's political discourse throughout the twentieth century, from Reza Shah Pahlavi to Imam Khomeini and his followers. Iran's emphasis on independence stems from (1) its proud historical legacy as a Safavid-Shi'i power (16th to 18th centuries), (2) its pre-modern defeats at the hands of foreign invaders (Greeks, Turks, and Mongols), and (3) its encounters with imperial powers (Russia, Britain, and the U.S.), which Iran holds responsible for its dependence and underdevelopment.²¹ In particular, Iran's collective memory of nineteenth century defeats at the hands of foreign powers is still a very powerful discursive theme which had an important impact on the course of development in nineteenth and twentieth century Iran.

Iran's emphasis on independence is different from the Western understanding of nationalism in international politics,²² and has led scholars to classify it as a "maximalist" independence or "hyper-independence" or "true independence."²³ One creative characterization of this phenomenon is "the arrogance of non-submission."²⁴ This emphasis on hyper-independence manifests itself in two principal ways: First, it causes Iran to resist what it perceives as foreign dominance in the international system; and, second, it causes Iran to place an unusual emphasis on self-reliance in the security realm.²⁵ Moreover, these are principles enshrined in articles 2, 3, and 153 of Iran's 1979 Constitution, which explicitly reject any form of dependence or submission to foreign states. For example, during President Ahmadinejad's speech to the UN General Assembly in New York in 2005, he attacked "Those hegemonic powers, who consider the scientific and technological progress of independent and free nations as a challenge to their monopoly on these instruments of power and who do not want to see such achievements in other countries..."²⁶ Ahmadinejad perceives himself as defending Iranian independence from foreign domination.

The second principal element of Iran's revolutionary discourse is the demand for justice ('*adl*). In Shi'i Islam justice is considered "of overwhelming importance" and is demanded from Muslims in their day-to-day life.²⁷ One of the central themes of Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary ideology was the triumph of the oppressed in the face of injustice. This populist sentiment called for supporting the powerless, disadvantaged masses of people (*mostaz'afin*) in their struggle to escape oppression from the world's oppressive superpowers (*mostakhabarin*). Khomeini included the capitalists, socialists, Phalangists,

¹⁸ Homeira Moshirzadeh, "Discursive Foundations of Iran's Nuclear Policy," *Security Dialogue*, vol. 38, no. 4, December 2007, pp. 521-543; Arshin Adib-Moghadam, "Islamic Utopian Romanticism and the Foreign Policy Culture of Iran," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 265-292.

¹⁹ Farhang Rajaee, *Islamic Values and World View: Khomeyni on Man the State and International Politics, Vol XII* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, Inc., 1983), pp. 71-72.

²⁰ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle Eastern States* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2002), Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Eds., p. 284.

²¹ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle Eastern States* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2002), Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Eds, p. 285; Moshirzadeh, p. 529.

²² Afrasiabi, pp. 16-18.

²³ Moshirzadeh, p. 530; Ramazani, p. 28.

²⁴ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle Eastern States* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2002), Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Eds., p. 285.

²⁵ Moshirzadeh, p. 530.

²⁶ Naji, p. 126.

²⁷ Nikkie Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 18.

Zionists, Fascists, and Communists into the group of oppressors. Khomeini insisted that, “The dispossessed must triumph over the dominant elements.”²⁸

Justice is viewed as a universal value and obligation, and this principle is articulated in article 154 of the Islamic Republic’s Constitution, which states that the Islamic Republic of Iran considers the rule of justice to be the right of all the people of the world.²⁹

It is through the prism of their principle of justice that Ahmadinejad and his supporters relentlessly attack the Holocaust, attempt to delegitimize Israel, support the Palestinians and other “liberation” movements and criticize the U.S. led international system for mobilizing support on behalf of Israel.³⁰ On 9 December 2005, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the seat and symbol of Islam, Ahmadinejad said, “Some European countries insist on saying that during World War II, Hitler burned millions of Jews. And they insist so strongly on this issue that anyone who denies it is condemned and sent to prison.” He continued, “**Although we don’t believe this claim**, let’s suppose what the Europeans say is true...let’s give some land to the Zionists in Europe or in Germany or Austria. We will also support it. They faced injustice in Europe, so why do the Palestinians have to pay the consequences.”³¹ The clause, “Although we don’t believe this claim,” is Holocaust denial.

