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An Analysis of United States-Iran International Relations

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Abstract

My research strove to further the knowledge of United States-Iran international relations through comprehensive analysis. I investigated and presented information on the internal politics of Iran, and I analyzed and commented on the organization of the government of Iran. I critically examined the historical scholarship on the affairs of state between the United States and Iran, and I investigated the current state of affairs and prospects for the future. From this understanding, it became possible and necessary for rigorously logical and insightful decisions to be made in the current political environment in which emotions and passions dominate, and I probed and evaluated a variety of future policy options for both countries. I concluded that direct diplomacy is needed and that the process of political engagement remains the most likely way to effectively address the areas of policy difference between the two countries, rather than utilizing the rhetoric of regime change and engaging in antagonistic saber rattling. The United States needs to use Iran as a partner in the Middle East to make progress on the issues of shared interest and to create the opportunity for mutual advancement.

Introduction

In this paper, I investigate and present information on the internal politics of Iran, analyze and comment on the organization of the government of Iran, critically examine the historical scholarship on the affairs of state between the United States and Iran,
and analyze the current state of affairs and prospects for the future. I focus on background information and the distinctive set of circumstances that lead to the establishment of an Islamic government in Iran, and I subsequently address the structure of the current government. I critically examine the historical scholarship on the affairs of state between the United States and Iran, and I propose an answer to how the theocracy’s structure and divisions within Islam shape Iran’s foreign policy. Finally, I examine the foreign policy implications of the Islamic Revolution and the foreign policy of Iran since the Revolution. I subsequently analyze policy options for the future of United States-Iran relations and propose possible solutions. Due to the space restrictions for publication in Kaleidoscope, however, I have not included this final section and will conduct further research in those areas during the summer.

From Monarchy to Theocracy: The Genesis of the Islamic Republic

The inexorable correlation between foreign policy and domestic conditions is in no country more apparent than the Islamic Republic of Iran (Kamrava, 1-5). Throughout its history, Iran has been ruled by absolute monarchy, with individual rulers seeking personal advancement over the national interest (Bradley, 31-40). The Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) brought about the introduction of the concept of the limitation of powers with respect to the Shah. An event unprecedented in the Arab world, it started affecting fundamental change with respect...
Minister of Iran from 1951-1953. He was passionately known leader was Mohammed Mossadeq, the Prime from foreign manipulation (Martin, 17). The most well influence within Iran as well as true independence of which advocated for the elimination of all British to the oil nationalization movement (1951), the leaders This rebirth of social and political activism eventually led participation unthought-of during the rule of his father. The new king brought a new era of political freedom and perceived to have set the elimination of Islam as a Germany. Using dictatorial methods, he proposed the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and a strengthening between the great powers of the day: the United States, clergy. His foreign policy was a grand balancing act a grand popular uprising and the disapproval of the banned the use of the veil in 1935 to the response of customs, and as one example of this, he officially the cities, in effect creating a more Western culture and consumer society (Kamrava, 67-68). This set of six bills was passed by referendum (a referendum Imam Khomeini would later describe as “mendacious” and “scandalous”) under the title, “The White Revolution” (Khomeini, 178). How foreshadowing a name it was would be made apparent in due course, as the militant clergy and fundamentalist population rose to vocal and passionate opposition to these reforms, lead by Khomeini.

Khomeini would formally state in no uncertain terms his opposition to the Shah and to the imposition of Western culture on the traditional values of Iranians in a speech on June 3, 1963. He declared, “We come to the conclusion that this regime also has a more basic aim: they are fundamentally opposed to Islam itself and the existence of the religious class” (Khomeini, 177). In response to the Shah’s naming his bills the White Revolution, Khomeini stated, “The religious scholars and Islam are Black Reaction!” (179). He articulately called the people of Iran to action against the Shah, using religion and history (the Shah’s father provided Khomeini an ironically perfect example) as his illustrations.

Within hours, the state police of the Shah had contained Khomeini, and he was subsequently imprisoned. The popular uprisings that resulted from this were unprecedented, and within a year, Khomeini had been released from prison and exiled to Turkey, and then Iraq.

So began the long, slow journey toward Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution in Iran. With its foundations firmly set, and the seeds planted in the minds of the population, the Revolution was brought to fruition with the return of Imam Khomeini from fifteen years of exile, glorious in his welcome’s magnitude and implications (Stempel, 174).

