

## Impact of Ideological Factors on Foreign Policy of Iran towards United States

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### Abstract

*Foreign policy of Iran has undergone various changes throughout its evolutionary history. It has been greatly transformed particularly after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, but the ideological factor remained intact. It is significant to find out that what made Iran to cooperate with its greatest enemy of Khomeini era in post-Khomeini period. The main argument of this study is that the foreign policy of Iran is a unique amalgamation of ideology and pragmatism which enables Iran to achieve its objectives as a nation-state in international system. This paper is primarily based on qualitative research method while secondary sources of data are used. This paper explains the transformation in foreign policy of Iran primarily as a consequence of changing dynamics of regional and international politics. Nevertheless, the oscillations in US-Iran relations are prevalent till today. This research paper explores the relevance and impact of ideology in US-Iran relations and proposes that limited cooperation between United States and Iran in specific areas can help both the countries in establishing working relations for the sake of peace at greater level.*

**Key Words:** Foreign Policy of Iran, Ideology, Islamic Revolution, Pragmatism

### Introduction

Foreign Policy behavior of Iran has remained a matter of concern for global community because of its peculiar and unique nature. It is not only complex but also difficult to comprehend if not viewed through multiple dimensions. The transformation in foreign policy of Iran after Islamic Revolution of 1979 and subsequent reorientation of Iran in international system is noteworthy in this regard, specifically in its relations with the global power United States. US-Iran relations took a U-turn after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 from pro-West to anti-West approach and deteriorated drastically because of dominance of ideological factor until death of Khomeini in 1989 (Wise, 2011). The world again witnessed transformation in foreign policy of Iran towards a pragmatic approach after death of Khomeini but at the same time complying with the revolutionary ideology. These fluctuations are still evident in US-Iran relations. The purpose of this study is to find out how ideology influences foreign policy of Iran and its relations with the United States and what influences Iran to cooperate with US at one time and adopt a completely different approach at other times. There are several factors which have influenced Iran's Foreign Policy towards United States and altered it from confrontation to building connections in post-Khomeini period. The most significant are the new interpretations

of religious ideology for pursuit of national interests in changing dynamics of regional and global politics.

Foreign Policy of Iran, unlike many nation states is motivated by ideological rhetoric. This unique character of foreign policy of Iran makes it complex and hence, difficult to comprehend. Various researchers have tried to explicate role of ideology in foreign policy of Iran and its impact on foreign relations of Iran in their own ways of analysis. Emad Khalili in his research article, *The Foreign Policy of Islamic Republic of Iran: Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran* argued that despite of reputation of Iran as an ideologically driven state Iran has proved itself as an institutionalized rational actor which puts its strategic interests before its ideological interests while shaping foreign policy. M.R Dehshiri and M.R Majidi in their article, *Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Revolution Era: A Holistic Approach* argues that identity as viewed through constructivism is socially constructed and hence, supersedes material national interests. Josef Westermayr in his research article, *Realpolitik in Iran: Opportunities and Challenges* argues that it is remarkable that government of Iran is able to devise policies on behalf of Iran's national interest in a pragmatic and rational way, without being restricted by the state identity and official rhetoric.

### **Deviation from Traditional Patterns of State Interaction**

The foreign policy behavior of Islamic Republic of Iran is contradictory to traditional patterns of state interaction in international politics and thus could not be understood through those patterns. Iran gives primary importance to ideology, that is, a non-materialistic factor, in its foreign policy while at the same time keeping in view its national interests. Foreign Policy of Islamic Republic of Iran is primarily driven by its ideological perspectives and revolutionary values rather than merely adhering to the logic of nation state (Nia, 2011).

From rationalist perspective, the Islamic Republic of Iran is an objective-oriented actor primarily pursuing its materialistic interests. Contrary to this, the ideational structures are also dominant in foreign policy of Iran. The significance of material structures cannot be denied, but as per constructivist view material structures does not hold any meaning without normative and ideational context (Adler, 1997). Therefore, in order to understand foreign policy behavior of Iran, it is significant to understand ideological and normative characteristics of the country which are best explained by constructivist approach.