It is argued that Ahmadinejad uses his foreign policy bombast to (1) generate domestic political support from hard-line religious figures, (2) signal to domestic political opponents the tone and direction of Iran’s foreign policy, (3) create a leadership role for Iran in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which provides Iran with regional prestige and geopolitical leverage vis-à-vis the West, and (4) generate popularity for the Islamic Republic among the populations of the Arab states whose leaders are supported by the West, therefore creating domestic pressure on Arab leaders to act more aggressively on the Palestinian-Israeli issue and delegitimizing their regimes. However, despite these arguments, to claim that Ahmadinejad’s Holocaust denial is strictly instrumental is nothing more than sophisticated and apologetic acceptance of Ahmadinejad’s self-serving misunderstanding of history.

Ahmadinejad’s attacks on the Holocaust are part of the erroneous perception that the Holocaust led directly to the establishment of the state of Israel. He asserts that there is a causal link between the Holocaust and the creation of Israel. However, this account is a misreading of history: The Zionist enterprise began long before the Holocaust; for example, the 1917 Balfour Declaration recognized the Zionist efforts to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine more than fifteen years before the Holocaust.

Ahmadinejad was not the first Iranian high official engage in Holocaust denial. The Supreme Leader (*rahbar*) of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamane’i, also attacked Israel by attempting to cast doubt on the atrocities of the Holocaust. In April 2001, he said, “There is proof that the Zionists had close relations with German Nazis. The presentation of astronomical figures on the massacre of the Jews was, in itself, a means of making the people express sympathy with them and prepare the ground for occupying Palestine and justifying the Zionists’ crimes.”³²

The political leaders in Iran have used Holocaust denial as one element of broader “vehement anti-Zionist position” which reflects “traditional anti-Jewish themes in Iran’s national and religious culture.”³³ Meir Litvak has astutely noted that as opposed to the modern scholarly literature on nationalism, Jews are not viewed as a nation but rather as a scattered religious

²⁸ R.K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, 1988), pp. 23-24.

²⁹ Moshirzadeh, p. 533.

³⁰ Moshirzadeh, p. 533.

³¹ Naji, pp. 154-156.

³² “Iran: Khamene’i says Zionism exaggerated Holocaust,” Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1, BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 24 April 2001.

³³ Meir Litvak, “What is Behind Iran’s Advocacy of Holocaust Denial?” *Iran Pulse* #3, Center for Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2006.

community who rejected the message of the Prophet Muhammad.³⁴ These themes are an important part of the teachings of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the ideological founder and leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and “have guided the Iranian government ever since the 1979 Revolution.”³⁵

Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 revolution, wrote with a distinct anti-Jewish theme, which combined Shi'i ideology with elements of European Antisemitism. In the opening paragraphs of his book *Islamic Governance (Al-Hukumah al-Islamiyyah)* Khomeini claimed that, “From the very beginning, the historical movement of Islam has had to contend with the Jews,” who “first established anti-Islamic propaganda and engaged in various stratagems, and as you can see, this activity continues down to the present.”³⁶ In Khomeini's earlier book, *Clarification of the Questions (Touzih al-Masa'el)* he emphasized the Shi'i doctrine of the ritual impurity of unbelievers (*nejasat*), whom he considered contaminated. He directed his followers not to purchase products that could not be purified (such as food) from unbelieving infidels.³⁷

It would seem that President Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader, in the spirit of Imam Khomeini's ideology, believe that a just solution for the Palestinians is the elimination of the Jewish State of Israel. This is the view of many officials in the Islamic Republic who believe that Zionism is part of Western imperialist designs against Islam,³⁸ which are supported by an unjust international system.³⁹

On 26 October 2005, in Tehran, Ahmadinejad gave a speech at a student conference, and for the first time he called for the elimination of Israel [literally: ‘this Jerusalem occupying regime must vanish from the pages of time.’] This language was not new in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Indeed, Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of the Iranian daily newspaper *Kayhan* and advisor to the Supreme Leader, stated, “The honorable President has said nothing new about Israel that would justify all this political commotion... We declare explicitly that we will not be satisfied with anything less than the complete obliteration of the Zionist Regime from the political map of the world.”⁴⁰