The Structure of the Islamic Republic
The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the governing document of the Islamic Republic, and it expresses Khomeini’s ideological vision of a practical Islamic state endeavoring toward perfection (Martin,
Religious army to pursue jihad and for the establishment of a republic (Article X). The Constitution provides for a "fundamental role in the uninterrupted process of the revolution of Islam" (Article II). The exalted dignity and value of man is praised, and from this assumption comes the doctrine of the "negation of all forms of oppression... and of dominance" (Article II).

In accordance with these rather idealistic goals, the Constitution outlines sixteen specific duties of the government, from "the complete elimination of imperialism" to "the elimination of... all attempts to monopolize power" (Article III). One duty is particularly frightening in its implications. It gives the Iranian government the power to control and manipulate the press and media under the auspice of "raising public awareness" (Article III). Another gives the government the right to impose universal military training for the sake of safeguarding Iran's independence and Islamic order (Article III).

When considering foreign policy, one duty is striking: "framing the foreign policy of the country on the basis of Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unspiring support to the mustad'afin of the world" (Article III). Articles CLII-CLV specifically address the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is based upon the "rejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of it and submission to it, the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects and its territorial integrity, the defense of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with respect to the hegemonic superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent States" (Article CLII).

This idea of a single Muslim nation with a people united behind a common religion and heritage is important, and the fact that it appears so readily stated in multiple instances in the Constitution is revealing and significant. It is also strikingly similar to the policy of the former Soviet Union, the unification of all Communist former countries and the recruitment of the working classes of all other countries. The Constitution continues to set limits on freedom in its proposition that only three non-Islamic religions are recognized by the state: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. All Muslims are bound to treat non-Muslims with ethical norms and principles of Islamic justice, as long as they are not engaging in conspiracy against Iran. (Article XIII).

All people of Iran enjoy equal rights, according to the Constitution, but in a slightly Orwellian...
fashion: “all citizens of the country, both men and women, equally enjoy the protection of the law... in conformity with Islamic criteria” (Article XX). “The restoration of [women's] rights” is called for in Article XXI, but a review of the history of Iran shows that progress in this area has been less than ideal.

All laws shall be based on Islamic criteria. Deliberative bodies shall be formed to comply with verses from the Qur'an. Freedom, independence, unity, and territorial integrity are inseparable. No authority has the right to infringe in the slightest way upon the political, cultural, economic, and military independence of the Iran under the pretext of exercising freedom.

The basic guarantees of the American Bill of Rights are also guaranteed in the Iranian Constitution with the all-important stipulation that the exercise of those freedoms does not conflict with the basic tenets or foundation of Islam, which may be, of course, interpreted in the manner deemed worthy by the Supreme Leader.

The economy is one of significant socialism. The Constitution states that the government of Iran will endeavor to uproot poverty and deprivation, and it will supply to all citizens “the provision of basic necessities for all citizens: housing, food, clothing, hygiene, medical treatment, education, and the necessary facilities for the establishment of a family” (Article XLIII).

The question of the actual structure of the government is answered next. Highest power is reserved for the Supreme Leader. Khomeini assumed this role first, and Ali Khameini has been the Leader since Khomeini’s death in 1989. The Leader sets the general priorities of the government and the national guiding principles of the country. He is the Commander in Chief, and he appoints the head of the Judiciary, the news agencies, half of the members of the Council of Guardians, and various other heads of agencies.

The Council of Guardians is a body of twelve, half of whom are appointed by the Leader and half of whom are appointed by the head of the Judiciary, who was previously appointed by the Leader. The Council of Guardians oversees the activities of Parliament, determines shari’a (Islamic law and Qur’anic commandments) compatibility, and qualifies candidates for parliamentary elections. It has veto power over any act of Parliament. A second advisory group is the Expediency Council, which was formed to mediate disputes between Parliament and the Council of Guardians. Its thirty-four members are conservative and usually side with the Council of Guardians. As a result, it is now effectively the advisory body to Leader, although it is subject to internal manipulation.

The second highest-ranking official in the Iranian government is the President, who is popularly elected for a four-year term, renewable once. He is responsible for the day-to-day workings of the Iranian government, but he does not set state goals or ideals. The entire executive branch is subordinate to the Supreme Leader. The legislative power is vested in the Islamic Consultative Assembly (also known as Parliament or Majlis), the body of the people’s representatives elected directly every four years. Eligibility for candidates for Parliament is determined by the Council of Guardians, which is effectively entirely appointed by the Leader. Essentially, the Supreme Leader can dictate if a person is not eligible for holding a seat in Parliament, which has dangerous ramifications for the future of a functioning government.

