

# Reflections on Iran's Foreign Policy: Spiritual Pragmatism

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### **Abstract**

The present essay argues that Iran's foreign policy since the 1979 Revolution has pursued an overall aspirational paradigm which I call "spiritual pragmatic", embodying two seemingly conflicting elements – spirituality and pragmatism. It is also suggested that this hybrid approach to foreign policy is nothing new to Iran; rather, in fact, it dates as far back as ancient pre-Islamic Persia, and more recently, since the reign of the Safavids in the 16th century. The crux of the argument here is to try to dispel the rather cliché images of the post-revolutionary Iranian foreign policy as either "irrational", "paranoid" or something of that sort or order.

The essay will try to trace the examples of the suggested overall approach since the very early days of the Revolution, under the late Ayatollah Khomeini, and subsequently under Ayatollah Khamenei, and during various administrations all through the past three decades. To elucidate the discussion, two specific issues – examples – have been given particular emphasis – the nuclear dossier and the Iran-US relations. The latter, even if strained thus far and with somewhat bleak prospects currently, will have to undergo positive, mutually beneficial change in the future, which as argued in the paper, will have to move beyond misperceptions and more importantly, will require recognition on the US part of Iran's genuine, long-term national concerns and sensitivities. The essay also touches, in very broad terms, on the still unfolding situation in Iran and addresses the requirements for smooth transformation in its governance in the future.

The essay has been authored with the hope of helping to create a better understanding of Iran's foreign policymaking - in the West in general and the in United States in particular.

**Keywords:** Iran's aspirational foreign policy, spirituality, pragmatism, Iran-US relations, nuclear dossier

## Introduction

This essay suggests that the evolution of Iran's foreign policy since the Revolution in 1979 has incrementally produced an aspirational paradigm for Iran's foreign policymakers which I call "*spiritual pragmatic.*"

Pragmatism is conventionally viewed as the opposite of principle, whether religious, moral or ideological. The gradual evolution of Iranian foreign policy since the revolution, however, demonstrates that Iranian foreign policymakers have aspired to create a hybrid of pragmatism and spirituality.

The conundrum of spirituality and pragmatism, however, is not limited to Iran; it is universal. The history of American foreign policy, for example, shows that this tension is often expressed in terms of realism verses idealism. President Richard Nixon, for example, was regarded as a realist while President Jimmy Carter was considered an idealist.

Yet American leaders seldom understand this same practicality/spirituality interaction in Iran's foreign policymaking. At times, therefore, they



candidly acknowledge in private and public that they do not understand Iran's foreign policy behavior, while at other times they view it as "irrational" or "paranoid." I hope the following reflections will help to create a better understanding of Iran's foreign policymaking in the West in general and the United States in particular.

### **The Ideal of an Islamic State and the Reality of World Politics**

#### **Ayatollah Khomeini**

The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran reflected the worldview of its founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. He aspired to the ultimate rise of an "Islamic world order" for the benefit of humanity. He said on December 18, 1979, "Islam is not peculiar to a country, to several countries, to a group of {people or countries} or even the Muslims. Islam has come for humanity...Islam wishes to bring all of humanity under the umbrella of its justice."

Khomeini showed in action what he meant. On January 1, 1989, for example, in a letter to the Soviet leader Michael Gorbachev he castigated the "bankrupt ideologies of the East and the West" and urged him to adopt "Islamic values for the well-being and salvation of all nations," including the people of the Soviet



Union.

Yet, all revolutions mellow or, in Kenneth N. Waltz's words, "socialize" to the international system. In the case of Iran, for example, the ideal of exporting revolution is not a priority of Iran today as it was in the early years of the Revolution. Iran's leaders, like those of other states, have to take serious account of the reality of world politics as well as their spiritual principles. They encounter what I call an "*international constituency*."

Since the Revolution Iran's leaders have tried to take account of the reality of this constituency by trying to adapt the *pristine* ideological principles of the early days of the Islamic Republic to the realities of changing world politics. The super idealist Ayatollah Khomeini himself led the way toward an aspirational paradigm of spiritual pragmatism. He sometimes changed what others called "his ideological line" (*khat-e Imam*), and was quite flexible in adjusting his idealistic worldview to the dictates of circumstance. He criticized ideological zealots who were beholden to fossilized ideas at the expense of the national interest.

