

Domestic Ideational Sources of Iran's Foreign Policy*

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* A shorter version of this article was presented in the Conference on Iran's Foreign Policy, Oxford University, UK (2000).





Abstract

Iranian foreign policy during the post-revolutionary period has often been described as pursuing ideological objectives and means. Given the problems usually associated with the concept of ideology, the alternative concept of “domestic ideational sources” would offer a broader perspective and prove less problematic. By this concept is meant the totality of ideas, norms, rules, and discourses that in their inter-relations make the material life meaningful. The basic conceptual and theoretical aspects of the role of ideas and domestic ideational sources in foreign policy - in general and with particular emphasis on the realist outlook – are discussed in the first part of the article.

Based on this brief theoretical expose, the article will attempt to look into - and clarify – the main – Islamic- Shi’ite -- components of the domestic ideational sources of Iranian foreign policy since 1979. It will be argued that basic Islamic-Shi’ite ideas; the Iranian encounter with and experience of the West during the 19th and 20th centuries; Iranian intellectuals' response to the West's challenge manifested in a kind of Occidentalist discourse; and Western counter hegemonic, leftist and anti-imperialist discourses; have all played a role in shaping and/or affecting Iran’s Islamic revolutionary discourse. Furthermore, the discussion will also show how the discourse of the international system (or international ideational structure), have affected the Islamic discourse, which has led in turn to a variety of interpretations of domestic rules and norms. It will as well be argued that in the process of interaction some extra-religious ideas/discourses and events/experiences have influenced the formation of some versions of the Islamic discourse.

Keywords: Iran, foreign policy, ideational structure, discourse, Islamic discourse

Introduction

Iranian foreign policy during the last three decades has often been described as pursuing revolutionary-ideological objectives and/or means. Although it can be convincingly argued that ideology -- in spite of its incrimination in realist tradition -- plays a role in any foreign policy, its role has often been highlighted in explaining the policy of revolutionary regimes and this has been true about many of the analyses of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹

Ideology can be seen as a set of concepts and assumptions about social behavior and social systems (Evans and Newnham 1998). Any idea or set of ideas may be used as ideology if employed as a means of judgment about social order and/or political action. What changes a proposition into an ideology is to apply it in political struggle (Djalili 1989: 58). The

1. Although some analysts who seem to be inclined to portray Iranian foreign policy as a “threat” focus on its ideological elements (e.g., Menashri 1997), this cannot be generalized to all “ideological” explanations of Iran’s foreign policy.



concept of ideology is often used in foreign policy analysis to show the dogmatic nature of ideas that affect the actions of states. Yet, as Barry Buzan rightly suggests, most organized ideologies are themselves essentially contested concepts, and therefore impossible to define with precision, and probably in a constant process of evolution by nature (Buzan 1991: 44). Even though ideology is often taken to have a more or less fixed nature, in practice it is not. Furthermore, sometimes it seems that the concept is used in a derogatory manner, especially when applied to the analysis of state action.

In order to avoid the problems usually associated with the use of the concept of ideology, one may take a broader perspective by focusing instead on an alternative concept - "domestic ideational sources". By "ideational sources" I mean the totality of ideas, norms, rules, and discourses that in their interrelations make the material life meaningful. States, as social actors/agents, are in a state of reciprocal relationship with ideational sources at both *domestic* and *international* levels. Both of these have a role in the constitution of state identity, agency, its interests, and its foreign policy behavior. Although most constructivist analyses of foreign policy emphasize the importance of international ideational structure and its



role in the constitution of, or changes in, the foreign policy of states, the role of domestic ideational sources should not be underestimated.

This paper attempts to look into – and clarify – the main components of the domestic ideational sources of Iranian foreign policy. Furthermore, it shows how various discourses, including the discourse of the international system (or international ideational structure), have affected the domestic discourse, which has led in turn to a variety of interpretations of domestic rules and norms.

The first part of the article reviews some basic conceptual and theoretical aspects of the role of ideas and domestic ideational sources in foreign policy in general. Then the main components of domestic ideational sources and their role in the construction of Iranian foreign policy will be discussed. The concluding section will address the evolution in some ideational components in the course of time.

Domestic Ideational Sources of Foreign Policy: An Overview

It is usually argued that mainstream IR theories, and in particular various strands of realism, regard *international material* structures as the major source of state behavior. Although neo-realists, and in



particular Kenneth Waltz, do not offer a theory of foreign policy, they have some explanation for states' behavior. In the words of Kenneth Waltz (1979), "state behavior varies more with differences of *power* than with differences in *ideology*, in internal structure of property relations, or in governmental form". *Rational* actors who wish to survive give "rational responses to structural constraints" (Dessler 1989: 459). Although Waltz's theory is a materialist one, his discussion on the "rules of the game" proves that material factors cannot be considered sufficient in explaining states' behavior.¹ Yet even this "ideational" concept refers to international-level and not unit-level rules.

