Religion and International Relations: Some General Reflections, with Particular Emphasis on the Experience of the Islamic Republic

Dr. Hassan Rouhani

Hassan Rouhani, former Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (1989-2005), is currently Director of the Center for Strategic Research (CSR). He also serves as the executive director of the Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs.

Abstract

The dominant perception in the 19th and 20th centuries seemed to indicate that the march of modernity would lead to the marginalization of the role of religion in the public sphere, including in the realm of politics. Many scholars of international politics and International Relations (IR) have also argued along the same lines. The emergence of a strong counter-trend, a religious-based outlook, since the early decades of the 20th century, especially in the waning decades of the century, appeared to challenge that seemingly entrenched conviction. The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 – as full-fledged religious state – served as the climax of that counter-trend with significant implications and repercussions, for the region, for the Muslim world, and also for international relations. The present essay is an attempt to look into these issues. It will be argued that the new religious counter-trend, particularly the revival of Islam, represents a process across the Islamic world geared to the preservation and revival of the Islamic identity, and also relying on Islam and its teaching to shape and guide governance in Muslim lands. The essay will also try to have a look at some of the challenges involved in the process; that is, the challenges Islamic governance will face in dealing with others – the dominant secular international system and its components.

Keywords: Religion, Secularism, International Relations, Islam, Religious Outlook, Identity

Introduction

A panoramic view of the development of the Western societies during the past centuries, at least since Westphalia in 1648, would point in general terms to the gradual and progressive waning of the role of religion [Christianity] – and religious thought – in the public sphere in general, including in particular the realm of politics, and a as a corollary in affecting the course of international relations. It can be argued that since the major agreements reached in Westphalia among then dominant European powers – which have proved ever since to have been of historical significance at both practical and theoretical levels – the discussions and issues pertaining to the realm of international politics have been shaped and made by politicians – practitioners – and scholars whose point of departure, as opposed to the dominant tradition prior to that, was not emanating from a particularly religious worldview or outlook. The new trend of non-religious-based thought and action was further strengthened during and as a result of the

Enlightenment era and its strong, and as it happened, quite lasting, intellectual legacy, which deeply influenced the thinking of successive generations of scholars of international politics during the 19th and 20th centuries. From the vantage point of this overall outlook and the seemingly unimpeded march of modernity proper, religion and religious thinking would move further from the previously-held central position in public sphere and national life of societies to a marginal, un-influential position, hence unimportant to the actual political life of societies and relations among states -- nation-states in the post-Westphalian conception.

While this overall worldview and outlook and the patterns of thought, analysis and action they have produced have held almost unchallenged and practically uninterrupted sway at the global level, it is fair to say that a counter-trend, a religious-based-inspired outlook – most notably Christian and Islamic - has also been discernible during the past two centuries, particularly in the twentieth century, albeit on a much smaller scale and effect. The present essay will confine itself to the Islamic counter-trend to the dominant tradition and paradigm in international relations, and more specifically, it will try to look into how the Islamic Revolution in Iran - and the religious

state it has created – has approached this field and conducted its foreign policy in action. The emergence in late 1970s of a popular Islamic movement in Iran, which led to the victory of the Islamic Revolution in February 1979 and subsequently the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a full-fledged religious state, and its actual policies during the past three decades, have aroused interests of different kinds and at various levels on a global scale, among others, at the intellectual-academic and analytical level.

