Free and Confined: Iran and the International System

Mohiaddin Mesbahi[*]

Abstract

The study of Iran's interaction with the international system is predicated on three broad theoretical assertions. First, the international system is a tripartite system with three interrelated yet distinct structures, namely coercive-military, normative-social, and economic-developmental. Second, agency (state), Iran in this case, is simultaneously unitary and composite, interacting distinctly with corresponding structural components of the international system. Third, the net assessment of any state's position within the international system, in this case Iran's, must take into consideration the symbiotic impact of the interaction with all three structures, and the cross fertilization and cross compensatory dynamics between them; weakness and vulnerability in one might be compensated for by strength in another. The delicate balance of Iran's interaction with the international system in the last three decades, and especially in the post-Soviet/post-9/11 era, has vacillated between a systemically permissible threat of war and the potential for a historical, though reluctant, systemic accommodation. In its brinksmanship interaction with the three layers of the international system, Iran by design and by default has been strategically "lonely" and deprived of meaningful alliances and great power bandwagoning. Nevertheless, Iran is not isolated but rather intensely engaged, relying on its own capability which is predicated on a native strategic culture. The protection of this strategic culture remains the most formidable challenge facing the Islamic Republic in the fourth decade of its life; a challenge that emanates partially from systemic pressure and no less significantly by domestic normative dynamics.

Keywords: Iran, International System, structure, agency, social-normative, Iran strategic culture

[*] **Mohiaddin Mesbahi**, is Ptofessor of International Relations at Florida International University.

Introduction

While there has been considerable work on Iranian foreign policy in general (Hunter 2010, Takyeh 2009, Ehteshami & Zweiri 2008, Maleki and Afrasiabi 2008, Adib-Moghaddam 2007; Ramazani 2004 and 2001,Sariolghalam 2002, Afrasiabi 1994) and more specifically on Iran's regional or bilateral relations with great powers and the United States (Parsi 2007; Chubin 1997; Ansari 2007; Limbert 2009; Wright 2010; Maloney 2008; Sick 2001; Bill 1988 and 2001; Brzezinski, 2004; Beeman 2005; Sajjadpour 1995; Cordesman and Hashem 1997; Pollack 2004; Dabashi 2010) since the Iranian revolution of 1979, there has been less attention and scholarly work on relations between Iran as a new player and the corresponding and coterminous International System with which this new actor has interacted since its inception. The Iranian Islamic revolution (Milani 1988; Keddie 2006; Ehteshami 1995; Amir Arjomand 2008 and 2009; Menasheri 2001; Abrahamian 1993) was one of the most seminal events in the international politics of the 20th century. Its profound impact on the domestic transformation of Iranian polity and society has been more than equally matched by its deliberate and unintended impact on international politics, regional dynamics and great power politics and interactions. Like the 1917 Russian revolution, the 1979 revolution had a disproportionate impact beyond its borders, both in terms of its normative extraterritorial reach and implications, and more concretely on the structural dynamics of the international system. The revolution and the revolutionary state have in turn, as was the case with the Russian revolution, been subjected to significant pressure for over

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three decades; the symbiotic result is one of the most intricate agent-structure (Friedman and Starr 1997; Wendt 1999, Wight 2006; Onuf 1989) interactions (co-habitation) between a revolutionary state and an evolving international system (Buzan and Little 2004). This paper attempts to provide the basic contours of this interactive and mutually constitutive relationship between Iran and the existing international system.

The study of Iran's interaction with the international system is predicated on three broad theoretical assertions. First, the international system is a tripartite system with three interrelated yet distinct structures, namely the coercive-military, the normative-social, and the economic-developmental. Second, the agent (the state), Iran in this case, is simultaneously unitary and composite, interacting distinctly with the corresponding structural components of the international system. Third, the net assessment of any state's position within the international system, in this case Iran's, must take into consideration the symbiotic impact of the interaction with all three structures, and the cross fertilization and cross compensatory dynamics between them; weakness and vulnerability in one might be compensated for by strength in another. Each structure has its own formal and informal organizational and institutional arrangement, and each arrangement while tending to be hierarchical or hegemonic, is also heavily contested. Each structure is used by the actors as a platform for domination and resistance, capacity building and denial. States, including Iran, interact with each other, and individually and collectively with the system and its component structures. Each structure deals with the state in a manner most conducive to its own elemental attributes, extracting and re-projecting a particular and prevailing "identity". Thus, for example, within the coercive-military structure, it is the unitary state which is being dealt with and taken into consideration, while in the social/normative and economic/developmental structures, the state, no matter how resistant and how insistent on its unitary nature and sovereignty, will

be dealt with and interacted with in its composite form, displaying and exposing its inner components including socio-cultural and economic groupings and associations. In a nutshell, the state, while unitary on one level (coercive/military), is *composite* in other levels. Iran's interaction with the international system and its structural components has to be taken into consideration with both the unitary and composite nature of Iran in mind.