In January 2001, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamene'i, said that Israel was a cancerous tumor that needed to be removed from the region. In December 2001, former President Rafsanjani, while leading a Friday prayer service in Tehran, threatened Israel with nuclear destruction and said “if one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. However, it will only harm the Islamic world. It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality.”⁴¹ It is through the revolutionary principle of justice viewed through the prism of Imam Khomeini's ideology that Iran relentlessly attempts to de-legitimize and threaten Israel.⁴²

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Imam Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution* (Berkeley, California: Mizan Press, 1981), Translated and Annotated by Hamid Algar, p. 27.

³⁷ David Menashri, “Iran, the Jews, and the Holocaust,” Stephen F. Roth Institute For the Contemporary Study of Antisemitism and Racism, *Annual Country Report*, 2005.

³⁸ Meir Litvak, “What is Behind Iran's Advocacy of Holocaust Denial?” *Iran Pulse* #3, Center for Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2006.

³⁹ Rajaei, p. 87.

⁴⁰ *Kayhan*, 30 October 2005 as quoted in Kasra Naji, *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), p. 149.

⁴¹ *Agence France Press*, 14 December 2001; “Iran: Rafsanjani warns of high cost of US support for Israel,” *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, 15 December 2001.

⁴² David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (London and Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass, Ltd., 2001), pp. 262-263.

Iranian officials also employ the principles of justice and equality to attack the hierarchy of powers in the international system. For example, in September 2005, when Ahmadinejad referred to the attempt of Western nuclear powers to prevent Iran from enriching uranium as “nuclear apartheid,” and said to the Turkish Prime Minister, “With respect to the needs of Islamic countries, we are ready to transfer nuclear know-how to these countries,” he was attacking what he perceives as the injustice and inequality in the double-standards of the international system. Iranian officials argue against the injustice and double-standard of the U.S. posture toward the nuclear program of Iran on one hand, and that of India, Israel, and Pakistan, on the other. These arguments are also part of the ideology of Imam Khomeini who argued that it is only the logic of the oppressors which rules over the relations between nations,⁴³ where Iran was part of the oppressed nations and the U.S. was the oppressor.

Resistance is the third element or theme of the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary ideology. The idea of resistance is and has been a powerful theme in the discourse of many of the Islamic Republic’s institutions such as the Revolutionary Guards (*Sepah-e Pasdaran*), the hard line media, the Guardian Council, the Basij, and the Islamic associations.⁴⁴ The Islamic Republic’s rejection of the Western dominated international order is deeply rooted in its discourse of resistance. Israel, which the Islamic Republic views as a colonial tool of the West artificially implanted into the heart of the Muslim territory, is a core focus in its discourse of resistance. The Islamic Republic’s foreign policy has actively cultivated relations with Islamic resistance movements throughout the Middle East. These movements have drawn inspiration from the Iranian revolution in 1978 and 1979, and in turn the Islamic Republic has provided support to these movements. Hizbullah in Lebanon has embraced Khomeini’s ideology and has maintained a close relationship and identification with the Islamic Republic. Furthermore, Hizbullah and to a lesser degree Islamic Jihad and Hamas, have provided the Islamic Republic with a means to project the Islamic revolution beyond its immediate borders. The Islamic Republic’s ability to influence events Palestinian-Israeli arena, provides it with an important lever to manipulate public opinion in the conservative Arab states. Therefore, pursuing its revolutionary agenda concerning Israel has provided the Islamic Republic with concomitant instrumental points of leverage to use in its relations with its Arab neighbors. In other words, by pursuing its ideological agenda vis-à-vis resistance to Israel, Iran is both reinforcing its revolutionary commitment to resistance and concurrently developing instruments of regional influence that provide it with diplomatic leverage. Resistance is a theme that goes hand in hand with the idea of independence, which was discussed earlier.

