

The matter with Iran

By Fred Halliday,
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A few years ago, during a visit to Tehran to give some lectures at the foreign ministry research and training institute, I was taken to lunch by a senior Iranian diplomat at a once fashionable Italian restaurant in the northern middle-class suburb of Tajrish. Educated as a scientist in the United States before the 1979 revolution, he had been an important figure in the post-revolutionary regime, and later a senior diplomat. I had met him at various conferences on European-Iranian relations and we had struck up something of a rapport. On this occasion, after the usual semi-official *tour d'horizon*, we began talking about the early history of the Iranian revolution and of its foreign policy.

"We made three big mistakes", he said: first, in holding the American diplomats hostages for a year and a half and thereby deeply antagonising the US; second, by not accepting the very favourable peace which Saddam Hussein had offered in the summer of 1982, when Iran had the upper hand in the war, then already two years old; and third - to me the most surprising of his points - in not supporting the communist regime that came to power in Afghanistan in 1978, and instead backing the pro-American guerrillas that (with eventual success) opposed them.

The reflections of this diplomat are of considerable relevance to the situation in which Iran finds itself today. For sure, the pressure [0] being put on Iran by the US is arrogant and in many ways illegal. For Washington to protest about Iranian "interference" in Iraq when it is the US which invaded the country in 2003, and when it is Iranian allies (if not clients) who staff much of the government and armed forces of Iraq, is also ridiculous. So too is the attempt to blame [1] Iran for the spread of *Sunni* terrorism, including al-Qaida activities, in the region. No country has a greater interest in the stability of Iraq than Iran, a point Washington has stupidly failed to note these four years past.

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Yet there is another side to the US-Iranian polarisation that could prove dangerous not only to Washington but also the Islamic Republic and which arises from the miscalculations of the Iranian leadership itself. Iran's President Ahmadinejad has made himself popular in much of the Arab world, and among Muslims more broadly, for his outspoken denunciations of the US. He has also heartened many by his calls for the destruction of Israel (something he did indeed call for, despite claims [12] by some inside and outside Iran that he was mistranslated: the words *mahv bayad bashad* [must be wiped out] leave no room for doubt).

Yet Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has also thrown caution, and a due evaluation of the enmity and strength of his enemies, to the wind. (Ayatollah Khomeini once rebuked Ali Akbar Velayati [13] for following him in a violent denunciation of Saudi Arabia, reminding the longstanding the foreign minister that it was his job to maintain relations with other states.) At the same time the president has indulged in a set of ill-conceived economic policies at home, squandering oil revenue to boost consumption, launching retrograde educational and cultural campaigns against secularism, while failing to meet the campaign promises to the poor that, in 2005, secured his surprise election [13]. The failure of his candidates to prevail in the December 2006 elections [13] to the Expediency Council, an important constitutional watchdog, and a growth of criticism even from conservatives and other clerics, augurs ill for his future.

No one can tell where the current confrontation [13] between Tehran and Washington will lead to. Perhaps, as a result of impatience, miscalculation or innate risk-taking, Iran and the US will be at war in the near future. Or it may prove to be the case that both are playing for time: the Iranians want to spin out negotiations with the west over the nuclear issue [14] until the US position in Iraq is even weaker, the US may want to stay its hand in the hope that domestic economic and social problems will further weaken the regime and allow them to precipitate political upheaval. Everything is possible.

The roots of turbulence

In this context it is worth looking more closely at the way in which Iran formulates its foreign policy, and the roots of its high-risk policy. Much is made of the fact that Iran is an ancient imperial power [15], one of the four countries in the world - along with China, Egypt and Yemen - which can claim continuity as a state over 3,000 years.

It may also be some satisfaction to Iranian leaders that with their influence in Lebanon and Palestine, Iran now has a military emplacement on the shores of the Mediterranean for the first time since the Achaemenid empire [16] (c 550-350 BCE). Moreover, Iran's aspiration to nuclear capability, in whatever form, is as much due to the aspiration to be a major power as to military factors, just as is the retention of what are in practice useless and expensive weapons by Britain and France.

Certainly, Iranian official, and popular, attitudes towards nearly all their neighbours (with the interesting exception of the Armenians [17]) are replete with prejudice and a sense of

superiority. "You colonialists left your goat's droppings around the region, but sooner or later we will sweep them away", one interlocutor in Tehran said to me. When I asked what these "goat's droppings" were, he replied: "Pakistan, Iraq and Israel".

It is in part this self-perception which explains one of the most constant features of Iranian foreign policy over the past century, and one to which my diplomat companion was drawing attention during our lunch in Tehran: namely, the recurrent tendency of Iranian leaders to overplay their hand. Even a brief list is striking:

- in the second world war, Reza Shah [18], the first of the two Pahlavi monarchs, thought he could balance British and Russian pressure by maintaining relations with Germany, but in the end, and as soon as Russia entered the war in 1941, Iran was invaded and Reza Shah sent off to exile in Mauritius
- in the early 1950s, the nationalist prime minister Mohammad Mossadeq [19] thought he could nationalise Iranian oil (hitherto a monopoly of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, today's BP) on his own terms and avoid a compromise with western governments: in the end, he was overthrown in the CIA and MI6 coup of August 1953
- during the Iran-Iraq war [20] of the 1980s, Ayatollah Khomeini failed to grasp the Iraqi near-surrender of 1982, a consequence of his belief that Iranian forces could topple the Iraqi regime and impose a *Shi'a* substitute; the result was six more years of war, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iranians, the entry of the US navy into the war on the side of the Iraqis, and (in August 1988 [21]) a far less favourable peace.