The Secular Phenomenon and its Implications: A Brief Overview

The crux of the issue at hand concerns the development of the modern secular outlook in the West and its practical implications, for the West itself and for the rest of the world as the system which emanated from it acquired a global character and reach. Ever since the end of the Medieval Ages in Europe, especially since Renaissance and the religious Reformation, religion which was once highly influential in individual, family, social and governmental life as well as in shaping intellectual productions in earlier times was gradually cast aside from social and political life.[1] The emergence of the concept of nation-state in the post-Westphalia

unfolding world – as the philosophical foundation of the formation of government – further solidified that process. As a result of this foundational transformation, the philosophical disposition of man shifted from the metaphysical to the worldly. The new outlook, diametrically opposed to that of the Medieval Ages, accorded human rationality and enterprise a totally new status; replaced faith and reliance on god with human decision and will,[2] and also relegated religious and metaphysical beliefs to the realm of individual subjectivity and private sphere. The Enlightenment, which was in turn further strengthened through the rapid development of capitalism, industrialization, urbanization and marked improvement in people's economic lot, and also the development of individuality/individualism – various manifestations of modernity proper - gave the secular outlook and discourse a very strong impetus and helped its institutionalization in the Western societies. Individual – and individual choice - thus came to occupy a highly prominent position in the social order, including in the realm of politics. Defined in ontological and epistemological terms, the modern, secular outlook revolved around a set of central concepts as humanism, rationalism, realism, liberalism, and also democracy – liberal democracy. For the

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immediate purpose of the present essay, it is of note that the Westphalian concept of nation-state, based on the centrality and supremacy of national interests, helped the gradual development of an international system in which sovereign nation-states engage in competition, conflict, and alliance in order to safeguard and buttress their position and interests or to expand them.

It might be of interest also to have a brief look at some of the implications of the secular outlook with regard to the theories of international relations, as they have developed over time. With their initial ontological-epistemological roots in the Enlightenment, especially the positivist school of thought, the dominant line of thinking in this field has been molded by the rather strict, exclusive reliance on [applied] scientific knowledge and instrumental human rationality. As it happened, the positivist outlook and analysis came to cast its rather long shadow on a wide range of analytical-intellectual work in various fields, including in the field of politics and International Relations, thus leading to virtual disregard of outlooks or alternative analyses not conducive to quantification – which was certainly the case with religion and religious-based-oriented discourse and analysis. From this vantage point, religion was totally disregarded in

scientific research and relegated to the private sphere, characterized by such a prominent figure in modern International Relations as Hans Morgenthau as a non-scientific phenomenon.[3] Others went so far as to state that "little prediction has been uttered with such certainty that religion is making its last efforts and that the secularization theory is a theory that can turn into a paradigm for social sciences".[4] No wonder, then, that given the almost undisputed preponderance in the second half of the twentieth century of the modernization theories on the one hand, and the realist paradigm on the other, there was hardly any room for the consideration or relevance of the religious-based outlook and analysis in International Relations studies; in fact, little room for the consideration of the role played by religion-based belief systems as an influential factor in society and politics.[5]

Against such a prohibitive backdrop, however, the works of a group of scholars belonging to the comparative school and engaged in field studies in other parts of the world – across the developing world, inclusive of the Middle East – gradually appeared as a counter-trend. Swimming against the current, they came out with a somewhat differing outlook; religion still plays an important role in many

societies, and on that basis, the necessity of considering such a role and its practical implications in serious theoretical-academic analysis. The appearance in the 1980s and 1990s[6] of a growing number of analytical works of the new trend in the field of political science and sociology openly questioning previously-held seemingly solid convictions with regard to religion and its role in society attested to its strength as well as to its prospects. Judged otherwise, it could be argued that the earlier predictions that the march of modernity would lead to the gradual erosion in and inevitable ultimate demise of the religious outlook proved utterly hasty and premature, and in fact, seemed to have boomeranged – as corroborated by later developments.