Iran and the International System: The Complex Military-Political Structure

For over three decades, Iran has lived within two profoundly different and distinct military-political power structures in the international system: first, the 1979-1991 period of systemic bipolarity (Buzan and Little 2004) that witnessed the revolution, the "new" cold war, its end, and the demise of the Soviet Union; second: the 1991-present era, the post Cold War and post 9/11 era, during which it has experienced and continues to grapple with the dynamics of a US-led "unipolar moment". (Krauthammer 2002)

Between 1979 and 1991, the new revolutionary state operated within a bipolar military structure dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union (Gaddis 2006; Westad 2007; Leffler 2008). The normal systemic expectation was that the downfall of the pro-American regime in Tehran would have enormous structural ramifications on the regional balance of power within the bipolar system. Given Iran's historical geopolitical position as the buffer (Ramazani 1966; Kazemzadeh 1968) against the presumed Russian/Soviet southward move, the birth of the new republic promised a strategic shake up in the region, one perhaps with a domino system-wide impact in favor of the Soviet Union.

The Iranian revolution and the shift in Iran's strategic systemic position and orientation took place in the midst of two contradictory developments in the geo-strategic dynamics of the international system. At the close of the 1970s, the Soviet Union, capitalizing on

the U.S. defeat in Vietnam and riding on radical leftist revolutions in the Third World, appeared to have all the attributes of a truly global superpower with promising ambitions on the horizon (Westad, 2007). At the same time, the inclusion of Egypt in the U.S. sphere of influence after Camp David was a very promising strategic shift which complemented the US's long standing hold on Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel, signaling the U.S.'s post-Vietnam recovery and the reconsolidation of its position in the international system.

The revolution and the shift in Iran's systemic/structural loyalty had an immediate impact on the U.S. Losing Iran was a major systemic setback for the United States, a loss that over three decades of efforts have yet to overcome. The American loss was by default a potentially major gain for the Soviet Union. The Soviet southern flank was relieved of a historical point of structural pressure, the American strategic Turkey-Iran-Pakistan linkage was broken, and the potential for a nightmarish structural shift which entailed the eventual Soviet political strategic penetration of neighboring Iran resurfaced. The strategic gain of the 1953 coup had potentially been reversed. Nevertheless, unexpectedly and to the surprise of the two custodians of the bipolar system, the Iranian revolution did not follow the systemic expectation; the US loss was serious and consequential but not regionally existential. The new Iranian state not only did not join the Soviet camp, but it soon became its primary regional critic, and eventually a key military balancer in Afghanistan (taking sides by default with the US Cold War effort in containing communism). The Soviet gain was certainly serious, as the revolution had eliminated the US southern containment linchpin, but not essential, as the revolution and the new state became an independent source of security concerns, some with serious and internal dimensions as the war in Afghanistan had opened the possibility of threats of a different nature emanating from the South.

Iran was thus "lost" as a strategic and structural energy, which was not captured by either superpower within the systemic calculation

of balance of forces and distribution of capability. A rather unique systemic condition had emerged; a pivotal regional state had shifted its strategic loyalty without a corresponding systemic impact on balance of forces within the bipolar distribution of power. This unique position, as will be discussed below, was a by-product of the social/normative impact of the revolution and its system-wide strategic ramifications, and as such, became the hallmark of Iran's interaction with the existing international system.

