

Iran: Technology as a Civilian and Government Tool of Influence

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Technological advancement and changes can be attributed to the shifting climate of the international realm today, and technology can be used by the government or the people to selectively display certain information for a particular purpose or agenda. This trend is clearly displayed in the current situation in Iran where technology has been recently used by the civilian population to advocate for certain rights and issues that need to be addressed. Essentially, one can attribute the utilization of technology such as social media as a means of the civilian population to push for their liberal, left-leaning agenda. Conversely, the government has been able to use technology as a means of asserting dominance over the civilian population, pumping out religious rhetoric and most importantly expanding its influence in the Greater Middle East (G.M.A.) region.

The opportunities that technology has presented to the Iranian government has allowed it to expand and build upon its network in the G.M.A., and to choose to established ties with countries outside of the G.M.A. as well. This has also facilitated partnerships to develop with surrounding countries and along with the goals of the Iranian government to reach out and influence other nations. The role that technology plays in changing the dynamic country of Iran is immeasurable due to the opportunities it has presented to the civilian population, as well as the government. This paper shall analyze the influence of technology on the implementation of Iranian policy in internal and external affairs. The two specific themes used as case studies will be nuclear technology, the internet and internet-related technology.

This section of the paper shall focus on how the quest for and usage of civilian and military nuclear technologies has shaped Iranian foreign policy in the past three decades. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran was a major turning point in its domestic and foreign affairs. Iran went from being an American and Western supported monarchy to a religious theocracy, with undertones of democracy. In the early stages of its existence, the Islamic republic was not interested in nuclear technology or weapons. Even though the Shah had previously asked top scientists to be ready to develop a weapon if any of Iran's neighbors acquired one,¹ the Ayatollah Khomeini banned research into nuclear weapons as soon as he came into power.² The early years of the Iranian revolution also coincided with the declaration of war by Iraq on Iran.

This war arguably shaped if not cemented the already hardline foreign policy of Iran towards the West. With visible American support for Iraq, the Iranians found themselves at the receiving end of a war of attrition, and a war that they had not started. This helped bring about a complete reversal of the country's strategy towards nuclear weapons. In 1988, the Ayatollah, Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini outlined the Iranian need for nuclear/atomic weapons as a deterrent against future threats to its sovereignty.³ In the almost decade long war between Iran and Iraq, there were many instances where Iraq used chemical weapons and other weapons of mass destruction against Iran. Even though it was Iraq using these weapons, the United States tolerated this use of weapons of mass destruction to meet their own ends.⁴ Despite the admission that the U.S. "knew full well that it was selling materials to Iraq that was being used for the manufacture of chemical weapons, and that Iraq was using such weapons",⁵ Iran did not respond likewise because the regime at the time did not believe in chemical weapons and more importantly, it did not have the requisite amount either. However, as former President of Iran Hashemi Rafsanjani noted, the conflict with Saddam

¹ Scott D. Sagan, "How to Keep the Bomb From Iran," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 5 (September 2006). <http://goo.gl/ozXRqi>.

² Yossi Melman and Meir Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran*. N.p.: Basic Books, 2008, 89-90.

³ Ruhollah M. Khomeini, "Letter from Ayatollah Khomeini regarding weapons during the Iran-Iraq war." Council on Foreign Relations.

⁴ Gawdat Bahgat, "Saddam Hussein's Legacy: A Preliminary Assessment and Future Implications," *SAIS Review* 25, no. 2: 100.

⁵ Glenn Kessler, "History Lesson: When the United States looked the other way on chemical weapons," *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2013. <http://goo.gl/gecbpr>.

Hussein showed the mullahs that “the moral teachings of the world are not very effective when war reaches a serious stage.”⁶ Therefore Iran was compelled to equip itself in the use of chemical, bacteriological and radiological weapons, and this war was the basis of the shift in Iranian policy towards a more nuclear capable state.

