

## Iran and the international community: roots of perpetual crisis

By Hooshang Amirahmadi,  
Created 2006-11-24 00:00

Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran's international relations have been marked by more than occasional instability and turbulence, entangling Tehran into costly periodic crises vis-à-vis individual nations or groups of nations. In this context, I define "crisis" as a condition in which Iran's foreign policies have come into conflict with its own national interests or the national interests of other nations, leading to a significant decline in Iran's international standing. The most significant of these crises are:

- the hostage crisis in Tehran
- the war with Iraq (1980-88)
- the "spiral conflict" with the United States
- the sustained internal struggle over foreign policy
- the current nuclear predicament.

Whenever the Islamic Republic of Iran has acknowledged its international predicaments, it has often blamed foreign powers, the United States and Israel in particular, for conspiring against the revolution and the regime in Tehran. Some of its enemies have argued that the crises are premeditated and are being used by the regime as a survival strategy. Conspiracy theories have a special place in Iranian political culture. Other explanations have focused on the religious basis of its foreign policy, its rampant cronyism and mismanagement, the failure of any attempts at political reform, and the lack of any comprehension of global realities after the cold war.

These explanations are justified, but limited in breadth and depth. A more complex analysis must also account for other more significant and highly interrelated reasons. They include:

- the Islamic Republic's "spiral conflict" with the US
- its theocratic state model
- its eastward orientation
- its misguided foreign-policy priorities
- its lack of trust in international community
- the tension between the interests of Iran and its commitment to Islam

- the Islamic Republic's abandonment of Iran's pre-revolutionary economic role in the middle east towards a new political-military position with a focus upon the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

## **Tehran and Washington**

The first and most important source of conflict in Iran's international relations is its "spiral conflict" with the United States, and the US policy to isolate, contain, and/or change the Islamic regime. A "spiral conflict" is one in which both parties escalate each other's extreme positions to new heights, based on a mixture of fact and fiction, misperceptions and misunderstandings, distrust and demonisation.

In a "spiral conflict", discussions turn ideological, each side becoming increasingly obsessed with the other, leading to the mismanagement of the relations. Even well-intended actions become a cause for further animosity. Significantly, "spiral conflicts" make negotiable grievances look non-negotiable, preventing the parties from serious engagement.

This fact should become a major source for concern, given that the current US-Iran "spiral conflict" embodies the most formidable global political issues of our time: nuclear non-proliferation, terrorism, the middle-east peace process, human rights, democratisation and political reform.

**Hooshang Amirahmadi [1] is professor of international development, the Edward J Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, and director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Rutgers University. He is the founder and president of the American Iranian Council [2]**

Hooshang Amirahmadi's website is [here \[3\]](#)

This article is a longer version of address delivered on 13 November 2006 to the sixtieth anniversary conference of the [Middle East Institute \[4\]](#) in Washington, DC

## **A foreign-policy model**

Iran's theocratic state model is a second source of conflict in its foreign relations, as it is antithetical to an increasingly secular world in which faith is a private matter and governments are not the only global players. The problem has been compounded in recent times, after the Bush administration identified radical Islam an enemy and made fighting terrorism and nuclear non-proliferation its top foreign-policy priorities. Iran's nuclear program, its association with Hizbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and the harsh [pronouncements \[5\]](#) of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad against Israel and the Jews have made Tehran a convenient target.

The Islamic Republic prioritises its [foreign relations \[6\]](#) in the following order of importance: Islamic nations, neighbouring countries, regional states (minus Israel), and extra-regional states. Accordingly, improving its relationship with the United States is not considered to be a priority.

No wonder that maintaining a state of "no war-no peace" (or *détente*, as Iran's former president, [Mohammad Khatami \[7\]](#) used to call it), has been Tehran's primary policy approach to Washington. Unfortunately, this approach has become institutionalised as the basis for Iran's foreign policy and is today shared by reformists, pragmatists, and radicals alike.

