

An Analysis of the Role of Ideology in Iranian Foreign Policy

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Revolution in Iran and the Road of Ideology

Since Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979, it has been easy to assume that the Islamic Republic of Iran makes decisions based on ideological grounds. This paper will analyze the concrete role of ideology in Iran's foreign policy. It will consider possibilities such as religious ideology primarily or partly motivating Iran's foreign policy initiatives, or if such initiatives are independent of ideological drives. By analyzing different scholarly interpretations of foreign policy initiatives made in Iran pre- and post-revolution, this paper argues that ideology has not played a determining role in Iran's foreign policy but rather has served as a tool for ensuring national stability and support.

Iran has gone through regimes with varying ideologies. The territory that is now the Islamic Republic of Iran was formerly known as Persia, until 1935, when the modern state of Iran was formed. Continuing into the mid-twentieth century, scholar Shahram Akbarzadeh explains that "the Iranian people embraced the democratic process, moving the country away from its traditional royalist system," referring to Muhammad Reza Shah, the monarch of the Pahlavi Dynasty and the nation's leader at the time.¹ Elections democratically brought Mohammed

Mossadeq into power, leading to the establishment of a nationalist government that sidelined the Shah with the help of the Tudeh Party. Mossadeq's government, contrary to the pro-Western and US-dependent Shah, "moved to nationalize the Iranian oil industry and free the state from Western economic influence."² Socialist movements were growing throughout the Middle East, with Mossadeq's government as an example in Iran, thus alarming Washington. These concerns led to the overthrow of Mossadeq's government with a US and UK-backed coup d'état that reinstalled the Shah. Akbarzadeh states that the coup, codenamed Operation Ajax, is often seen as the first clear example of direct US intervention in Middle East politics. Muhammad Reza Shah made further decisions that spoiled the view the people of Iran had of America. The Shah launched the White Revolution, which scholar Janet Afary says was "an aggressive modernization program that upended the wealth and influence of landowners and clerics, disrupted rural economies, led to rapid urbanization and Westernization, and prompted concerns over democracy and human rights."³ Although the White Revolution led to extraordinary economic growth, Afary notes that "heavy government spending, and a boom in oil prices led to high rates of inflation and the stagnation of Iranians' buying power and

standard of living.”⁴ The Shah also replaced the traditional Islamic calendar with a royalist one. Although only a symbolic change, such examples deepened the perspective that the Shah was disconnected from Iran’s cultural and religious identity. Akbarzadeh states, “in a fiercely nationalist country, the idea of a leadership that was beholden to external influences was profoundly destabilizing.”⁵

As the Iranian people looked for change, Khomeini emerged as the leader they were looking for: for Khomeini was a traditional Islamic cleric, “an anti-Western, nationalist religious scholar stood in stark contrast to the opulent lifestyles of the ruling pro-US elite.”⁶ Scholars Čech and Krupová explain that Islamic resistance was not born with the 1979 Revolution, but was a key societal characteristic born against imperialism and colonialism in the twentieth century.⁷ Western interference came with economic exploitation and the implementation of a Western lifestyle, “jeopardizing the foundation of the Muslim faith and traditions.” In the late 1970s, Afary explains that the Shah’s sociopolitical repression increased, limiting outlets for political participation and outlawing oppositional parties such as the National Front and the Tudeh Party. There were protests with thousands of participants, who faced a harsh response of censorship, surveillance, harassment, illegal detention, and torture. This led to a surge in anger, which spurred anti-regime protests throughout the country. In February 1979, the monarch was overthrown, and Khomeini returned to Iran after being sent into exile for his opposition to the Pahlavi

regime in the early 1960s. A referendum on April 1 established the first Islamic state in modern history.

Javaid et al. explain that foreign policy is often derived from ideology, although it may not be religious for every state. Ideology is related to politics in five different ways: enabling the interpretation of the foreign environment through an intellectual framework, establishing interactions and coherence between domestic and external environments, providing rationalization and justification for foreign policy decisions, expressing historical development, and providing a moral and ethical system to correct attitudes and evaluative criteria.⁸ Iran’s ideology is based on Shi’a Islam; Iranians are specifically known as the Imamites or Twelvers. Iranian Shi’ites are called Twelvers because they “believe that the prophet’s rightful heirs were twelve in number,” with only Ali, the first in line, ruling. The twelfth Imam disappeared as a child in 874 A.D. Akhavi explains the dilemma of authority that Muslims faced with the Imam’s occultation, as Shi’ites were living under Sunni rule.⁹ Both Sunni and Shi’a Muslims follow the Qur’an and perform similar prayers. However, they differ in their understanding of authority and in their interpretation of Islamic law. Shi’a Muslims believe Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, was the successor and should have been the next caliph. However, Sunni Muslims believe that the Prophet did not have a successor, and the community should choose the next leader. Abu Bakr was chosen to be the first caliph, which was seen as illegitimate. The

competing conceptions of authority have led to sectarian tension in Iran.