For example, in facing the realities of domestic political disarray and superpowers' opposition to the revolutionary regime, Khomeini told Iranians, "we must become isolated in order to become



independent” (*baayad monzavi shaveem taa mostaqel shaveem*). But when diehard factions opposed his decision to establish relations between Iran and Turkey and Germany he admonished them. He cited the example of the Prophet Mohammad who, Khomeini said, dispatched ambassadors worldwide. Subsequently, after he consolidated power, he rejected a “hermit” status for Iran in foreign affairs, and told the hardliners in no uncertain terms on October 30, 1984, that their opposition to foreign relations “would mean defeat, annihilation and being buried right to the end.”

Ayatollah Khomeini’s pragmatic approach to spiritual ideals is exemplified in the case of Iran’s arms deal with the US. After the exposure of the secret deal Iranian leaders, especially Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, vigorously denied the deal, and ridiculed the surprise visit of Americans who came to Iran bearing a cake and a Bible. But the fact remains that Iran needed arms to defend itself against Iraqi aggression. Under the circumstances Khomeini believed that a deal with even the “Great Satan” was advisable.

To cite another example, Khomeini reluctantly accepted the United Nations Resolution 598 of 1988, saying he was drinking poison. He set examples in his



lifetime for future leaders of Iran to follow, showing that in foreign affairs to compromise with the enemy is not appeasement. On the contrary, it is a sign of strength. In regard to the US he said Iran would establish relations with America “if it behaves humanely” (*agar aadam be-shavad*).

Iran’s leaders have tried to follow Ayatollah Khomeini’s example of spiritual pragmatism. President Seyyed Ali Khamenei, who later became the Supreme Leader, articulated that aspiration in terms of what he called Iran’s “Open Door Foreign Policy.” He said on July 20 and again on August 6, 1984, “Iran seeks to have rational, sound and healthy relations with all countries” so as to serve not only Islam but also Iran’s national interest. That is to say, he aspired to blend pragmatism and Islamic spirituality as he interpreted the term “spirituality.”

#### **President Rafsanjani**

Rafsanjani was impelled in his two terms of office to emphasize Iran’s post-Iraq-Iran war practical needs. He pressed for economic development and military reconstruction. He downplayed ideological doctrines. He said, “We can not build dams with slogans.” In effect, he went beyond adapting Islamic principles to the dictates of national interest. He said on April 17, 1987, “I believe our principles are obeyed, but in some



cases we may be limited and we may have to forego some of these principles.”

Rafsanjani debunked the slogan, “Neither East, nor West” after the demise of the Soviet Union. Instead he pursued a realistic “Good Neighbor Policy.” He reversed hitherto hostile relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia where, for years, Iranian pilgrims had fueled agitation with political demonstrations during the pilgrimage season (*Hajj*). Also, in spite of the dispute with the United Arab Emirates over three islands in the Persian Gulf, he developed good relations with smaller Gulf monarchies. Moreover, he established amicable relations with the new post-Soviet states of Central Asia. With no ideological baggage he emphasized Iran’s common interests in culture, economic development and trade with these states.

#### **President Khatami**

President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami emphasized that practical actions must take place in the context of “spirituality and morality.” He called his paradigm “Islamic democracy.” He introduced a degree of social and political freedom unprecedented since the Revolution.

Khatami reawakened hope that the Revolution’s promise of freedom would finally be realized.





Expatriates like me hoped that the age-old autocracy would ultimately vanish from Iran. In addressing Khatami at the United Nations on September 4, 2000, I concluded my remarks by saying, “*There can be no durable political order without equitable justice under the law and no justice without liberty.*”

Khatami’s attempts at reforming the political system (*nezam*) from within, however, were blocked by diehard religious and civilian politicians. His legislative proposals for limiting the extensive powers of the Council of Guardians in vetting presidential and parliamentary candidates were blocked by the ultra-conservative politicians in the name of Islamic purity.

Yet Khatami’s détente policy was successful. His proposal for dialogue among civilizations was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly, giving mandate to the Secretary General to promote dialogue through dissemination of information, conferences and seminars. His conciliatory words and actions improved Iran’s international image in a manner unprecedented since the Revolution.

Despite US animosity, he offered the American people an olive branch. He said boldly on December 14, 1997 “I respect the American people and nation,” and on January 7, 1998, he told the American people of Iran’s interest in the exchange of professors,



writers, scholars, artists, journalists and tourists with those from the US.

Khatami creatively tempered Khomeini's ideological *fatwa* on the British writer Salman Rushdi. His Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi told British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook on 24 September 1998 that "Iran had no intention nor was going to take any action whatsoever to threaten the life of the author of *Satanic Verses*."