Fundamentally, foreign policy is an instrument of domestic politics. The sustenance of the Iranian Revolution owes a great deal of its survival to regional animosity towards Israel, and the ever-present threat of coming under the influence of the West. Notably, this influence could occur through the covert or overt actions of its Sunni dominated and American supported neighbors. Ever since the Iranian Revolution, the Islamic government of Iran has refused to accept the legitimacy of the Israeli government. The Republic sees itself as the sole defendant of the rights of the Palestinians, as most other Middle Eastern leaders have refused to take a strong stance on the issue against Israel. Advancement in technology, especially military and nuclear technology, is a means for Iran to enforce its foreign policy in the Middle East and a deterrent against attacks by Israel or its allies.

Additionally, the advancement in nuclear technology for military and civilian use gives Iran a stronger bargaining position if it ever enters negotiations. Hence, it can be argued that Iran may have never wanted a weapon in the first place and is just using the threat of building one to consolidate its position. This gives credence to the numerous statements by various Iranian leaders over the last two decades who state that Iran does not want or need a nuclear weapon. Ali Akber Salehi, the head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization argues that,

“We do not feel any real threat from our neighbours. Pakistan and the Persian Gulf, we have no particular problems with them, nor with Afghanistan. The only powerful country is Russia in the north, and no matter how

many nuclear weapons we had we could not match Russia. Israel, our next neighbour, we do not consider an entity by itself but as part of the US. Facing Israel means facing the US. We cannot match the US.”⁷

This shows that Iran is a rational actor, like all other states in the global order, and unlike what it is sometimes portrayed to be as in the West. Though the Iranian rhetoric throughout the past has been that they require nuclear technology for civilian use, Iran has never actively tried to quell rumors that their Uranium enrichment program is for military use. This purposeful ambiguity is politics at play because it acts as a bargaining chip when dealing with other countries. This may prove to be a hazardous maneuver similar to what Saddam Hussein tried with the Americans in 2003

just before the Iraq War, but it has worked so far for the Iranians. In the Iraqi case, Saddam Hussein’s refusal to allow proper inspections had a rationale behind it; if the world knew that Iraq had no weapons, the security of his regime would have been compromised. Similarly, if Iran proves to the world today that it has no intention to build nuclear weapons or no ‘civilian’ nuclear program, they have no bargaining chip for dealing with the West. In order to preserve its current standing in the global political system, Iran cannot let this happen and therefore, it must project an appearance of nuclear capability.

Current Iranian foreign policy is more influential than it has ever been in the past, especially regionally. Iran supported the rebels in Afghanistan in their fight against the Taliban and now, because of the American withdrawal and shared border with the country, it has unprecedented access to the top most power centre in Afghanistan. Most Afghan leaders today were funded or helped in some way by Iran when they were rebels. Furthermore, the American instalment of a Shia dominated cabinet in Iraq has in many ways helped increase Iranian influence in Iraq.⁸ Former American Ambassador Ryan Crocker stated in an interview in 2013 that the formation of the Shia cabinet was in more ways than one, to appease

⁶ Sagan, "How to Keep the Bomb From Iran." *Foreign Affairs*.

⁷ Iran’s Nuclear Program Is Peaceful: Smyth Gareth, Interview with Ali Akber Salehi, *Financial Times*, September 9, 2004.

⁸ Ali Rahigh-Aghsan and Peter V. Jakobsen, "The Rise of Iran: How Durable, How Dangerous?" *The Middle East Journal* 64, no. 4 (2010): 561.

the Iranian leadership.⁹ Ambassador Crocker also publicly admitted that when he was Ambassador to Iraq from 2007-09, the new Iraqi leaders used to shuttle between Tehran and Baghdad to get orders from the Iranian government.¹⁰ This appeasement of Iran by the United States through Iraq shows how Iranian realpolitik has worked in attaining regional supremacy. The ever-present threat of nuclear capability has helped Iran in its foreign policy goals even though it may have hurt its internal economy because of sanctions.

