

Iran's Foreign Policy: An Intellectual Journey

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Introduction

When I was invited to attend CIRA's annual meeting in April 2000 in order to receive the Center's Award,¹ I thought it might be appropriate for me to focus my brief remarks on how the subject of Iran's foreign policy has come to be my main intellectual concern over nearly half a century of research and writing in the United States.² This text reflects in the main my remarks delivered at the Center on April 29, 2000.

Nationalization of the Oil Industry

My research career in the United States began in 1952 when I was working on my doctoral dissertation at the University of Virginia.³ At the time the oil nationalization crisis dominated Iranian politics. Against the wishes of the government of Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq, the British government managed to internationalize the dispute between Iran and the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). Iran argued that as a sovereign state it had the right to nationalize a foreign private oil company operating under a concessionary agreement. The British government argued that it held over 50% ownership of the AIOC and that the Iranian law of nationalization amounted to a breach of international law because it did not provide for "adequate and just compensation." In other words, it was an act of confiscation. The United States got involved as a mediator. Iranian acceptance of American mediation reflected Iran's perception at the time that the United States had championed the cause of Iranian nationalism during the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911, during the 1940s when the Soviet Union was pressuring Iran for an oil concession, and especially during the Irano-Soviet dispute over the evacuation from northern Iran of Russian occupation troops in 1945-1946.

Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq believed, therefore, that the American government could be an honest broker in the Irano-British conflict. The United Nations Security Council took up the Anglo-Iranian oil nationalization dispute where Dr. Mosaddeq in person defended Iran's case against the British on moral as well as political grounds. But

* I would like to thank Dr. Hamid Zangeneh who invited me to serve on the Advisory Board of the Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis. I am also grateful to Dr. Hooshang Amirahmadi for inviting me to this special session in my honor.

the International Court of Justice did not decide on the merit of the case. Rather, it issued "interim measures of protection" for British installations in Iran pending the settlement of the dispute through negotiations. All these momentous and related events seemed to indicate to me that I should write my dissertation on the international legal and political aspects of the dispute.

Foreign Policy: A Scholarly Vacuum

In the course of my research I was startled by the lack of published works in any language on the foreign policy of Iran. Iranian students abroad, especially in Europe, including Mosaddeq himself, had written doctoral dissertations on various narrow topics concerning Iran's relations with other countries, such as foreign capitulation in Iran. And some Iranian writers, especially Mahmoud-e Mahmoud, had chronicled and documented volumes on British relations with Iran. These were largely devoid of any theoretical and analytical concerns. The only book in English that touched on Iran's foreign relations indirectly was authored by George Lenczowski, entitled Russia and the West in Iran, 1918-1948: A Study in Big-Power Rivalry. As the title reveals, this seminal work focused on the foreign policy of great powers in Iran.

In other words, there was no systematic work in print that focused on Iran's foreign policy on its own terms. A small and weak state, Iran was viewed as the object of the policies and manipulations of big powers. Beyond Iran, there seemed to be a consensus among Western scholars, and ironically among most Iranian writers too, that developing nations had little, if any, power to make decisions on their own. My own mentor, Professor Hardy C. Dillard, who subsequently served as the American judge on the International Court of Justice, was at first skeptical about the potential contribution of my study to knowledge.⁴

State of International Relations Theory

Another factor that motivated me to write on Iran's foreign policy was the poor state of international relations theory. Political scientists at the time debated whether international relations constituted a special field of study outside the traditional discipline of political science. In addition, the extant literature on international relations, both theoretical and empirical, was hardly useful to the study of the foreign policy of developing nations. To no small extent this reflected the fact that the study of international relations was largely dominated by the theory that is now called "traditional realism." The hallowed volume on this theory in America, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, was Hans J. Morgenthau's classic, Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace. I myself used it as a textbook in teaching international politics for years. Traditional realists focused then, as neorealists do today, primarily on the role of great powers on the world stage. The former emphasizes the role of the state in world politics and the latter stresses the overriding importance of the international system.