The explanation of religion as the new force influencing international politics does not mean a rupture from the theoretical tradition governing this area and founding a new explanatory logic based upon religion, but it centers on the search for instruments in exploring the role played by this new factor

Revival of the Religious Outlook

Even though it may sound Marxian, but the proposition seems to be true that every thesis creates its own antithesis. Applied to the case at hand, it

means that secularism as the overarching outlook, supported by practical materialism of economism and extreme one-dimensional[7] individualism, among others, served in their collective effect to lay the grounds for the revival of religion – religious belief/faith-based beliefs, on a global scale, including both in the advanced Western societies as well as a wide range of other societies. The recent trend during the past few decades in the United States in marked increase in church attendance and also popular attraction to Asian ancient religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, as reflected in the rapid growth in the number of Buddhist temples in the State of California,[8] is clearly indicative of a discernible change in this regard. The emergence during the past few decades of a stronger conservative block, inclusive of the Religious Right and Evangelicals, within the framework of the mainstream Protestant church in the States, which has shown its weight in a wide range of legislation on sensitive education and health issues and also politically in the 2004 presidential elections, is reflective of the same general pattern of revival. A similar phenomenon can also be discerned with regard to the active socio-political role of the American Jewry, with its particularly manifest activism in US foreign policy.[9]

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The revival of religious fervor also took place within and through the Catholic Church. While Pope John Paul II, himself a Polish national, extensively used his papal position and the Catholic Church in Poland and across the Soviet Block against the atheist Communist rule, many of his junior churchmen – clerical and lay – in Central and Latin America developed their own religious-based revolutionary ideology, Liberation Theology[10] - albeit eclectic in certain respects, against the capitalist hegemony of the United States and her local military men.

However, the strongest and most extensive wave of religious revival in the twentieth century took place in the Islamic world – to which I will turn in the next section. But, in so far as the overall rise of religious movements during the second half of the century is concerned, it should be said, in passing, that since sometime in the 1950s, during the heydays of the anti-colonial struggle, early forms of a nascent return to Islamic teachings in search of "lost" identity took shape in many Muslim societies. The initial anti-colonial drive in many African and Asian countries gradually developed into different kinds of home-grown protest movements against a wide range of foreign ideologies, including Western imperialism – as the more recent reincarnation of traditional

colonialism - and also Communism, failed nationalism, and Third World radicalism – along with whom Muslim groups and currents had fought as comrades during the earlier periods of anti-colonial, anti-foreign struggles.

The climax of the religious counter-current came with the emergence of a popular protest-revolutionary movement in Iran in late 1970s which was led by a visionary Muslim jurisprudent, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Victory of this revolutionary movement against the pro-West monarchical regime and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic, a full-fledged religious government under the direct tutelage of the Shi'ite ulama, marked a totally new phenomenon and provoked serious interests – and concerns - of different kinds on a global scale – some of politico-economic nature, others cultural, still others of a military-strategic nature. This development in the Iranian society and the repercussions and consequences which were reckoned from the very outset to be quite serious and far-reaching, also proved of serious interest to analytical-academic quarters, also from the vantage point of practical policy implications in different areas and fields, including foreign policy and foreign relations – both regional and international. One of the major questions that was raised at the time

concerned the concept of stability, whether at the regional or international level, which went hand in hand with the perennial problem of the effect of revolutionary states on the stability of the status quo, or the new world order.[11]

The Revival of Political Islam

Political Islam, as a line of thinking among Muslims in modern times believing in the necessity of reviving Islam as a form of governance, dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century, and in particular to the writings and political activities of Seyyed Jamaleddin Asadabadi – also known as Afghani - during the reign of Nasser-eddin Shah, the Qajar King. Even if his idea of promoting an Islamic Alliance – Ettehad-e Eslam- failed to materialize, it is generally believed that his Islamic revivalist thinking has left its imprint on later generations of Muslim thinkers, intellectuals and political activists, whether in his homeland Iran, or in such other Muslim lands as Egypt – another important center of new Islamic currents and activity at the time. The new line of Islamic thinking and the political struggles associated with it in Iran led in the early years of the twentieth century to the Constitutional Revolution (1905-06), in which the Shi'ite ulama played a pivotal role – a

historical development that left its lasting impact on the Iranian society only to come full fruition over seven decades later. The same line of thinking in the post-First World War period emerged in the writings and activities of such prominent figures as Sayyid Qutb and Hassan al-Banna in Egypt, and Allamah Maududi in the Indian Sub-Continent, who expounded the theoretical foundations of modern political Islam. The writing and beliefs of both Qutb and Al-Banna carried a strong anti-nationalist flavor, which could be reckoned as a response to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of new, independent states under nationalist, secular rule.