Classical realists were more interested in non-material aspects of and domestic influences on international life. While Hans Morgenthau's basic idea, i.e., "interest defined in terms of power," is often interpreted as referring to material power, he exhibits full awareness of the significance of ideational resources. In his discussion on "national character" as one of the elements of national power, Morgenthau (1985) discusses the role of "culture pattern" as "certain qualities of intellect and character [that] occur

1. His notion of "socialization" also points to the significance of ideational factors.

more frequently and are more highly valued in one nation than in another.” He also discusses ideology. In his view, ideologies have an instrumental function, that is, the “beautification” of foreign policy (Couloumbis and Wolfe 1990: 99). They are seen as masks concealing “the true nature of the policy.” He, however, concedes that there may be cases where foreign policies (for a period of time) do not follow a “rational, objective and unemotional course” (Morgenthau 1985: 7).

Neo-liberals, like neo-realists, have also attempted to explain states’ behavior on the basis of a rationalist account of states’ actions in an anarchic environment. Yet, they see the incentives for cooperation amongst states more than what is envisaged by neo-realists. Thus they see a role for international institutions and their rules and norms as important variables in explaining states’ behavior (see Keohane 1983). Nevertheless, as Wendt (1999) correctly argues, the role of norms and rules is not extended to affect states’ identity.

Liberals in general have shown more interest in the role of ideas in international relations and foreign policy. Andrew Moravscik (1997), for example, sees “ideational liberalism” as an important variant of liberal theory. Whereas ideational liberalism “views the



configuration of domestic social identities and values as a basic determinant of state preferences,” it does not offer a “distinctive position on the origins of social identities... nor on the question of whether they are ultimately ideational or material factors.”

Goldstein and Keohane (1993) have explored the role of ideas in foreign policy more explicitly. They believe that “ideas *as well as* interests have causal weight in explanations of human action” (original emphasis). Ideas include worldviews, principled beliefs, and causal beliefs. They “influence policy when the principled or causal beliefs they embody provide road maps that increase actors’ clarity about goals or ends-means relationships, when they affect outcomes of strategic situations in which there is no unique equilibrium, and when they become embedded in political institutions.” To them, ideas are independent variables that explain foreign policy behavior.

In general, more “agent-oriented” and/or “voluntaristic” analyses in contrast to “structuralist” views tend to focus more on the role ideas may play in shaping foreign policy. This perspective attempts “to reconstruct the parameters of action in favor of the notion of contingency, i.e., granting decision-makers more autonomy” in conducting their actions (Carlsnaes 1992: 253). The emphasis here is on the



contingent nature of social and political processes and the role of actors' intentions and motivations (Hay 1995: 196). From this point of view, elite's belief systems which are organized according to "a few abstract and widely shared principles" (Murray and Cowden 1999: 457) affect policy making. In the words of Carlsnaes (1987), perceptions and values that constitute the "dispositional dimension" of foreign policy affect choices and preferences (the "intentional dimension") that lead to foreign policy action. As argued by Levi (1970: 5) almost four decades ago, "values and beliefs influence perceptions and through them decisions.

Theories and analyses of foreign policy decision making take ideas seriously. For example, the idea of the "definition of the situation", as introduced by Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin (1962), is an attempt to recreate the "world" of the decision makers as they view it, and the manner in which they define situations becomes another way of saying how the state is oriented to action and why. Hermann, in his influential body of work (1986), sees foreign policy makers' perception as a key element in explaining foreign policy choices. Steven Spiegel (1985) also argues that perception and philosophy of leaders are important variables in foreign policy decision making. As seen by



Herrmann, perception is defined as “a concept that describes the construction of reality in which an individual makes foreign policy decisions” (1986: 843). In the same vein, concepts such as images (Cottam 1977, Jervis 1970), cognitive mapping (Axelrod 1972), schemata (Herrmann 1986), and operational code (George 1969) have been developed to underline the significance of ideas in foreign policy making. Yet as Larsen (1997) argues, in traditional foreign policy analysis beliefs are seen as intervening variables and not meaningful references for the actors.