There are at least two reasons for why this approach has undermined a stable Iranian foreign policy. First, the United States has increasingly become uneasy with this *détente* and it has tried at every opportunity to move relations towards more peace or more conflict. Second, despite

Iran's desire to the contrary, most Islamic nations in Iran's region tend to be its adversaries, whereas most of its regional supporters are non-Muslim states. In addition to Israel, Iran's adversaries include Pakistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan and many Arab states; while its supporters include Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, and India!

This prioritisation also means that China, India, and Russia come before Europe and the United States, as far as the Iranian foreign-policy establishment is concerned. This eastward orientation has not been welcomed by Washington at a time of growing demand for world oil in the face of declining supplies, particularly considering that China, a rising contender for superpower status, is the source of most of this increased demand. For the United States, Iran has adopted the wrong stance in the world's geopolitics. Unless Iran changes its stance or is weakened as a potential ally to China, the United States will not tolerate the Islamic regime in Tehran.

The Islamic Republic's foreign policy makes a third troubling division among the world community of states: those who are its friends, those who are its enemies, and those whom it mistrusts, either as potential adversaries or allies. The trouble is that the first two categories include the most powerful states of the world, such as the United States, larger European states, Russia, and China!

Even though a large number of the Group of 77 [8] sympathises with Iran, only a few even among this association of (now 131) developing-world states at the United Nations are trusted by Tehran. Iran still needs to learn that nations have no permanent enemies or friends but only permanent interests.

Iran's lack of trust in the international community, and the west in particular, has both historic and contemporary roots. It is instructive to recall a few episodes.

When the Iranians staged a constitutional revolution [9] in 1906, the British and Russians tried to destroy it, and in the end they succeeded in ending the movement by means of the coup that brought Reza Shah to power in 1921.

In the 1930s, the British refused to help Iran develop its railways, alleging that it would help Russia to access the Persian Gulf. Ironically, after Iran had built the railways with little outside help, the allied forces used it to move soldiers and equipment to Moscow for the purpose of defeating the Nazis. Iran was then declared the "bridge of victory."

In 1953, when the Iranians moved to nationalise their oil, the British [10] intelligence service, with support from the CIA, overthrew the democratically elected president, Mohammad Mosaddeq [11], alleging that he and his supporters would allow the communists to dominate the country through the pro-Russian Tudeh Party [12].

In the 1960s, the west refused to help Iran build its steel industry and the late Mohammad Reza Shah had to turn to the Soviet Union for economic support. In 1979, when the Iranians overthrew the Shah, hoping to establish a democratic republic, the United States tried to change its course through a few attempted coups.

The Iran-Iraq war [13] in the 1980s confirmed Iran's deep-seated suspicions regarding the international political situation. Few states came to the aid of Iran despite the fact that most could see that Iraq was the invader and Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons and missiles against Iranian civilians. Currently, the western world, and in particular the United States [14], is focusing upon preventing Iran from developing civilian nuclear technology.

The fact is that whatever the Iranians have tried to do in the direction of development and democracy in the last one hundred years, the west has considered it dangerous and presented itself as an obstacle, thus increasingly eroding Iran's trust and drawing its animosity.

Thus, from its inception, the Islamic regime has been struggling with a foreign policy to remain independent of the east and the west. That goal was in itself a difficult one to achieve; the regime made it even harder by insisting that its foreign policy must also serve both Iran and Islam.

Initially, Islam came first as Iran's foreign policy emphasised exporting the revolution, particularly to neighbouring Arab nations, a policy that has heightened tensions [15] between the Islamic Republic and the Arab world. Over time, Iran's foreign policy has become more pragmatic and focused upon Iran's national interests, as it began emphasising participation in international agencies, economic liberalisation, post-war reconstruction, and selective global integration.

However, the fundamentalist elements continue to push for a more Islamic approach, and therefore, the tension between the interests of Iran and Islam in the foreign policy continues as Tehran vacillates between the world's integrative and disintegrative forces. To balance the interests of the various Islamic factions, Tehran's international relations continue to espouse the principles of independence, egalitarianism, and support for oppressed people throughout the world, and particularly oppressed Muslims. Active participation in the Group of 77 and the denunciation of "American arrogance" and "Israeli Zionism" are aspects of this foreign-policy philosophy.