Iran's response to the terrorist attacks in America on September 11, 2001, during the George W. Bush administration, could not have been a better example of pragmatism. Within hours after the attacks by al-Qaeda extremists, Khatami condemned the "terrorist horrific attacks" perpetrated by "a cult of fanatics." Khamenei was the first cleric in the Muslim world to call for "holy war" (*jihad*) against terrorism as a "global scourge," and many Iranians held candle light vigils for the American victims of terrorism.

The Khatami government also helped the US to defeat the anti-Iranian Taliban regime, which had harbored the anti-American al-Qaeda terrorists in Afghanistan. Iran also aided the establishment of the new government of Hamid Karzai, and extended \$500 million to his government for reconstruction over five years.

Bush's response to all these conciliatory policies outraged Iranians. In his first State of the Union address on January 29, 2002 he included Iran with North Korea and Iraq in an "axis of evil," a designation which was then, as now, an insult to Iranians of all political stripes.

When in August 2002 a group opposed to the regime outside Iran (*mujaheddin khalq*) divulged a secret nuclear facility at Natanz, the suspicion of the West, especially the US, about Iran's intentions intensified. Western leaders accused Iran of trying to make nuclear weapons. To contain Western suspicion, Khatami asked the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to send inspectors to Iran in February 2003. The IAEA reported afterwards that there was no evidence of a nuclear weapons program in Iran. From then on Iran negotiated with the IAEA and with Britain, France and Germany (EU-3), presumably to remove doubts about Iran's nuclear intentions, and went so far as to voluntarily suspend nuclear enrichment for about two years. The Bush administration stayed out of the European discussions with Iran, and pressured the Europeans to take a hard stance in negotiating with Iran.

Iran hoped all along that there could be a deal between the two sides to settle the nuclear dispute.



The EU-3 offered incentives in return for Iran's continued suspension of nuclear enrichment. Iran considered the incentives to be "pseudo-concessions (*shebh-e emtiazat*), and insisted that Iran had the "inalienable right" (*haq-e Mosallam*) to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). All along the US and Israel threatened possible military strikes on Iran's nuclear facility at Natanz, which prompted the soft-spoken Khatami to say Iran would respond to attacks with "hell fire."

#### **President Ahmadinejad**

Did Ahmadinejad aspire to the paradigm of pragmatic spirituality as had his predecessors? This question is difficult to answer. His words and demeanor have proved quite controversial. The West in general and the US in particular have considered his foreign policy to be "confrontational." His harsh statements have differed significantly from the conciliatory remarks of Rafsanjani and Khatami. Ahmadinejad's strident statements about wiping Israel off the map and his denial of the Holocaust, although tempered later during his first term, have been viewed in the US as a threat to regional peace and security. Israel claimed then, as it does now, that a nuclear Iran poses an "existential threat" to the Jewish state.

Many argue that Ahmadinejad's vitriolic rhetoric has harmed Iran and Iranian interests, embarrassed Iranian expatriates around the world, and even displeased Iran's friends such as the former United Nations-Secretary General Kofi Anan, who said he was "dismayed" to hear certain statements. Domestically he has been even more controversial, especially since the June 12, 2009 elections and the cataclysmic events that have gripped the country and the entire governance structure – to which I will briefly turn *in the final section of this essay*.

The real question of concern to this essay, however, is whether Ahmadinejad's ultra-conservative interpretation of spirituality and his reputation as an ideologue demonstrate that he has not been pragmatic in foreign policymaking. To address this question, it is best to examine his nuclear policy in detail below which, contrary to conventional wisdom, shows that he has been somewhat pragmatic.

He resumed uranium enrichment, criticizing the Khatami government for suspension. His action alarmed the IAEA, the West and Israel. But he insisted, as had Khatami, that Iran's nuclear program aimed at producing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, especially for electricity. He also continued to negotiate with the IAEA, as had Khatami, but his



relatively confrontational stance soured relations with the Agency. The Agency had complained for years that Iran had not been forthcoming with satisfactory answers to its questions about Iran's nuclear program, answers that would enable the Agency to report that there was no military dimension to Iran's nuclear program--that there was no smoking gun.

The IAEA finally decided, under US pressure, to refer Iran's dossier to the United Nations Security Council for the first time. The Khatami government had managed, with the help of Iran's chief negotiator Hassan Rouhani, to keep Iran's case out of the Security Council. The Council passed three major resolutions demanding that Iran stop enriching uranium. It also imposed sanctions, which Iran viewed as "unwarranted and illegal." Iran's defiance of the Council, however, was partly in reaction to the IAEA reference of its case to the Council.