More recent developments in agent-structure debate in social sciences, mostly influenced by Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, have been characterized by a kind of “revised structuralism” in which (1) the interplay between structures and agents is taken into consideration and (2) structures are not seen only as constraints on social action but they are perceived to provide opportunities and possibilities for any action (see for example, Giddens 1979, Wendt 1987, Callinicos 1988, and Hay 1995). And in the words of Dessler, they act as materials for action and not an environment for it (1989: 467). It is also suggested that “structures do not determine outcomes *directly*, but merely define the potential range of options and strategies” (Hay 1995: 200). Although the



focus in Giddens's structuration theory is on "the operation of macrostructures," they are regarded as existing only as "human agents ... absorb, reveal and reproduce them" (Rosenau 1990: 147).

This has significant implications for International Relations and foreign policy analysis. Among the major contributions in this regard reference can be made to the following: Wendt's emphasis on conceptualizing "agents and structures as mutually constituted" (Wendt 1987: 350); Dessler's notion of structure as both enabling action and constraining its possibilities and being "the outcome as well as the medium of action" (Dessler 1989: 452-53); Carlsnaes' model for explaining foreign policy action in which the causal effect of structural dimension on both dispositional and intentional dimensions and explaining the intentions on the basis of dispositions are focused on (Carlsnaes 1987); and his dynamic model for analyzing foreign policy change in which the factor of time is included to show the mutual relationship between agents and structures in the course of time (Carlsnaes 1992).

The "ideational turn" in political science - and International Relations - which involves paying attention to "ideational variables" in political explanation (Hay 2004: 142) has also influenced



foreign policy analysis. . Furthermore, it has been argued that to understand actions, practices, and institutions, “we need to grasp the relevant meanings, beliefs and preferences of the people involved” (Bevir and Rhodes 2004: 130). Constructivism and various strands of post-structuralism, as the main representatives of ideationalist approaches, allow for incorporating ideas as the main pivot in foreign policy analysis and, at the same time, they caution against any “voluntaristic” or “deterministic” account of foreign policy action on the basis of “ideological factors.”

Although system-level constructivists such as Alexander Wendt (1999) tend to focus on the constitutive effects of international ideational structure on the identity and hence the interests and behavior of states, it is reasonable to look for domestic ideational resources that shape states’ corporate identity and its interest in the first place. Many foreign policy analyses that focus on ideational sources of foreign policy tend to rely on constructivist accounts and/or discourse analysis.

Roxanne Doty (1993) uses “discursive practices approach” (DPA) in foreign policy analysis. She emphasizes the linguistic construction of identity. In her approach, language is seen as a set of signs that generate subjects, objects, and worlds; in contrast to

cognitive approaches, actors are not seen as the loci of meaning; and discursive practices are seen as analytic forms or the units of study. Since policy makers act within a discursive space that creates “their” reality, the focus of the DPA is on the ways in which this reality is produced and various practices become possible.

In addressing “the nature of broad domestic constraints in terms of meaning structures” within which policies take place, Henrik Larsen (1999) draws on social constructivist premises to show how interests and goals for foreign policy are constructed. He, too, employs a discourse approach. Discourses are seen as the basis on which preferences, goals, and interests are made. Political discourse can be seen as a domestic structural factor constraining and enabling foreign policy; it makes a certain range of policies possible but particular stances or policies cannot be necessarily deduced from the discourse.

From a similar perspective, Roxanna Sjöstedt (2007) explores the conceptual connections between foreign policy doctrines and prevalent political and societal discourses to identify discursive mechanisms that are prominent in both discourse and doctrine. In her “discursive structural approach” the construction and organization of the context within which foreign



policy is made is taken into consideration in order to show how preferences and interests are constructed.

What is emphasized in discourse approaches is that discourses show both continuity and change. But, as Larsen (1997) argues, a “change *in* discourse is not a complete change *of* discourse.... We can have changes that affect the discourse at different levels of depth. Only if the governing statements are altered would we see the complete disappearance of a given discourse” (Larsen 1997: 17). Individual interpretation of the dominant discourse may also in the course of time alter the dominant discourse or create a new one (Sjöstedt 2007: 238). Struggles between different wings of the bureaucracy could be interpreted as struggles over meaning by different discourses (Larsen 1997: 22) the result of which may be a change *in* discourses.

What can be added to the above arguments is the importance of articulation of particular discourses with other ones. As far as foreign policy discourse is concerned, we see how elements of other discourses (both domestic and international) may be incorporated into foreign policy discourse and this is one of the sources of changes therein.