Iran was destined to carve out an "insulated" and self referential strategic space which fundamentally tried to ignore systemic calculations of power. A *lonely strategic state* was born in 1979 and has since continued to survive. Capitalizing on its geographical centrality and motivated by ideational ambitions and its sheer willfulness, the new Iran regarded the international system as a theater of action and agency -not rules and roles; ignoring material distribution of power and its consequences. Its longstanding and intricate strategic symbiosis with the US had made it lonely, yet busily engaged at the core and crossroads of all major regional and occasionally global issues of significant systemic ramification. This loneliness, beyond its ambitious and deliberate native genealogy, was significantly also the byproduct of hostile relations with the US, while dialectically, the same relations became the core energy catapulting Iran to the crossroads of major systemic engagement and relevancy; riding on US contrarian systemic opposition Iran became lonely yet globalised (a systemic state by design and default).

There is no single important regional critical "global/systemic issue" that either directly or by default does not go through Iran and the Iranian factor, be it great power competition, great power interventions and major regional wars, access to energy, Islamic radicalism, clash of civilizations, the Palestinian issue, terrorism, revolutions or nuclear proliferation. The major wars of the last two decades--wars with system wide impact and implications including the 1980 Iran-Iraq war, the US-Iraq war in 1991, and the US invasion of

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Iraq in 2003, and even the war in Afghanistan (both by the Soviets and the Americans), the Israeli-Hezbollah war in 2006, the Palestinian-Israeli encounters, the continuous shadow of the further use of force in the region, and the greatest military deployment in the post war history by a superpower and its alliance, the dynamics of nuclear proliferation and the future of the NPT regime--all have their roots directly or indirectly in the systemic reverberation of the Iranian revolution and Iran's role in international politics, and their strategic consequences.

In the post Cold War international system, Iran's *activist/critical neutrality*, was far more beneficial to the new Russian state than to its Soviet predecessor. Weak, disorganized, and vulnerable, the new Russia benefited from the mutual and obsessive Iran-US security preoccupation; Russia structurally left the defense of her southern flank to the default consequences of the US-Iran confrontation. The US paid a heavy price in its relations with Russia, as Moscow exploited the US-Iran confrontation to ease through its era of weakness, to protect its practically defenseless southern flank during the Yeltsin years, and to buy essential time to recover under Putin. All this occurred without a major strategic rapprochement with Iran which could have limited Moscow's choices and constrained her strategic maneuverability. On the structural level, Russia exploited the US-Iranian encounter (Mesbahi, 2010).

Other systemic great powers such as China and the EU also benefited from the strategic vacuum created in 1979, mostly at the expense of the United States. Yet these great powers' systemic possibilities of gain were always tempered by the twin factors of their bilateral ties and relations with the United States. Above all they were constrained by the limitations posed by Iran's effort to carve up an independent strategic space for itself without *dependent empowerment* via great power alliances or bandwagoning. Iran's normative claims and ambitions actually hampered her military–political bandwagoning with great powers.

Beyond great powers, Iran's impact on the regional balance of power and balance of threat (Walt, 1990) was ironically if expectedly counterintuitive. A materially less powerful, more vulnerable and lonely Iran became the core of formulations of strategic threat by a host of regional states, ranging from Iraq to Israel. At the zenith of its military weakness, with a decimated army, lost alliance, and empty treasury, Iran became the most formidable systemic regional challenge for a host of actors, small, big, authoritarian or democratic. Iraq's attack against Iran took place at the nexus of Iran's physical vulnerability and systemic loneliness, within a permissive structural and political environment which encouraged and even rewarded aggression (Rajaee 1993 and 1997; Mesbahi; 1993).

The war against Iran thus was not a bilateral war between neighbors, though it did have its immediate roots in bilateral issues and contentions. Instead it was a "systemic war," in the sense that a diverse range of regional and global actors either supported or acquiesced to its initiation and its prosecution. The critical analytical point here is the delicate albeit concealed connection between the deliberateness of this systemic war, (i.e., the extent to which actors consciously coordinated the initiation and especially the longevity of the war, a matter worthy of investigation by contemporary and future historians), and the structural permissibility of war emanating from the international system against Iran. This permissibility provided the unspoken, "natural condition" for diplomatic possibilities to use war as a deliberate choice. Since the 1979 revolution, with various degrees of maturity, the international system has been pregnant with a "war condition" against Iran.