Constructivism is the most appropriate theory to explain the foreign policy behavior of Iran which has remained relatively unchanged despite of systemic pressures, particularly towards United States. In order to understand foreign policy of Iran from constructivist view, constructivism can be divided into three categories: Systematic Constructivism, Unit-level Constructivism, and Holistic constructivism (Mohammed, 2011). Systemic constructivism, as name indicates, focuses on transformations in international system while emphasizing on ideational and normative structures of the system. It neglects the dynamics of domestic politics and its impact on foreign policy. Unit level constructivism primarily focuses on domestic changes which shapes identities and interests of states which are then reflected in external behavior of states. Holistic Constructivism is a balanced approach which focuses on identity at both domestic and international level. It attempts to abridge the

first two versions of constructivism challenging the dichotomy between them and tries to accommodate all elements which shape the interests and identities of states (Smit, 2005).

Based on constructivist view, essential discourses of foreign policy of Iran can be explained comprehensively and clearly. First, the logic of responsibility which refers to the ideological ambitions and objectives of a state outside its borders, this characteristic distinguishes ideological states from secular ones. Second, counter hegemonism and anti-arrogance campaign prevalent in foreign policy of Iran due to sense of pride in Persian culture and sense of victimization and resistance against dictation and domination by any foreign power. Third, independence and self-sufficiency through indigenous technology is one of the primary focus of foreign policy of Iran. Iran seeks to internalize more advanced technologies and knowledge to reduce its dependence on foreign powers and as an efficient response to the international boycotts. Fourth, Persian nationalism is ingrained in Iranian nation because of its centuries' old identity as one of the oldest civilizations of the world. Iranian nation holds pride in its cultural and historical background (Karimifard, 2012). According to Gregory F. Giles, the culmination of historical, cultural, and religious influences of Iran is considered to constitute its strategic personality or culture. Fifth, perception of the enemy is the most significant discourse in post-revolutionary Iran. It is mainly fueled by the history of intervention, manipulation, and exploitation of the country by foreign powers (Rubin, 1980). Sixth, Islamic unity based on the concept of *Ummah* to be materialized through solidarity among Muslim countries by means of economic, social, political, cultural, social, religious, technological and strategic ties. Seventh, the concept of Martyrdom in terms of *Jihad* eliminates fear of any worldly power. Eight, justice through revisionist policy and challenging unjust and unfair international order created by hegemonic states particularly United States (Yazdani & Hussain, 2006). Islamic Republic of Iran and the United states doesn't share any common identity which could facilitate the process of reconciliation among both. Even if they agree to cooperate with each other, that cooperation would be unnatural and odd which would not last longer (Ramazani, 2009).

### **Impact of Ideology on Foreign Policy of Iran: Socio-Political Constructs**

Currently, Iran is at the crossroads of global push-and-pull because of its strategic and geopolitical significance. Iran's foreign policy behavior is a reflection of its revolutionary ideology which dominates its security policy as well. Revolutionary ideology combined with Islamic characteristic makes Iranian political system unique and differentiates it from other revolutionary systems (Ismael & Ismael, 1980). The Islamic ideology limits the choice of a suitable conceptual framework to analyze the foreign policy of Iran. Commonly applied rationalist and positivist approaches fail to accurately analyze the foreign policy behavior of Iran. Rationalist theory can explain Iran's foreign policy behavior to some extent mainly from the perspective of material factors in international system, but it is unable to explain the role of non-material factors, specifically ideology in this case (Mohammed, 2011).