In this article, ideational structure in foreign policy sphere is seen as a discursive formation consisting of concepts and propositions (more often

in the form of rules and norms). It mediates any understanding of external events and/or structures and affects the actions and reactions. As Wendt argues, social structures “are inseparable from the reasons and self-understandings that agents bring to their actions” (Wendt 1987: 359). Foreign policy discourse is itself in a dynamic relationship with some master or grand discourses, other neighboring discourses (including hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ones), past experiences, and in a constant interaction with structural forces of the international system.¹ Therefore, we can follow its modifications and reinterpretations in the course of time and we may also see how elites relying on the “same” grand discourses may pose various and sometimes more or less contradictory interpretations of the reality and act thereupon.

Revolutionary Islamic Discourse and Iran's Foreign Policy

The ideologization of Islam has been a rather long process in the course of which Islamic concepts and ideas have been employed in political struggles. It must

1. There is, of course, an undeniable interaction between ideology and domestic social and structural forces. However, I do not focus on this interplay in this paper.



be noted, however, that in this process some extra-religious ideas/discourses and events/experiences have influenced the formation of some versions of the Islamic discourse. This discourse, when applied to foreign policy, shows how other discourses as well as the experiences of the “carriers” of the discourse might affect its main components.

It can be argued that basic Islamic-Shiite ideas; the Iranian encounter with and experience of the West during the 19th and 20th centuries; Iranian intellectuals' response to the West's challenge manifested in a kind of Occidentalism discourse; and Western counter hegemonic, leftist and anti-imperialist discourses; have all played a role – albeit to different degrees – in shaping and/or affecting Iran's Islamic revolutionary discourse. Challenging the West has been one of its main characteristics. Furthermore, when the Islamic Republic was formed and this discourse began to be practically employed in defining and conducting the state's foreign policy, it also became subject to the growing influence of two other international discourses, i.e., the very discourse of the international system and the moderately counter-hegemonic discourse of the Third World countries.

The overarching fact about the Islamic Republic of Iran is that Islamic concepts underlie all rules and

policies and Islam is considered as the point of departure of all domestic and foreign policies; therefore, the significance of the Islamic discourse in foreign policy making is undeniable. Islam as a religion is a “worldview” that defines the “universe of possibilities for action” (Goldstein and Keohane 1993).

What has been called Islamic theory (Djalili 1989) has been developed in the Islamic tradition. It was basically inspired by the Qur’anic verses, deeds and sayings (*sonnat* and *hadith*) of the Prophet (PBUH) -- and in the Shiite school, those of the Imams -- and the original and secondary sources of the Islamic law or *sharia* as elaborated by Muslim jurists of the Islamic Empire and Iran especially during the 8th-10th centuries. This discourse and the ideas and concepts it has produced can have substantial and serious sociopolitical connotations - to some of which with implications for foreign policy I refer below.

The basic dichotomy in Islam, as in any other religion, is between right and evil extended to include other oppositional pairs such as faith and unfaith, just and unjust, oppressed and oppressor, etc. These oppositions were the basis of the image of the world for Muslim thinkers whose ideal was to establish an “ecumenical” society with the spread of a religion with



a universal mission. In order to realize this goal, the basic division of the world was one constructed upon a dichotomy, i.e., Islam and non-Islam. Accordingly, the human beings were divided into two basic groups of Muslims and non-Muslims, time into pre-Islam and Islamic eras, and place into two territories of Islam (*dar-al-Islam*) and non-Islam or warfare (*dar-al-harb*). Therefore, the real borders that separate the main communities of the world are defined on the basis of two opposite poles and it has been assumed that with the spread of Islam there will be an ideal worldwide Islamic community (Djalili 1989: 17, AbuSulayman 1987).

Theoretically, *dar-al-Islam* is a single territory with a single authority and a single community (*umma*). In this ideal form, Islamic community does not eventually recognize nation-state-based division of the world and that is why it is said that Islamic community in its ideal form is not supranational but a single '*umma*' (Djalili 1989: 18). In this Islamic community, justice is the most exalted value and its full realization the ideal of the *umma*. The realization of justice is not only the duty of the Islamic authorities; rather, every individual is responsible for doing justice to himself/herself, his/her brothers and sisters in the community of the faithful and even



outside it, and to act against unjust behavior on the part of anyone. In other words, struggling against oppression and defending the oppressed are considered as important religious duties. Ramazani (1990) suggests that this justice-seeking attitude has been also influenced by the ancient Iranian tradition and in “Imami Shi’ism in particular, justice ranks the highest among all values.”¹

In the relationships between the two opposite poles, whether individuals or communities, no dominance by non-Muslims/non-believers on Muslims/believers is accepted. In Islamic texts this is known as the principle of prohibiting dominance (*ghaedeh nafy-e sabil*), according to which Muslims should not be dominated by non-Muslims (Dehshiri 1378 [1999]: 346). This can also be seen as an integral part of the universal quest for justice since the unbelievers seek to impose their dominance to further their own interests at the expense of Muslims.