Iran’s troubled history of experience with Western powers reinforces the idea that Iran must resist foreign powers that threaten its sovereignty or independence.⁴⁵ Iran lionizes its historical episodes that focus on political resistance in order to preserve its independence, such as the tobacco protests (1891-1892), the constitutional revolution (1905-1911), the oil nationalization movement, and the Islamic resistance to American capitulations in 1963, which are episodes explicitly referred to in the preamble of the 1979 constitution. On the other hand, compromising on Iran’s independence in any form or in exchange for any reward has often resulted in vilification in Iran’s domestic political arena.⁴⁶ For example, President Ahmadinejad’s supporters vilified the previous administration’s decision to suspend nuclear uranium enrichment (15 November 2004) as an embarrassing surrender comparable to the treaty with Russia at Turkmenchai in 1828. This treaty forced the ruling Qajar dynasty to cede huge portions of Iranian territory to Russia. This territory was never regained and today forms portions of present-day Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.⁴⁷

The Islamic Republic’s Revolutionary Pragmatism

To return to the initial point of reference for this essay, rather than asking if the Islamic Republic is a pragmatic or revolutionary actor in an either/or, zero-sum proposition

⁴³ Rajaei, p. 80.

⁴⁴ Homeira Moshirzadeh, “Discursive Foundations of Iran’s Nuclear Policy,” *Security Dialogue*, vol. 38, no. 4, December 2007, pp. 521-543.

⁴⁵ Moshirzadeh, p. 536.

⁴⁶ Moshirzadeh, p. 536.

⁴⁷ Naji, pp. 123-124.

the question one should ask is: How, and in what context, has the Islamic Republic's pragmatism historically manifested itself in its foreign policy? Or, in other words, how has it adjusted its means to meet its revolutionary goals?

The historical record has demonstrated that Iran's leadership has followed the Imam Khomeini's dictate: "The preservation of the Islamic Republic is a divine duty which is above all other duties."⁴⁸ What did Khomeini mean? He was alluding to those situations where the Islamic Republic's leadership believes the survival of the Regime is at stake, in which case the Islamic Republic may compromise on its ideological principles to protect the Islamic state.⁴⁹

In the early days of the Islamic Republic, the Imam Khomeini's rhetoric regarding exporting the Iranian revolution threatened Iran's Gulf neighbors. In addition to broadcasting regional radio messages in Arabic that attacked neighboring regimes that Khomeini believed to be corrupt or pawns of U.S. imperialism, the Islamic Republic was suspected of training and arming a group of Shi'is who plotted to overthrow the ruler of Bahrain in 1981. The Islamic Republic was also suspected of complicity in the multiple bombings carried out by Shi'is in Kuwait in December 1983, and the hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner flying from Dubai to Karachi in 1984. The Islamic Republic also used its delegation to the *hajj* in Mecca to politicize the event and to incite believers against the Saudi Regime. In 1987, Rafsanjani inveighed against the Saudi Regime claiming Iran should "uproot the Saudi rulers in the region and divest the control of the holy shrines from the contaminated existence of the Wahhabis, those hooligans."⁵⁰ Further, the Islamic Republic used ideology to mobilize its young teenagers during the war against Iraq. Young Iranian men and boys were sent to the front in the war against Iraq, where they were employed as human waves to cross minefields and serve as human detonators in advance of Iranian troops carrying out military offensives. During the first ten years of the Islamic Republic Iran's foreign policy was perceived by the West as being revolutionary and ideological.⁵¹ Iran's foreign policy posture was also influenced by its relative isolation during its decade long war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq beginning in 1980.⁵²

In July 1982 Iran, which had succeeded in driving Iraqi forces from Iranian territory in 1981, went on the offensive, taking the war into Iraq. Iraq, facing increasing losses, attempted to internationalize the war by attacking Iran's shipping and oil tanker traffic in the Gulf. Since Iraq was not shipping oil through the Gulf, Iran responded by attacking the shipping and oil traffic of the Arab Gulf states. This initiated the Tanker War phase of the conflict, which ultimately resulted in the U.S. Navy entering the Gulf to protect tanker traffic to and from Kuwait. With the support of many of the Gulf rulers as well as the West, the war began to turn in Iraq's favor in the mid-1980s, and Iran became increasingly isolated, lacking adequate supplies of advanced weapons. It was in the context of facing the possibility of losing a long, bloody war against Iraq, and perhaps even an end to the Regime, that elements within Iran entered into an agreement with the U.S. and Israel to exchange kidnapped American hostages in Lebanon for Israeli and American arms and equipment. Iran depended on oil revenues to finance its war effort; in 1986 the market for oil declined sharply, seriously damaging Iran's capability to sustain the war against Iraq. Further, Iraqi attacks on Iran's oil-producing infrastructure exacerbated fluctuating market conditions. Iran's wartime economy had already been stretched thin; it relied on subsidies, rationing, and price controls to manage rapidly declining resources. By 1988, the war was absorbing nearly half of state revenues leaving little money for anything else. It was the politics of preserving the Islamic Regime that forced Khomeini to give up "war