Iran is one of the most significant countries in the Gulf region. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran revolutionized the whole course of action of the Islamic

Republic in international arena and left deep imprints on its foreign policy. The foreign policy of Iran in post-revolutionary era is characterized by ideology which is primarily based on religion (Posch, 2013). The changing global geo-political environment and the dynamics of world politics are exclusively shifting. International politics is mainly dominated by realist paradigm and is chiefly interest driven, while overshadowing other factors including ideology. Interestingly, despite of dominance of realist paradigm in international politics, Iran is stick to its ideology and tunes its foreign policy with its ideological values and norms alongside its interests (Ramazani, 2004). Iran has changed its worldview over a period of time after Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The revolutionary ideology has never been taken for granted in foreign policy of Iran, but its intensity has been reduced in accordance to the changing global political dynamics. Yet, ideology is an important determinant in foreign policy making in Iran. It is evident in foreign policy of Iran that despite of the significance of ideological factor, pragmatism is prevalent in the policy to cope up with the emerging challenges and changing contours of regional and international politics (Javaid et al, 2016). The question of security and survival, like other states, is dealt by Iran through rational and pragmatic approach, sometimes by superseding ideology as well. The foreign policy of Iran is the result of complex combination of various factors, of which some are based on centuries old identity. Some are ideological factors which emerged during Khomeini era as a result of Islamic Revolution of 1979. Foreign policy of Iran, generally, is shaped by three main elements. These include: (i) Nationalism, (ii) Islamism, and (iii) Anti-Imperialism (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016) & (Muzaffar, et. al. 2018)

### **Ideational basis of Iranian Foreign Policy in the Light of Constitution of Iran**

Foreign policy behaviour of Islamic Republic of Iran emanates from its core principles of foreign policy which are derived from the Constitution of Iran and are devised by revolutionary leadership of Iran which includes both religious and political leadership of Iran. The objectives of Iranian foreign policy are devised on the same lines as envisioned by the revolutionary leadership. The foundation of post-revolutionary Iran is based on perfect justice of Almighty and His legislation. The government measures to ensure social justice in Iran are based on the same notion of Islamic justice, which simultaneously exist in both religion and government. As per the Constitution, the political leaders of Iran should seek perpetual guidance from the religious leaders or Ayatollahs as they have essential role in the continuous process of the revolution of Islam. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the governing document of Iran. It is a reflection of Khomeini's ideological vision of making Iran a practical Islamic state striving for perfection (Martin, 2000). The Constitution which is endorsed by the people of Iran establishes the basis of a system of governance based on the concept of sovereignty of the ultimate Truth and Quranic justice. It was approved by a majority vote of 98.2% of the eligible voters in a referendum held on March 29 and 30 in 1979 (Chapman, 2009). The constitution provides guideline for political, economic, social, and cultural relationships within the society and with external world.

Leadership plays a significant role in foreign policy formulation of any country and Iran is no different. Foreign Policy of Iran is unique in a way that it is formulated by two parallel tiers of leadership, including religio-political leadership which primarily refers to the Supreme Leader, and the popularly elected political leadership, that is, the President (Buchta, 2000). Some leaders just come and leave; others change the course of history. Khomeini was one of those revolutionary leaders who changed the course of history. His revolutionary ideology left deep imprints on foreign policy of Iran which is evident till today.

## **Impact of Socio-Political and Ideational Constructs on US-Iran Relations**

The relations between United States and Iran have remained fluctuating from one extreme to the other throughout history. The journey of both the countries has never experienced a smooth path for a longer period of time. Foreign policy during revolutionary era was marked by staunch anti-American sentiments. Khomeini not only vandalized US influence in the region but he also supported and praised every anti-American sentiment and even went too far in endorsing protest and terrorist attacks against Americans. This narrative propagated by Khomeini was exact opposite of what Reza Shah believed and promoted. The adherence to ideology was strong during his regime which was reflected in his policies as well. He took out Iran from American sphere of containment against Soviet Union, reduced oil sales to the United States, nullified arms purchase agreement with United States and also approved the hostage crisis (Sick, 1985). His ideological legacy, though with relatively less intensity, is prevalent till today so are the U.S sanctions and trade embargo against Iran. These sanctions have not only damaged economic system of Iran but have also affected the domestic politics and external relations of Iran. Only time will reveal that for how long the Revolution will impact United States-Iran relations.