The idea of “ideal Islamic community” – regardless of the debates among the Muslims on its actual examples since the time of Prophet Mohammad - has always remained the basic theoretical discourse

1. For a discussion on the importance of the discourse of justice (and independence) and its implications for understanding Iran’s policies, see Moshirzadeh 2007.



for Islamic thinkers and particularly the *ulama*, and the concepts and ideas mentioned above have usually been employed in their perception and understanding of the world.

What is most relevant to the present discussion is that Iranian Muslim thinkers, especially in the last two centuries, have confronted and experienced the West on the basis of such a dichotomous perception of the world. The two Iran-Russian wars in the early decades of the 19th century and the humiliating defeats and losses Iranians suffered therein are generally reckoned to have shaped the critical starting point for perceiving a new unfaithful evil power seeking to weaken and defeat Muslims and their faith. These wars were seen in Iran, especially among the *ulama* and their faithful followers, as the onslaught against Islam. The notorious interventions of Western imperialist powers – Britain, France and Tsarist Russia - in the domestic and foreign affairs of Iran during the Qajar period and the losses Iranians suffered from these policies intensified this perception. The sudden emergence and meteoric rise of Reza Khan to power in the post-Constitutional Revolution period, especially through a suspicious coup supported by the imperial British, could be seen as the further continuation of the infidel West's conspiracy against the Muslims. Reza Khan's



Westernizing policies and his insistence upon the forced secularization of the Iranian society further intensified the deep-seated suspicions about the gradual - albeit invisible - but ever-increasing success of the Westerners' plot for discouraging Muslims and isolating Islamic teachings and thought. Against such a backdrop, the client regime of the post-1953 coup was seen again as a sign of the general conspiracy - a dependent regime fully supported by foreign powers bent on suppressing Islamic values and their main carriers and advocates.

This perception has formed the crux of what many Iranian, as well as non-Iranian Muslim thinkers in Islamic countries, had come to understand from their historical experience of the West; hence calling for the resurrection of Islam as a struggle against the encroaching powers of the West who were not only exploiting the natural and human resources of the Islamic territory but also undermining and destroying the very foundations of the Islamic tradition and Muslims' beliefs. That is why Islamic resurgence in mid-twentieth century took the form of an anti-colonial discourse, or in the words of Cassels (1996), "an extreme form of anti-colonialism". Thus the West was seen as the *dar-al-harb* "where the duty of the true believer is to fight against evil" (p. 236).



This dichotomous Manichaean image of the world has been accompanied by a rather monolithic perception of the West as the “other” against the monolithic “self” of the Islamic *umma*. The only path toward salvation, therefore, would be through the resurrection of the Islamic unity in order to revive the lost Golden Age of Islam. That’s how and why the idea of pan-Islamism emerged. It should be noted, however, that pan-Islamism was a response to the new conditions of the world where nation-states had emerged and the Islamic territories were divided into “artificial” nation-states. And this was seen again as the result of the colonialists' wish - and drive - for a weaker position for the Muslims through imposing upon them internal divisions to guarantee their own “rule” - hence, the proverbial “divide and rule.”

It is worth mentioning here that the predominant perception among Iranian Muslims – both clergy and laity - of a materialist, non-spiritual, and amoral West was not confined to the capitalist countries of the West. The negation of both “East and West” in the leitmotif of this discourse in the Iranian Revolution and afterwards, i.e., the “Neither East, nor West” dominant slogan in Iranian foreign policy, meant that both Western and Eastern powers were more or less characterized by the same evils: expansionist



tendencies, oppressive behavior, and exploitive manners - all rooted in the lack of spirituality. This is what one could well trace in the well-known letter of the late Imam Khomeini to the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev (Ramazani 1990a: 48-49). As far back as the early 1960's, Ayatollah Khomeini, then a rising relatively young *mojtahed* with a peculiar militant outlook engaged in a political struggle against the Pahlavi state, had castigated both the Soviet Union and the Western powers in his famous dictum - "America is worse than Britain, Britain is worse than America, the Soviet Union is worse than both; all worse than each other and all more vicious than each other" (quoted in Madani 1362 [1983]: 88).

