

## Understanding Iran: Getting Past Stereotypes and Mythology

The deterioration of mutual understanding in U.S.-Iranian relations since the September 11 attacks reflects the disparity between what Iran's current leadership can deliver and the expectations of any U.S. administration. Iran's current leadership makes foreign policy decisions fundamentally on revolutionary idealism, especially on the Palestinian issue, rejecting the two-state solution; pursues a security doctrine based on ambiguity; assists military groups, characterizing them as freedom fighters; and confronts U.S. dominance in the Middle East. In contrast, the United States is determined to institutionalize the two-state solution, regards an unfriendly Iran's security doctrine as opposed to its interests and those of Israel, views Hamas and Islamic Jihad as terrorist groups, and aims to contain Iran's Middle East activities and projection of power.

Since September 11, 2001, the Islamic Republic of Iran has practiced greater caution, toned down its rhetoric, and even been willing to engage in issue-area negotiations with the United States in Geneva. Such stylistic alterations do not reflect shifts in Iran's threat perceptions or in U.S. objectives but do signal calculated adjustments to a new regional and international environment. Although Iran and Iranians played no role in the September 11 terrorist attacks, Washington grouped Iran in the "axis of evil." Although Iran played a constructive role in helping the United States bring down the Taliban, many individuals in the Bush administration continued Iran bashing. Furthermore, Tehran was overjoyed to witness Saddam Hussein's fall and stayed out of the way of U.S. operations, only to learn that Washington would speed up efforts for regime change in, and spend more money on, co-

---

Mahmood Sariolghalam is an associate professor at the School of Economics and Political Science of the Shahid Beheshti (National) University of Iran in Tehran and editor of the English-language journal *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*.

---

Copyright © 2003 by The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
*The Washington Quarterly* • 26:4 pp. 69–82.

vert operations against Iran. The underlying reality is that no matter what Iran does, unless it alters its attitude toward Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, no fundamental policy change in Washington will occur.

Objective scrutiny of the contemporary Iranian political system, on the one hand, and its policies, on the other, reveals a relatively stable polity but policies that are subject to change, perhaps in fundamental ways, as a result of the pressures building up inside the country. If Washington were objectively to assess the current Iranian political situation and correctly conclude that the Islamic Republic is here to stay but will steadily evolve, then the United States may not only pursue but also achieve desired policy concessions. If it believes the Islamic Republic is here to stay, then Washington will focus on trying to persuade its leaders to change policies rather than attempt to alter its structure, just as President Richard Nixon accomplished with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China during the Cold War.

Moreover, constructive U.S. efforts to develop better relations with this Muslim nation could help Iran's progress as a model of rational, political change in the Middle East as well as improve U.S. relations with the Muslim world at large. To improve bilateral relations, Washington should recognize these realities in Iranian politics and policies as well as the particular roles and value of national sovereignty and Islam in Iran.

## **Bilateral Misperceptions**

---

The ongoing bellicose climate of U.S.-Iranian relations dates back to at least the Iranian revolution of 1979 and demonstrates vividly that the fundamental area of contention and tension between the two countries remains: Iran's clerics believe that the United States seeks to remove them from power or at least to isolate Iran globally. Comparatively, U.S. officials believe that Iran is constantly undermining U.S. efforts in the Middle East. Symptoms of this fundamental problem abound. Tehran and Washington continue to define terrorism in drastically different ways. Iran views Hamas and Islamic Jihad as groups attempting to free their land from Israeli occupation. Furthermore, Iran believes that Israelis are not interested in a Palestinian state, that Tel Aviv ultimately seeks a humiliated Palestinian enclave within Israel proper. Conversely, Washington has officially announced U.S. support for a Palestinian independent state and is implementing a road map toward peace with Israeli and Palestinian representatives. In this context, groups that pursue a military solution to the problem, killing innocent people, should be outlawed and characterized as terrorist groups. Perhaps from a neutral stance,

one can point out that Iran and the United States have varying perceptions of Israeli intentions in the peace process.

The Iranian government senses that the United States has singled out Iran for its human rights record and system of governance, even though dictatorial regimes run many of Washington's allies in the Middle East, allowing almost no voice for the citizenry in those nations. All recent U.S. administrations have engaged in active diplomacy to deny nuclear technology, allegedly to be used to build nuclear arms, to an unfriendly Iran. Moreover, the United States continues to raise alarms about Iran's defense programs.