Nevertheless, Ahmadinejad continued to negotiate with the IAEA and P5+1 (the five permanent members of the Security Council-- the US, Russia, China, France and Britain) and Germany. He welcomed the Bush administration's belated decision to send Under Secretary of State William J. Burns to participate in the P5+1 discussions with Iran. He said on August 3, 2008 "Iran has always been willing to

solve the long-standing crisis over the disputed nuclear program through negotiations.” These reassurances notwithstanding, the negotiations went nowhere. The P5+1 offered Iran incentives in 2006 and in 2008 which Iran did not find to be meaningful enough to accept.

To continue Iran’s long-standing interest in settling all issues in dispute with the US, including the nuclear one, through diplomacy, Ahmadinejad sent on November 6, 2008 an unprecedented congratulatory letter to the American President-Elect, Barack Obama. He welcomed Obama’s determination to engage Iran in negotiations without preconditions.

In pursuing engagement with Iran, President Obama sent a New Year (*Nowruz*) address on March 21, 2009 to the Iranian people *and government*, the first time such address to be made by an American president since the Revolution. His remarks about the greatness of Iranian culture were music to the ears of the people of Iran. Khamenei, however, responded by a litany of Iranian grievances against the US. More specifically, he said he did not wish to prejudge the intentions of the new president, whom, he said, he did not know; but he demanded action to match Obama’s “slogan of change.”

Nevertheless, conservative Ayatollah Khamenei



has supported negotiations with the IAEA and P5+1. On October 1, 2009 the representatives of Iran and the US sat across the same table in Geneva for the first time since the Revolution to discuss the nuclear issue. Other members of the P5+1 also participated in the talks, and the Iranian and American representatives also held sideline talks for forty-five minutes in a reportedly positive atmosphere.

Iran's nuclear negotiations from October 1 to the end of 2009 fell into two broad categories. One concerned Iran's nuclear program, particularly its nuclear facility at Natanz. The other focused on the newly discovered facility under construction at Fordou, a village near the holy city of Qum.

Regarding the first category, an October 1 meeting in Geneva led to a tentative agreement between Iran and the P5+1. Iran accepted it *in principle*. The agreement provided for Iran to ship 2,600 pounds (1, 200 kilograms) of its low-enriched uranium (LEU) to Russia by January 15, 2010 for processing into fuel rods which would then be sent to France for further processing and finally returned to Iran for its nuclear research reactor in Tehran to be used for medical purposes.

To detail the technical and legal terms of the agreement, Iran's ambassador to the IAEA, Ali Asghar





Soltanieh, met with his American, Russian, and French counterparts between October 19 and 20 in Vienna to consider a draft proposal prepared by the IAEA. The proposal originated from Iran's request to the IAEA to refuel the small medical reactor which has long been under international inspections and is not considered by the West to be part of a nuclear weapons program.

The IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei said the proposal was a "very important confidence-building" measure, and "an agreed arrangement could defuse a long-standing crisis and open space for negotiation." He also expressed cautious optimism that the draft agreement would be approved by the deadline he had specified, 22 October.

The draft agreement, however, gave Iran pause. The key concern of Iran was then, as it had been in 2007 when a similar deal had been made but rejected by Ayatollah Khamenei as "an infringement of Iran's sovereignty." As a result, Iran did not respond by the 22 October deadline. Voices of opposition to the deal were heard in Iran soon after the deal had been made public. For example, on October 25 Ali Larijani, Iran's speaker of the parliament and former chief nuclear negotiator, warned that the West was trying to "cheat" Iran and might never return its enriched uranium.



Apparently Iran informed ElBaradei on October 29 that it would not send its enriched uranium abroad, a verbal remark that he thought was not a final response from Iran.

On November 18, 2009 Iran's Foreign Minister Manoucher Mottaki, in an interview with *The Hindu*, outlined three options. First, Iran itself would further enrich the fuel. Second, Iran would purchase the fuel from other countries as in the past. Third, Iran would consider further the IAEA-brokered proposal, to which it had already provided an "initial response."

In reacting to the West's continued suspicion that Iran intended to build nuclear weapons in spite of its active negotiations, the chief of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization (IAEO) Ali Akbar Salehi, stated "It is against our tenets, it is against our religion, to produce, use, hold or have nuclear weapons. We have been saying this for decades."