Another important implication of this perception of the world and the Islamic belief in and quest for universal justice is reflected in the concern for all the oppressed of the world. If the present arrangements are unjust and oppressive, then it is an Islamic duty to support and even to cherish and promote justice-seeking movements. That is why the ideas of "supporting liberationist movements" and "the export of the Islamic Revolution" have held a prominent position in the foreign policy agenda based on this discourse.

Two other intellectual/counter-hegemonic discourses in Iran have affected or at least reinforced



this Islamic perception of the West. One is the so-called Occidental discourse of Iranian intellectuals. As Mehrzad Boroujerdi (1996) has convincingly argued, “West” has been a *problematique* in intellectuals' discourse in Iran for quite a long time. This discourse -- like its Islamic counterpart -- has been based on a dichotomy between self and the other. Since late 19th century, Iranian intellectuals in their quest for identity gave form to an understanding of the “self” which was historically affected by their perception of the dominant “other”, i.e., the West. On the one hand, their critical conception of the West and modernity has been --paradoxically -- through resorting to Western critical thought. On the other hand, their reaction against the West has been manifested in nativist discourses of “Westoxication” and “return to the Self.”¹ This nativism was in accord with anti-imperialist, nationalist, independence-oriented concerns rising from the historical experience of the West in Iran and therefore some aspects of it were more or less in harmony with the Islamically-inspired discourse and could theoretically reinforce it.

The second discourse that has had its own effects on the basically Islamic ideology, one that can also be

1. Since I have used the Persian translation of Boroujerdi's work, the English equivalents used here may not be the same as his.



seen as a sub-discourse of the Occidental discourse, was the leftist /anti-imperialist discourse dominating more militant intellectual circles in pre-revolutionary Iran. This discourse, founded upon the Marxian notion of imperialism, divided the world into two opposing camps of the oppressed exploited people of the periphery and the exploiting capitalists of the center – the West. According to this discourse, the capitalist West would use all its political, economic and cultural leverages to buttress its dominant position and increase its own power. The leftist discourse, too, was based upon a dichotomy in which the West represented the dark, reactionary evil and the “rest” the rightful progressives.

So, it was not just the Islamic discourse but also other counter-hegemonic discourses that had their fundamental dichotomy as one between the rightful self and the oppressive other, which, interestingly enough, was the same for all of them; the “West”. Thus the ideological Islam, which came to characterize the dominant aspect of the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79, saw the West (then manifested in its major contemporaneous representative, i.e., the United States) as the root of all evils Iran (along with other Islamic countries) had been experiencing for a long time. If the revolution was against the Shah, the Shah



himself was seen as “the US puppet” or “the American Shah”. And if the main slogan of the revolution was “Down with the Shah”, the US was also to be “downed” all the way with him. This is what has been termed as “explosive levels of populist expression” of simultaneous “alienation from the Shah's regime and the United States” (Ramazani 1990a: 41).

Furthermore, the dichotomous understanding of the world and the quest for justice that is not provided by the existing system of international relations dominated by the West imply not only a critical position toward the system, it may actually question the very legitimacy of the existing arrangements.

When this anti-imperialist/counter-Western discourse is to be applied in foreign policy making, that is, in practice, it comes into contact with two other discourses that in turn influence it. The first one is the hegemonic discourse of international relations with ideas/concepts such as territoriality, statehood, sovereignty, independence, national self-determination, territorial integrity, national interests, national security, national power, non-intervention, etc. This may also be seen as a kind of “discursive structure” of the international system that influences the very “discursive space” (Carlsnaes 1992) of the



actors. Although other discourses mentioned above somehow mediate the very meaning of the components of this discourse, it, nevertheless, has affected the Islamic discourse referred to above. It may also be employed as an enabling structure that facilitates external communication and gives an internationally-legitimate and acceptable tone to the goals which are primarily defined in terms of the Islamic ideology (such as supporting the right of Palestinians to “self-determination”).

The second discourse is that of the Third World countries or Third-Worldism, itself a result of colonial and post-colonial experiences of these countries. It embodies the collective quest of the community of Third World/developing countries for international justice, economic development, equality of the states in practice, independence from ex-colonial powers, non-alignment, modifications in international rules, norms, institutions and organizations in favor of developing countries by introducing notions such as the New International Economic Order (NIEO), Common Heritage of Mankind, the right to development as a fundamental human right, nationalism, etc. The essence of this discourse, which had been somehow pioneered by two Iranian politicians in Qajar and Pahlavi periods, that is,



Amirkabir and Mosaddeq (Ramazani 1990a, 1990b), has also influenced the ideological discourse of the Iranian foreign policy in the post-Revolutionary period. While not pro status quo, this moderate counter-hegemonic discourse seeks to modify the existing system without any radical change in its underlying ideas, *inter alia*, the territorial nation-state, sovereignty, and non-intervention. In its Iranian version, the policy of equilibrium (*tavazon*) takes the international system for granted and tries to “protect and promote Iran's national interest by maintaining a balance of power and influence in relation to other states” (Ramazani 1990a: 44).