Iran impacted the international system's politico-military structure by changing the regional balance of power, and introducing an independent strategic space and force within the structure. Iran is fundamentally self reliant and self referential. Though it has tried to augment itself through great power maneuvers and quasi or "pretend" alliances (with Russia and partially with China)where strategic

language overcompensates for the absence of material content-- (Mesbahi 2010), there is no meaningful strategic empowerment within the state system for Iran via great power balancing and or bandwagoning. Iran's systemic security, however, benefited from Iran's strategic capacity building power via non state actors, social movements, militant groups, and its own asymmetrical coercive and deterrent capability. Combined with the reorganization of the Iranian military (Ward 2009) and a level of self sufficiency in military hardware, especially its considerable missile technology, these have provided an important physical foundation for Iranian systemic defense and projection.

Iran's expansive geographical borders and well-developed yet vulnerable populated urban centers have made a perfect defense impossible. While imposing a constant security burden and vulnerability against external invasion, they have also given Iran a domestic strategic platform for a sustainable and dynamic defense based on 4th generation warfare. In fact, reliance on 4th generation warfare and the depth of Iran's heartland have given Iran a critical strategic depth of existential significance. Iran's systemic impact in terms of distribution of capability is the reorientation of the strategic platform from a purely conventional to non-traditional 4th generation warfare as the critical supplement to its conventional power. In fact, Iran is among the very few (if not the only modern state) states within the international system that is capable of conducting 4th generation warfare both at home and abroad.

For over three decades, the international system (and here I am not referring to a country or a group of states, but to a material system with its own systemic and rational/attitudinal language) has only grudgingly "accommodated" this new Iran. The system respects Iran's physical capability, and has taken it into consideration in global and regional balance of power calculation, but only grudgingly, and with continuous ambiguity and the potential for rejection and diminution. This peculiar attitude of the system is reflected in punitive

economic and political sanctions, the continuous presence of actual and potential coercive measures which have kept and will continue to keep its shadow over Iran. The system continuously probes the essential longevity of this unique systemic presence by an otherwise medium-size regional power. It is within this delicate context that a nuclear Iran and its systemic implications for structural balance and distribution of power has been perceived and contemplated by the international system and its key actors.

Iran and the International System: The Contested Social/Normative Structure

Iran's material systemic impact on the international system, and the system's response, are only understandable in the context of Iran's interaction with the social/normative structure of the international system.

Without its social/normative power and capacity Iran's strategic material position would either not exist or be an empty shell. It is Iran's social/normative capacity that has given Iran's material power a disproportionate physical reach and relevance. It is this social/normative asset that has given strategic substance to Iran's material capacity, and has provided Iran with a relatively effective asymmetrical deterrence against great powers with far more superior coercive capability.

Iran's systemic strategic loneliness was essentially predicated on the assumed or real normative revisionism that the revolution injected into the international normative structure. This revisionism, genuinely or instrumentally, became the analytical and conceptual framework of seeing, feeling, and constructing Iran by actors within the system. The social/normative impact of the new Iranian revolutionary state, like its strategic impact, took place at the crossroads of two distinct international social/normative systems, the Cold War and the post-Soviet orders. The Cold War international social/normative order was characterized by the encounter between the two hegemonic narratives

of capitalism/freedom and socialism/resistance. This era was organized mostly around the two superpowers which were competing for the hearts and minds of a host of actors, while attempting to shape both the formal and informal normative international institutions. This bifurcated normative social and ideational line up went through decades of fluctuations. Initially, and mostly, favoring the Soviet side for most of the Cold War period where the West was, on a global scale, normatively in a defensive position. This process metamorphosed, gradually and eventually, into the Soviet decline, especially after the invasion of Afghanistan, leading to the eventual collapse of the Soviet social/normative world, first in Eastern Europe and then within the Soviet state itself (Brown 2009). The era of the post-Soviet international social system/structure ushered in the collapse of communism and most Marxist narrations, and witnessed the triumph of US-led Western capitalism and the promise of a dominant neoliberal order.

The Iranian revolution was thus born in the middle of an intense period of hegemonic and counter hegemonic international social space and narratives, backed by the major material capacities of the two superpowers; a somewhat commensurate international system where the material power matched the universal claims to truth and norms. The anti-American/anti-imperialist narrative of the Iranian revolution, especially after the hostage crisis, put Iran's social/normative force on the side of those resisting the US/Western domination. As such it was naturally welcomed by the Soviet/Marxist/populist international narrative, contributing to the regional and global critique of the United States.