This new trend of thinking among Muslims, with its ups and down in various Muslims societies and success to different degrees in impacting the state of governance, nevertheless, failed to establish a fully-fledged Islamic rule in any Muslim country. The only exception, however, occurred in Iran in 1979 through the establishment of the Islamic Republic - a government and political system shaped by and founded on Islamic worldview and teachings, the Sharia in particular. The undeniable impact of the emergence on the international scene of this religious state, at both regional and international levels, and in different fields and areas, is fully known to everybody

and has been extensively discussed and analyzed, by friends and foes, during the past three decades. Fact of the matter is that the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran brought Islam – political Islam to be precise – as a potent, dynamic actor to the forefront of regional and international politics.

Given Iran's strategic geographical position and its size, population, huge potentials in various fields, and also rich millennial cultural-civilizational heritage, the impact of the emergence of a religious state in Iran with a revolutionary ideology was bound to have strong reverberations across the Muslim world, more so in Iran's immediate neighborhood and the Middle East. To cite an example, the Islamic Revolution's clear doctrinal impact in the occupied Palestine and contribution, even inadvertent, to the ascendance of a militant Islamic current, as distinct from the predominantly nationalist-radical political discourse of the Palestinian resistance movement up to the 1980s can hardly be denied. The same also applies to the situation in Lebanon, where the Shi'ites, albeit enjoying relative majority among different communities, had been practically on the fringe of the society - both politically and economically. As a result of the new situation in the area and inspired by the success of their co-religionists in Iran, they have

organized themselves in the meantime to turn into a credible national force with a status commensurate with their number and weight. This development, needless to say, has also come to bear in very tangible terms on the state of the Palestinian resistance movement and the general anti-Israeli struggle.

On a larger scale, the impact of the Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic has been felt in different fields across the Muslim world – political, ideological, and socio-cultural. At the ideological level, the victory of the Revolution, an example of an Islamic-inspired-led popular social revolution in the latter part of the twentieth century, has served as a strong moral incentive for a wide range of disenchanted social and political forces in many Muslim societies, which have in turn utilized the Iranian particular experience in organizing themselves within their own respective communities and national societies. The general impact on the Muslims' thinking – far beyond sectarian differences – and actual conduct[12] has been undeniable. The discernible trend in various Muslim societies in the increasingly active participation of Muslim groups and parties in provincial and national politics, even in the formation of governments or alternatively in defeating ruling coalitions, since the advent of the Islamic Revolution

in 1979 is another indication and gauge of the impact. The lively debates during the past few years in both Afghanistan and Iraq, while still under foreign occupation, on the extent of consideration of the role of religion – Sharia – in the drafting of the new constitution, including on the title of the new regime – republic versus Islamic republic - clearly point to a number of important factors in both societies, inter alia, the level of popular sensitivity to the issue and also the clear religious outlook and orientation of active and influential organized political-ideological forces and currents. The very fact that despite strong outside pressure an article was enshrined in the new Afghan constitution prohibiting the promulgation of legislation contrary to the precepts of Sharia was indicative of the strength of the Islamic outlook in the Afghan society and politics. The same also came to be the case in Iraq. The strength of the religious factor in Afghanistan, particularly given the still open wounds from the Taliban days and their widely discredited reactionary outlook and repressive policies, should be understood and analyzed from the vantage point of the resilience of the deep-rooted causes involved. The situation in Turkey in recent decades, especially since the emergence of the Islamist discourse in the 1980s, and more so since the rise to power of the Justice and

Development Party – still at the helm – provides another interesting example of the rising fortunes and political endurance of the overall religious discourse, especially once considered within the bigger political context of a staunchly secular state. Samuel Huntington's emphasis in the post-Cold War days on the West's problem with Islam itself, and not with Islamic fundamentalism, can in a rather peculiar and oblique way point to Islam's new-found stature on a global scale, and therefore, bringing to bear on the state of international relations.

