
Mapping the “American Labyrinth” in Iranian Foreign Policy

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American-Iranian relations since 1945 could potentially serve as a unique case for understanding almost every single notion in international politics: from strategic alliance, high-level security cooperation, intensive cultural exchange, and unlimited commercial trade to hostage-taking, incessant bashing, economic sanctions, military confrontation and perhaps the enmity of the century. It is an interesting source for understanding why nations and governments cooperate and go to war; why they may fall in love or truly hate each other; and why, despite many potential areas of common interest, they may benefit from avoiding each other. Moreover, with some theoretical attention to the details and dynamics of the U.S.-Iranian scuffle over the last two decades, it may become evident that this difficult relationship is an excellent case for studying American foreign policy as well as deconstructing a developing country's struggle to integrate pride, modernization, and legitimacy. As evidenced by the cyclic nature of international politics, it may be difficult for the current vendetta between Iran and the United States to continue because it contradicts the logic of geopolitics and geo-economics and, most important of all, the logic of generational change in attitudes. But a reprieve calls for a deep and careful understanding of history, definitions, and interests. Whereas only two years ago it was inconceivable to think of even slight moderation in the political vocabulary used by the two sides, today the obvious divisions in both societies reflect complex internal structures. It is not the intention of this essay to undertake the colossal project of explaining

U.S.-Iranian confrontation. Instead, the objective is to fathom some of the underlying issues to which both countries need to pay attention.

Like all countries, Iran's foreign policy is basically a reflection of its domestic politics and the decision-making processes of its elite. However, whereas before the revolution, only one person constituted the process of decision-making in Iran, today a constellation of clerics, Muslim nationalists, and even professional nationalists influence a complex network of relationships in the process of both domestic and foreign policy decision-making. Undoubtedly, a clerical leadership at the core of the political establishment serves as the final arbiter, but the processes of analysis and conceptual deconstruction are no longer a singular territory. This newly evolving competitive system makes Iran a highly dynamic and yet politically stable country in a standard Middle Eastern context. Among fair-minded and unpoliticized analysts, it is conventional wisdom now that Iran has the most competitive political system in the Muslim Middle East. Clearly though, it certainly needs to undergo a long process of maturity. Beginning with the Rafsanjani presidency in 1989 and more so since Khatami's election in 1997, public opinion in Iran has won an influential role in debates on public policy and in the political process—a fundamentally new development in Iran's modern history. Political rivalries among various factions in Iran are real. In a sense, for an evolving society with an interest in the concepts and practices of civil society, open factional rivalries are perhaps illustrative of healthy politics in the long term. Clearly, in the end, factional rivalries are preferable to Mubaraks, Fahds, or Turkish military generals. To be sure, because of its marketability, Iran's domestic politics are scrutinized to the smallest detail by the Western media. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are more or less ignored. Iran's internal political rivalries are depicted as unnatural, irrational, and even unnecessary while similar developments in France, Japan, Russia, India, and Mexico are viewed as balancing mechanisms in a democratic process. Despite the global high-profile criticism of anything that has to do with Iran, it is puzzling that the political establishment in Tehran looks the other way and behaves as though nobody really understands Iran's interests and outlooks. With the exception of the Arab countries, Israel, and the United States, the rest of the world deals with Iran on a normal course.

If this is true, what then explains the continued hostility toward the United States? If Iran is so secure internally, why does it need a confrontation with Washington? How can we account for the "American Labyrinth" in Iranian foreign policy thinking? What purpose does the continuation of the "American complex" serve in the behavior of Iranian foreign policy? There seem to be three basic reasons for this dilemma: 1) clerical historical mind set, 2) state legitimization requirements, and 3) American policy toward the Middle East. Below, I will examine each of the three variables.

Clerical Historical Mindset

If the Iranian revolution had finally landed in the political hands of the nationalist groups, Iran's foreign policy would have echoed rather different tendencies today. Among all the political groupings in Iran, the clerics stand very different and unique. Although one can certainly locate many orientations among the clerics, there are common traits to be identified, especially when it comes to the issue of collective group identity. The overwhelming majority of the clerics express and radiate an uneasiness about modernity and its mission, but feel at home with their own controlled processes of modernization. In this sense, they are not global. The political landscape in Iran provides them with the necessary arena to assert their religious convictions but also and even more importantly, their long-held political outlooks and objectives. Indigenization of politics grants them immense power. Highly confident of their historical mission, clerics are also conscious of their grassroots support. There seems to be a commitment that power in Iran should not be shared with foreigners, especially with a superpower. The record of the politicized clerical establishment in Iran indicates a strong uncompromising attitude toward the Western world. Most clerics do not come from the Westernized urban areas, so they have an unsullied sense of tradition and they are keen to preserve it. From a cultural perspective, clerics are concerned about the consequences of engaging with America. Many point out that the American civilization is a "civilization of surface," meaning that it is concerned with physical appearance, body-building, money, number of cars, bank accounts and incessant varieties of physical "joy and pleasure." It has less or no concern for philosophy, the soul, inner explorations, and mental peace. A comparative analysis of the two mind sets would reveal that there are rather serious philosophical differences regarding the definition of many cultural issues between the clerics and the United States which actually get blurred in political confrontations. Therefore, from a clerical perspective, indigenization of culture can better be protected by maintaining a studied distance from the United States. It would be a mistake to presume that thousands of adherents of the Iranian revolution, some non-clerical sectors of the elite, and orthodox groups throughout the country do not share these viewpoints. It is not clear, however, whether there is a broad societal consensus in Iran over these anxieties and interpretations. Furthermore, the power of the cultural and the Shii bindings between the clerics and the masses in Iran should not be underestimated, for they provide perpetual fences before easy and Western cultural entrances.