### **A new faultline**

A final source of instability in Iran's international relations is the Islamic Republic's role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, having replaced the Arab states. Specifically, over the past two decades or so, the Arab states have gradually moved away from their traditional militaristic role vis-à-vis Israel towards an approach motivated by economic interests, in which foreign investment and trade are used to integrate the Arab, American and European economies, indirectly also incorporating Jewish economic interests. It is no surprise that the traditional Arab-Israeli conflict has increasingly become a Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Meanwhile, Iran has moved in exactly the opposite direction, sacrificing its traditional economic role in the region and relations with the west and Israel [16] for its new political and military objectives. This transformation was more a consequence of the Islamic revolution than the American sanctions against Iran. Seeking to become the leader of the Islamic world, the new Islamic regime in Tehran was more than happy to occupy the position that the "defeated" Arab nation had vacated. This opportunity, the new leaders thought, could also elevate Iran to its historic position as "the representative of the east" in its fight for independence from the west.

Consequently, the primary faultline in middle-eastern politics is moving away from the Arab-Israeli conflict towards an Iran-Israeli conflict, and by extension, a US-Iran conflict. The Israeli-Hizbollah war in Lebanon in July-August 2006 was the first proxy war [17] between Iran and the US in the Arab world. Because Israel does not wish to confront Iran single-handedly, it has increasingly relied upon the United States to keep Iran's ambitions and power in check. As long as the United States is willing to perform this role, Israel will not engage Iran in a direct conflict. With the Democrats now (after the mid-term elections of 7 November) in charge of the US Congress, the Americans will only become more confirmed in this role.

### **A rising power?**

The Islamic Republic's turbulent foreign relations have resulted in immense economic and technological costs, many strategic losses, a general erosion of its legitimacy, and international isolation and distrust. Worse yet, the crises have led Iran to face the United States and Israel as two powerful and resolute enemies in a dangerous neighbourhood and at a time of significant domestic discord.

Notwithstanding this vulnerability, some pundits have argued for the "rising power" of Iran. Some among them have made this argument as a warning, hoping to convince the United States, Israel, or the collective international powers that the threat posed by Iran must be checked by sanctions or a war. Others are interested in using this argument to convince the United States to engage Iran diplomatically. So far, only the first group has been heard.

However, the arguments in favour of the rising power of Iran overemphasise certain developments while disregarding other countervailing ones. First, the destruction of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, the two main enemies of the Islamic Republic, is said to have increased Iran's power [18] in the region. This argument ignores the fact that both Iraq and Afghanistan border on Iran and are currently wracked by ethnic and sectarian conflicts, which threaten Iran, a multi-ethnic nation, rather than strengthen it. It is not surprising that Tehran does not wish to see the United States leave Iraq or Afghanistan before it has achieved some degree of political stability. (This view was conveyed to me by Mohammad Khatami in New York in September 2006 [19]).

Second, it has been argued that the *Shi'a* are rising [20] in power while the *Sunni* are declining. Examples are drawn from *Shi'a* political movements in Iraq and Lebanon as well as a few smaller movements in other Arab nations. In the wake of Saddam Hussein's demise and the inability [21] of Israel to extirpate Hizbollah [22], *Shi'a* have certainly become more emboldened and assertive than anytime prior.

Nevertheless, this political assertiveness cannot be translated into effective political power for the majority of the *Shi'a* population throughout the middle east, which is largely downtrodden and oppressed. Iran is also unwilling to identify its Islamic ideology as a specifically *Shi'a* one, fearing the sectarian conflict that some of its opponents clearly wish to promote. Besides, *Shi'a in the Arab world* [23] more often identify as Arabs first, and only then as *Shi'a*, as the Iran-Iraq war has clearly demonstrated.