This great-power centric approach to the study of international politics reflected, and still does to a significant extent, various underlying stereotypical assumptions and attitudes rooted in Western history and political culture. Yet few scholars recognized these problems. Annette Baker Fox, for example, wrote in her classic, The Power of Small States: Diplomacy in World War II, that a "traditional great-power stereotype of the small state was that of a helpless pawn in world politics." Social scientist Lucian W. Pye, to cite another significant example, wrote in 1960 in his enduring Politics, Personality, and Nation Building: Burma's Search for Identity these still relevant lines:

"As yet the West is still unable to conduct its relations with the new countries according to the customary considerations and calculations which are normally assumed to govern international relations. All the illogical reactions of race and class, of paternalism and pity, of pride and prejudice combine in various ways to blur the Westerner's image of transitional peoples. At the one extreme there are those in the West who idealize and romanticize the efforts of the new countries. At the other extreme are those who contemplate with horror the end of an old order and the 'descent of barbarians upon the small corner of the civilized world'."

Diplomatic History: Another Scholarly Vacuum

A third factor that contributed to my decision to try to fill the gap in Iranian studies on foreign policy was the fact that no systematic study of Iran's diplomatic history existed in the late 1940s and early 1950s in any language. There were, of course, some works on Iran's history, both ancient and modern, in both Western and Persian languages. But these were largely narratives of events. The challenge for me, therefore, was twofold. How could I construct a descriptive account of Iran's diplomatic relations with other nations? More importantly, how could I produce simultaneously an analysis of those relations that could be useful to the students of international relations and foreign policy with respect to small nations in world politics?

Social Sciences: A Fortuitous Rescue Mission

What came to my rescue in trying to grapple with these agonizing questions was the changing nature of the state of the art in the study of politics and international relations. The impact of social sciences on these fields had been growing over a long period of time. But that impact increased exponentially after the onset of the process of decolonization and the participation of an increasing number of Third World countries in the General Assembly of the United Nations. For example, Gabriel A. Almond and James S. Coleman edited the pioneering volume, *The Politics of the Developing Areas*, Lucian W. Pye published the work just mentioned, while Leonard Binder authored the first social scientific study of *Iran, Political Development in a Changing Society*.

Yet, as seen above, the study of the foreign policy of small and developing nations got short shrift because international studies continued to be largely great power centric.

And at least in part for this reason voices began to be heard about the great need for making bridges between the study of comparative politics and international relations. This idea encouraged me to relate the Weberian typology of "traditional" and "transitional" societies and politics to the study of foreign policy in general and Iranian foreign policy in particular.

Hence, I was able to identify the traditional and transitional patterns of Iran's foreign policy within the context of the country's own historical experience. The traditional patterns fell roughly in the period between the rise of the Safavid dynasty in 1501 and of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925. And the transitional patterns were relatively prominent during the rule of the two Pahlavi kings who must be credited for setting in motion the process of modernization in earnest, no matter how flawed it may seem in retrospect. And the Iranian Revolution at least in part reflected the consequences of that process. More importantly, it is often forgotten that the revolution did not stop that process and that the Iranian society and state, therefore, continue to grapple with the challenges of transition.

Yet to reject the idea that transitional societies and states are simply the pawns of great powers in international politics did not mean that my approach should refuse to recognize the pervading influence of the international system on foreign policy. Even after World War II, when Third World states began to throw their weight around in the international arena, their societies, politics, cultures and necessarily their foreign policies as well were acutely exposed to the influence of the international system, whether viewed as bipolar, multipolar or unipolar. For example, revolutionary Iran can not totally escape today the process of globalization, although it may pick and choose what it may consider to be compatible with its own values.

Allowing for these two linkages in my approach, however, did not seem to me to capture the whole factual reality. The impact of the domestic situation on foreign policy and the influence of the international system on foreign policy granted, the approach could be even more useful if it also allowed for another linkage, that between the domestic situation and the international system. In other words, there are times when domestic change in a country influences the whole international system, such as the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Changes even in a transitional state and society make an impact on the international system. For example, the landmark election of President Khatami has gone a long way in a short time to change the attitude of regional and European states and many international organizations toward revolutionary Iran.

The Dynamic Triangular Interaction

Even a triangular matrix of domestic situation, international system and foreign policy did not seem to me to capture enough of real world dynamics. The relationship between any two of the three axes was significantly *interactive*. To take, for example, the relationship between domestic and foreign policy with respect to Iran. The Iranian Revolution turned the Shah's foreign policy on its head. But the reverse is equally true. President Khatami's creative foreign policy initiatives help build support for his

government domestically.