The initial and collective reaction of the systems' social structure was for the most part, welcoming, supportive, and hopeful. From the Soviet Union to national liberation movements in the region and beyond, from populist poets in Latin America to post modern French intellectuals, including Foucault (Afary and Anderson 2005), the revolution and Iran's revolutionary narrative were seen as a major

dent in the body of US imperialism and overt and hidden Western colonialism. The odd factor that the revolution was religious and was led by a cleric was either mused over or was seen as the passing phenomenon of the necessary evolution of a petit-bourgeois radicalism destined to land in some form of mature national/secular populism if not Marxism. Few saw the possibility that the new state had its own distinct and ambitious voice, narration, linguistic lexicon and strategies, social and political claims and remedies on a global scale.

As was the case with its impact on the material balance of power within the system, the new revolutionary state attempted and eventually succeeded in developing and carving out a social/normative space, outside the bifurcated international social structure or partially within it, for its own narrative, again without *dependent normative empowerment*. Iran's social/normative capacity building was not through ideational bandwagoning with one of the superpowers and its social world. While it is true that Iranian anti-imperialism was enunciated in the twentieth century's mostly secular resistance language, Iran's intersubjective social world, while addressing a global audience, friend and foe, had a distinctly different, authentic and Islamic genealogy. Iran had its social/normative eyes on the Muslim world, and not only the states but increasingly the non-state actors, individuals, groups and societies.

Initially, and for the dominant bipolar social narratives handicapped by their secular modernity (Hurd 2008), the social/normative message of Iranian Islamism could hardly be taken as a serious normative challenge of any systemic significance. Of course, the new revolutionary state, it was assumed, could be a source of limited fanatical excitement and rhetoric, but certainly not a source of extraterritorial and systemic normativity, one with strategic military and political consequences.

This early optimism soon vanished for both superpowers and their respective ideational formulations and corresponding

international institutions. Iran became the embodiment of the Islamic threat in the midst of the new Cold War of the 1980's. The exclusive focus on Iran as an isolated and odd case blinded the custodians of the two global narratives to the emergence of the Islamic narrative as a silent (and sometimes not so silent) social movement engulfing, with various degrees of intensity, a significant part of the Muslim world, including areas with critical strategic significance for the great powers within the international system. A new systemic social/normative space, with considerable strategic implications, was in the making.

The impact of the Iranian revolution and its international narrative on the emergence and nurturing of this new systemic narrative of Islamic identity, selfhood, resistance and projective ideas about ideal polity and life was significant. It is true that Iran's social and revolutionary message was constrained by its ethnic and religious background, being Iranian and Shi'i, yet its strategic impact in showing the possibility of a "third way"--authenticity, resistance, and a strategy for local and regional action--left its indelible mark in shaping the emerging international social world and its audience and consumers during and after the Cold War and the Soviet collapse.

The Iranian contribution to the emerging and contested social/ideational narratives and order of the post-Soviet world were, in a broad sense, two-fold. First, in the heyday of Western liberal triumphalism and the "end of history" of the 1990's, the only alternative voice within the state system was Iran. The Russians had been thoroughly demoralized, socially and normatively, a predicament that Imam Khomeini had forewarned in a remarkable letter to Gorbachev in the waning days of the Soviet empire (Imam Khomeini's Letter 1993). The new Russia only mimicked the Western notions of superior social order, devoid of any native initiative and modification (Mesbahi 2010), the sporadic tired voices of left-over Marxists notwithstanding. The Chinese had opted for normative quietism, a form of ideational "taqieh" on a global scale, rationalizing its silent integration into the liberal world economy without accepting

its social and normative political consequences. The Chinese concern was the protection of full sovereignty on their own domestic social/normative space -thus their sensitivity over Western human rights mentoring, and its strategic consequences. China delivered very little conversation about universal norms and ideal polity. (In fact the Chinese had given that up way back under Mao when Soviet social imperialism was considered more of a threat than the old fashioned Western colonialism). India, the other Asian giant, was busy shedding the outmoded radicalism of post independence and nonalignment, embracing materially and socially the narrative of globalization and westernization. Smaller voices, such as Cuba's, were there, but were muted and ideologically tired. The in-home normative competition between the US and Europe was just that; "domesticated"; notwithstanding the occasional serious or symbolic oscillation between "power and paradise" (Kagan, 2003).

