

Modern Iran: An Examination of the Foundations of Hostile Foreign Policy

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Introduction

Today there is no secret that Iran and the Western world are engaged in a volatile geopolitical clash that threatens the stability of the Middle East and world at large. The political action of the Iranian state, which includes the attempt to acquire nuclear weapons, denying the Holocaust, and threatening the West and Israel, continues to antagonize the Western world. This paper aims to better understand the important factors that create these hostile and potentially dangerous policies. Overall, forces on both the domestic and international levels converge on the Iranian government and create policies that attempt to divert attention away from the issues that matter most (e.g., the human rights violation of institutionalized exclusion of certain opinions) and maintain some semblance of power for the current regime.

Theory of Cultural Relativism

Before examining the Iranian state and its political policies on a deeper level, I must establish an understanding regarding this paper's frame of reference. "*Cultural relativism* is the thesis that a person's culture strongly influences her modes of perception and thought"; in this regard it is important to note the frame of reference for examining cultural artifacts one has not directly experienced (Swoyer, 2010). This paper is written

from a Western perspective, and although its claims attempt to minimize Amerocentrism, there is no way to eliminate all personal and cultural biases. This paper does, however, attempt to utilize as many artifacts that are directly produced by the Iranian people as possible. In addition, since the Iranian people increasingly use Western frameworks (as the product of a globalized world) to express their own dissatisfaction with their current government (e.g., human rights violations, which will be discussed later), arguments presented in this paper should not be devalued on the basis of cultural relativism alone.

Root Cause Analysis

The root cause of the volatile foreign policies of the current Iranian government can ultimately be reduced to domestic and international pressures that force the government to recover its legitimacy. On the domestic level unfair social and political limitations have created a government that is no longer a fair representation of what Iranian citizens want. While in the past governmental institutions did reflect citizens' true desires (i.e., the birth of a theocratic government following the shah being ousted from power), globalization, demographic changes, and geopolitical movement have shifted the values of the people. The Iranian state, however, is unable to act as a reflection of the people's desires due to its rigid governmental institutions. Since many of the most important Iranian leaders are unelected, true power over social and political change is often out of reach for average citizens and has created ideological inequality that excludes those who favor reform (Adib-Moghaddam, 2006). A growing majority of citizens who are disenchanted with the policies of the current regime (but are unable to make real change in the state) put pressure on the government through society. In addition to the domestic pressure, Iran has also become a

target of hostile foreign policy on the international playing field. The United States, European Union, and United Nations have all condemned Iran's hostile policies that threaten the West at large. Responding primarily through sanctions and threatening discourse towards Iran, these actors also contribute to the policy responses of the Iranian regime. Manifestations of both domestic and international pressures can be seen in concrete artifacts that will be presented later. It is the attempt to curtail these pressures (which the artifacts clearly illustrate) and recover its legitimacy that creates the government's current hostile policies.

Domestic Pressures

John Rawls: Theory of Natural Rights

Ideological inequality, manifested in the institutionalized exclusion of opinions and political participation, is the most influential factor leading to social revolution in Iran today (Adib-Moghaddam, 2006; Lotfalian, 2009; Fairbanks, 1997). The birth of modern Iran represented state construction where "elites placed the liberation of the nation over individual liberties, the creation of unity over the defense of the individual human rights, and the strength of the state over the protection of civil society from state abuses" (Afshari, 1994). While the state has some elements of democracy, for example the election of a president with universal suffrage, ultimate authority is left in the hands of unelected and often oppressive individuals and rigid institutions (Hauss, 2006). The few democratic elements of the Iranian government have recently come under fire, as last summer's reelection of President Ahmadinejad "was affected by significant fraud," showing that supreme authority in the state is well outside of the people's control (Mebane, 2009).

While it is just for the state of Iran to have alternative governmental institutions (nondemocratic), at the point where these institutions are no longer a fair representation of what the people want, they are unjust and represent a violation of basic human rights by curtailing free choice and the ability for citizens to change their government (Kazemipur & Rezaei, 2003). As Leif Wenar explains, in John Rawls's view "political liberties are a subset of the basic liberties, concerned with the rights, such as the right to affect the outcome of national elections" and influence state governance (Wenar, 2008). This injustice is compounded by the fact that people are inherently blocked from changing the government of their own state, due to the unelected elements.

The majority political opinion of the Iranian population favors fundamental changes to governance and the introduction of democratic and free market social reforms (Clawson, 2004). Members of reform parties in the Iranian parliament have gone as far as proclaiming "their unwillingness 'to be present in a parliament that is not capable of defending the rights of the people and which is unable to prevent elections in which the people cannot choose their representatives'" (Adib-Moghaddam, 2006, quoting Agence France Press). Although this majority is frustrated with the policies of the current government, its inability to create change forces the Iranian people's beliefs to be manifested in other aspects of society. Examples of these manifestations, which are illustrated below, can be seen in a variety of artifacts ranging from individual interviews to political demonstrations.