The application of this triangular interaction approach to the study of foreign policy in general and Iranian foreign policy in particular required the addition of the modifier *dynamic*. My approach, therefore, has been called *dynamic triangular interaction*. This is obviously no place to report the results of this approach. Interested students will find more than they want to know in my writings on the foreign policy of Iran since the turn of the sixteenth century with emphasis on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The emphasis on these more recent centuries reflects the fact that beginning in the nineteenth century Iran was sucked fully into the whirlwind of international politics for the first time.⁵

I am happy to note that Middle East and international relations scholars recognized the value of my contribution when the results of my first twelve years of research were summed up in *The Foreign Policy of Iran, 1500-1941: A Developing Nation in World Affairs*.⁶ It has been even more rewarding for me to realize that over the subsequent decades of writing on the foreign policy of Iran my theoretical approach has proved to be just as useful.⁷

Perhaps part of the reason for this continued usefulness of my approach is the general lack of significant progress in the study of international relations theory. I have tried to pore over the literature on the theories of international relations and foreign policy in hopes of enriching the triangular-interaction approach, to no real avail. Progress in the use of jargon far outweighs efforts to conceptualize. Note, for example, "state" is dubbed as "unit" or "agent," and arguments rage today between the theorists who emphasize the "unit-level" and others who stress the "system-level." As seen, my approach allows for both unit and system. As to which one is more determinative relative to the other in shaping foreign policy decisions, I believe it significantly depends on time and circumstances. To be sure, theory is not merely a replica of reality, but neither is it totally independent of reality. Hence, the modifier "dynamic" in triangular interaction denotes the importance of the theory-reality relationship in my approach.

In a nutshell, my review of the dominant Western theories--neorealist, neoliberal and constructivist--reveals that they share in common the tendency to overlook the continuing importance of the nation-state, especially among the developing nations, as the basic player in the international system, just as they ignore the role of non-state groups such as the PLO in international politics. As a result, they ignore by and large the influence on foreign policy of the domestic situation, be it cultural, societal, economic, political, psychological, or a combination of any of these. Relative to advanced industrial states, this shortcoming is quite serious in the case of developing nations in which the problems of transition, whether cultural, social, economic or political, often influence significantly the formulation and implementation of foreign policy decisions. Neorealists emphasize the distribution of capability across the states, neoliberals stress the influence of international institutions, and constructivists focus on the impact of global norms.

The traditional realist theory that does consider the nation-state as still the main player on the world stage might appear to fill the need at first sight. But the theory, or at least its purist version, suffers from three major problems. First, it fails to give enough

weight to the influence of the international environment on foreign policy. Second, it fails to take seriously the role of developing nations in the international system. And third, it concentrates on the balance of power concept to the point of excluding what some scholars call "soft" issues such as AIDS, poverty, global warming and the like.

Questions for Further Research

Despite the fact that foreign policy research and writing on Iran has proliferated significantly over the past half a century (although more in quantity than quality) the need for much further work continues. Being committed to "Iranian Research and Analysis," this Center is an appropriate forum in which to formulate a number of questions with respect to Iran's foreign policy since the revolution. I hope that my fellow-scholars will find them suggestive:

1. Most revolutionary theories emphasize domestic factors, be they political, economic, social or psychological in nature. Some have begun to allow for the influence of the international environment as a causal factor. But the international environment with respect to transitional states is often conceptualized primarily in terms of foreign domination. Hence, many contemporary revolutions such as the Nicaraguan, Cuban, Mexican and even Iranian are seen as a mere reaction to foreign colonization, or other forms of foreign control. As valid as this perspective may be, it is completely different from a proposition that I have tried to advance for years. I posit that *the cumulative effects of foreign policy decisions made by the old regime over a long span of time can constitute an independent cause of revolution*. The term "independent" is intended to emphasize that such foreign policy decisions constitute phenomenal rather than epiphenomenal variables. In other words, they are not dependent for their causal power on economic, social, political, cultural or other factors. With respect to Iran, for example, *did the Shah's foreign policy decisions over quarter of a century contribute to the eruption of the Iranian Revolution?* I have tried to propose in my own works that the Shah's America policy did contribute to the outbreak of the revolution, but this proposition requires further in-depth research and analysis.
2. Traditional theorists define the "national interest" in terms of power as the state's dominant end for its own sake, while neorealists define it in terms of security as the ultimate end. *What is the definition of "the national interests" (manaf'a-e melli) in Iran today?* Since Iranians use the term "interests" in the plural, does that suggest a definition other than that of either the traditional realist in terms of power or the neorealist in terms of security? If so, what are the contents of those interests?
3. How may the definition of the national interests be said to have evolved from the Khomeini era to Rafsanjani's two terms, and especially since the presidency of Mohammad Khatami?
4. What are the formal and informal structures involved in the making and execution of Iran's foreign policy?
5. What is the relative weight of ideology as opposed to practical reality in Iran's foreign policy today?
6. Has there been a significant shift in the premise of Iran's foreign policy since the presidency of Khatami and, if so, in what sense?