The mantle and the language of resistance which had been taken up by Marxism in the early part of the 20th century, was left for all practical purposes to Iran, both by default and by choice. Other voices of resistance were mostly outside the state system. They could be found, first cautiously and then with more intensity, among the numerous individuals and groups emerging in the Muslim world. Nevertheless, the burden of providing an alternative state-centric voice was mostly left to Iran.

Second, on a regional level and in the Muslim world in particular, Iran's foreign policy culture of resistance, autonomy and independence, its demand for equality and respect at all cost, and its defiance of great powers even when materially and politically vulnerable, had a gradual but discernable impact on a host of actors, especially on social and militant movements. This became a source of indirect normative regional pressure and embarrassment for many regional states with subservient reputations in the eyes of their own restless populations. Iran's contribution to the international normative structure was a counterintuitive socialization of its audience with

messages that were at odds with the prevailing existing "rational/secular" norms: that the materially weak can survive by sheer will and readiness to risk harm and pain; that the great powers get their way by projecting fear and are usually and in reality gun shy; and that the readiness to die is key to an effective asymmetrical deterrence. This collection of messages and direct and indirect social/normative codes emanated not from an intense modern secular ideology (like Marxism) or nationalism/populism, but from a religious culture and ontology. A new anthropology of death--martyrdom--was introduced, with a considerable impact on the notion of security and deterrence; Iran's normative impact on the post-Soviet world, particularly in the Muslim world, was considerable.

As Iran was using the social structure of the international system for normative influence and capacity-building, the international system, in return, through its existing and hegemonic social/normative structure, responded and targeted Iran with great intensity and expansiveness, posing considerable normative challenges to Iran over the last 30 years. From 1979 until the present, the hegemonic structure of prevailing norms within the international system, generically and directionally through its main western custodians, has been relatively successful in not allowing Iran to "self-referentially" define itself within the international social structure, on its own terms. Labels such as "fundamentalist" and "fanatic", and the continuous accusations of conspiracies in neighboring states, terrorism, human rights abuses, lack of democracy, gender inequality, and above all the loaded and effective label of the "rogue state" (Benliot 2001; Abrahamian, Cummings and Ma'oz 2004; Lennon and Eiss 2004; Litwak 2000) are all part of organized and well defined, formal and informal institutionalized norms generated by dominant social powers led by the US, within the international social system targeting and affecting Iran. A considerable part of Iran's effort on the international scene and on its own domestic conversation--*intra elite* and *state-society*--has been devoted to defending herself and neutralizing the impact of

the systemic social pressure.

This systemic social /normative pressure has been key to the securitization (Buzan, Waever and de-Wild 1997) of Iran in the hands of its challengers within the international system, be it state, nonstate, or individual actors. It is this open-ended securitization which depicts and transmogrifies the Iranian state into a living person, an emotional state and thus one with the capacity for irrationality and even suicide. This type of securitization has been instrumental in the deliberate attempt to deny Iran the benefit of "rationality" on the nuclear issue and the concept of deterrence in its national defense posture.

The negative labeling and the securitized imagery of Iran is a collectively produced and institutionalized, formal and informal set of norms available to all actors to be utilized in their relations with Iran when needed. What makes the international normative structure, especially in its post-Soviet prevailing neoliberal order (Ikenberry 2011, Betts 2011) so critical is that contrary to the physical material structure of the international system that has primarily targeted Iran as a *unitary state*, the international social/normative structure deals with the state in its *composite form*; namely focusing on Iranian society beyond and "over the head" of the political establishment. There is a give and take between the international social normative structure and receptive layers of Iranian society. Thus, Iran's social/normative interaction with the international social system is bifurcated. Iran's significant ability to generate a new language of resistance and "literature" of international relations, opening a social space within the system, has simultaneously been subjected to a formidable response by the international social/normative structure, which attempts to question and neutralize the Iranian normative initiative and challenges.

Iran and the International System: The Prevailing Economic/Developmental Structure

Unlike the other two structures, Iran's impact on the international system's economic structure has been negligible. In fact, the Iranian

revolution and the state that emerged out of it never developed a distinct economic model. Nor has Iran been effective in accumulating a systemically significant economic power base and capability. It is true that Iran has been able to utilize its economic isolation and make significant progress in selective technologies, including nuclear and some industrial/military and commercial sectors, but overall, Iran has lagged behind the early optimism and expectation of the revolution (Dabir, 2010, Gheisari, 2009, Nasr, 2009, Alizadeh, 2001).