Much is made too of the fact that Iran is the most important *Shi'a* state and that the last great Persian dynasty, the Safavid [22] (1502-1736) made Shi'ism a powerful political and military, as well as cultural, force in the region, a rival for centuries to the *Sunni* Ottoman empire to the west. This *Shi'a* identity, one that the *mullahs* have in any case overblown, has also proved to be a mixed blessing for the Islamic republic; for many outside Iran - and even for *Shi'a* in countries like Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait - Iran's projection of its Shi'ism has put them in a difficult situation, not least for the implied claim of the superior authority of clergy, and politicians, based inside Iran. Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani [23], the leading *Shi'a* cleric in Iraq, and himself an Iranian, has long sought to limit such influence, as has, in a much rougher way, the rising *Shi'a* leader, Muqtada al-Sadr [24].

Iran's imperial and nationalist past and its *Shi'a* identity, are not, however, enough to explain the noisy and risky policy Iran is pursuing today. Here two other factors need to be brought into account. The first is that Iran is an oil-producing country, a fact that, especially at a time of high oil prices, gives to the state some leeway simultaneously to mollify the people and pursue expensive military programmes.

The problem is that these expenditures do little to alleviate the long-term problems of the economy and are usually, in the Iranian case, and also that of Venezuela [24], accompanied by much waste, corruption and factionalism. In this regard, Ahmadinejad and Hugo Chávez are two of a kind: intoxicated with their own rhetoric, insouciant about the longer term economic development of their oil industries and economy as a whole, and wilfully provocative, towards the United States and immediate neighbours alike, in foreign policy.

The second and indeed the most important (and neglected) factor explaining contemporary Iran, however, is a fact evident in its historical origin, policy and rhetoric: *that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a country that has emerged from a revolution and that this revolution has far from lost its dynamic, at home or abroad.*

It is not in the imperial dreams of ancient Persia, or the global vision of *Shi'a* clergy, but in the repetition by Iran of the same policies, aspirations and mistakes of previous revolutionary regimes, from France in the 1790s, to Cuba in the 1960s and 1970s that the underlying logic [24] of its actions can be seen.

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The trap of revolution

The Iranian revolution of 1978-79 was, as much [34] as those of France, Russia, China or Cuba, one of the major social and political upheavals of modern history. Like its predecessors, it set out not only to transform its own internal system - for sure at a high cost in repression, wastage and illusion - but to export revolution. And this Iran did: to Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon [34] in the 1980s and now to Palestine and, in much more favourable circumstances thanks to the US, to Iraq again. It can indeed be argued that it is the confrontation between internationalist revolutionary Iran on one side, and the US and its regional allies on the other, that has been *the* major axis of conflict in the middle east this past quarter of a century. By comparison, America's war with *Sunni*, al-Qaida-type, militancy is a secondary affair.

Here, however, Iran has fallen into the traps and illusions of other revolutionaries. Like the French revolutionaries, the Iranians proclaim themselves to be at once the friend of all the oppressed and "a great nation" (a phrase Khomeini [35] used that echoed, whether wittingly or not, the Jacobins of 1793). Like the early Bolsheviks, the Islamic revolutionaries began their revolution thinking diplomacy was an oppression and should be swept aside - hence the detention of the US diplomats as hostages. Like the Cubans and Chinese, they have combined unofficial supplies of arms, training and finance to their revolutionary allies with the, calculated, intervention of their armed forces.

All of this has its cost. The gradual moderation of Iran under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami [36] (1997-2005) reflected a sense of exhaustion after the eight-year war with Iraq and a desire for more normal external relations with the outside world, like the period of the

Girondins in the France of 1792-93, or the policies of Liu Shao-chi [37] in China of the early 1960s: but as in those other cases, and as in the USSR of Stalin in the 1930s, there were those who wanted to go in a very different direction, and proceeded to tighten the screws of repression, and raise confrontational rhetoric once again. A comparison could indeed be made with the Russia of the early 1930s or the China of the 1960s, and say that Iran under Ahmadinejad is now going through its "third period" or a mild replica of the "cultural revolution".

How long this can continue is anyone's guess; but it is likely to be years, perhaps many, before the Islamic revolution has run its course. Even Cuba [38], weak and exposed by comparison, has sustained its defiance and its model for well over four decades now. Yet even without war with the US, the risks and the costs (as many people in Iran realise only too well) are high.

Here, and again in a spirit of comparison, it is worth recalling the words of one of the wisest observers of modern revolutions, the now sadly deceased Polish writer Ryszard Kapuscinski [38]. His book *The Soccer War* [39] contains a passage observing the Algeria of the mid-1960s under Ahmad Ben Bella that apply to all revolutions, uncannily so in the case of Iran today:

"Algeria became the pivotal Third World state, but the cost of its status - above all the financial cost - was staggering. It ate up millions of dollars for which the country had a crying need ... Gradually, the gap between Ben Bella's domestic and foreign policies grew wider. The contrast deepened. Algeria had earned an international reputation as a revolution state ... it was an example for the non-European continents, a model, bright and entrancing; while at home, the country was stagnating; the unemployed filled the square of every city; there was no investment; illiteracy ruled, bureaucracy, reaction, fanaticism ran riot; intrigues absorbed the attention of the government ... The country cannot carry the burden of these polices. It cannot afford to and it has no interest in them."

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his advisers, and those of Hugo Chávez [39] too, would do well to read and ponder these words.

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- [13] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali_Akbar_Velayati
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- [20] <http://www.crimesofwar.org/thebook/iran-iraq-war.html>
- [21] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4260420.stm
- [22] <http://www.iranchamber.com/history/safavids/safavids.php>
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