There is no doubt as to whether the threat of nuclear capability has been used by Iran in the past couple of decades. As long ago as 1991 there were reports stating, “Iran is pursuing nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and seeking to obtain long-range missiles from North Korea...”¹¹ This accusation has been echoed by successive governments throughout the West: especially the United States and Israel. It is noteworthy that even though there has been almost no public proof regarding the enrichment of uranium for weapons purposes, the American concessions towards Iran’s regional hegemony over the Middle East, barring Israel, have not lessened. The Iranians have thus far perfectly balanced between implying threats of weapons, and stating that there is no intention for a weapon. The bargaining position it has reached because of such actions (among others) has been visible recently with President Rouhani opening up to negotiations vis-à-vis Iran’s nuclear program. It will take some time to see the extent to which these negotiations will be effective, however, the influence that nuclear technology has given Iran while dealing with foreign policy issues is indisputable.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

Social media has played a great role in Iran's current affairs due to the platform it has provided

the public with for voicing their concerns and speaking about the issues that affect them. Facebook has been used by the public as a means of gaining personal autonomy and as a tool for pushing their political issues.¹² This is not supported by the government as there have been clear bans on the two social media platforms of Twitter and Facebook since 2009. Recently however, the new government lifted the ban this September allowing Iranians to access various social media after years.¹³ The government originally placed the ban in order to control civilian populations movements and their efforts to rally against the ruling administration. Strategically, this was a means of limiting the interaction between people with similar interests and beliefs, and ultimately, a way to control a population that was experiencing major unrest. A further aspect was establishing a connection with the outside world, which the government believed could negatively influence or morally corrupt the civilian population, and consequently the state. This stands in contrast to current usage of social media by the new president, Hassan Rouhani, and several members of his government. These officials actively use Twitter and various other social media platforms to effectively communicate to the civilian population.

The shift in public relations in Rouhani’s government and in the approach to social media shows that the leftist force within the Iran has been gaining traction and must be appeased through policies. Interestingly enough, the change in government in Iran can be seen clearly by the now portrayed image of secularity and openness. They are essentially backtracking on the damage caused by former president Ahmadinejad, by moving towards accepting the contemporary era and adapting to a changing world. As Rouhani stated, “In the age of digital revolution, one cannot live or govern in a quarantine...”¹⁴ In this statement, he is acknowledging the quarantine that Iran was under through Ahmadinejad and noting that it was largely ineffective in the status quo**** or keeping the civilian population content. The move towards greater freedom of speech via social media platforms is a milestone for Iran's domestic and

⁹ Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2013.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Elaine Sciolino, "Report Says Iran Seeks Atomic Arms," *The New York Times*, October 31, 1991.

¹² Mona Hajin, "Seeking Personal Autonomy Through the Use of Facebook in Iran," Sage Open. no. 3 (2013).

¹³ Saed Kamali Dehghan, "Iran's President Signals Softer Line On Web Censorship and Islamic Dress Code" the Guardian. Accessed October 16, 2013. <http://preview.tinyurl.com/ny4pkhz>

¹⁴ Kamali Dehghan, "Iran's President Signals Softer Line On Web Censorship and Islamic Dress Code"

foreign policy due to the gravity of the matter. As Rouhani elaborated, "The virtual space is a tool and it can be an opportunity or a threat,"¹⁵ meaning that the government now realizes that there is also an opportunity that has presented itself in the form of creating a new image of Iran on the domestic and international front. This shift in the Iranian government's perception of the uses of social media largely affects the interactions that Iran has with the world and more importantly, changes the perception and the image of Iran in media worldwide.

The biggest change in Iran's foreign policy can be seen through the social media posts regarding those of the Jewish faith and the topic of the Holocaust. Rouhani tweeted a Rosh Hashanah blessing recently, which is a big move for Iran in the aftermath of the Ahmadinejad government. The

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step showed that Iran is ready to move towards a more secular and open society - one in which there is room for tolerance. Marzieh Afkhami, a spokeswoman for Iran's Foreign Ministry, tweeted about Rosh Hashanah as well and was confronted by someone online who stated that Iran should at least

acknowledge the Holocaust. The spokesman replied by stating that "Iran never denied it. The man who was perceived to be denying it is now gone. Happy New Year." The stance that Iran is now taking can be seen as open, tolerant and accepting, even in regards to the issue of Holocaust denial. It is clear that the government of Iran is looking for a major change in its worldwide image and is willing to use the tool of technology to render that possible. Iran is clearly distancing from the views and statements of Ahmadinejad, and is moving toward an Iran that can be more interactive and accepted in the international realm.