On December 12 Mottaki announced Iran's counterproposal. He said, "We suggested that the exchange take place over the course of some years." He further informed the 5+1(group) that Iran "could deliver 400 kilogram uranium enriched to 3.5 percent on Kish Island and receive its equivalent enriched to 20 percent." In return Iran would demand 100 percent guarantee that it would receive this further enriched



fuel.

In explaining the course of the negotiation, Mottaki said, “They (the US, Russia and France) told us to provide the 3.5 percent enriched nuclear fuel and receive the 20 percent fuel, and we agreed with the general outlines of the proposal, but we suddenly realized that the Western media reported the 1,200 kilogram of nuclear fuel would be shipped out of Iran so that Iran” would be unable to produce nuclear weapons. “Is this,” he asked rhetorically, “a response to confidence building?”

Reportedly, the US dismissed the Iranian offer, but as of this writing there has been no official response from the US. Mottaki said that Iran had not received an official response, and we “do not insist that the other side respond to the proposal. We just wanted to open a way for the other side.” The deal was said to have required that the nuclear material had to be exchanged all at once, and had to be 1, 200 kilograms and sent to Russia in one batch.

Iran had suspected all along that the West, especially the US, had hoped that the deal would stop Iran from acquiring greater ability to enriching uranium, at least for a while. The suspicion was fueled on November 2, 2009 when the US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton urged Iran to accept the deal



and emphasized that it would not be altered.

The next day, Ayatollah Khamenei repeated what he had said in response to Obama's New Year address in March that he would not prejudge "the slogan of change," but now he said the practice of the US contradicted its rhetoric. With an eye to Clinton's inflexible statement, he said, "On the one hand Americans talk of negotiations. On the other hand they continue to threaten and say the negotiations must have our desired results."

The US's apparent dismissal of Iran's proposal was followed by discussions aimed at imposing tougher sanctions on Iran. Obama had set the end of the year as the deadline for Iran to be forthcoming in negotiations, otherwise stiffer sanctions would be imposed, presumably by the UN Security Council, assuming that Russia and China would support such a move. Obama had been encouraged by Russia's apparent willingness to go along with further sanctions. China had also been approached by Dennis Ross and others in Beijing, who argued that the US could not stop a country from military action against Iran if that country believed Iran's nuclear program posed an "existential threat," referring to Israel's repeated threats of military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities.



Yet, on December 11 the US Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, while foreseeing “some significant additional sanctions imposed by the international community” on Iran if it did not agree to the Geneva agreement, discounted the idea of a military strike against Iran. He said, “You never take any options off the table [meaning using military force], but the reality is that any military action would only buy some time, maybe two or three years.”

Iran, however, viewed its counterproposal as a way of opening, not shutting, the door for negotiation. Mottaki said it was up to the other side to respond. He added, “Today it is not possible to frighten countries through threats or sanctions, and the language of sanctions goes back to the 1960s.” On December 21, he added “We do not insist on our proposal. We aimed to open a door for the other side.” He added, “It (the proposal) is one step forward to prove our goodwill and a suitable opportunity for them.”

To take up the second aspect of the nuclear dispute: at Iran’s invitation, the IAEA inspectors visited the Fordou nuclear facility, which had been discovered by the US and which Iran had announced soon thereafter. The IAEA reported on November 16, 2009 that Iran’s belated “declaration of the new facility reduces the level of confidence in the absence of other



nuclear facilities under construction, and gives rise to questions about whether there were other nuclear facilities in Iran which had not been declared to the agency.”

Iranian officials explained that they had been motivated to build an underground plant because of “the threats of military strikes against Iran,” a reference to possible military action against Iran by Israel, the US, or other Western powers.

The IAEA's concern, however, continued. On November 27 its Board of Governors adopted a resolution censuring Iran. It urged “Iran to comply fully with its obligations under...the resolutions of the Security Council and meet the requirements of the Board of Governors, including by suspending immediately construction at Qum” and clarify “the purpose of the enrichment at Qum and the chronology of its design and construction.”

Iran was angered, and officially pronounced its rejection of the resolution on November 29. On the same day that the resolution was announced Ahmadinejad said that Iran would study what it would take for Iran to further enrich the existing stockpile of nuclear fuel in a medical reactor rather than rely on Russia or another nation. He also declared that Iran planned to build 10 more nuclear plants. The Iranian

parliament also reacted defiantly. More than 200 members signed a letter, urging that the agency's presence in Iran be further restricted, while a few others called for the withdrawal of Iran from the NPT – a measure that I believe has never been seriously considered in the higher echelons of the Iranian government.

