

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION AND POLITICAL REALISM

While there have been junctures over the past couple of decades at which one would have expected Tehran and Washington to resume diplomatic ties, for reasons rooted in Iran's internal political infighting as well as the interests of other regional powers, this has not happened. In the past few years Iran has been the focus of international attention due to its uranium enrichment, claimed by many in the West to be the prelude to nuclear armament. This article reviews the parameters of Iran's foreign policy in the region and assesses the prospects of war in light of the many dimensions taken into account by the United States, among others.

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The Islamic Republic of Iran, true to form, has consistently pursued theologically driven and jurisprudentially formulated policies in pursuit of religiously defined interests. Therefore, the source, means, and goals of foreign policy, and for that matter, domestic policy, in Tehran stand opposed to the conventional Western paradigm of democratic legitimacy and accountability, utilizing rational diplomacy to advance perceived national interests.

This framework helps in understanding the policies of Shiite Tehran in establishing and supporting Hezbollah, logistically, financially, and politically. It could also explain Iran's alliance with and its unremitting support for Assad's Syria, its rivalry with Saudi Arabia, its support of *Zaydis* in Yemen,¹ its sympathies with the opposition in Bahrain, and its close ties to the Shiite government in Iraq.

Together with Sunni Saudi Arabia's countering policies to minimize Shiite influence, the policies of the Iranian establishment are a stark reminder that sectarianism is far from over in the Middle East. Accusations and counter-accusations of the two poles against one another, ranging from Tehran alleging Riyadh is nothing but a stooge of Washington, to Saudi religious leaders branding Shiism a heresy in Islam. This *schism* in Islam plays an important role in the Middle East.

Perhaps, the most prominent feature of the revolutionary Iran's foreign policy has been its staunch hostility to the United States. This started with the storming of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979 and the holding of U.S. diplomats hostage for 444 days. This incident resulted in the rupture of formal diplomatic ties between the two countries. Relations between the two capitals were not resumed even at several important junctures when their foreign policy perspectives appeared to overlap. First there was the Bosnian question wherein both Tehran and Washington, in the face of opposition from many Europeans and Russia, supported military action against the Serbian forces. Later, Washington toppled the Taliban in Afghanistan, who have been staunch enemies of Shiism and who had almost gone to war with Iran. Last but not least, Saddam Hussein, who had actually started a war against Iran that lasted for almost eight years, was also removed from power by the U.S. military assault on Iraq. A Shiite government sympathetic to Tehran now reigns in Baghdad in place of Saddam.

Other than the obvious common interests between the two capitals, as noted above, there are additional factors that would suggest closer relations between the U.S. and Iran. During the years when the U.S. was known to have wielded influence in Iran (1953-78), the Iranian economy developed at a fast rate and generally, compared to

¹ *Zaydis*, the followers of *Zaidiyyah*, are a sect within Shiite Islam, though many of their teachings resembles those of Sunni Islam. They are mainly situated in Yemen.

the previous era, there was much greater prosperity. In contrast to other countries with sway in Iran in the past two centuries, U.S. influence did not seem particularly harmful in any shape or form. It is also interesting to note that the only foreigner known to have died for the cause of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran (1906-9) was an American named Howard Baskerville. Currently the great majority of the Iranian diaspora have chosen the U.S. as their new place of residence despite difficulties in obtaining immigration permits in the U.S. and the sheer geographical distance between the two countries.

All of these factors would seem to encourage a speedy resumption of diplomatic ties. However, this has proven illusive. Three factors can be identified as possible culprits. First, countries that are rivals of the U.S. perceive Iran's anti-American stance to be in line with their national interests, and they tend to encourage the *status quo*. Keeping American companies out of the rich Iranian oil and gas fields can have its rewards for U.S. competitors. Second, anti-Americanism seems to be the last-remaining slogan of the Iranian revolution. The less than perfect record of the revolutionary establishment in social, economic, and other fields, coupled with the country's relative isolation in the international arena, have left little, if any, to celebrate as achievements. Still distant from the goals of the 1979 revolution, anti-Americanism may have become the *raison d'être* of the continuing revolutionary rule in Tehran. Lastly, the internal struggle amongst the elites in Iran has meant that no faction is in full control and is thus ill-prepared to risk a full resumption of ties with the U.S., lest rival factions would use this as an excuse to undermine their position. It is believed that the current government of President Ahmedinejad has failed to strike an accord with Washington precisely due to this factor.

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Currently the most formidable challenge for the Islamic Republic is its nuclear policy. At the outset one has to draw a distinction between nuclear program and nuclear policy. Whereas Iranians at large may be in favor of a peaceful nuclear program, they may not necessarily subscribe to any nuclear policy pursued by their government. However, in the absence of any polls in the country on this issue, it is rather difficult to be certain about public opinion.

Iranian nuclear aspirations started before the revolution and involved French and German companies. After the revolution, however, the program was abandoned by the new government and later sustained damages from Iraqi bombardment. It was only later that the Islamic Republic revisited the nuclear issue and decided to continue the project. This time, however, much work was carried out by the government before the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was properly informed of Iran's renewed interest in nuclear energy. The clandestine work thus raised international suspicion about Iran's uranium enrichment, which still falls short of an all-clear from IAEA. A couple of sites at *Parchin* and *Fordoo* in Iran are of particular concern and the IAEA has asked for unrestricted access to them, to no avail thus far.