## **US Misperceptions about Foreign Policy of Iran**

The US depiction of Iran's foreign policy is flawed as they view it as irrational which is not actually the case. The tradition of prudent statecraft in Iran has been established centuries before the creation of Israel and way before Western countries became civilized during the era of Cyrus, about more than two thousand years ago. Like all other countries, Iranian diplomatic history is not free of mistakes. Iran has made several mistakes in its diplomatic history particularly in post-revolutionary period, which was marked by agitation, provocation, subversion and even terrorism. But the fact that there were many instances in post-revolutionary period where Iranian foreign policy was constructive, moderate and pragmatic cannot be denied. For instance, President Khatami vehemently denounced terrorism and violence and promoted rapprochement. He tried to improve relations with the Arab neighbors, softened stance on Israel and attempted to normalize relations with the European countries and offered an olive branch to the United States. The foreign policy under Khatami restored the tradition of *hehmat* (wisdom) in Iranian statecraft.

The role of Supreme Leader in foreign policy of Iran usually annoys the United States as he still depicts US as a "Great Satan" and keeps the ideological rhetoric at the core of Iranian foreign policy (Beeman, 2005). International community views this dualism as two-level-game approach while in reality it is same as two sides of a same coin. Like most of the countries, foreign policy of Iran is also linked to the policy preferences of the ruling political elite of Iran and of the particular political group having power of decision-making at any point of time. The dynamics of foreign policy of Iran does not reflect the basic structure of Islamic Republic of Iran, it rather reflects the reaction to domestic, regional and international challenges which the state face (Westermayr, 2015).

Foreign policy formulation in Iran is not a prerogative of an individual but is compiled by multiple actors (Halliday, 2001) Radicals gain prominence when Iran is

threatened externally. Usually threats from the West ignite Islamists to react (Barzegar, 2009). Different paradigms including pragmatic, Islamist and historical-nationalist attains significance in Iran depending upon the circumstances. Relations of United States and Iran in a nutshell are based on narrative building by leaders on both sides. For instance, Bush administration pursued a confrontational approach towards Iran and termed Iran as “Axis of Evil” (Soltani&Jawan, 2010). Mahmud Ahmadinejad on the other side was hard core ideologue and responded in same tone calling American politicians as cowboys. The successors of both were moderate and hence, kept confrontation at lowest rather tried to normalize relations as evident in Iran-United States nuclear deal termed as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Both Obama and Rouhani believed in cooperation and agreed to initiate “Dialogue among Civilizations.” On Iranian side, it was initially perceived that ideology was being downplayed but the outcome proved that neither ideology nor pragmatism was downplayed. The geo-political circumstances and prevalent international environment along with domestic environment and internal conditions of both the countries influenced their ideas as well as actions. For United States and other global powers, Iran’s nuclear program was major concern as for them it posed a great threat to global security (Tabatabai, 2017). Furthermore, by engaging Iran and other countries in dialogue, United States conveyed a message to international community that it is one and only United States who can impose geo-political codes on other states. United States tries to maximize its global hegemony by controlling regional powers of the Middle East and thus, the largest energy reserves of the world.

Foreign policy reorientation in Iran, if needed at any time, is only possible through reforms in entire political system of Iran. Presently, the core objective of domestic and foreign policy of Iran is the regime survival. The factional power struggle within Iran has significant impact on role of Iran in international politics and its foreign policy strategy, its perceptions of the global politics and directs it to choose policies which serve the national interests of Iran (Rakel, 2007). Several factors play role in shaping foreign policy of Iran including Islam, nationalism, geopolitics, and ethnicity (Ehteshami, 2001).