Kenneth Katzman explains that the leaders of the 1979 revolutions asserted that the Shah, who was secular and authoritarian, “had suppressed Islam and its clergy,” so they established a clerical regime where the Supreme Leader has ultimate power. The Supreme Leader would act as *vilayet-i faqih*, the figure who will be in power until the lost Imam returns, combining political and religious authority.¹⁰ Katzman highlights the nature of Twelver Shi’ism, which is a fight for the oppressed, as Iran’s leaders say Shi’ite Muslims are “underrepresented and economically disadvantaged minorities in many countries of the region.”¹¹ He adds that Iranian leaders assert, “the political and economic structures of the Middle East are heavily weighted against oppressed peoples and in favour of the United States [US] and its allies,” claiming that the region’s structure has been “distorted by Western intervention and economic domination,” which needs to end.¹²

Three Takes on Ideology in Iran’s Foreign Policy

Scholars Ľubomír Čech and Kristína Krupová argue that since the revolution of 1979, Iran has based its foreign policy agenda on a new revolutionary ideology, which Shia Islam has been a significant platform for. The major overlapping factors impacting foreign policy decisions were found to be religion, Iranian nationalism, as well as Iran’s historical experience of superpowers’ interventions and penetration of foreign elements into

Iranian society. Čech and Krupová focus their analysis on President Hannas Rouhani’s foreign policy, specifically how a pragmatic leader was still constrained by religious ideology. Rouhani focused on normalizing Iran-West relations by diffusing the crisis over Iran’s nuclear program and bringing back its reputation as a trustworthy political partner.¹³ However, what shows the role of ideology is not a pragmatic leader, but the constraints Rouhani faced as the leader of a nation founded on an ideological narrative. While Rouhani’s administration “broke away from ideological rhetoric and defined new priorities, including economic interests and prosperity of the society,” the foreign policy remained focused on ideological principles like the Shi’i principle to assist the oppressed.¹⁴

Čech and Krupová also analyze the ideologically determined international relationships, such as Iran’s relationship with Israel, Shia militias, and Sunni actors. Although Rouhani was able to make concessions on Iran’s stance towards Zionism, its ideological stance on not recognizing Israel as a Jewish state, did not change. Rouhani also faced heavy opposition from the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, as “the conservative political parties [did] not accept such radical changes since they pose a threat to [the] legitimacy of the Iranian regime.”¹⁵ During the era of Rouhani’s presidency, Iran’s foreign policy developed a dual character, meaning foreign policy initiatives combined Rouhani’s pragmatic proposals and the ideological decisions of the Supreme Leader. Čech and Krupová argue that Rouhani being pushed to change

foreign policy decisions based on religious drives proves that ideology plays a crucial role in Iran's foreign policy. However, one could also argue that the Supreme Leader's allowance of pragmatic and secular input demonstrates the flexible nature of ideology in Iranian politics, which would not be the case if policies were based solely on ideological principles. However, Čech and Krupová explain that there have been many Iranian foreign policy decisions that were "sources of tension and sharpening criticism for inciting sectarian conflicts," referring to involvement in the Syrian Civil War and Iraq's politics, support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, and its support for the Houthis in Yemen which are framed as ideological decisions, as they are Muslim neighbours.

Caferoğlu and Ünal agree to a certain extent, arguing that ideology is at the forefront of foreign policy factors, but that there are other factors, such as anti-Westernism, Persian culture and geopolitics, as well as realpolitik, of practical and strategic interest.¹⁶ Caferoğlu and Ünal present the Shia Crescent as a geopolitical concept that shows the role of ideology in Iran's foreign policy. The Shia Crescent encompasses Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Bahrain. Caferoğlu and Ünal say, "It is possible to include Azerbaijan, Western Afghanistan, and Yemen in this region." Recalling the Shi'i ideology to protect the oppressed, they explain, "Iran has assigned itself the mission of the protector of Shi'ites in its foreign policy and is to increase its effectiveness by providing all kinds of aid, including sending soldiers to the Shi'ite groups living in this geography." When

interfering with the politics of these nations, Caferoğlu and Ünal argue that Iran's main concern is to protect the Shi'ite population. Supporting Shi'ite populations wouldn't have a strategic or practical aim other than creating relationships with them. The fact that Iran's support does not link to a specific pragmatic agenda may show that ideology is the main factor in such alliances.

On the other hand, Iran wants to be a great power in the Middle East, which is not possible without alliances. Iran gave up its Western alliances due to national reactions toward Western interference in the nation, so it must find alliances within the limited scope of non-Western countries that the Iranian population would support. The Middle East is ethnically and demographically very diverse, but religion is a strong tie between several states. The population in the Shi'a Crescent would form an alliance that is easier to make and gain national support for. Moreover, one should not undermine the power of alliances with groups, even if the groups are minorities. As Dr. Devine stated, twenty-five percent of a population is enough to keep a person in power, and alliances in several countries would be a source of pressure for each government, giving Iran substantial power.¹⁷ I argue that these alliances, although based on religion, are still political decisions in which ideology is a factor that makes it the best practical option. Caferoğlu and Ünal argue that their foreign policy is a tool in promoting religious and political interests, where Iran "uses its 'Shi'ite identity' to help justify its strategic goals and connections in the Middle East."¹⁸ So, the clearer argument

would be that ideology does not have a direct role in Iran's foreign policy. Rather, it is rather a tool for obtaining national support, as well as a factor in fully practical decisions.