State Legitimization Requirements

Although the political establishment in Iran is moving in a diversified direction,

its agenda cannot exclude the interests of the active and politicized clerics whose attention to history's verdict on their performance has especially increased in recent years. For clerics, the most quintessential symbol of activism is in the area of Islamic culture and rituals. They tend not to separate their cultural and their political roles. The revolution has tied their destiny to the status of the state. To untangle this relationship would mean that they have to return to their confined non-political preaching duties; this is more than a political suicide. If the state were to become secular, a meaningful clerical role would lose its relevance. A cultural clerical role at the state level roped to an assertive and, at the same time, constitutional political leadership, guarantees clerical and state security. Therefore, clerical and state security become one and the same phenomenon. Here, the clerical mind set falls into a political and state arena. From this perspective, the state becomes legitimate if it can anchor the clerical role. In turn, a clerical political role without a cultural substance would be a contradiction in itself. The processes of state legitimization, then, require an active clerical role. In most cases, clerical cultural pronouncements collide with the economic and developmental agenda of the non-clerical advocates of the revolution. Cultural pronouncements and religious symbolism are powerful materials for political assertiveness. In this context, a relationship with the United States would open up possibilities for greater economic cooperation, reduce political friction over the definition of many Middle Eastern conflicts, and disturb pure clerical presentation of cultural authenticity. The dynamics leading to the downfall of the Soviet Union are used by prominent clerics with a rather high degree of perspicacity as a contemporary example of American imperial designs to create a unipolar global system. One should bear in mind that the revolutionary leadership has a very penetrating historical memory regarding foreign domination of Iran. Iran's current foreign policy behavior consistently includes the granting of concessions to those countries that do not possess the capacity to influence Iran's political process. This is justifiably considered as a fundamental concern in defense of national sovereignty. It can be argued that the United States is the only country in the world that has the capacity to influence political outcomes in Iran. A political relationship will eventually trigger the opening of the cultural floodgates to Iran. Therefore, there exists an intricate triangle that substantiates Iran's confrontational U.S. policy: a visible and meaningful clerical role in national politics, maintenance of national sovereignty, and a continuing maneuvering role in Middle Eastern politics.

American Middle Eastern Policy

Traditional American policy toward the Middle East over the last five decades has concentrated on the main political figures in every country. This has been more true in the Arab world. Moreover, much of the Middle Eastern interaction with

the United States took place during the Cold War, when the American preoccupation was to contain the Soviet Union and allow it a secondary role in the region. During this period, while authoritarian rulers maintained their grip on Middle Eastern societies, in almost all of these countries some form of opposition and dissent surfaced. In fact, dissent in both the Arab and the non-Arab Middle East dates back to the times of the Ottoman empire. The United States, as a global power, has paid little

attention to the internal dynamics of these states. As a status quo power, Washington has no motive to encourage change or to welcome the active political participation of the opposing voices.

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Undoubtedly, this pursuit has served American national interests in the area of oil security and defense; however, it has damaged the view of American democratic values among the enlightened, civil society advocates, as well as intellectual and rational voices in the Middle East. This is a major dilemma for Middle Eastern specialists in the United States. Among Middle Easterners also, even those who believe in a solid, bilateral, and mutually respectful relationship with the United States, there is a feeling of disillusionment mainly because of a lack of American attention to the political aspirations of the local people. Even the most global-minded individuals in Iran's political establishment express disapproval of the American status-quo attitude toward the Middle East. Some point out that even the American media completely ignore the undemocratic nature of the governments in the Arabian Peninsula, yet on a daily basis does not miss an opportunity to report any wrongdoing in the remotest villages of Iran. There are countless violations of human rights in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey everyday, they contend. But they are barely covered in the mainstream American media. Because of the very turbulent history of the last two hundred years, even an average Iranian has internalized a sharp psychological capacity to quickly notice any sign of discrimination. This overall tendency in American Middle East policy has caused a continuing ambivalence, tension, and uncertainty among Iran's policymakers to design a U.S. policy so that Iran's sovereignty and regional status will not be jeopardized.

There appears to be no prospect in the near future for any structural change either in Iran's policy toward the United States or in American policy in the Middle East. Both sides differ rather seriously in the definition of the issues as well as the delineation of interests. Iran's size, geopolitical beauty, rich culture, and unique historical pride dictate a visible regional presence. The revolution has given this role an Islamic posture. As long as authoritarianism dominates the political landscape of the Arab world, Iran has an authentic pretext to ride above others, espe-

cially if its pluralistic drive becomes institutionalized. But in a turbulent world and a crisis-ridden Middle East, unique Iranian talent and energy should turn inward and focus on its internal construction. Iran's ostentatious approach to its political independence needs to be cemented to economic predictability, for the idea of national sovereignty may well be a devalued coinage in the heightened globalization of the twenty-first century. Iran's future lies in its economic nationalism. An economically prosperous Iran may interpret a relationship with Washington as a less conciliatory option. Moreover, Iran's Asian identity will enrich and uphold its sovereignty more than its Middle Eastern identity. Iran, a unique land in an inhospitable neighborhood, cannot afford to share sorrow in never-ending odysseys. If America moves from its current position of managing crises in the Middle East to a role of leadership over political development, particularly in the Arab world, American Wilsonian ideals will gradually materialize in a fertile ground, and the Middle East as a whole, with a population of some 300 million and an evolving youth, will experience a peaceful transition period toward pluralistic political change, thus contributing to the global economy, culture, and technology. 