### **Roots of Spiritual Pragmatism**

The salience of the spiritual pragmatic paradigm over the past three decades since the Revolution has deep roots in what I call "*Iran's diplomatic culture*," defined as those values, norms, mores, modes of thinking and ways of acting which have developed over centuries as a result of Iran's diplomatic interaction with other nations. These attributes have survived change and have influenced generations of Iran's foreign policymakers and diplomats and their negotiating style. For example, in talking to Iranians directly, Americans should anticipate that Iranian diplomats will come to the table with certain expectations that it would behoove American diplomats to understand at the outset. I will outline below the implications of such expectations for the US Iran policy.

Wisdom and rationality, which are the hallmarks



of spiritual pragmatism, were embedded in Iran's diplomatic culture as early as the birth of the Iranian state in the sixth century B.C. I choose two Iranian leaders or policymakers in history who are acknowledged as the supreme examples of pragmatic statecraft, Zoroastrian Cyrus of the pre-Islamic period and Shia Shah Abbas I of the Islamic era.

Herodotus praises Cyrus (558-530 B.C.) for his "statesmanship and liberality," the Bible reveres him for liberating the Jews from Babylonian captivity, and Adda B. Bozeman credits him with establishing the first "international society," which is to say a society that respected the human rights of the conquered peoples living in the Persian Empire. Above all else, she says, Iranians were the first people in history who concerned themselves with the relationship between morality and self-interest, a relationship that is, I think, at the foundation of spiritual pragmatism.

Shah Abbas I (1587-1629) was a devout Muslim, who believed he was "the spokesman of the Hidden Imam." Yet, according to Roger Savory, a leading Canadian historian of Safavid Iran, the shah moved away from "strict Shia ideology," was a "brilliant strategist and tactician, and preferred to achieve his ends by diplomacy rather than war." In a bold move to restore Iran's territories lost in incessant wars





waged by his predecessors, the shah signed a peace treaty with the Sunni Ottoman Empire in 1590 in which he abandoned the customary cursing of the “first three Caliphs,” a unique example of humane tolerance of sectarian difference.

Iranian policymakers, as I said before, have always aspired to create a hybrid of pragmatism and spirituality. That aspiration since the Revolution, it seems to me, has been often expressed in terms of the Quranic-based norm of *hikmah* (“wisdom”) in Arabic and *hekmat* in Persian. *Hekmat* has two dimensions, pragmatic (*hekmat-e ‘amali*) as well as spiritual (*hekmat-e nazari* or *elahī*).

I wonder whether the pragmatic dimension (*hikmat-e amali*) is compatible with the Western, particularly American, philosophy of pragmatic instrumentalism as expounded by American philosophers, especially John Dewey and my late friend and colleague Richard Rorty, one of the most influential American philosophers of his time. Rorty asked for my advice before going to Iran for a lecture on “Democracy and Philosophy.” He told me after his return that he was surprised to hear that Iranians were reading his writings. Rorty, like Habermas, whose philosophy is known to many enlightened Iranians, believed that membership in a religious community



will be taken over in time by “constitutional patriotism,” which I suggest has been a hallmark of Iranian aspirations since the Constitutional Revolution.

American charges of “irrationality” and “fanaticism” in Iran’s foreign policy reflect ignorance of such profound intellectual engagement of Iranians with American thought. Such charges prompted me to publish in 1986 *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, which demonstrated that even at the height of religious fervor in the first five years of the Revolution Iran’s foreign policy decisions included pragmatic strands. My book also argued that the United States should temper its containment policy and engage Iran, which only now is Obama trying to do.

### **Implications for U.S.-Iran Relations**

The central implications of these reflections for the US Iran policy are intellectual and practical. Westerners, especially Americans, often make unwarranted assumptions about the forces which drive Iran’s foreign policy. Here are six examples of such assumptions.

First, it is assumed that factional politics determine Iran’s foreign policy; moderate leaders are



conciliatory, whereas hardliners are confrontational. Iran's diplomatic culture proves this wrong. Foreign policymakers everywhere, including in Iran, change their stance according to the dictates of circumstances. In other words, decision makers take soft or hard positions depending on the issue at hand. Thus, today's moderates may become tomorrow's radicals.

Second, it is assumed that Iran's contradictory principles determine its foreign policy. The principles of semi-divine *faqih* and popular sovereignty in the Constitution, it is argued, render foreign policy decisions and actions "incoherent." This is partly true, but this assumption fails to take note of the effects of international politics and of Iran's diplomatic culture, as defined above, on Iran's foreign policymaking.