The final elected body is the Assembly of Experts, a group of eighty-six clerics popularly elected for terms of eight years. Candidates for a position in the Assembly are investigated and approved by the Council of Guardians. The Assembly’s main duty is to elect and confirm the Supreme Leader when the position becomes vacant. The group is similar to the Vatican’s Council of Cardinals in its duties.

The implications of this structure are numerous. Foremost is that the Supreme Leader has effective control over all levels of the government. If he does not have direct control, he has surrogate control through appointees. Lucidly explicated by Noori in his work, Islamic Government and Revolution in Iran, the Constitution makes palatable the philosophy that the Islamic idea of state only claims that law is of divine origin, not the rulers or the government itself (14). Islamic government is also founded on the principles of eradicating inequality and pursuing social justice.

Noori presents six distinctive features of Islamic government that demonstrate its uniqueness in the international community. First, the Islamic state is “founded on an ideological basis in which an individual's geographical, national, ethnic or linguistic background does not play any part.” Essentially, the Islamic state is united by a quality deeper than any superficial traits. Second, the Islamic state is dedicated to humility and “unequivocally opposed” to pompous ceremonies and lavishness. Third, Noori claims that Islamic government is “the most inexpensive form of government” since it dispenses with troublesome bureaucracy and other inconsequential institutions, although in practice, such an absence has not come to fruition. Fourth, the eminent concern of Islamic government is not economics. Fifth, the importance that Islamic government places on the spiritual and moral soundness of its leaders sets it apart from other governments. Last, the Islamic state is free of deception and deceit. The preeminent, guiding force of Islamic government is the goal of creating the perfect society, with all people united in philosophy (26-29).

As Buchta notes, the Shi’a clergy have increasingly consolidated their political power and their control
over all levels of the government (xi). Substantial informal power structures exist within the Iranian government as well. For a substantial and compelling treatment of the relationships between officials within the Iranian government, see Buchta’s Who Rules Iran?: The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic.

According to Amuzegar, the Finance Minister and Economic Ambassador in Iran’s pre-1979 government, “Khomeini’s promise of a just and free Islamic society has proven a sham. After nearly a quarter-century of theocratic rule, Iran is now by all accounts politically repressed, economically troubled, and socially restless. And the ruling clerical oligarchy lacks any effective solutions for these ills” (1). His observation is insightful and revealing of the true accomplishments of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini’s grand promises of an ideal, peaceful Islamic society have not come to fruition in what Mafinezam and Mehrabi call “a legacy of unsustained achievements” (3).

The bewildering ideology of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which sought to move society back to the seventh century and the era of the Prophet Mohammed in an atmosphere of complete religious control, contrasts heavily with the ideology of other revolutions that sought to usher in eras of freedom and new ideas (Bozeman, 388). Present in the Constitution and the methods of governance are a multitude of contradictions and incongruities, but also the foundations of a crudely unrefined, but functioning, government.

The Evolving Relationship between the United States and Iran

Formal diplomatic relations were established between Iran and the United States in 1883. Much of the early contact between Iranians and Americans, however, came in the form of American missionary action. The majority of these missions aimed to convert Iranians to Christianity. The American Presbyterian Mission founded the first missionary school in Iran in 1835, forty-eight years before the two nations established official relations (Heravi, 10-12). In the earliest years of the two countries’ diplomatic efforts, general ignorance on the part of the American people and the American government of Iran dominated the exchange of ideas, and a vague, idealistic idea of Iran was pervasive throughout the United States government.

In 1856, the United States and Iran signed the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce mutually declaring the principles of friendship and commerce between the two nations and pledging to sustain “a sincere and constant good understanding” of each other (Alexander & Nanes, 3). In spite of President Buchanan’s advice and due to the American Civil War, a legation was not established in Tehran until twenty-seven years after the signing of the treaty. The formal establishment of the American legation in Tehran occurred on June 11, 1883, with the presentation to the Shah of Minister Benjamin’s credentials. By 1888, the Iranian diplomatic party had arrived in Washington and had received its first audience with President Cleveland.