Mahmood Sariolghalam argues that ideology and religion may have had a core role in Iran's foreign policy during Khomeini's life, as the leader of the revolution, but every leader after him made practical decisions based on personal gain. He says that when Khomeini was a leader, his character and religious authority had the strength to dominate factional policies. However, after Khomeini's death, different political narratives and foreign challenges took over, and "gradually, ideas and ideology became pretentious. Sariolghalam explains that after 1989, after Khomeini's death in June, the battle in politics did not appear to involve ideas and worldviews, but persons and groups seeking statesmanship and political consolidation.¹⁹ Foreign policy initiatives included concessions with the US, a strategy Khomeini's government would have never allowed, as well as restarting the nuclear program.

Iran's nuclear program came into force when the Shah was still in power and was destroyed during the Iran-Iraq War. Sariolghalam describes the reason for restarting the program as the revelation, gained during the Iran-Iraq War, of the need for a military deterrence strategy. The said deterrence strategy could be an example of opaque nuclear deterrence, as it is known that Iran is restarting their nuclear programme and will have the power to protect itself. Sariolghalam says, it is "a deterrence strategy founded on nurturing regional proxies, a missile

industry, and a nuclear program."²⁰ However, he also says this program would most likely not become a nuclear weapon program, as the intention was to maintain distance from the US, and nuclear weapons would "invite a potential military attack from the United States and/or Israel and also turn the country into another North Korea, with vast limitations imposed on its economy and society by Western powers."²¹ A nuclear program that was restarted after the revolution would show that the foreign policy of Iran still holds some structure from pre-revolution times. The current government still uses programs the Shah started, showing that foreign policy initiatives may not be determined purely by ideology. Although the goal of distancing Iran from the US may seem ideological due to Khomeini's preachings and its anti-Western attitude. Iran would be protecting itself from a US attack, which would be much more practical than ideological.

Javaid et al. argue a middle point, hypothesizing, "Iranian foreign policy is a unique manifestation of both Ideology and Pragmatism where national and individual models are equally participating."²² They explain that the 1979 Revolution created a religious influence in Iran's foreign policy, but as time passes, we see a "changing geo-political environment" in the world that is altering the dynamics of global politics, let alone Iran's. ²³ Iran specifically has gone through a partial shift, which can be seen not only by its change in attitude towards the West, but also when comparing the conflicts between Iraq and Afghanistan. Javaid et al. state that there are, simultaneously, issues motivated by ideological concerns like the wars in Iraq

and Afghanistan that reveal strategic concerns like the US presence, and the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Overall, their examples show that although ideology has been part of the Iranian narrative, foreign policy decisions and initiatives have been strategic. Javaid et al. say, “Islamic ideology is the source of unity and integration at [a] domestic level,” highlighting that this is the way leaders were able to create a unique socio-cultural bond between the people and trust with the masses.²⁴ Although Javaid et al. argue that ideology and pragmatism are equally important for Iran’s foreign policy, I would agree that such a statement is more applicable to general politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Where ideology plays a key role in national policy initiatives with the goal of stability and cohesion, foreign policy is independent of ideological pressure and decisions are made on pragmatic and strategic grounds.

Conclusion

Overall, this paper has analyzed the role of ideology in Iran’s foreign policy, discussing whether ideology is a primary or partial factor in foreign policy initiatives, or if foreign policy decisions are made independently and strategically. When analyzing several policy factors, such as Iran’s interest in the Shi’a Crescent, regional alliances, nuclear programs, and

the development of interactions with the West throughout history, the conclusion is that foreign policy decisions are made strategically and ideology does not have a role in initiatives. Although an ideological framework exists, especially after the 1979 Revolution, deterrence, geopolitical needs, political alliances, and a pursuit of power have a much bigger role in foreign policy than exporting Shi’i beliefs. Deeper analysis has shown the flexibility of ideology throughout the history of politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the greater importance of protection and power for Iranian leaders. Nevertheless, ideology has been a critical tool in implementing foreign policy initiatives. In a diverse nation like Iran, ideology and religion have been an instrument for coherence and collaboration between diverse and historically conflicting demographics. It is also important to highlight that, although there has been a shift from ideology to pragmatism in Iran in recent history, ideology and strategy have always been in the hands of Iranian leaders. Additionally, although practice may have differed with time, strategies based on the needs of the era have been stable. Going forward, it is likely that Iran will continue to act strategically in Iran-West relationships, nuclear advancement, and regional alliances, as well as using ideology to keep the peace internally.

Endnotes

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