⁴⁸ Afrasiabi, p. 17.

⁴⁹ Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (London and Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass, Ltd., 2001), p. 14.

⁵⁰ David Menashri, "Iran," in *Middle East Contemporary Survey, Volume XI* (Boulder, San Francisco & London: Westview Press, 1987), edited by Itamar Rabinovich and Haim Shaked, p. 417.

⁵¹ R.K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, 1988).

⁵² Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian The Second Republic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

until victory” and drink the “poisoned chalice,” accepting, with great reluctance, U.N. Resolution 598, which ended the Iran-Iraq war on 20 August 1988. As one analyst noted, Iran’s “acceptance of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 598 calling for cease-fire with Iraq was the revolutionary leader’s [Khomeini’s] single greatest submission to the logic of realpolitik.”⁵³ In other words, with the existence of the Regime at stake, the Imam Khomeini reversed himself to preserve the Islamic Republic.

Six months after Khomeini ended the war with Iraq, and three days after the 10th anniversary of the 1979 revolution, on 14 February 1989 Khomeini announced it was the duty of Muslims everywhere to kill author Salman Rushdie for his book *Satanic Verses*, which was published in the summer of 1988. In May 1989, Rafsanjani was encouraging Palestinians to retaliate against Israel by attacking Westerners. He said, “If, in retaliation for every Palestinian martyred in Palestine they kill...five American or Britons or Frenchmen,” then the Israelis “would not continue their wrongs.”⁵⁴ Khomeini’s decree and Rafsanjani’s statement may be interpreted as the Regime’s reassertion of its revolutionary identity following the compromises required to end the Iran-Iraq war and begin reconstructing the nation.

1989 was an important year for the Islamic Republic of Iran. In June 1989, the Imam Khomeini died and Sayyid Ali Khamene’i somewhat controversially succeeded Khomeini as the new *rahbar* of the Islamic Republic. The government also amended its constitution in 1989 eliminating the position of prime minister and vesting the office of the president with much stronger executive powers. Rafsanjani was elected president and faced the steep challenge of reconstructing Iran’s depleted, war-torn resources.

A critical component of Rafsanjani’s plan to rehabilitate Iran’s economy, which was on the brink of disaster following a decade of war, was improving relations with the West so that the Islamic Republic would be eligible to receive loans from the World Bank and IMF. Rafsanjani understood that reconstructing Iran’s economy required achieving three primary goals: (1) developing ‘normal’ diplomatic relations with the outside world; (2) improving Iran’s access to Western technology, particularly in the area of oil infrastructure; and (3) integration of Iran into the world economy to increase Iran’s socio-economic development.⁵⁵ These pragmatic tactics were necessitated by Iran’s economic crisis. These goals entailed changing the image that Iran presented to the world rather than changing the revolutionary identity of the Regime.⁵⁶ Rafsanjani implemented a tactical shift in order to soften the revolutionary image of the Regime – which in the words of one scholar based in the Islamic Republic was a form of dissimulation, or *taqiyya*⁵⁷ – rather than a fundamental reorientation of the Regime’s revolutionary identity. In a December 1991 Friday sermon, President Rafsanjani called for a prudent policy (*tadbir*) in domestic and foreign affairs, “so that we can help people without being accused of engaging in terrorism, without anyone being able to call us fanatics.”⁵⁸ David Menashri noted that Rafsanjani was not rejecting terror he “only wished that his country would not be identified with such actions and not be viewed as fanatic. This was the nature of his ‘pragmatism’ if this was the correct word for such an approach.”⁵⁹

⁵³ Ahmed Hashim, *The Crisis of the Iranian State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 30.