Third, it is claimed that the failure of the United States in Iraq and the weakening position of George W Bush translates into more power for Iran, particularly because Iran has significant influence in Iraq. Even if the United States were to get bogged down in Iraq for a long time, Washington would still have a hundred times more destructive power than Iran could ever muster.

Besides, the recent elections will move the Bush administration to the political centre, forcing Democrats and Republicans to compromise upon a bipartisan Iraq plan [24]. Such a development will erode most of Iran's relative advantage in Iraq, particularly if the new policy were to re-enfranchise Iraqi *Sunni*.

The relative decline of Israeli power vis-à-vis that of the Arab street and the Palestinian popular movement is said to be the fourth development that promotes Iran's growing power. It is argued that this decline, coupled with the increasing conventional and strategic military power of Iran, will in due course lead to the establishment of a balance of power between these two current nemeses [25].

While Israel has no Arab army to defeat these days anymore, it does possess the fourth largest army in the world, with over 200 nuclear bombs, and can destroy any regional enemy force in no time. Short of becoming an immense nuclear power, Iran can hardly match Israel - and in the current political climate, Iran will never be allowed to take the nuclear route [26] to the end.

Finally, the Islamic Republic's political-military build-up and assertiveness [27] is no substitute for its lack of adequate economic and technological progress and the erosion of its popular legitimacy. While hard power - military force - still matters, it is increasingly the soft power of nations, the legitimacy of their domestic and international actions, that define their national strength. Failing to normalise its relations with the west, reform its domestic politics and translate the windfall oil revenue into jobs for its youth and improved living standards for its poor, the Islamic Republic will remain weak and fragile both at home and in the international community. This is despite the fact that Iran is a historic and resource-rich country with a strategic location, rich civilisation [28], deep and penetrating culture, and proud and intelligent people.

### **Also in openDemocracy on Iran, its foreign policy and relationship with the United States:**

V.K, "'Rogue state' bites back [29]" (30 August 2001)

Mamoudreza Golshanpazhooh, "Listening to Iran [30]" (30 January 2006)

Fred Halliday, "Iran vs the United States – again [31]" (14 February 2006)

Bahram Rajaee, "Iran's nuclear challenge [32]" (14 February 2006)

Kaveh Ehsani, "On the brink: the Great Satan vs the Axis of Evil [33]" (3 May 2006)

Trita Parsi, "The United States's double-vision in Iran [34]" (9 May 2006)

Hazem Saghie, "Iran's politics: constants and variables [35]" (12 May 2006)

Behrad Nakhai, "Iran, the US, and nuclear plans: pen and sword [36]" (18 September 2006)

### **An end to "spiral conflict"?**

In short, as long as the sources of instability in Iran's foreign relations are not removed or reduced, Iran will continue to remain a source of concern for the world community, just as the world community will remain a source of trouble and weakness for Iran. The only possibility for resolving this problem lies in changing the US-Iran "spiral conflict" into a US-Iran "spiral cooperation."

To resolve its "spiral conflict" with the United States, Iran must accept a political solution to its problems. Under former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, its approach to regional and international policy focused upon expanding economic ties; under Mohammad Khatami, upon cultural relations; and under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad [37], upon religious ideology. None of

these approaches have worked. The fact is that the US-Iran "spiral conflict" is in its essence political and ideological.

The United States can initiate a change towards normalising relations with Iran by removing the concept of regime change from its policy towards Iran, to which the Islamic Republic must respond by offering an acceptable compromise for its nuclear programmes. As things stand, any movement forward must involve a mutually acceptable compromise [38] over Iran's nuclear programmes, one that recognises Iran's right to civilian use of nuclear technology but verifiably and positively prevents it from diverting this technology towards any military uses.

I think it is possible to arrive at such a solution, provided that the United States places a huge pile of carrots [39] upon the negotiating table for Iranians to see, while at the same time placing a similarly large pile of sticks under that very same table for the Islamic regime to see.

To conclude: in the new global age, Iran's national security is best guaranteed and its power best augmented through national development and democratic [40] change. These will require the normalisation of relations with the United States. It is instructive to recall the fact that no country has ever become democratic in recent history without diplomatic ties with the United States. Iran will not be an exception to this rule.