Artifact 1: Iranian Newspaper Poll

On the most basic level, the majority of citizens are in favor of dramatic changes to the rigid governmental institutions of the modern Iranian state. In 2003, the Iranian newspaper *Yas-e Now* published a poll that asked citizens the following question: “What are the actual demands of the Iranian people?” The results provided rare insight into the lack of political capital held by the current regime. Twenty-six percent of the citizens surveyed said they were in favor of “fundamental changes in management and in the performance of the [political] system.” Even more staggering, 45 percent were in favor of “change in the political system,” even if the change required “foreign intervention” (Clawson, 2004). As Iranian citizens become further disenchanted with the clerical regime, they also observe a contrast in freedom between their Islamic state and the Western world. As Western influence continues to make its way into Iran (even with the government’s attempts to keep it out) through globalization, Iranians have become more and more aware of their Western counterparts. “There are fewer [*sic*] better explanations for why so many Iranians today are pro-American than [President] Bush's July 12, 2002 statement: ‘The people of Iran want the same freedoms, human rights, and opportunities as people around the world... yet their voices are not being listened to by the people who are the real rulers of Iran’” (Clawson, 2004). Since the rigid governmental institutions block citizens from changing their own government, citizens are forced to accept the policies of the conservative regime, even when a majority favors reform. For example, the current regime continues to block Western influence, even though a majority of the people desire Western goods (Majd, 2009).

Artifact 2: Plight of Women (Account of One Woman)

The Iranian government's actions are especially focused on some groups within Iranian society. The government today continues to enact policies that even antifeminists in the West would find unacceptable; "women who commit adultery can legally be stoned to death" (Haus, 2006, p. 385). Women are "regarded as second-class citizens under Iranian law"; they are forced to cover their heads with scarves and lack freedom of speech (Basu, 2009). Recently Iranian women have become some of the most vocal agents of change, becoming "noticeably front and center of the massive demonstrations that have unfolded" (Basu, 2009). In an interview for CNN one Iranian woman put it this way: "This regime is against all humanity, more specifically against all women....I see lots of girls and women in these demonstrations, they are all angry, ready to explode, scream out and let the world hear their voice. I want the world to know that as a woman in this country, I have no freedom" (Basu, 2009, quoting Parisa). Although "women have become primary agents of change in Iran" as they push for modernization of their rights, they remain second-class citizens in the eyes of their own government (Basu, 2009, quoting Nayereh Tohidi; Fairbanks, 1997).

Artifact 3: Plight of the Well Educated (Student Interviews)

One of the most influential groups of Iranian citizens fueling the push for reform is well-educated young people. The victory of current president Ahmadinejad in 2005 and again in 2009 was "perceived by most members of the Iranian scientific community [and intellectual community at large]...as a setback to social reform" (Lotfalian, 2009). These individuals are often so disenchanted with the current state of their nation they leave the state in search of a better (more fair) life in the Western world. "There are economic

problems and no job security and no freedom,” says one student who hopes to go to Australia (quoted in Harrison, 2007). “Iran has also lost some of its brightest, best-educated, young professionals who have emigrated for political and/or economic reasons since the 1970’s” (Hauss, 2006). As another Iranian student, Shabanzade, put it; “We work from morning till night and still we cannot live off the money we make but over there [in the West] we can have a better life with less hours of work” (quoted in Harrison, 2007). This is not only a product of misrepresentative governance but also a barrier to reform. Since so many of Iran’s best and brightest leave the state in search of freedoms and a better life in the Western world, the society loses the people who could potentially champion reform efforts (Hauss, 2006). If the state remains on its current course, these two groups represent a “massive force responsible for the winds of change currently blowing over Iran” (Harrison, 2003).

Artifact 4: Iranian Music

Beyond the plight of specific groups within Iranian society, Western influence has also prompted new outlets for growing frustrations. One example of these outlets is pop culture, which has recently seen the emergence of underground Iranian hip-hop music pushing messages of reform. One example of Iranian hip-hop is the song “The Cops Again” by Hichkas, currently the most famous Iranian rapper. The song’s lyrics (see Appendix, 1) illustrate the society’s dissatisfaction with the part of the government that people have the most daily contact with, the police. The lyrics demonstrate the lack of freedom afforded to Iranian citizens (especially youth) and call attention to the constant frustration of young people over how they are treated by their own government: “It seems

that arresting us is their hobby, especially at night.” The song also calls attention to growing sentiment that Iran should integrate itself into the modern world through lyrics that express desires similar to those of Western peers: “I wanna sing rap all the time, too make lots of cash, buy lots of cool cars.” Overall Iranian music has become an important and influential outlet for citizens who lack the right of voicing their opinion in their own government. Music offers citizens both a way to have their voice heard and a way to broadcast the message of change. In response to the message Iranian hip-hop aims to spread, the government has cracked down on the music’s dissemination into Iranian society, banning it in many areas.