With anti-U.S. sentiments so prevalent among Iran's top cleric elites, Washington believes it cannot trust Tehran's nuclear intentions and defense policies. Iran believes that it has natural influence throughout the region, while Washington refers to Iranian influence and actions as "meddling." From the U.S. perspective, Iran's policies and efforts run counter to U.S. interests in the Middle East. Both Iranian nationalism and religious orthodoxy opposes U.S. unilateral policies in the Middle East. That Iran remains the only state in the world that does not recognize the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict leads the United States to consider Iran's defense capabilities and its anti-Israeli policy as two sides of the same coin.

**Iran can become a model of rational, political change in the Middle East.**

Iran fails to understand and refuses to accept the fundamental issue that a basic improvement in U.S.-Iranian relations cannot be achieved without Tehran's acknowledgment of the strategic alliance between the United States and Israel; since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Iran's attempts to separate the issue of Israel from a potential improvement in U.S.-Iranian relations have consistently failed. The Israeli factor is the single most crucial ingredient that must be addressed before any fundamental or incremental resolution of the differences between Tehran and Washington. The unfortunate reality is that the Iranian clerics are not prepared to alter their view of the Palestinian conflict and Washington cannot forgo its strategic attachment to the Israeli component of U.S. interests in the Middle East. In the end, Washington and Tehran are incapable of considering each other's domestic structure and subsequent constraints.

The issue of Israel is part of the political psyche of the current Iranian elites, whose mind-set was shaped in the 1950s and 1960s when they were in their twenties and the developing world was in the midst of anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles. During the same period, Iranian political ac-

tivists—both Muslim and non-Muslim—developed a certain opposition to the United States as a consequence of Washington’s direct involvement in the removal of Iran’s elected prime minister, Dr. Muhammad Mossadegh, and the reinstatement of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The Muslim faction of the antishah movement simultaneously became sensitive to, and suspicious of, U.S. support for the establishment of Israel, and Israel soon emerged as a significant supporter of the shah’s regime. The roots of the Iranian leadership’s current anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli attitudes are thus directly related.

From the perspective of Iran’s national interests, however, current trends in Tehran’s policy toward the Middle East peace process have an expiration

**Economic necessities will coerce Iran to engage with the West.**

date and may be constructive only for philosophical discourse. The pursuit of justice may be the most predominant feature of Islamic international relations, but even justice cannot be pursued without a powerful foundation in economic productivity and the projection of military capabilities. In Islamic-oriented foreign policy, power differences are not recognized. The Shi’a conception of justice rejects ordering human or national hier-

archies based on economic and/or military structures and capabilities. There is certainly a hierarchy; but it is, or should be, an ethical one, according to which people and nations develop themselves spiritually. Furthermore, a nation-state is considered “just” when it does not distinguish itself from others according to its economic power, military and offensive capabilities, and racial distinctiveness.<sup>1</sup>

As the examples of the former Soviet Union and China demonstrate, pressure to put bread on the table and the economic necessities of rebuilding the country will coerce Iran to engage with the West rather than pursue futile confrontation. As leaders who have worked to improve Iran economically in the past, Muhammad Khatami and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani each have indicated, albeit ambiguously, that Iran will have to open up to the world and ultimately, as a non-Arab country with no common borders with Israel or direct association with Arab causes, accept the two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Because of their existing perspectives, Iranian clerics’ anti-U.S. attitudes and Washington’s anti-Iranian sentiments fundamentally compel each side to evaluate the other as existential security threats, leaving little room for compromise. Even U.S. offers of engagement and soft language during the Clinton era were viewed with uncertainty; that administration used more

carrots but at the same time used larger sticks by enforcing more intensified sanctions. Historically, U.S. legislators' and foreign policy officials' endorsements of covert operations, regime change, and support of the opposition during the Clinton administration and the subsequent Bush administration have led to the Iranian government's paranoia about Iran's security and have delayed efforts to bring about change and develop consensus-building processes between the two countries. U.S. interests in removing the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam in Iraq converged with those of Iran, but the broader asymmetry of beliefs and lack of communication caused a steady drumbeat of accusations and impeded cooperation between the two governments. For the Iranian clerics, the underlying issue is the acceptance and recognition of Iran's sovereignty by the United States.