⁵⁴ Quoted from David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass, Ltd., 2001), p. 197.

⁵⁵ Ahmed Hashim, *The Crisis of the Iranian State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 30.

⁵⁶ For a serious theoretical treatment on how states manipulate their images for their desired ends in international relations, see: Robert Jervis, *The Logic Of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

⁵⁷ Afrasiabi, p. 11.

⁵⁸ Radio Tehran 20 December 1991 – Daily Report, 23 December 1991, as quoted in David Menashri, “Iran,” in *Middle East Contemporary Survey, Volume XV* (Boulder, San Francisco & Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), edited by Ami Ayalon, p. 385.

⁵⁹ David Menashri, “Iran,” in *Middle East Contemporary Survey, Volume XV* (Boulder, San Francisco & Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), edited by Ami Ayalon, p. 385.

The Regime adopted a two-track foreign policy during the 1990s. On one hand it pursued the aforementioned goals of softening its image with the West to expedite desperately needed socio-economic development and global market integration; on the other hand it, supported the Islamist Regime in Sudan and Hizbullah in Lebanon, rejected the Israeli-Palestinian peace accords, supported militant Islamic organizations in the Palestinian territories, conducted assassinations of prominent opponents of the Regime throughout the world, and developed a secret nuclear energy program.⁶⁰

Iran's foreign policy posture during the 1990s was shaped, in large measure, by the security arrangements that emerged in the Persian Gulf region following Operation Desert Storm, the U.S. led international war to undo Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990-1991. The Islamic Republic maneuvered through the Kuwait crisis as a neutral party seeking to take advantage of the war between its two major enemies, Iraq and the U.S. It condemned Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and opposed U.S. military build-up in the region.

Iran also benefited from Iraq's vulnerability in the period following Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and prior to Operation Desert Storm. In mid-August 1990, Saddam, eager to insure that Iran would remain on the sidelines, made several immediate and important concessions to the Islamic Republic to settle unresolved issues related to the Iran-Iraq war. Saddam agreed that (1) territorial rights to the Shatt al-Arab waterway would be governed the 1975 Algiers Accord, (2) Security Council Resolution 598 would be accepted, and (3) Iraq and Iran would carry out an exchange of prisoner's of war, of which there were nearly three times as many Iranian prisoners. As a gesture of goodwill, Saddam also agreed to withdraw from 26,000 square miles of occupied Iranian territory. These were significant concessions from Iraq, and ultimately presented Iran with the victor's spoils from its long war with Iraq.

Following the war, Iran was eager to play an important role in the post-war regional security of the Gulf. The Islamic Republic believed that the Gulf's coastal states should be responsible for Gulf security, and the region should be free from foreign interference.⁶¹ It advocated a regional system of collective security (*amniyat-e dast-e jam'ii*).⁶² Further, the leaders of the Islamic Republic believed that any regional security system that excluded Iran was illegitimate. However, Iran's prudent neutrality during the Kuwait crisis was a product of its post Iran-Iraq war weakness. By remaining on the sidelines during a critical security episode for the region, the Islamic Republic marginalized its own position in any future regional security cooperation.

Following Saddam's defeat in 1991, the Gulf Cooperation Council ("GCC") states⁶³ announced a preliminary security plan for the Gulf, the Damascus Declaration, which included the six GCC states plus Egypt and Syria. Iran was excluded from this new security arrangement. However, when the Damascus Declaration fell apart in the spring 1991, each of the GCC states made separate bilateral security deals with U.S. to guarantee their security, which, not only excluded Iran from any role in regional security, but also entrenched the Great Satan's military forces in its backyard. It is hard to overstate the effect of these developments. Iran's national identity is deeply tied to its historical self-perception as the dominant regional power in the Gulf. The build-up and long-term presence of U.S. forces in the Gulf and the Arab Gulf states preference for U.S. security rather than a regional arrangement antagonized the Islamic Republic, which felt it was being slighted.

For Iran this issue was not simply a matter of its self-image or regional policy regarding its Arab Gulf neighbors; the sustained post-war U.S. military presence in the region put its historical oppressor in its backyard and presented a direct challenge to the Islamic

⁶⁰ Ali Banuazizi, *Iran's Revolutionary Impasse: Political Factionalism and Societal Resistance*, *Middle East Report (MERIP)*, No. 191 (Nov.-Dec. 1994), p. 4.