Having already laid out in broad, general terms the discursive picture, we can now proceed to take a look at the more practical aspects. In light of the foregoing, it can be reckoned that what has formed the basis of the Iranian foreign policy during the last thirty years is an evolving combination of some elements of all the discourses discussed. In contrast to the arguments portraying a unified monolithic ideological discourse solely based on a specific immutable ideological perspective informing the foreign policy of Iran, it can be argued that in different periods and under various concrete situations some sub-discursive elements seem to have become more dominant.

The following main elements lie at the foundation of different combinations and/or various readings which have shaped the ideological discourses of foreign policy in Iran in the post-Revolutionary period:

1) *The unity of the Muslim world*: As mentioned earlier, it is assumed that the nation-state-based arrangements of the modern international system, reinforced by the sanctification of artificial borders in nationalist ideologies, have functioned against the interests of Muslims whose unity could increase their power in relation to non-Muslim colonialist/imperialist powers. Even as early as the 1930's, when the young Ayatollah Khomeini was writing the book *Kashf-al-asrar [Discovering the Secrets]*, he considered the modern nation-state as a product of human weak mind (Ramazani 1986: 20 and Menashri 1990: 41). Nationalism, as an ideology, has been repeatedly repudiated by successive generations of Iranian Muslim leaders (*ulama*). Hence, the Islamic Republic, as enjoined by the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Article 152), should seek to realize the unity and well being of Muslims and support them all over the world regardless of nationalist aspirations. This principle can also be read – interpreted - in a manner to recognize -- at least for



the present and foreseeable future -- the reality of legal separation of the Islamic entities and simultaneously encourage integrationist/alliance-seeking measures for the unification of Muslim countries and improving their well being as well as enhancing their cultural solidarity. This unity could not only mean a requirement of the struggle against imperialism, it could also lead to strengthening the Muslim world position in the international system, i.e., a structural change or even a substantive change in the whole Euro-centered arrangements.

2) *Supporting the oppressed*: The Iranian-Islamic quest for universal justice implies that the Islamic state should attempt to strengthen the oppressed people's movements struggling to liberate themselves from the yoke of tyranny, whether domestic or foreign. This principle, also stipulated in the Constitution (article 154) as well as the Act on the Duties of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (article 4 entrusting the Ministry with the responsibility for "supporting the righteous-seeking struggles of the oppressed, especially the Muslims against the oppressors/the arrogant"), is again prone to be interpreted in various ways, from providing the oppressed with arms, military training, etc., to moral encouragement through ideological training, to



diplomatic pressures against the oppressive rulers and/or supporting the oppressed of the world in international institutions/organizations, i.e., through rule-binding actions. It is worth mentioning that linking this commitment in the same article to constitutionally recognized principle of non-intervention in the affairs of others makes the latter interpretation more compelling.

3) *Struggling against the oppressors*: The quest for justice, the principle of “prohibiting dominance”, referred to above, and the very dictum of “Neither be an oppressor, nor submit to oppression” in the Islamic-Shi’ite tradition require resisting oppression, arrogance (*estekbar*) and domination. As far as the existing international system is concerned, this constitutional principle is reflected in the leitmotif of “Neither East, Nor West” as the main arrogant oppressors. From this vantage point, the role superpowers play in world affairs is not acceptable (Ramazani 1986: 21). Since the superpowers were seen at the time the Constitution was being drawn up and discussed as the most powerful and, at the same time, the most immoral entities, this struggle was mainly directed against them - which in the post-Cold War situation had to be continued mostly against the surviving one. The approach and policy towards Israel



- another oppressive actor in the international system whose existence is taken to be associated with Western powers and their will to weaken Muslims can also be understood within this overall framework. Although it has been argued at times that Iran's anti-Israeli stance reflects “the resentment of the revolutionary leaders over Israel's close identification with the Shah and the United States” (Ramazani 1986: 160), it seems more reasonable to see it as an independent attitude toward oppression against some Muslim people.