In so far as the impact of religion – Islam, to be precise - on international relations is concerned, a number of levels could be discerned. Some examples have already been briefly discussed, particularly from the view point of the role Islam and – and the Islamic outlook/Muslim forces and currents – have come to play in active politics and governance of various societies. A second level concerns the role of Islam and specific Islamic affiliation as the defining element of identity of communities and minorities within a bigger social or national context with a different – in some cases hostile – outlook or attitude. This aspect has gained particular prominence in the post-Cold War period, most notably in the wake of the political developments in the Balkans, and the atrocities

committed against Muslim minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia in the early 1990s and also later in Kosovo. As alluded to earlier, the emergence in the occupied Palestine since the 1980s – more specifically, in the 1990s - of a militant political force with a strong, solid religious outlook also attests to the same pattern – the Islamic identity aspect in the platform and outlook of Hamas is unmistakable, and more so, in the case of the Lebanese Hezbollah. The classic case in this regard, though not Islamic, pertains to Northern Ireland, where nationalistic sentiments and aspirations have been pursued through subscription to Catholic beliefs and identity. Liberation Theology in Central and Latin America, also from the Catholic tradition, provides another relevant example. Increasing assertiveness during the past two decades in India on the part of Hindu political forces – even though in part a response to increasing Muslim activism – is still another example of popular turn to religious identity and affiliation in political activity.

Another level concerns the relationship between religious belief(s) and the question of legitimacy. Religion plays an important role in providing legitimacy for institutions and organizations in the public sphere - similar in general terms to other

sources of legitimacy. But, the role played by religion and religious beliefs, as has been amply witnessed in various societies in modern times, both developed and developing, has been and still continues to be of a more crucial - and lasting - impact due to the deep-rooted nature of such beliefs in the formation of identity, character and psyche of their followers. That is what sets religion and religious beliefs quite apart from other sources of organizational affiliation and association as happens to be the case with political parties or other institutions based on more transient sources of allegiance or affiliation.

The third aspect - perhaps the more important aspect in so far as international relations proper are concerned – relates to the role religion and religious affiliation plays in the regional and international conduct of countries, states and political regimes. While the discussion in previous lines was more focused on such a role at the domestic level within communal and national boundaries, the other aspect we now turn to concerns the supra-national aspect. The role played by the wide range of Muslim forces in Afghanistan since the 1979 Soviet occupation – and equally their foreign supporters within and outside of the immediate region – is a now a classic case. The depth, expanse, and long-term consequences and

repercussions of the developments that have unfolded in Afghanistan since the early 1980s and particularly after the departure of the Soviet forces, including the rise of Taliban and the subsequent developments since 9/11, all serve to underline the growing role religion and religious convictions have come to play in international relations, including at the regional level. The Balkan situation also exhibited both levels of impact – the role of religious affiliation and identity at communal and societal level that soon metamorphosed into internecine blood-letting and regional conflict with critical continental and ultimately, international, repercussions. However, a note of caution on the intrinsically complex nature of the phenomenon under review is in order. The role played by the increasing assertiveness of religion proper and religious outlooks in politics at the communal and national level as well as at the regional and international levels, as has been witnessed during the past decades and in more recent years, has acted as double-edged sword – it cuts both ways. The discussion thus far has addressed the positive impact of such a role and engagement. But, the grim reality on the ground and on a global scale points also to a very different picture – the role played also in the creation of tension and conflict, whether at the communal-

ethnic level or at larger national and regional levels, the ugly examples of which abound around the world. The emergence in recent years in virtually all religions – monotheistic or otherwise, of fundamentalist currents with extremely dogmatic views on matters of faith and also on the wide gamut of social, cultural and political issues is a clear reflection of the sad fact that faith and belief can also move in the wrong direction, and cater to tension, conflict, and even open violence. Needless to say, such currents, which, also happen to enjoy governmental support of one kind or another, implicit and sometimes even explicit, tend to further complicate an inherently complex state of international relations.