Artifact 5: Social Networking and Political Demonstrations

Another influential outlet for growing frustration among Iranian citizens has been social-networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, which provide a window into the lives of Iranians who push for change on a daily basis. Following the fraudulent re-election of Ahmadinejad in 2009, many Iranians used Twitter to express their dissatisfaction with the election results. “Web-based technology, such as the social messaging service Twitter and online video-sharing site YouTube, enabled Iranians to document and disseminate to the world images of and information on repression in the wake of the recent election” (Quirk, 2009). In addition to spreading their opinions through social networking sites, Iranians also capitalized on YouTube as a way to depict the oppressive regime. “In the hours immediately following the government's announcement of the election results and through Tuesday evening, Iranians of all ages took to the streets with chants of ‘Down with the Dictator,’ and ‘Where is my Vote?’” (Quirk, 2009). These

demonstrations were immediately uploaded to YouTube, and within minutes the entire world could see first hand the plight of Iranian citizens (see Appendix, 2).

International Pressures

In addition to the domestic pressures that currently face the Iranian government, international pressures also influence policymaking. On the international level both powerful nations, like the United States, and intergovernmental organizations, like the United Nations, push the Iranian government to act in certain ways. Today, these pressures usually come in the form of sanctions and threatening discourse, which seek to undermine the same policies these outsiders are threatened by (e.g., perpetuation of a nuclear program and Holocaust denial). In many ways, however, the international policy responses have become part of the problem, fueling the perpetuation of an “us vs. them” mentality (discussed further below) and subsequent hostile foreign policies.

Artifact 6: Economic Sanctions

In response to the perpetuation of Iranian policies such as the perpetuation of the nuclear program as well as hostile discourse (e.g., Holocaust denial), the United States has imposed a series of harsh economic sanctions against the current regime (see Appendix, 3a). This policy bars all banking transactions between the two states, any imports from Iran, any exports to Iran, and any financial dealings with Iran, as well as many aid programs for Iranian citizens (Overview of Sanctions, 2009). The United Nations Security Council has also imposed its own sanctions against Iran in response to Iran’s uranium enrichment programs, which violate the “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear

Weapons” (see Appendix, 3b). Although these sanctions are loose in comparison to the ones levied by the United States, they still discourage trade and economic connections between Iran and the United Nations’ member states (United Nations Security Council, 2008).

Artifact 7: Threatening Discourse and Preconditions

Beyond concrete policy response to the current Iranian regime, it is also important to examine the discourse the United States and other international actors use to depict the state. In response to the perceived Iranian “security threat” US foreign policy has employed the threat of military force (Rogers & Holt, 2006). In addition to the threat of military action, US discourse has also imposed preconditions on any negotiations between the two states. For example in 2007, the Bush administration demanded that the Iranian government stop its nuclear program before the US would have any diplomatic negotiations with the government (Majd, 2009; Tarock, 2006). Policies like this not only antagonize the Iranian leadership, but also ostracize the Iranian people, uniting them behind the illegitimate government (Hudson, 1996).

Iranian Policymaking: The Theory of “Rally Around the Flag”

In response to decreasing support for the current regime domestically the Iranian government has capitalized on international pressures, which have been shaped by threats of economic sanctions and military force, and attempted to create an “us vs. them” mentality within the society (Bennis, 2009). Indifferent-to-hostile discourse and the overall attitude of the West have “always added urgency to the nationalistic rhetoric” (Afshari,

1994), playing into the hands of Iranian leaders, perpetuating their power as well as their policies. Beyond discourse, international action, specifically by the United States, has attempted to isolate Iran through economic sanctions (Tarock, 2006). These actions have also been counterproductive, “hurting ordinary Iranians, inflaming public opinion and uniting the country behind the government” (Landler, 2009). In this regard the Iranian government depicts international pressure as anti-Iranian, not simply antigovernment. Overall the government works to create a “rally-around-the-flag” mentality among its citizens through the use of diversionary politics. Originally formulated by John Mueller in *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, the “rally-around-the-flag” theory describes the mentality created among citizens when faced with a serious crisis (Mueller, 1985). The theory claims that when serious threats are posed to a state, citizens come together, criticism of the government is drastically reduced, and officials receive short-term support (regardless of their political affiliation). An example can be seen in the approval ratings of President Bush following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, which were the highest in his entire tenure in office.