This principle can also be interpreted in different terms: as total negation of the international system or alternatively as implying attempts towards establishing a new one (as Djalili 1988 and Ramazani 1990a and 1990b see it), or still as an independence-seeking approach negating clientele relationships with great powers and a critical attitude towards the superpowers and their values, manners, and behavior. This principle is also associated with the unity of Muslim world and defending the oppressed. The unity of Muslims can act as a unity against the oppressors, and in a just new world order where no oppressive superpower exists, the oppressed will be liberated.

4) *The survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran:* This contains *raison d'etat* but is not confined to it. Although this may appear to be in conflict with the



first principle, it is an important part of the ideational structure that makes Iranian foreign policy possible. Qazvini sees the protection of the Islamic metropolis or *um-ol-qora* as “the most important principle in the Islamic system” (1374 [1995]: 63). This is in part a reflection of the very rules constituting and regulating the international relations -- that is, the structural influences of the international system. In an international system where the very existence of the Islamic Republic, as any other state, is founded upon the existence of a nation-state with its internationally defined and recognized territory, the implications of accepting this basis should also be recognized – and respected. This, as seen by some analysts, has led to a realist approach in foreign policy making (Sajjadpour 1374 [1995]: 29). In principle, from an Islamic perspective, *raison d'etat* includes not only the well-being of the state, but also the “nationalist” principle of defending national territorial integrity, the survival of the institutions, *and* the main socio-political heritage of the Islamic revolution, i.e., Islamic values. This would imply a rather broad definition of national interests, and hence, national security. Since upholding Islamic values and norms, or restoring “authentic cultural traditions to the masses at the expense of foreign ideologies” (Kazemi and Hart 1990: 59) are



seen as a part of the very existence and identity of the state, protecting them against external attacks and threats becomes a part of national security agenda. Buzan (1991) argues that the “ambiguity and flexibility” of ideas do not allow policy makers to easily determine whether the ideology is attacked or endangered or not. And he further continues that one cannot easily “apply a concept like security to them” (Buzan 1991: 45). As such, while achieving a basic consensus regarding the protection of more general values could be possible, reaching consensus on specific ones might prove quite difficult.

5) *Exporting the revolution*: Based on historical experience, it could be reasonably argued that all revolutions tend to expand their ideas and/or model of revolutionary movement and governance to other lands/countries. Imam Khomeini, in his understanding of the border-free nature of Islam, saw the Iranian revolution as the first stage of a “comprehensive Islamic revolution,” as an instrument for attaining moral unity among the Muslims and a model for other societies (Menashri 1990: 96). No wonder, then, that the promotion of Islamic ideas in the form of the revolutionary Islam has been one of the main issues in post-revolution Iranian foreign policy. As Esposito and Piscatori (1990) suggest,



“[t]his objective was rooted in the Koran's mandate to Muslims (and thus the Muslim mission) to realize and propagate God's message throughout the world. The goal of exporting the revolution ... was reflected in a worldview that distinguished between *dar-al-Islam* ... and *dar al-harb*” (p. 30). Defined and conceived as such, the export of the revolution is not only a “revolutionary move” but also, and more importantly, a “doctrinal duty” based on the religious principle of *da'wa* or call (Rajaei 1990: 67).

Conclusions

Based on the discussion in previous lines, it could be concluded that the set of ideas constituting the identity of the Islamic Republic, and hence, shaping Iran's foreign policy, can be - and has been - interpreted in rather different ways. In the first place, there is no consensus in regard to the priority of the principles that have shaped or been of effect to foreign policy making. Therefore, various sectors within the foreign policy apparatus in its broad sense may have had and pursued different priorities, which allows different articulations become possible. This in itself leads to a multiplicity of interpretations.

In the second place, there is a range of possible interpretations of the very same principles when the



existing international system is considered. At one extreme, they can be seen as absolutely anti-system, and at the other extreme, they can also be interpreted in a manner to accommodate the very rules and norms of the existing international system. Given such possibilities, one could argue – reasonably and even convincingly - that international meaning structure as well as interactions with other actors may affect priorities and interpretations. Analysis of actual situations and developments in the Iranian foreign policy during the post-revolutionary period, especially in the 1990-2005 period, lead us to conclude that many of these principles gradually became consistent with the constitutive and regulative rules of the system. Nevertheless, in what could be considered a rather paradoxical outcome, the reaction of some major actors in the international system failed to help and reinforce the changes, which, in tandem with similar tendencies at the domestic level, led in turn to the emergence and dominance of less accommodative interpretations. Such a development might imply that structural forces of the system do not determine the ideational aspects of a foreign policy but these aspects may change through articulation with dominant international discourse as well as through exchanges with other actors in the system.

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