The Experience of the Islamic Republic

Religion has always played a pivotal role in the Iranian society, both in the pre-Islamic ancient Persia as well as all through the Islamic era. That role assumed a more formal, institutionalized form in the wake of the rise to power of the Safavids in the 16th century, which made Shi'ism the state religion in the country – a situation that has continued ever since. The role and influence of ulama in the society at large, and in the realm of politics, gradually grew in the meantime and came to directly affect the state policies in different

areas, which ultimately culminated in playing a critical, leading role in the victory of the Constitutional Revolution in the early years of the twentieth century. Such a role, it has to be underlined, was played in tandem and close cooperation with, the Shi'ite seminaries and ulama in Najaf, Iraq, as evidenced, among others, in the issuance of religious verdicts (fatwa) in support of constitutionalism by such senior ulama as Akhund Khorasani, Seyed Kazem Yazdi and Ayatollah Mazandarani.

The Constitutional Revolution, as is widely known to the students of Iran's modern history, managed to turn the despotic Qajar dynasty into a constitutional monarchy. But due to the negative impact of a combination of internal and external factors, it failed to institutionalize the constitutional government and was totally defeated with the establishment of the dictatorial rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-1941). The political activism of the ulama and religious seminaries continued during the 1920s and 1930s, even if at a much subdued level, and came to the fore once again, along with other militant political forces, after the fall of the Pahlavi King in 1941 when the Allied Powers occupied the country as part of their war effort to assist the Soviets. This new round of activism played an important part in the

course of the national struggle for the nationalization of the oil industry in late 1940s and early 1950s – which led as a result of the August 1953 coup to the restoration of Shah to the throne and establishment of another period of dictatorial rule (1953-1979).

After a period of tense relationship between the Shah and the ulama during the 1950s, the situation sharply deteriorated as a result of a number of factors. The rise to prominence in 1960-1 within the ranks of the grand mojtahed of Ayatollah Khomeini changed the political equation at a time of general economic crisis and open political opposition to the Shah. The brewing conflict came to a climax in early June 1963 and led to the ruthless suppression of a popular revolt in Tehran and a number of other major cities. Ayatollah Khomeini, the most vocal critic at the time, was arrested and put under house arrest for over a year and finally sent into exile over his open denunciation of the law granting immunity to US military personnel. The forced exile started in Turkey and continued in Najaf, Iraq, lasted until a few months before the collapse of the monarchical regime. During the 15-year exile, the Ayatollah and his growing cadres of followers, both clerical and lay, continued their opposition against the Shah – needless to say, along with a wide range of oppositionl forces and currents.

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The process of the popular protest movement in Iran against the Shah's regime in 1978-79 which led, in the course of almost a year, to a powerful revolutionary movement, under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, an 80-year-old Shi'ite jurisprudent, is a well-known story all over the world – let alone to the serious students of Iran and its contemporary history. So is also the outcome of this revolutionary movement – the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 as a full-fledged religious state, inspired by Islamic teachings and founded on the principles and edicts of Sharia. It can be said with certainty that the religious state established in Iran, while sharing some similarities in certain respects with a number of other governments in the Muslim world, was quite unique in terms of its legal structure – a republic with a distinct religious identity – which was also unique in the distribution of authority between the office (institution) of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurisconsult) and the rest of the state apparatus, inclusive of the executive branch. The development of this unique governance structure during the past three decades, inclusive of the 1989 constitutional amendment involving the annulment of the office of prime minister and concentrating the executive authorities in the office of the president, has

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been extensively studied by scholars of various disciplines, and commands a voluminous, and ever-growing and rich literature to its credit. The subject, still of scholarly interest, especially from the vantage point of its long-term implications for governance in Iran and also as a potential model for other Islamic societies, deserves to be further studied and analyzed.