Third, it is assumed that the ideology of Iran's policymakers determines their decisions. Political Islam, it is argued, makes for "irrational" policy decisions, (this is essentially the Kissingerian dogma that revolutions never change).

Fourth, and paradoxically it is assumed that *Realpolitik* rather than ideology drives Iran's foreign policy, that ideology is simply used to rationalize crass power politics. On the contrary, Iran's diplomatic culture demonstrates that ideology and power politics sometimes coexist, sometimes clash and other times



fuse. Different policymakers accord different weights to ideology relative to practical realities.

Fifth, it is assumed that great powers are the real players in the international system and small, weak or underdeveloped nations are their pawns. Such an assumption disregards the momentous post-World War II processes of decolonization and the emergence of newly independent nations which control their destinies and make foreign policy decisions on their own despite great power intervention. Iran's recent history demonstrates graphically that since the Revolution Iran has made independent decisions despite unrelenting Western, especially American pressures, sanctions and threats of military force.

Sixth and finally, there is a pervasive biased attitude that prevents Westerners from understanding Iran dispassionately. Nearly a half century ago Lucian W. Pye, a renowned American social scientist, argued perceptively, "All the illogical reactions of race and class, of paternalism and piety, of pride and prejudice combine in various ways to blur the Westerner's image of transitional peoples."

Western policymakers knowingly or otherwise often fall victim to such untested assumptions and biased attitudes. Having observed US policymaking from the inside for nearly six decades, I think faulty



assumptions often underpin US policymakers' mistaken policies toward Iran. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, for example, flatly confessed in public that she did not understand Iran. Presidential candidate Obama, to cite another example, said, "I would engage in negotiations with Iran, with no conditions, because **we don't really understand how Iran works.**" (Emphasis added).

The sincere intention of President Obama to engage Iran, however, seems to have become saddled by what is called a "dual track" strategy, the brainchild of Dennis Ross who now serves in the National Security Council. On the one hand, the US is negotiating with Iran on the nuclear issue. On the other hand, it is threatening tougher sanctions and hinting implicitly at a possible military attack on Iran.

The representatives of any country, especially the US, need to take into account some core expectations of Iranian negotiators. I extract several of these from the history of Iran's diplomatic culture as follows:

First and most important, Iran expects the U S to understand that Iran's foreign policy is fundamentally driven by a fierce commitment to independence rooted in Iran's steely sense of *national identity*. The invasion of Iran by Alexander of Macedonia and other invasions by such foreign forces as Arabs, Turks,



Mongols, Afghans and Iraqis did not dent that sense. Even the Arab invasion did not rob Iran of its Persian identity. Unlike Egypt, Iran refused Arabization, and over time embraced Shiism, whose core tenets were compatible with those of Zoroastrianism, Iran's ancient religion. Above all else, the Persian language helped maintain Iran's sense of national identity. The 10<sup>th</sup> century epic poet Ferdowsi wrote in his *Book of Kings*, "I revived the Iranian identity through the Persian language" (*'ajam zendeh kardam be-din Parsi*). Iranians often cite Ferdowsi from memory today.

In this context the US should understand that when it imposes sanctions on Iran unilaterally or through the UN Security Council, and when Israel threatens to attack Iran, Iran's national pride is offended. Iran will resist any coercive foreign action in the future as it has in the past.

Second, Iran expects the US to recognize its strategic importance and its status as a major player in the Middle East. In the Persian Gulf, Iran straddles the Strait of Hormuz, the global oil chokepoint; it connects the Middle East to Central Asia and South Asia; it is the largest Shia state in the Muslim world; it is endowed with rich oil and gas resources; it has the largest industrial base of all countries in the Middle

East, and it has greater influence in Afghanistan and Iraq than any other regional state.

Given all this, the US should anticipate that Iran will retaliate against any attack. If attacked, it will likely target the American presence in the Middle East, especially in the nearby Persian Gulf where the oilfields of the US friends and allies are within Iran's easy reach. Iran could also mine the Strait of Hormuz, which will endanger the world economy including Iran's as well. Such possible acts of retaliation will likely open a third war front for the US in the Middle East with catastrophic consequences for both countries.

Third, Iran expects the US to respect it as an equal partner in negotiations. Iran's long memory of condescending Western attitudes does not help negotiations. Obama's respectful attitude is appreciated in Iran, but Iran also expects actions to match words about change. If the US should indeed dismiss Iran's nuclear counterproposal out-of-hand it could jeopardize an unprecedented opportunity for the two nations to settle all disputes of the past thirty years through negotiations.