By 1896, a movement had begun in Iran calling for a constitution and a legislative body. After the movement formally stated its set of principles, the American minister in Tehran, Richmond Pearson, relayed a pessimistic message to the U.S. State Department, stating his observations and beliefs:

1. The great body of the Shah’s subjects have no idea of the meaning of constitutional government.
2. The majority of the people are illiterate.
3. There is no middle class, whose interests could form the basis and the guarantee of constitutional government.
4. Iran is still largely a feudal state.
5. The concept of autocracy is more accepted than democracy.
6. It is generally believed that the Mujtahids, who sided with the reformers or revolutionists in the recent agitation and whose influence gained the victory for that party, will soon return to their traditional support of autocratic ideas (Herlavi 18-19).

To complicate matters, in 1904, the Reverend Benjamin Labaree was murdered in northwestern Iran. This event was “the one important event in Persian-American relations up to that time” (Yeselson, 82). The Labaree affair brought about an analysis of the existing diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran, and it revealed the dangers of missionary work in Iran. While the final settlement between the two governments favored the American standard of justice, the Labaree affair also forced the United States to become unduly involved in the course of Persian justice.

After the slight crisis of the Labaree affair, a Constitution was successfully constructed and implemented. Muzaffaru-Din Shah, who had granted the Constitution legitimacy, died, and his successor, Mohammed Ali, “immediately tried to undermine the Constitution” (Herlavi 20). Ali’s desire to rule as an absolute monarch resulted in the Constitutional Crisis of 1907-1909, during which the “American attitude was one of non-intervention” (Herlavi 20). After Ali’s abdication in 1909, the United States again pledged full support for his successor, the twelve-year-old Crown Prince Ahmad, who would rule under the regency of Azed Al Molk. The Labaree affair and the change from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy fundamentally changed American-Iranian relations.
In what James Goode called “the diplomacy of neglect,” the United States pursued a course of non-intervention in Iranian affairs. For example, the United States did not come to Iran’s help when the Iranians felt a sense of danger because of the Anglo-Russian Convention, which they interpreted as an attempt to partition Iran into one British and one Russian zone of influence. Consistently, the Iranians sought America’s help to lessen the perceived European influence in their country, but despite its willingness to help, the United States was reluctant to provide assistance. As Yeselson stated, “America’s more positive role in world affairs in the twentieth century did not include the translation of such pro-democratic sentiments into an official policy of encouragement for revolutionary movements overseas” (88).

In 1911, under President Taft’s order, the United States sent W. Morgan Shuster to head an American financial mission in Iran to help mend the Iranian economy. There was one caveat, however. The mission was, by order of the State Department, in no way representative of the United States government. The men were simply private citizens being employed by a foreign government. Shuster’s mission did nothing to alter Washington’s policy toward Iran, but it did help increase the positive public support of Iranian issues (Heravi 30-34). Yeselson has called the Shuster mission “the high point of America’s prestige [in Iran]” (228).

At the outbreak of World War I, Iran quickly informed the United States of its neutrality, although its neutrality was routinely violated by Russia, England, the Ottoman Empire, and Germany. As previous years of relations would indicate, the period of war did not see much interaction between the Iranian and American governments. Iran subsequently asked for “assistance of the United States Government in securing for [Iran] representation in the peace conference which will convene at the termination” of the war (Heravi 36). At Britain’s insistence, however, Iran was not offered a voice. The world was enlightened quickly thereafter of the secret negotiations happening between Iran and Britain. On August 10, 1919, a secret treaty between Britain and Iran was made public, and the response from the United States was highly unfavorable. In the treaty, Britain promised to take a much more proactive role in Iranian affairs than the United States had done in the past, but Britain still denied that Iran would become a protectorate or a quasi-colony. Britain would maintain this position of preeminence in Iranian affairs until 1921, when the newly established leadership of Reza Pahlavi nullified the treaty and effectively showed Britain that foreign countries would not be allowed influence under Iran’s new nationalism.

In 1925, after being crowned Shah, Pahlavi began to modernize Iran, fusing nationalism and westernization. After witnessing the failure of British leadership, the debacle of Russian influence, and the perceived neglect given by the United States, Reza Shah set the goal of Iran becoming independent of foreign influence. During this same time, Iran was requesting various American advisors for the Ministries of Finance, Commerce, Agriculture, Public Works, and other similar governmental agencies. With limited involvement in the internal affairs of Iran, the United States maintained a relatively consistent state of relations with Iran until the outbreak of the Second World War (Heravi 58).