Iran's place within the international distribution of economic, technological and financial resources and power is not significant. It is certainly incommensurate with its military/political and social/normative capacities within the international system. The prevailing forces within the global economic system, backed by the political will of its dominant actors, has limited Iran's economic role to that of a raw material producing country and increasingly a regional market for perishable consumer goods. The low level of foreign investment, the flight of capital, the increasing brain drain, and the penetration of a global pattern of consumption and habits, are all serious signs of Iran's vulnerability at the hands of forces embedded in the international economic structure. It is critical to underscore here the intricate and seldom noticed connection between Iran's erosion of normative capacity and economic underdevelopment, and the globally generated cultural pattern of consumption and commodification. It is ironic that Iranian thinking has seldom connected its continuous preoccupation with the cultural onslaught (hoojoom-e farhangi) with patterns of consumption and an "import/trade–based" economy and market.

Cognizant of their economic Achilles heel, the Iranians have tried to set the stage for an ambitious economic plan to transform the country into a regional power house by the middle of the next decade. The realities of Iran's economic performance, even in the most optimistic projections, however, have made the attainment of that objective improbable. Iran's power base within the international

system thus lacks an economic and developmental component. This gap has remained and will continue to remain a major handicap for the pursuit of Iran's national security and interests and a major source of vulnerability within the international system. Ironically, Iran's continuous economic weakness in the economic/developmental structure had to be compensated by more investment and energy in the other two components of the systemic power base, namely the military/political and the social/normative dimensions. Furthermore, Iran has tried to use its economic resources-including its lucrative consumer market, as a venue for expansion of political and strategic relations with major global economic players such as China, key European states such as Germany and Italy, and some key neighboring states such as Turkey and to a lesser degree Russia. The enormous oil revenue of recent years has made Iranian purchasing power and its hungry middle class market into a tool for breaking Iran's political/economic containment by offering lucrative deals not only in the energy sector, but also in consumer goods, with the hope of making systemically induced economic sanctions initiated at the UN by great powers strategically acceptable and tolerable in practice. The opportunity cost of such undertaking to the development of a national/native economy has nevertheless been considerable. Iran's significant energy resources are not only the strategic backbone of its economy but the critical resource to maintain its strategic competitiveness in both military and normative structures of the international system; it is this interconnectedness with the two other structures of the international system that has made Iranian oil exports a potential candidate for a "securitization" contingency in a hypothetically severe systemic confrontation.

Conclusion:

Iran's national security and Iran's place in the international system will be decided at the nexus of the three layers of the international system: 1- its material coercive distributive structure; 2- its contested social/normative structure, and 3- its economic/developmental capacity and resources. Iran has built a significant capacity on two of the system's structures, the coercive-military and the social-normative, while it continues to face considerable challenges in both at the same time. Iran's systemic capacity glaringly lacks a corresponding and complementary economic and developmental leg.

Iran's potential for survival and greatness within the international system to some degree depends on the sustainability of the self-made, deliberate or inevitable, loneliness and self sufficiency in its national defense capacity and power projection. Naturally, many critics have lamented over Iran's loneliness and the opportunity costs associated with it, but the irony is that the Iranian potential capacity to be a regional great power with systemic international significance is in fact rooted in the genealogy and dynamics of its loneliness; "greatness" or significance seldom results from following and bandwagoning; there are no strategic free lunches, so to speak, in the international system. Pretentions have their limits. Sacrifice and intelligent risk taking and above all a strategic readiness across the board by state and society to accept material pain and deprivation are usually necessary pre-conditions not only to survive but to arrive at a potential moment of sustainable systemic power and possible greatness.

The critical key to sustain the gains that Iran has made and contain the challenges for a country that is strategically lonely and thus self reliant within the international state system, is fundamentally its domestic condition, and thus above all its degree of internal legitimacy. This internal legitimacy is Iran's *systemic/holistic center of gravity* within the international system. That legitimacy is broadly a

function of two interrelated dynamics: first, economic development/efficiency, and second, normative political legitimacy.