Fourth, Iran expects empathy. In realizing this, former President Bill Clinton said in April 1999, Iran "has been the subject of quite a lot of abuse from



various Western nations,” and sometimes “it is quite important to tell people, look, you have a right to be angry at something that my country or my culture or others that are generally allied with us today did to you 50 or 60 or 100 or 150 years ago.”

And fifth, Iran expects the US to explore creatively the areas of potential common interest with Iran. Here are some common goals that it behooves both countries' decision-makers to consider constructively:

- Stability in Afghanistan and Iraq under representative governments.
- Security of uninterrupted flow of Persian Gulf oil supplies to world markets.
- Non-proliferation of nuclear weapons worldwide.
- Prevention of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.
- Regional security and economic cooperation in the Persian Gulf and beyond.
- Cooperation against Taliban insurgents and al-Qaeda terrorists.
- Modernization of Iran's oil industry so as to increase global oil supplies.
- Exchange of scholars, students, parliamentarians and athletes, among others.





### Looking Ahead

As Winston Churchill once said, “The further backward you look, the further forward you can see.” Having looked backward, what can be said about the future of the aspirational paradigm of pragmatic spirituality in Iran’s foreign policymaking?

It bears repeating that Iranian leaders were the first in international history to concern themselves with the conundrum of moral imperatives and pragmatic necessity. All Iranian leaders, from Ayatollah Khomeini to Ahmadinejad, have aspired to create a hybrid of the two, but they have given different weight to practical and spiritual considerations. Rafsanjani did not hesitate to forego Islamic doctrines if it were practically necessary, Khatami struck relative balance between the two, and although Ahmadinejad has produced an image of recalcitrance, he has not been able to disregard the imperative of practical necessity, or, in other words, to ignore the institutional imperatives of complex domestic politics or the demands of the international constituency.

Will future Iranian policymakers also aspire to create a hybrid of practicality and spirituality? The answer will partly depend on the outcome of a complex combination of the emerging political trends



within Iranian society and the global community while the ancient quest for spirituality will continue.

Domestically, younger generation Iranians will demand freedom as Iranians have done ever since the Tobacco Protest of 1891-1892. Khomeini had promised not only independence, but also freedom, which appears to lie at the heart of the current protest movement. By the end of 2009 there were clear signs of creeping radicalization of university students, who have always been central to social movements and popular demands for a wide range of rights recognized in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Even the older generation revolutionaries such as Mir Hussein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi, the perceived leaders of the opposition, and Rafsanjani and Khatami called for internal reform of the Islamic system. They all emphasized the centrality of the role of the people in Iranian society and politics.

Globally, unstoppable changes will interact with domestic transformations in Iranian society to advance universal values of freedom and democracy. Global trends will continue towards greater rates of literacy, accelerated urbanization, greater accountability of government to the people, deeper economic interdependence, broader cooperation against the scourge of terrorism, tighter control of infectious

diseases, higher standards of health, more efforts to reduce global warming, and less of a gap between the rich and the poor.

What lies behind the dilemma of spirituality/pragmatism is essentially the relationship between state and religion, which is as old as Iran's history. This relationship is the single most fundamental challenge Iran faces today and into the foreseeable future. The unprecedented criticism of the Islamic system as it exists today demonstrates that Iran will have to *redefine* the system.

Although the future cannot be predicted, one thing, however, is predictable. The Iranian demand for freedom, democracy, justice and higher human rights standards will persist. Human rights aspirations are universal, not simply Western. Iran must observe human rights standards because they are compatible with its own values – as stipulated in clear terms in the provisions of the Constitution which still seems to be the main rallying point of the mainstream protest movement. The roots of these standards are essentially the same values in Iran and America. In America as in the West in general they spring from the Christian belief in the oneness of humanity. In Iran they are embedded in the hybrid Perso-Islamic heritage. Ancient Iran is said to have made the world's first



human rights declaration while in Islam all humanity is one in the sight of God. Ayatollah Khomeini was speaking to this fundamental Islamic value when he said, "Islam has come for humanity."

No one has articulated this ideal better than has one of the greatest poets of Iran, Sa'di (1184-1283/1291), a traveler for decades in the Islamic world of his time. I memorized his beautiful and profound lines about seven decades ago when I was a schoolboy in the land of my birth:

The sons of men are members in a body whole  
related,  
For of a single essence are they and all created  
When Fortune persecutes with pain one member  
sorely, surely  
The other members of the body can not stand  
securely.  
O you who from another's trouble turn aside your  
view  
It is not fitting they bestow the name of "Man" on  
you.