Leaving aside the domestic policies in Iran since the 1979 Revolution, it will be attempted in the following lines to shed some light on the overall international atmosphere at the time of the Revolution which impacted and shaped its response to and subsequent interaction with the outside world; or in other words, the rationale and foundational principles of the foreign relations of the Islamic Republic vis-à-vis the international system.

1. The cognitive problem. This difficulty arose from the international system's inability and/or unwillingness to recognize the Islamic Republic as a religious – Islamic - state, which was different from formal diplomatic recognition as a state. This could be considered as one of the root causes of a permanent state of distrust that has existed since between Iran and the West in general and some of its members in particular.

2. The problem of lack of precedent (experience).

The Islamic Republic, as a unique full-fledged religious – Islamic - state in modern times, and facing a generally less-than-friendly – if not outright hostile – external environment, had to rely fully and exclusively on its own resources to develop approaches and policies in almost all fields of Iran's national life, including in its dealings with the outside world – the international system. The new ideological state lacked any credible source of emulation – contrary to other leftist revolutions in the earlier decades of the century who could easily emulate the hard-won experiences of others. Put otherwise, Iran simply had to explore and define what it meant to be religious – Islamic – in the waning decades of the twentieth century.

3. Establishment of a new pattern of interaction. The Islamic Republic's interaction with the dominant international system, as borne out by the actual experience, reveals the contours and parameters of a rather peculiar interaction – between a predominantly secular system and a religious state committed to pursual of approaches and policies inspired by and based on its own ideology. This type of interaction has confronted both sides with particular – even peculiar – challenges, and equally important, how new ways and means have been explored to circumvent or overcome the challenges involved. The challenging relationship
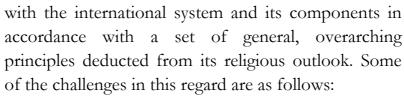
between the two sides seems to be still continuing, indicating also that both sides have exhibited a certain degree of flexibility which has allowed them to continue dealing with each other. From the vantage point of the Islamic Republic the latter aspect is gauged as a sign of a religious state's successful survival in an otherwise unfriendly surrounding atmosphere, and even promotion – to a certain degree – of its normative structures and value system.

4.   Peace-building   potential.   The   Islamic Republic's quite substantial experience, particularly in the post-Cold War period, in lending its assistance as a regional power towards resolving conflicts in Central Asia and the Caucasus stood in sharp contrast to the prevalent stereotypical images and perceptions of the Islamic Republic. The same pattern of positive contribution could also be seen in Iran's role in Afghanistan and Iraq in the post-9/11 period. It is of note that common faith-related and cultural affinities between Iran on the one hand, and such countries as Afghanistan and Iraq on the other, and also in Lebanon – even though somewhat different from the other two – has certainly helped place Iran in a highly influential position to play a positive role.
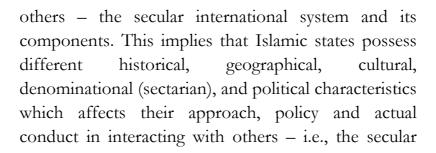
Challenges of a Religious State in the International System

In the preceding section a number of the challenges faced by the Islamic Republic in dealing with the international system were briefly discussed. One can try to look into some of the theoretical-conceptual foundations of such difficulties, including, in particular, the foundational difference between the very raison d'etre of a religious state and that of a an international system based on secular principles. As argued by the proponents of the religious outlook, the problem lies in the dominance of functionalist or instrumental rationality theories of state[13] - presuming the secular nature of the state. Based on that presumption – unacceptable to the followers/proponents of the religious outlook – the state, the secular state, holds a neutral position on moral issues and avoids subscribing to any particular moral system (let's say, any particular religion). The religious state, in a diametrically opposed position, is defined first and foremost by its commitment to a certain moral code – Sharia in the case of the Islamic Republic. Even if the thrust of the Sharia in principle applies mostly to the realm of personal/individual conduct – realm of domestic policies of the state – the religious state – Islamic Republic – acts in its dealings

with the international system and its components in accordance with a set of general, overarching principles deducted from its religious outlook. Some of the challenges in this regard are as follows:

■ The necessity of addressing the possible dichotomy/conflict-contradiction between definition of national interests, security and state identity as defined respectively by a secular state and a religious state. This would also imply the possible dichotomy between the pursual of policies geared to national purposes versus pursual of supra-national or cosmopolitan purposes.