From its birth in 1979 until the present, security has remained an obsession for the Islamic Republic. U.S. threats, economic sanctions, and rhetoric have greatly contributed to Iran's security consciousness in the last two decades. Iran separates issues of disagreement, whereas the United States—with wider domestic, regional, and international power and interests—is driven by the concept of linkage. Tehran's desired relationship with Washington is one that allows economic relations to expand without limitations and simultaneously maintains a calculated political distance. This desire is a consequence of Iranians' fundamental distrust, rooted in the people's historical memory, of U.S. intentions, which Iran perceives as focused on complete subordination of Iran. A mixture of religious and nationalist orientation, based on maintaining sovereignty, continues to overshadow the attitudes of Iranians—both clerics and nonclerics—toward the United States; fear of U.S. domination has shaped much of contemporary Iranian political behavior and thus Iranian history.

Since the crisis in Afghanistan (and even during the Clinton administration), Iran has displayed increments of understanding and cooperation in an effort to encourage the United States to redefine the Islamic Republic, to accept its sovereignty, and to settle the U.S. government's differences with Iran's current structure. Recently, however, the level of confrontation has been elevated to core issues of security, sovereignty, and the structure of conflict between the two sides, demonstrating the lack of U.S. understanding of Iranian politics and resulting in an enduring stalemate.

## **Understanding Political Iran**

---

In defining and understanding Iranian politics, Washington tends to focus on the Iranian clerics as the key source of the problem, while it is the concept of sovereignty permeating among Iranians of all strata that is the pow-

erful driving force not to be underestimated. Although recent U.S. policy changes, such as its preemption strategy, threaten the sanctity of sovereignty in international politics, Iran also contributes to the tensions over sovereignty. The fact that Iranians have failed thus far to create accountable institutions that can deliver stability, sovereignty, and growth while keeping potential, foreign hegemonic incursions at bay contributes to Iranian sensitivity on the subject. Regardless of who is to blame, failure to address the

**Iran will ultimately accept the two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.**

deep sensitivity all Iranians attach to their national sovereignty is ill advised.

For Washington to imagine that it can deconstruct and then reconstruct Iran's political system is a strategic miscalculation. Iran is not Iraq, and if the current disarray in post-Saddam Iraqi society is at all alarming, Iranians are far more prepared to defy foreign rule and are passionate about doing so. As Iranians reminded themselves on August 19, 2003, the fiftieth anniversary of the coup

that removed the democratically elected Mossadegh from power, Iranian society has changed dramatically. Whereas in 1953 only a few hundred individuals were able to facilitate the process of removing the prime minister, today, with a literacy rate of more than 90 percent, Iranians are far more conscious of the political processes in their country. Even in defiance of the internal squabbles between the reformers and the conservatives and the widespread inefficiencies in the country, Iranians' dismissive reaction to the city council elections in February 2003 was telling: only 11 percent of the voting population turned out.

Moreover, although the regime in Iraq consisted of some 54 individuals at the top level, with no grassroots support and no political intermediaries between the leadership itself and the population at large, Iran is a much more complex and modern system of stratified layers between the top elites and the masses. In Iran, some two million administrators and managers run the machinery of the state. Thousands of individuals work hard to advance Iranian national interests irrespective of what the top elites may wish or direct. In other words, unlike monolithic North Korea or Libya, Iran is a far more differentiated society where the average person enjoys the right to defy the state in very sophisticated layouts. Iran has more than a million schoolteachers, who educate approximately 18 million students throughout the country. Viewed in this light, Iran is perhaps the most politically dynamic society in the developing world.

No consensus exists in Washington on what the problems with Iran are, much less on what approaches would ultimately resolve those problems. For

whatever reason, Washington think tanks do not seem to conduct objective analyses of the situation in Iran but inject their wishes and desires. In this context, a number of axioms about Iran exist today that need to be clarified. To be precise, objective and informed analysis would reveal:

- Iran is not, by any measure, in a revolutionary mood.
- The Islamic Republic is conceptually challenged but politically stable.
- Iranians do not recognize any political leadership currently residing outside the country.
- A democratic movement does not exist in Iran.
- Iran has liberalized many of its policies in historic proportions but is far from a democracy.
- The overwhelming majority of the people from of all walks of life is interested in the state's efficiency, not in overthrowing it.
- Although Iranians regard the clerics' method of governance as inefficient and outdated, they view these leaders as part of the country's social and cultural fabric.
- Iran's economy suffers from deep structural problems, and there are no quick solutions that can be adopted by any government in Tehran.