In many ways the “rally-around-the-flag” concept applies directly to the current situation in Iran, explaining the tactics of the Iranian government in its attempt to maintain power even though it is faced with its own illegitimacy. In its attempt to curtail the domestic pressures illustrated above, the government utilizes “diversionary politics,” which include the perpetuation of its nuclear program, and threatening discourse aimed at the United States and its allies, to perpetuate an “us vs. them” mentality among its citizens. The United States’ tactics have been largely ineffective; “increased international pressure...has enabled the current regime to...discredit any moves toward reform as

externally inspired” (Waite, 2008). The international community reinforces this mentality as it continues to utilize policies that are seen as anti-Iranian rather than antiregime. All of these forces culminate in the current regime’s use of diversionary politics on the macro level, in an attempt to assert Iranian power and deflect attention away from its inherent illegitimacy. International responses in the form of sanctions and military threats are utilized by the government to create an “us vs. them” mentality. This mentality capitalizes on the proud nature of Iranian citizens on the micro level, building support for the regime and reinforcing its ultimate goal to remain in power (Majd, 2009).

Conclusion

Although the volatile state of affairs between Iran and the Western world is highly publicized, it is easy to gloss over the plight of modern Iranian citizens and the policies that create hostility. With a better understanding of how and why the Iranian government continues to utilize threatening foreign policies towards the West, the United States and its allies will be better equipped to face the regime and prevent a large-scale global conflict.

Appendix

1. Artifact 4: Iranian Music

The Cops Again (Hichkas)

Go back to your home, all of you

Again cops are coming, everyone hides their illegal things

Because if he got you, you are busted.

The red light of their siren is dancing on the walls but it is not the dancing light of some

nightclub with dancing girls

As soon as everyone caught sight of them, they would disappear cause

We have some troublesome object in our pocket.

I will be as tame as a kitten in front of cops one of those goody kids that their mama

worship them.

I will behave in front of Mr. Cop as though I am some educated engineer

I will prate something about college life or my grades. I will behave as if I am such a goody boy officer would smile and say: good luck kid. When they are gone, every one

would come out again guys would say: start rapping again. I will sing and sing and

drumming on a bucket

look, look, do not put handcuffs on me.

Hey, hey a voice is coming everyone would run away, there is some disturbance up there.

It seems that arresting us is their hobby especially at night.

hey, hey a voice is coming everyone would run away, there is some disturbance up there. It

seems that arresting us is their hobby especially at nights.

Hey officer, put them in the van oops fight again, fight. do not move from your sit. oh, ok.

Ok. I was just kidding. I do not have anything to hide, I do not have to run away.

yeah? You are lying. if you do not bust me one night your night wont pass? You have

nothing better to do?

You would say turn around so that I put handcuff on your hands but I would run away.

That is what I will I wanna get stoned I will fool with you, cause I am so mischievous,

I will sing and sing till your head begin to spin, and you begin quacking like a duck do not

play with my lighter, idiot I wanna fire my dope,

oh boy, cops again, gonna forget the dope, gonna run

Hey, hey a voice is coming everyone would run away, there is some disturbance up there.

it seems that arresting us is their hobby especially at nights.

Hey, hey a voice is coming everyone would run away, there is some disturbance up there.

it seems that arresting us is their hobby especially at nights.

Hey Reza do not look behind your back why??? a cop is looking at you have something to

hide? no have any drugs. yes, got a dope. rolled it before. okay, just play cool throw it out

of your pocket. are the trees so tall? no. cool, so we can jump and get away. it is too late

for running away, just throw it down and put your foot on it

now what? I paid for it not you. I rather die than throw it away. officer is talking on his

radio, get up, got to run you wanna go to jail?

No, I wanna sing rap all the time, too make lots of cash, buy lots of cool cars.

Hey, hey a voice is coming everyone would run away, there is some disturbance up there.

it seems that arresting us is their hobby especially at nights.

hey, hey a voice is coming everyone would run away, there is some disturbance up there. it

seems that arresting us is their hobby especially at nights.

Hey bro, I am out of here I do not wanna go to jail. every one throw away everything that

he has got, now is time to run away.

2. Artifact 5: Social Networking and Political Demonstrations

a. Iranians protest against election results 13 June 2009:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eICmB9nwgU>

b. Violent protests in Iran: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zb2VzW8h_g

c. The Iran Protest Gets Violent:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zKiD1RZUrc&playnext_from=TL&videos=g0

[WViHO3aD0&feature=rec-LGOUT-exp_fresh%2Bdiv-1r-1-HM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zKiD1RZUrc&playnext_from=TL&videos=g0WViHO3aD0&feature=rec-LGOUT-exp_fresh%2Bdiv-1r-1-HM)

3. Artifact 6: Economic Sanctions

a. An overview of O.F.A.C. (United States) regulations involving sanctions against

Iran: <http://www.ustreas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/programs/ascii/iran.txt>

b. Resolution 1803 (2008), adopted by the United Nations Security Council at its

5848th meeting, on 3 March 2008: <http://www.globalpolicy.org/images/pdfs/scr1803.pdf>

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