The US will also benefit from normalisation because a weakened Iran is ultimately not best for the US and the region. In the recent times, a strong Iran has often been an anchor for regional stability, while a weakened Iran has encouraged regional outlaws to stir trouble. Besides, if Iran's democratisation process and its economic and political development were to be further arrested, the country could conceivably move towards fascism, given the frustrated state of the Iranian youth - a dangerous possibility for all parties involved.

---

**Source URL:**

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/iran\\_perpetual\\_crisis\\_4128.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/iran_perpetual_crisis_4128.jsp)

**Links:**

- [1] <http://mideast.rutgers.edu/FACULTY/BIOS/Amirahmadi.html> target=\_blank
- [2] <http://www.american-iranian.org> target=\_blank
- [3] <http://www.amirahmadi.com> target=\_blank
- [4] <http://www.mideasti.org/> target=\_blank
- [5] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=3&debateId=128&articleId=2981>
- [6] <http://www.mfa.gov.ir/output/INDEX.HTM>
- [7] [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mkhatami/mohammad\\_khatami.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mkhatami/mohammad_khatami.php)
- [8] <http://www.g77.org/main/main.htm>
- [9] <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/book.asp?isbn=0300121059>
- [10] [http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/document/document\\_20050822.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/document/document_20050822.shtml)
- [11] [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mmosaddeq/mohammad\\_mosaddeq.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mmosaddeq/mohammad_mosaddeq.php)
- [12] [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/tudeh/tudeh\\_party01.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/tudeh/tudeh_party01.php)
- [13] [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/articles/united\\_states\\_iran\\_iraq\\_war1.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/articles/united_states_iran_iraq_war1.php)
- [14] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=6&debateId=128&articleId=3267>
- [15] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/iran\\_gulf\\_states\\_3863.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/iran_gulf_states_3863.jsp)
- [16] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=3&debateId=128&articleId=2974>
- [17] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict/war\\_proxy\\_3752.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict/war_proxy_3752.jsp)
- [18] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-iraq/article\\_1900.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-iraq/article_1900.jsp)
- [19] <http://www.amirahmadi.org/Writing/Articles/Khatami%27s%20trip.pdf>
- [20] [http://www.cfr.org/publication/11179/shia\\_revival.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/11179/shia_revival.html)
- [21] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle\\_east\\_politics/hizbollah\\_victory\\_3809.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle_east_politics/hizbollah_victory_3809.jsp)
- [22] <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero073106.html>

- [23] <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/8127.html>
- [24] <http://www.usip.org/isg/>
- [25] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=3&debateId=138&articleId=3498>
- [26] <http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Focus/laeaIran/index.shtml>
- [27] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-iran\\_war/politics\\_3538.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-iran_war/politics_3538.jsp)
- [28] <http://www.salamiran.org/IranInfo/General/History/>
- [29] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle\\_east\\_politics/article\\_224.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle_east_politics/article_224.jsp)
- [30] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-irandemocracy/listening\\_3226.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-irandemocracy/listening_3226.jsp)
- [31] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-irandemocracy/again\\_3267.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-irandemocracy/again_3267.jsp)
- [32] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/nuclear\\_challenge\\_3263.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/nuclear_challenge_3263.jsp)
- [33] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/brink\\_3498.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/brink_3498.jsp)
- [34] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-iran\\_war/double-vision\\_3518.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-iran_war/double-vision_3518.jsp)
- [35] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=3&debateId=138&articleId=3538>
- [36] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/nuclear\\_research\\_3911.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/nuclear_research_3911.jsp)
- [37] <http://www.president.ir/eng/>
- [38] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/nuclear\\_research\\_3911.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/nuclear_research_3911.jsp)
- [39] <http://www.washingtonobserver.org/en/document.cfm?documentid=54&charid=3>
- [40] <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/ReligionTheology/Islam/?view=usa&ci=9780195189674>



This article is published by Hooshang Amirahmadi, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.