One of the most common misconceptions about Iran is what meaning analysts extrapolate from dissent. Careful observation of Iranian politics shows that almost all Iranians agree that violence should not be used, that incremental change should guide all attempts at reform, and that foreign military intervention would be costly for Iran. Even Iranian-Americans overwhelmingly oppose foreign military intervention as a way to reform Iran's political system.<sup>2</sup> Many individuals and organizations in Washington understandably would like to see the political machinery in Iran collapse, but the realities project different conclusions. Iranian thinking and behavior are ambiguous, and Iranians seem to enjoy demonstrating their ambiguity, feeding this confusion about Iran's true political nature. Because there is a tendency in Iranian political culture to want everything simultaneously, ambiguity allows Iran to make progress incrementally.

Although Iran's polity is not about to change, its policies, particularly its foreign policies and foreign economic relations policies, may expire along with its current top elites. Some of the current ideas will surely continue,

particularly Iran's devotion to protecting its national sovereignty, as they are part of the culture that shaped Iran's sociopolitical movements over the last 150 years when confronting foreign rule. The enduring legacy of the Iranian revolution is likely to be that it institutionalized this historical concern to protect Iran's national sovereignty.

Contemporary Iran has a highly stratified society, however, that will change the look of its elite leaders and its foreign policies in an evolutionary manner.

**The Islamic Republic of Iran is conceptually challenged but politically stable.**

Its young population will be the driving force that sets an agenda focused on economic development, cultural diversity, and political openness. The current political stage in Iran requires time to mature; it can be viewed as a transitional period in the country's long and linear historical struggle with despotism and monarchism, one that will peacefully lead to an institutionalized Iran. The Iranians are a dynamic people, who have been at the fore-

front of change in the Middle East since 1906 when the Constitutional Movement began in the country.

Almost a century ago, Ahmad Kasravi, an Iranian writer, suggested that the Iranian people owe a period of rule to the clerics, who over the last three centuries have been an essential part of Iran's politics, claiming that they could achieve sovereignty and prosperity if they reach power. Political Islam in Iran is a reaction to foreign rule in the country. Islam emphasizes Muslims' sovereignty from foreign rule, providing the Muslim clerics with a basis to confront monarchies with European or U.S. backing. Any indication that foreigners may find an opportunity to influence the political process in Iran allows political Islam to remain a potent force, capable of social mobilization and political organization. Islam will indefinitely remain a part, but not necessarily the ruling part, of the Iranian culture no matter how the Iranian political system might evolve. Thus, the external promotion of a secular culture in Iran is not a realistic political pursuit at this time and is likely to harm external as well as Iranian interests.

In the end, Iranians cannot avoid settling for a system that will be founded on a combination of Iranian nationalism, Islamic faith, and globalization. This outcome might be a contradiction in terms, but any Eastern culture that desires to coexist in a contemporary global context that is dominated by the West will have to navigate these apparent contradictions and adapt itself to them. Having had the opportunity to travel extensively throughout the region, it is evident to this author that Iran is the most liberal Muslim society. The evolution of Islamic thought on governance within the Iranian political system will have lasting conceptual ramifications throughout the Muslim



world in making Islam compatible with globalization. Therefore, it is in the United States' interests to use carrots rather than sticks to accept and gradually influence Islamic thinking into the postindustrialized world.

Rational political change in Iran will have to come from within. Even those who define themselves as secular nationalists in Iran—let alone religious and neoreligious political forces—would feel degraded if outside forces were to come in and rule their country yet again. Both groups would reject such imposition from the outside, even if it required armed conflict. Between those inside Iran who would consider themselves enlightened and those outside the country who care for Iran's progress, there is a vast gap between culture and what is considered relevant and possible. The concerns, political memory, and national agenda of both communities diverge dramatically; those who have lived in Bethesda or Bel Air for two decades or more are far from the reality of today's Iran. To be fair, they are too distant to feel and internalize the nuances that now constitute Iranian political culture.

Reform in Iran will be the outcome of the political forces and dynamics within the country. Yet despite the fact that political competitiveness among various Iranian political orientations in a larger democratic framework is inevitable, no single group across the spectrum of political groupings in today's Iran would qualify as a modern political party with grassroots support and professionalism, which makes democratic change problematic: there can be no democracy without democrats.<sup>3</sup> Although hundreds of individuals in Iran can impress their audiences with their command of the literature on democracy, those same people have little tolerance for accepting differences of opinion, allowing others to advance, and competing fairly with other contestants. Such intolerance is rampant from the educated to the uneducated, from the cleric to the secular, from the rural population to the urban population, and from Iranians in Tehran to Iranian-Americans in West Los Angeles reaching out for change.