Technology has also been used to gain traction and support for major issues in Iran. For example, in regards to the women's rights movement in Iran, there have been several Iranian women activists

that have been under arrest or have been exiled from the country, due to either their expression through art via social media platforms or for their protests in Iran. For example, Shirin Neshat has spent most of her fifty-three years of life in exile from Iran due to her solidarity with the women's rights movement and harsh criticism of the state of women in Iran today. Her film "Women Without Men" highlights the journey of four Iranian women under the pressures and laws placed upon them by the government for conformity.¹⁶ The Iranian women's movement is now in a new political context and this is allowing open meetings and making demands known. This is in great contrast to the situation that was present during the Ahmadinejad government where women would have to cease all public activity.¹⁷ The idea that women had no choice but to essentially go underground was detrimental to the movement that was trying to be pushed by women. The Iranian women involved with the movement essentially had to choose between their determination to be in Iran as a woman who has rights and exile or indefinite detention. As Tahmasebi, an Iranian activist stated regarding women activists in Iran:

"If they were active, they were not as vocal about it. The social space for activism was much more limited and there was great uncertainty about what would happen. Some of it was based on repression, some on the poor economic situation, and some of it on a general sense of hopelessness. I think women's movement activists expect to see a lot of the restrictions lifted in line with Rouhani's promise to allow for civil society to operate freely".¹⁸

This insight into the women's movement now means that the preexisting network of women activists can not only meet openly again and make demands without the threat of persecution or exile, but they can also recruit new members and expand their network with outreach via social media, especially through the use of blogs. In Ahmadinejad's Iran there were stringent rules

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Phillip French, "Women Without Men" the Guardian. Accessed October 16, 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jun/13/women-without-men-film-review>.

¹⁷ Your Middle East. "Iran's new government and the hopes of Iranian women movements." Accessed October 16, 2013.

¹⁸ Ibid.

regarding blogging and the women's movement, but now there is more freedom to pursue such activities.¹⁹ By being able to voice their opinions and recruit new members of their movement the traction and attention that women's rights in Iran deserves can actually gain momentum, and due to the current political environment, their demands can actually be heard.

Furthermore it is apparent that the connection that social media has allowed Iran to have with the outside world is one that has changed the perception of Iran. Traditionally, it has been a black-boxed state that has attempted to quarantine itself from the rest of the world in order to protect its morality and its values in the changing climate of the international realm. With social media platforms open to the rest of the world to communicate and observe what the Iranian state is like. As some political commentators have stated, "Not only did Twitter allow those inside Iran to communicate with each other, it allowed the rest of the world to see what was going on at a time when the regime had severely restricted the mainstream media's ability to cover the story."²⁰ This observation rings true for the previously quarantined country as it allowed the perception of Iran to change and therefore influenced the way that the world and world leaders to some extent may treat Iran in the future. The changes in regards to the modernization of Iran are leading to a far more inclusive society and while there are pitfalls to the government including the issue of women's rights, LGBTQ issues, the changes in Iran allow for movement towards a more inclusive and productive society as a whole.

The use of technology by the Iranian government as a foreign policy tool and by the people as a tool for reform has allowed the country to reach a certain political stability in the middle ground. They have unknowingly achieved this due to the push from the far right and from the left of the spectrum. The country has over a period of time proceeded towards a rather centrist position on the political spectrum. This has manifested itself in the recent elections in the country where the most moderate of the candidates was elected. Though these candidates went through a vetting process wherein their conservative credentials were scrutinized by

the Ayatollah, the choice of the people was the most centrist candidate. Furthermore, President Rouhani's actions since taking over have shown a remarkable shift from the previous regime's stance on various issues. The role that technological advancements, be they military or civilian, in this shift cannot be emphasized enough. The impact of nuclear technology and an expansion in the access to the Internet has had a tremendous impact on Iranian politics.

¹⁹ Wojcieszak and Briar Smith, "Will politics be tweeted? New media use by Iranian youth in 2011." *New Media and Society*. no. 1 (2013): 91-109.

²⁰ Arianna Huffington, "Arianna Huffington: Facebook, Twitter and the Search for Peace in the Middle East." *The Huffington Post*. Accessed October 16, 2013. goo.gl/CfXilC