7. What is the relative weight of domestic considerations as opposed to the international environment in Iran's foreign policy?
8. What can be said about the interrelationship between the concept of dialogue among civilizations and Iran's foreign policy?
9. Do Iran's stated foreign policy objectives match its capabilities?
10. To what extent does professional expertise as opposed to ideological, kinship and friendship considerations obtain in the selection of personnel in the structures involved in Iran's foreign policymaking?
11. Is it likely that the political elite will ultimately defer to the Majlis on the issue of US-Iran relations as Khomeini did in regard to the settlement of the hostage dispute?
12. How does Iran define the threat to its national security?
13. Does rampant factionalism impair Iran's foreign policy and, if so, what can be done about it?
14. Is Iran's "sick" economy the single most important driving force behind improving relations with industrialized democracies at least in part as a means to attract foreign capital and know how?
15. How should Iran deal with the processes of globalization?
16. Would Iran benefit from a better knowledge of the process of transition to democracy in Southern Europe, Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe?
17. In what way could domestic reforms influence Iran's foreign policy making?
18. What are the areas of convergence and divergence in the worldviews of "reformers" (islah talaban) and "conservatives" (muhafezeh karan)?
19. What are Iran's principal foreign policy priorities?
20. Has the foreign policy of the Khatami government put a gentler face on Iran on the world stage?

Endnotes

- ¹. The Award recognizes me "For Many Outstanding Contributions to the Study of Iranian Society and Culture."
- ². This longtime intellectual involvement has earned me the widely-acknowledged sobriquet of "The Dean of Iranian Foreign Policy Studies in the United States."
- ³. As a result I was awarded the post-graduate degree of "The Doctor of Science of Jurisprudence" in 1954, reflecting the concentration of my studies on international law and politics.
- ⁴. He soon overcame his doubts and became an enthusiastic supporter of my research project. Years later I dedicated to him *my Beyond the Arab-Israeli Settlement: New Directions for U.S. Policy in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 1977) for "*Showing me the Way*." The "way" was intended to denote objectivity.
- ⁵. I characterized my approach as "crude" in the introduction of *The Foreign Policy of Iran, 1500-1941: A Developing Nation in World Affairs* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1966). But in his Foreword to the volume, Quincy Wright, a leading international relations theorist and the Dean of International Law Studies at the time, wrote: "The dynamic triangular interaction {provides} a basis for a theory of international politics and particularly of the foreign policy of small states, a matter of increasing importance as empires disintegrate and the small states which emerge exert influence in the United Nations."

⁶ First, the book manuscript won the first prize of the American Association for Middle East Studies, which was subsequently renamed MESA, for "the most distinguished contribution to Middle East Scholarship in 1964." Second, *Foreign Affairs*, the leading American quarterly on international relations at the time, wrote: "R. K. Ramazani's book is the only work in any language which gives an objective and detailed account of Iran's international role during this entire period," that is from 1500 to 1941.

⁷ See, for example, *Iran's Foreign Policy, 1941-1973: A Study of Foreign Policy in Modernizing Nations* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975). *The Guide to American Foreign Relations since 1700* viewed this book as "A comprehensive empirical analysis of Iran's foreign policy which draws on primary sources as well as on extensive field research and observation to provide the best single volume on Iran's foreign policy in the postwar period. "For postrevolutionary books, see, for example, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986 first edition, 1988 second edition" with an epilogue on the Iranian-American Arms Deal"). The review in the *New York Review of Books* says "{Ramazani} has written with sparkling clarity on a difficult subject and with both passion and objectivity on an issue which...is still laden with much emotional baggage," and the review in the *Washington Post* says "Ramazani's judicious and excellent book...sifts through the record of Iran's revolutionaries, and we are able to see both the passion and, then, the method and caution of Iran's clerical rulers."

I have been working on a sequel to the two previous volumes, which covered Iran's foreign policy from 1500-1973. I hope to live long enough to finish this third volume which will cover Iran's foreign policy since 1973.