Although Iran has liberalized vastly, as a system it remains a collection of political tribes. In the postrevolutionary period, Iran has deteriorated as a nation-state, but it is striving to become one again through a frustrating process. If Iranians as a nation decide to create a democratic society based on original thinking and adequate economic and educational conditions, they first must rid themselves of their "rentier" state, one that is entirely reliant on oil income to sustain itself, and fully globalize. Both developments are far from realistic, however, at least in the near term.

**P**olitical Islam in Iran is a reaction to foreign rule in the country.

The fact that the so-called conservatives as well as reformists were raised, socialized, and educated under the shah's regime should not be underestimated. Both groups lived under a dictatorial system, were not exposed to the rules of political competition, and indirectly internalized a political culture based on favoritism and patrimonialism. Much of the unconscious workings of political groups across the spectrum was shaped during the dictatorial years of the shah. The great hope for the future of Iran is the huge young population that has a forward-looking and internationalist agenda and is willing to learn from the world as well as contribute to it. Furthermore, Iranian nationalism needs to advance from the current stage of galvanization and drama to a higher stage of rationality and dispassionate calculations of national interest for Iran to become a contributing member of the international community, avoid adventurism, and focus on using all of its human and material assets to enhance its national wealth and thus its national power.

### **Policy Necessities in Tehran and Washington**

---

These Iranian realities make it ineffective, injudicious, and imprudent to use military solutions and covert operations to help a talented nation straighten out its historical paradoxes and enter the twenty-first century. Iran has posed no threat to any of its neighbors; Iran's ill-advised policies have, in fact, contributed to the further "Americanization" of the Arab world, the security environment in the Persian Gulf, and the political geography of Central Asia by threatening existing regimes and interfering in their internal affairs. As a consequence, many of these small and mostly vulnerable countries have turned to Washington to secure U.S. protection. Iran's rhetoric against the West, the United States, imperialism, and global justice is merely a demonstration of the psychological needs of its elites, whose rejectionist, anticolonial, and confrontationalist view of the world will not be shared by Iran's youth in the near future.

To tackle the country's level of inefficiency effectively, Iran urgently needs political stability, peace with all of its neighbors, and engagement with major powers. Regardless of the differences between the United States and Iran, Iranians need to enrich their conceptual and analytical process, mature through greater internal and peaceful rational socialization, and develop a sophisticated reference point for their national identity inclusive of all political leanings that have public support.

Iran has accumulated offensive military power over the years; especially since September 11, 2001, however, the Iranian leadership has demonstrated no resolve to wield it because the dominant mood among the rank and file of the country's bureaucracy leans toward focusing on prosperity. Yet, in the

postrevolutionary period Iran has been riddled with a pattern of lurching from crisis to crisis, effectively impeding its ability to prosper.

This crisis mentality results from the pursuit of narrowly defined, maximum political sovereignty, ultimately forcing Tehran to resort to the tools of the weak—rhetoric, resentment, and insecurity—while it is interdependence that can achieve maturity and confidence in today’s world. Iran’s concept of political sovereignty has deep nationalistic and Shi’a roots that will hold for many years to come as Iranians struggle with efforts to balance interaction with the world and enriched confidence-building processes at home over time. Until the floodgates of foreign investment swing open in Iran, such feelings of security and self-confidence in the ability to engage the world will not begin to accumulate. If Iranians do want to be part of the globalization process, it is important for them to come to grips with their sovereignty complex. Reliable rule of law, effective law enforcement, a friendly taxation and regulatory environment, and a transparent government are all conditions that will induce Iran to recapture its historic greatness and assert its regional role.

**It is interdependence that can achieve maturity and confidence in today’s world.**

The top echelons of the conservative and reformist camps in Iran today are not internationalists. Their common revolutionary experience does not include lessons on the interaction of trade, power, and confidence. A stable Iran requires room for everyone: Iranian patriots, nationalists, clerics, and all others, including professional, civil society, and women’s groups. As Iran downplays the democracy project, the country needs to focus on the expansion of national wealth, particularly to keep up with the anticipated population growth to 100 million by about 2018.

A psychological examination of the political behavior of the Iranian elites illustrates that they now seek security more than justice. Some of the traditional features of Iran’s foreign policy are returning to Iranian foreign behavior. The most important aspect of this change may be Iranian reorientation toward the West. In a sense, the revolutionary period of 1979–1997, during which changing the status quo in the Middle East described Iran’s foreign relations, is an aberration. Moreover, Iranian leaders understand that the underlying test of their credibility in the coming years will be delivering economic efficiency rather than pursuing foreign adventurism.