For over three decades the main reservoir of Iran's national security, and what the international system has taken into its material and normative calculation, is the existence of a *culture of integrity* (farhang-e ezzat) that itself is fundamentally rooted in Shi'ism. I would term it the "strategic culture of Ashura," a culture that expands the domain of security by combining the physical domain of security with the metaphysical dimension of life, thus taming the rational calculation of promise of anticipatory harm (Schelling 2008; George 1971) or its application by opponents. The result is an *index of pain*, the willingness to risk, to accept and to endure suffering and harm significant enough to provide both the imagery and reality of both normative and physical power of strategic systemic value.

Some analysts might think that Islamic Iran, as it is constituted today, can, like other medium size powers and states, find a more conventional substitute for this culture to support its national security and objectives. Thus they advocate a reliance on modern notions of nationalism and a conventional acceptance of the rules of the game and eventual acceptance of *dependent empowerment and bandwagoning* (via quasi great power alliances) within the international system. But Iran's nationalism is an empty shell without the culture of Ashura, and incapable of providing the normative foundation for Iran's national security and achieving its national interests. The international system, in calculating meaningful power, has very little respect for the flag waving nationalism of football games, or expressions of emotion over superiority of language or cultural heritage, or fights over the name of a lake; conventional nationalism does not count much in the calculation and estimation of the meaningful distribution of systemic capability. Thus Iran's security and Iran's proper place within the international system is highly problematic without this religiously defined strategic culture. The protection of this strategic culture, with all of its delicate ethical and normative elements, has to be the key to

Iran's strategies of domestic development in the future.

This strategic culture is simultaneously under tremendous pressure from two great and formidable sources; first the *culture of individualism*, which the onslaught of modernity inevitability brings, and second the *instrumentalist religiosity* via politicization of religion in the hands of political forces jockeying for positions of power. Normative states like Iran should take these twin challenges very seriously. The domestic custodians of these two challenges in Iran are usually on opposite sides of the political spectrum and at each others' political throats, so to speak. Perhaps unknown to themselves, both, albeit with different levels of culpability, are streams of water running in the same river and same direction in so far as the consequences of their words and deeds are concerned for Iran's national security and global position.

There are three critical questions facing Iran in its interaction with the existing international system in the fourth decade of its political system. First, how can Iran protect its core strategic culture? This question goes to the heart of Iran's domestic norms and the ethical foundation of its political system. The social capital that emanates from the religious culture which feeds Iran's deterrence capability; the intricate connection between authenticity, ethics, social capital, and national security is crucial. No other country within the international system has mortgaged its national security to the strength or fragility of the ethical foundation of its strategic culture to the extent that Iran has.

Second, can Iran eventually supplement its politico-military and normative-social power and potential with economic-developmental power? Iran's twin economic challenges, which are efficiency and distributive justice, remain the missing link in the Iranian power base and a critical source of systemic vulnerability and limitation. While the Iranians have recognized the centrality of this factor, as reflected in an ambitious national project of transferring Iran into the economic power house of the region in this decade, heavy politicization of the

notion of development and mismanagement has so far undermined their qualitative leap, despite the historical opportunity of unprecedented oil revenue in recent years.

Third, Iran, a medium size power in a traditionally western dominated sub region, a dependent state for most of its recent pre-revolutionary history, is poised to become the pre-eminent regional actor and a very consequential international player. Will the international system allow a peaceful transition to this status? Will the "war/coercive condition" eventually subside or will it eventually materialize in an existential fashion, suddenly and kinetically or in slow motion?

Iran's position within the international system and the system's interaction with it is not only measured by its military, normative, and economic power; the critical role of statecraft has to be recognized. The Iranians have been effective in tactical diplomacy, but, with episodic exceptions, not so in anticipatory and strategic statecraft. The current international system is fragile and in transition. The challenge for Iranian foreign policy and diplomacy, and for the key "custodians" of the existing international system, is to find a commensurate narrative to simultaneously arrive at a diplomatic moment, a moment of paradigm shift, that allows and accommodates the inevitability of Iran's new status. A paradigm shift that will eventually be predicated on the consensus that the peaceful accommodation of Iran in its newly sought position within the existing international system is beneficial for the stability of the system, and that the price paid for its acceptance is far less than the price of its rejection. Iran's position and status, its international life and for that matter its domestic dynamics, will continue to be negotiated and decided at the nexus of Iran's "agency" for freedom of action and the inevitable confining "structures" of the international system.

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