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Tehran denies any charges that it is pursuing a nuclear arsenal and insists it is seeking peaceful nuclear energy for medical and civilian purposes. However, some believe the nuclear question could be more complicated than that. The argument revolves around “potentiality” and “actuality”. Even a potential nuclear military capability, whereby Iran could produce nuclear weapons in a relatively short period of time (the actual time

needed to turn from potential to actual military nuclear power varies depending on many variables) may not be acceptable to countries such as Israel. Given Tehran's rhetorical pronouncements over the years on the destruction of Israel, Tel Aviv feels justified in its suspicion of Iran's ultimate intentions.

Notwithstanding Israeli concerns, the real motive for Iran's nuclear aspirations may lie elsewhere. Some observers claim that the unassailable conventional military prowess of the U.S. demonstrated in former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, where application of military power led to regime change on the ground has alarmed Iranian revolutionary leaders. In order to thwart such a possibility they wish to nuclearize their arsenal, thereby deterring Washington from seeking a regime change in Tehran through military means. North Korea serves as an example to them in this regard. With nuclear weapons in their arsenal, Pyongyang has been able to keep the U.S. at bay lest a nuclear war erupt. However, this can be a policy ridden with risks for the Iranian government, as discussed below.

Israel on its own lacks the capacity to effectively strike the suspected Iranian nuclear sites. Iranian communication and air defense systems would have to be neutralized

before deep penetration into Iranian air space could take place. Over 1,500 suspected sites would then have to be targeted, some of which are located deep in the mountains. Such an attack would probably require sustained bombardment over several weeks, if not more. Therefore, any effective military strike on Iranian nuclear sites would require the involvement of the U.S.

For U.S. policy makers the issue has important ramifications. Firstly, there is no guarantee that the U.S. military strike could permanently paralyze Iranian nuclear infrastructure. It would only postpone it, probably for several years; and then what? Would the U.S. have to resort to military force again? Secondly, an assault could lead to further suppression of public dissent by the authorities in Tehran and cause Iranians –who otherwise may appear disenchanted with the regime– to rally behind their rulers in defense of the country against foreign attack. That would add to the longevity of the current Iranian regime. Thirdly, the Iranian government, should they survive the military assault, could turn even more radical in the face of the attack by the U.S. Last but not least, while the U.S. will be bombing Iranian nuclear facilities –something many countries including the littoral states of the Persian Gulf wish to see– the world media, will in all likelihood blame and chastise Washington for invading yet another country. Why should the U.S., then, do the dirty work of the world and then get blamed for it?

Which brings the U.S. to an important question in its policy over Iran: Could a military operation against Iran's nuclear sites lead to radical political changes on the ground? In other words, would U.S. action result in a government in Tehran that would appear more reasonable towards Washington? If ever the answer to that question were to be affirmative, the likelihood of an attack would immediately rise. However, even in the absence of definitive prospects for a regime change, the U.S. may still feel compelled to go ahead with the military strike on Iran if it feels it is the only way to prevent the nuclearization of Iranian arsenal. But that will be neither an easy nor a simple decision for the White House.

The civil war in Syria has also proven a daunting challenge for Iran. Syria has been the only Arab ally of the Islamic establishment in Tehran since the early days of the revolution. It is also the route through which Hezbollah is sustained and replenished by Iran. Syria's political orientation is of utmost importance to Tehran. The unremitting and wholehearted support of Iranian authorities for the Assad government is yet another dangerous policy ridden with risks. Should Assad fall, it would be very unlikely for the succeeding regime in Damascus to maintain the same level of relations with Tehran. That could seriously jeopardize Iranian influence over Hezbollah and Lebanon. Wider implications could include further exposure to a military strike

as Tehran's retaliatory capacity against Israel will have been compromised with its diminished influence in the Levant.

The less than friendly posture of Iran's southern neighbors in the Persian Gulf is an additional external challenge for Iran. The UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait are all increasingly linked to Western defense systems that would protect them in case of the outbreak of hostilities. The stationing in the UAE of several U.S. F-22 fighters, the most advanced in the U.S. Air Force, has duly alarmed Iranian establishment and has reminded them of their relative vulnerability.

The internal challenges for Iran are also daunting. The economy is in dire condition, with no prospects of improvement, and further deterioration likely. The Iranian currency has been on a slippery slope since the revolution but in the past year or so it has been plummeting. The U.S. dollar is now over 200 percent more expensive than a year and a half ago. Iranian oil exports have fallen sharply and it will be years, even after sanctions have been removed, before Iran can regain its old markets. The populace at large, including the so-called reformists, feels disenfranchised and disillusioned with all brands of Islamist rule. They now aspire for fundamental changes. The internal fighting between factions has intensified and cracks at the heart of the establishment have now appeared. Even the Revolutionary Guards Corps seems divided on its political affiliations to various groupings. At the same time, the exiled opposition to the Islamic Republic based in the U.S. and Europe appears more organized and more eager to unite in their pursuit of change inside Iran. In the face of such threats to the *status quo*, Tehran's nuclear policy can indeed be a double edge sword.

However, whatever the outcome of Iranian nuclear issue, prospects in the Middle East look gloomy, at least in short to medium terms. Sooner or later nuclearization of regional countries will become an issue of concern again. Short of a carefully crafted policy to address/counter the issue in the long run, periodic measures will only serve as temporary relief. The unstable political situation in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Bahrain, the crisis in Syria, and the volatile political balance in Lebanon, together with the ever elusive Arab-Israeli settlement, and the uncertain outcome of Iran's nuclear issue all point in a dangerously violent direction.



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