### **Future Prospects of US-Iran Relations**

The Presidency of a moderate, Hassan Rouhani and President Obama in the United States were best combination to decide contentious issues between both the countries. They were in a position to reach the gains of cooperation on a positive-sum formula rather than sticking on zero-sum basis (Barzegar, 2012). Islamic Republic of Iran wants to be recognized as a member of aspiring countries of the world like Brazil, India and South Africa and therefore expects same treatment from major global powers. For United States, it is only possible when Iran is led by moderates instead of Islamists (Westermayr, 2015). Although the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) regarding Iranian Nuclear issue was signed after series of negotiations and was finally agreed by all stakeholders, it still remains one of the most controversial agreements in recent global history (Javaid, 2016). The agreement was viewed as law of the land in Iran despite of some opposition from security and political establishment but in United States, the deal was highly criticized. In fact, US President Trump withdrawn from the deal even without taking its western allies into confidence. The deal itself is a paradox, not because of its content but because of

varying viewpoints of the signatories even after its approval. The preservation of agreement without its strengthening or its halfhearted implementation is unlikely to achieve objectives of the deal and may prove it counterproductive. The possibility of avoiding confrontation greatly reduced after Trump coming to power in United States. The killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani by US airstrike further aggravated the relations between both the countries (Carnelos, 2020).

Despite of problematic relations between both the countries, United States needs to recognize Iran as one of the two regional powers in the Middle East, other being the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is significant to take Iran in the loop in order to bring peace in the region which otherwise seems unattainable. Moreover, Iran is longing for better integration into international community to get itself out of economic crisis and to reap the fruits of global economic integration. Complete normalization of relations between United States and Iran is difficult to achieve but mere rapprochement based on limited cooperation on limited matters of concern can help to build mutual trust. There are several common goals of United States and Islamic Republic of Iran in the field of security. The Civil War in Syria gravely needs some kind of cooperation between U.S and Iran. Although both the countries have divergent interests in Syria but finding a solution to Syrian crisis without Iran seems to be of very low possibility. US needs to accept that Iran is a major stakeholder in the region which must be engaged in vital decisions related to regional politics and security. Ignoring Iran will not bring an end to military stalemate and blood-shed in the region.

The role of Iran in the region and its geo-political significance enhances its significance due to which U.S cannot simply ignore it, therefore, holds no other option except to accommodate it. Due to conflicting ideologies, divergent national interests and varying regional and global objectives both Iran and United States are prone to confrontation and conflict with each other. The behavior of both countries if remain unchanged can lead to direct military confrontation which will have a substantial political and economic cost for both the countries and global community as a whole. The restoration of diplomacy between United States and Iran will convey a message to the people of Iran that United States is not their enemy and their compliance with international laws and norms will be acknowledged. The outcome will be beneficial for both the countries if confrontation is avoided.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to the general perceptions, ideology does not halt a state from achieving its material interests, nor does it threaten the security of the state. A dynamic and viable ideology helps a state to counter threats to its security and survival. Foreign policy of Iran is a classic example of an ideologically oriented state which has benefited both from security preservation and national coherence. Iranian foreign policy is characterized by its multifaceted and non-linear nature. Over emphasis on significance of any one dogma leads to wrong interpretation of foreign policy as there are multiple interrelated doctrines which constitute Iran's foreign policy. Oversimplified analysis of relations of Iran with other states and with regional and international organizations causes flawed understanding of country's foreign policy.



The differences between United States and Iran are deeply rooted in conflicting ideologies of both the countries which are evident in political systems, society, culture, and in foreign policy of these countries. Conclusively, this research reveals the main reason behind changing behaviour of Iran and its impact on relations with U.S as explored through this research is the new interpretations of ideology in Iran. Foreign Policy behavior of Iran has remained a matter of concern for global community because of its peculiar and unique nature which is not only complex but also difficult to comprehend. The transformation in foreign policy of Iran after Islamic Revolution of 1979 and subsequent reorientation of Iran in international system is noteworthy in this regard, specifically in its relations with the global power United States.

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