■ The contours of the religious identity of the state; what constitutes the religious or alternatively the secular nature of the state. This also implies the necessity – or inevitability – of a certain degree of flexibility on the part of the religious state in dealing with the secular international system, or the secular components of such a system, while still abiding by its own religious/doctrinal principles and obligations.

■ Past and present experiences within the Muslim world point to a plurality of Islamic identity, its perception or the requirements for an Islamic state. Similarly, there exists a plurality of patterns of behavior by Muslim states (though not necessarily a full-fledged state as the Islamic Republic) towards

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others – the secular international system and its components. This implies that Islamic states possess different historical, geographical, cultural, denominational (sectarian), and political characteristics which affects their approach, policy and actual conduct in interacting with others – i.e., the secular international system and its components.

■ And finally, the diversity and plurality of perceptions, approaches, and policies of Muslim states does, in fact, create a situation fraught with both challenges and opportunities, on the one hand, for the Muslim states themselves and the state of their own interactions, and on the other, for others – the international system and its components in dealing with each and every Muslim state and/or their collectivity.

Conclusions

The present essay has reviewed, in broad brush, the role religion and religious outlook – Islam in particular - have played in recent decades in the international system, which is, by definition secular. It has tried to look at some of the salient features of the new trend and discuss its ramifications. As discussed in the essay, the revival of the religious outlook in the international scene, practically within all religions, monotheistic and

otherwise, during the last century and more specifically during its latter part should be looked at from the overall vantage point of general response to the dominance and preponderance of the secular outlook and its excesses. In other words, as a reaction to what has been perceived as the undesirable outcome of reliance on the secular outlook and the positivist school, the religious outlook has tried to argue in favor of the continued relevance of a set of other factors disregarded by the secular outlook, and more importantly, by the international system shaped by it over time.

The essay has attempted to touch on the process of Islamic revivalism in modern times, especially since the early decades of the twentieth century, and instead focus on the particular experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran – as the only full-fledged religious state of its kind which came into being in the closing years of the 1970s. It has looked, even though in broad, schematic form, at the genesis of the revival of the Islamic thinking in Iran and its ultimate ascendance to power. While addressing the approach and policies of the Islamic Republic since its inception to a wide range of issues in the course of its regional and international interactions, the essay has also tried to look into the challenges the Islamic Republic has

faced in its dealings with the dominant international system.

In addressing the rationale for the emergence of the religious outlook in modern times, the essay has endeavored to highlight one specific aspect – the question of identity. As argued in the previous lines, this concept seems to have played a significant role in the general trend at the global level of the revival of religious outlook, which has taken different forms within various religions and in different parts of the world. Given the preponderance of the still unfolding globalization process with its strong homogenization tendencies, one could expect, with a high degree of certainty, that equally strong counter-trends espousing "identity" – at all levels; local/communal, national and regional – will persevere and continue to play a role commensurate with the perceived threats from the dominant system and its components.

As a final reckoning, given the continuation of dichotomies and conflicts at various levels, especially the extreme manifestations of blind recourse to either excessive secularism or dogmatic reliance on self-identity (inclusive of religious identity), exercise of a certain degree of flexibility and a sense of cooperation on the part of all players is called for – as witnessed in practice in the actual conduct of foreign relations of

the Islamic Republic. This is borne out, among others, by a recognition of the diversity and plurality that signify the perceptions, images, approaches and policies, and in the final analysis, experiences, of the components of the Muslim world.

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