“Prior to World War II, indifference and ignorance characterized the American attitude toward Iran” (Hamilton 2). By the early 1940s, however, after a sequence of diplomatic missions, many Americans were aware of Iran. In fact, in 1942, during the war, Iran asked for yet another American financial minister in Tehran. This final mission ended in 1945 after the Iranian Parliament voted to repeal the minister’s financial powers after a series of unpopular decisions.

By 1946, after two world wars, American–Iranian relations had undergone a transformation. By engaging in World War II, the United States had clarified its stance on world affairs and altered its policy of isolationism. The United States had pledged full support for Iran. Following Iran’s 1943 declaration of war against Germany in hopes of gaining membership in the United Nations, the governments of Iran and the United States reached an agreement in 1944 to elevate the United States Legation in Tehran to an Embassy, corresponding with the regard given to both countries’ diplomatic missions. Accordingly, President Roosevelt announced, “Iran and America have every reason to be close friends” (Heravi 102). Nevertheless, the American-Iranian partnership remained, as Alexander and Nanes deemed it, “a peripheral relationship” (1).

Over the years, the Department of State provided aid to support Iran’s independence, territorial integrity, political and economic progress, and overall sovereignty. The United States became a mediator in the English-Russian power struggle in the region. In due time, the United States had, of self-interested necessity, replaced Great Britain as the major Western influence in the Middle East in the post-war period. Finally, the stage was set for the United States to feel justified in defending Iran against possible aggression from Soviet aims.

U.S. involvement was secondary to the interests of Great Britain and Russia until its help as a neutral state in the conflict became necessary, in the eyes of the Iranians, to “fend off incursions on [Iran’s] independence” (Stempel, 59). The level of participation by the United States steadily increased during the post-war and Cold War period until the dramatic events
of the Islamic Revolution. The United States’ policy of Soviet containment was logically extended into the Persian region, and the Soviet Union’s military presence in Iran was eliminated after the arrival of the Americans. While the United States helped improve Iran economically and politically, it also provided a promising and demanding market for Iranian oil. Although Gasiorowski claims that the United States was attempting to construct “a client state” in Iran, the U.S. was truly more interested in ensuring that Iranian oil and other resources made it to the market. While the United States certainly had self-interest in mind in its dealings with Iran, its own advancement was not its sole concern. With increased involvement and a growing interest in the well-being of the United States’ strongest ally in the Middle East, the United States increasingly became interested in supporting the actions of the Shah, and it did not recognize or foresee the fermenting problems resulting from Western impositions on the traditional lifestyles of Arab Muslims.

Iran’s call for a neutral third party to counter the Anglo-Russian conflict within Iran led directly to the end of the hesitancy shown in the formative years of the United States–Iran partnership. Responding to that call, slowly at first, the United States gradually became more involved in both the internal and external affairs of Iran. America did, however, eventually become more concerned with Iran’s strength as an ally than America’s ability to help Iran’s political and economic well-being. Through the various American missions to Iran, relations strengthened, and America’s growth as a world power paralleled Iran’s growing sense of nationalism and desire for independence.

On the eve of the revolution, divisions had become apparent in America’s perception of Iran and the actual reality. Most Iranians came to view the United States as “chained to the Shah in negative ways” (Stempel, 80). As mentioned in the opening paragraph of this paper, the Nixon years brought about increases of support from the United States for Iran, and America became inextricably bound to the actions of the Shah.

The Interplay of Structure and Islam in Iran’s Foreign Policy
The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran establishes a government based on “the complete elimination of imperialism and the prevention of foreign influence” (Article III). This rejection of foreign manipulation is a logical consequence of the establishment of a society based on absolute submission to the ultimate authority, the laws of the Islamic faith. Article III also states the chief organizational principle of Iranian foreign policy: the government is responsible for “framing the foreign policy of the country on the basis of Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unsparing support to the mustad’afin of the world.” Even Article XLIII, an article concerning the economic organization of Iran, states that the “prevention of foreign economic domination over the country’s economy” will be a guiding force behind the establishment of the economy.

As an apparent insult to and rejection of previous policy, Article LXXXII simply states that “the employment of foreign experts is forbidden, except in cases of necessity and with the approval of the Islamic Consultative Assembly.” Previous Iranian policy had supported the hiring of American experts to aid the Iranian ministers in different policy areas, and the new Islamic constitution is purposefully breaking with this tradition from the past.

Articles CLII-CLV specifically are dedicated to the foreign policy of Iran, and they explicate a clear and consistent vision. Their brevity accentuates their stark message. Article CLII states the Iranian vision clearly:

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the rejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of it and submission to it, the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects and its territorial integrity, the defense of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with respect to the hegemonist [sic] superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent States.