⁶¹ David Menashri, "Iran," in *Middle East Contemporary Survey, Volume XV* (Boulder, San Francisco & Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), edited by Ami Ayalon, p. 403.

⁶² Afrasiabi, p. 101.

⁶³ The six GCC states include: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

Republic's revolutionary principle of resistance to an increasingly U.S. dominated regional and world security order. The Islamic Republic's first opportunity to demonstrate its symbolic resistance to the U.S. regional agenda came in October 1991 when it organized and sponsored an Islamist conference in Tehran (19-22 October) to oppose the U.S. organized Arab-Israeli peace conference in Madrid, to be held later that same month. Apart from the Islamist government of Sudan, the parties that attended the conference in Tehran consisted primarily of militant Islamist organizations from the Middle East and Africa, who rejected peace with Israel.

It is important to bear in mind that the Islamic Republic was still extremely vulnerable in 1991, just two years after the end of the Iran-Iraq war. Moreover, before the Kuwait crisis, Iran and Iraq were still negotiating over the terms of their post-war agreement. And while Iran's cash reserves had received a boost from the rise in oil prices during the war against Saddam, the Iranian economy was still vulnerable and its military was weak and poorly armed. President Rafsanjani was desperately fighting political battles at home to advance his economic reforms and integrate Iran into the global marketplace. The October 1991 anti-peace conference in Tehran provided the Islamic Republic with a pragmatic, low-risk opportunity to reassert its revolutionary identity of resistance to the U.S. order and Israel's legitimacy. Rather than direct military confrontation however, which was Iran's approach during the 1980s, it adapted new tactics in the 1990s, choosing to express its resistance through diplomatic initiatives, while at the same time providing covert financing, logistics, weapons, and training to proxy Islamist groups that were ready to confront American and Israeli interests asymmetrically. This tactical shift allowed the Islamic Republic to pursue a revolutionary foreign policy that was less likely to jeopardize the Islamic regime's survival. Combining savvy public diplomacy with covert and deniable militancy, Iran was able to pursue a foreign policy that was *both* pragmatic and revolutionary during the 1990s.

Conclusion

Henry Kissinger noted that the motivation of the revolutionary power may well be defensive, and Iran may well be sincere and justified in its claims of feeling threatened by the West. However, the key distinguishing feature of a revolutionary power, as Kissinger pointed out, "is not that it feels threatened—such feeling is inherent in the nature of international relations based on sovereign states—but that *nothing can reassure it*. Only absolute security—the neutralization of the opponent—is considered a sufficient guarantee, and thus the desire of one power for absolute security means absolute insecurity for all the others."⁶⁴ R.K. Ramazani, a leading scholar of Iranian foreign policy, observed that Iranian leaders, during the first decade of the Islamic Republic, almost never used the word security by itself it was always preceded the word security with "such adjectives as real, true, and genuine."⁶⁵

Indeed, it is the Islamic Republic's quest for regime security that has historically come into conflict with its revolutionary principle of independence. A prominent scholar in the Islamic Republic of Iran, noting the rigid criteria that "true independence" demanded, argued that "a balance needs to be struck between preserving political sovereignty (and not independence) and stable and permanent cooperation with the West." This scholar also argued that, "There is no such concept as political independence," and urged the Iranian elites "to move from the anti-colonial tendencies of the 1950s to the realities of statecraft of the 21st century."⁶⁶ Iran, which is still in the throes of its revolutionary development,⁶⁷ does not appear to have completed this transition.

⁶⁴ Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Europe after Napoleon: The Politics of Conservatism in a Revolutionary Age* (1964), pp. 1-3.

⁶⁵ Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, p. 27.

⁶⁶ Mahmood Sariolghalam, "Theoretical Renewal in Iranian Foreign Policy (Part I)," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, Volume 3, No. 3 (Winter 2002), p. 75.

⁶⁷ Said Arjomand, "Has Iran's Islamic Revolution Ended?" *Radical History Review*, Issue 105 (Fall 2009), pp. 132-138.

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