Article CLIV states with similar clarity a second crucial foundational principle of Iranian foreign policy:

The Islamic Republic of Iran… considers the attainment of independence, freedom, and rule of justice and truth to be the right of all people of the world. Accordingly, while scrupulously refraining from all forms of interference in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the just struggles of the mustad’afin against the mustakbirun in every corner of the globe.

Apart from the establishment of certain principles in the Constitution, the power structure of the government of Iran comments on the country’s attitude toward international affairs. The ultimate authority of the Supreme Leader, God’s representative on Earth, and his ability to arbitrarily set governmental policy is indicative of the country’s willingness to allow decisions to be made without deliberation or an open and honest discussion of the varying policy avenues available. The Supreme Leader is also declared, in Article CX of the Constitution, to have “supreme command of the armed forces” and to have control over the “declaration of war and peace, and the mobilization of the armed forces.”

The ultimate power of the Supreme Leader in the realm of international relations parallels his ultimate
authority in all areas of Iranian life. The entire system of Islamic governance is based on his power as the one official representative of Islam, but internal conflicts between members of the bureaucracy also have helped shape the functioning of the Islamic government.

Similarly, Iran’s championing of “independence, freedom, and rule of justice and truth” in one of the Constitution’s statements establishing the principles of foreign policy appears slightly hypocritical in light of a dispassionate examination of Iran’s record. Thus, both the organization of Iran’s government and the powers of the Supreme Leader contribute to the formation of Iranian foreign policy.

Shia Islam is the official religion of Iran, and this fact is important in the creation of Iranian foreign relations. Shi’ism holds that the only legitimate successors to the Prophet Mohammed are linear descendants in his bloodline. From the time of the death of Mohammed, however, Sunni Islam has been dominant, holding that the member of the Islamic community best qualified to lead to the community should assume leadership and power. Not until the establishment of the Islamic Republic did Shi’ism dominate a country’s religious atmosphere or did the leaders of a country profess belief in Shi’ism. Sunni Muslims historically have been the politically dominant force in countries with large Muslim populations. Even in Iraq under the reign of Saddam Hussein, where the majority of the population is Shia, the Sunnis controlled the government. Shi’ism’s rise in Iran emboldened Shi’ites worldwide, and Iraq was especially impacted by these invigorating revolutionary feelings.

With the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, however, Shi’ites controlled the actions of a country. Shi’ism is based on a more pessimistic view of human nature; it assumes, in opposition to Sunnism, that humans can neither find salvation nor manage their own affairs without divine guidance. Shia religious leaders presume a certain amount of political power because of their more prophetic and messianic roles.

The implications of Shi’ites in the seats of power are numerous. Shia as a ruling philosophy has many ramifications. Iran, as a Shi’ite country, seeks to hasten the day of the advent of perfect divine justice brought about by the second coming of the Twelfth Imam. Advocating and participating in jihad is one of the clearest ways to further the Twelfth Imam’s vision of a worldwide Islamic community, and to accelerate his return. Shi’ites are also, generally, more favorable toward violent, revolutionary action to further their political goals. There is a fundamental difference of temperament between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

Shia Islam also fully embraced nationalism within Iran and in other countries throughout the Middle East, as it capitalized on the discontent many Shi’ites felt at being constantly referred to as “lesser Arabs.” Their desire to change their perception led to some of the more extreme actions observed by the world by Shia Muslims.

The idea of the Supreme Leader, who is absolutely influential in matters of foreign policy, is directly a consequence of Shia Islam. Khomeini saw himself as representative of the proper successor to Mohammed and, like Plato’s philosopher-kings, perfect for creating and maintaining an ideal government and society. Throughout the history of Shi’ism, martyrs were glorified and exalted, from the original death of Imam Husayn, the fighter against Sunni tyranny, who was killed at the Battle of Karbala and whose day of death marks the Muslim holiday of Ashura. Invoking feelings of religious pride, and evoking messianic images and ideas, Khomeini rose to absolute power in the Islamic Republic.

The leftist, socialist tendencies of the Islamic Republic are a direct consequence of radical nature of Shi’ism and the time period in which the country was conceived. Clearly, both the structure of the Islamic Republic and the core beliefs of Shia Islam influence the foreign policy of Iran. An explanation of such would be incomplete without consideration of both characteristics.

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