No matter what the political orientation of the next Iranian president (to be elected in May 2005), he or she will be coerced into focusing on economic matters. This reorientation of the national agenda will require buying

security in foreign affairs and stabilizing Iran's currently unpredictable and oscillatory foreign relations. As a result, internal issues such as political legitimacy, economic productivity, and stabilization policies are gradually taking precedence over attempts to alter the Middle Eastern status quo.<sup>4</sup> Yet, an analysis of the underlying logic of Iranian behavior makes it apparent that, even without the Islamic Republic at its helm, areas of conceptual and

**It is important for  
Iranians to come to  
grips with their  
sovereignty complex.**

political friction between Tehran and Washington will not wither away completely. Because of its rich culture, historical pride, and sense of confidence, resulting in a national pride among the greatest in the world,<sup>5</sup> Iran, like Russia and China, will always have differences with the United States. Iran's level of conformity with the West in general and the United States in particular will never be like that of Arab or Latin American countries.

The logic of geopolitics, oil, and the evolving fabric of Iranian society will, however, ultimately bring the two rivals to agree on a cooperative yet frictional framework.

For Washington, as many Iran analysts have suggested, the United States will gain much more if it begins to court Iran's leadership. Geoffrey Kemp, an American author, urges:

It is unrealistic to expect Iran to stop its missile program or slow down the modernization of its conventional forces absent a new cooperative regional security environment. ... The future of the U.S. military presence in the Arab world and the size and configuration of Iraq's restructured armed forces will also influence Iranian perceptions. ... Iran will never publicly kowtow to American demands but if approached with respect, Iran's leaders might rethink their agenda in their own national and political interests. If the opportunity for cooperation is missed, the likelihood of an Iranian bomb will increase ... and a confrontation will materialize. This would be good for nothing and for no one. It therefore would be an act of enlightened self-interest for the United States to engage in imaginative diplomacy to prevent it from happening.<sup>6</sup>

In recognizing the fact that the rise of radical Islam in Iran has partly been a response to the antireligious policies of the shah's regime, which the United States fully supported, Washington must also accept that clerics in Iran are not going to alter their course and will continue to make grandiose claims about their reach. At least for the time being, whether in Malaysia, Iran, or Egypt, Muslims have an unconscious sensitivity to maintaining their cultural sovereignty, and a psychological recognition of Muslim political behavior is thus critical for the planning and implementation of U.S. foreign policy.

Part of the inevitable U.S. involvement and interaction in the twenty-first century asserted by Robert Kagan in his recent book, *Of Paradise and Power*, will be toward the Muslim world, which has more than one-fifth of the world's population. In utilizing that power, the United States needs to recognize that Islam will continue to play a determining role in shaping political priorities as well as the cultural outlook of Muslims and thus will develop a realistic policy for engaging the clerical communities in the Muslim world. Demonstrating respect and understanding will prove far more effective than will any other policy instrument.

### **Looking to the Future, Patiently**

---

The United States needs to look beyond 2010, when groups that will compete to advance Iran's national interests, economic prosperity, and political openness will manage the Islamic Republic. A corollary can be drawn here with the Chinese Communist Party, which promotes capitalism, globalization, and strategic relations with major powers and today administers the Chinese government. After all, if Immanuel Kant were alive today, he might argue that reason and coherence have a distinct logic east of Turkey and that contradictions on the surface may not be all that relevant if they do not interfere with a country's substance and strategic direction. As the coalition's experience in post-Saddam Iraq clearly shows, the United States must learn to deal more effectively with irregularities and irrationalities in the nations with which it engages.

With little understanding of the local nuances of Iran, the United States cannot develop long-term, strategic thinking or policy. This is precisely the conceptual divide that separates Europe from the United States when it comes to the way the two sides conduct foreign policy. The United States should avoid military solutions to settle its differences with Iran, as military strikes on Iran would delay rapprochement for many years to come. "Occupation" and "foreign occupation" are words that could mobilize Iranians across the political spectrum and resurrect historical memories dating back to the Mossadegh era.

A central idea that can be encapsulated in an aphorism is that Iran is a leader in the process of rational political change in the Middle East. As a reaction to foreign rule, the Iranian revolution caused irreparable damage to Iran's potential economic development but at the same time expedited the clarification of Iranians' sources of identity. Through the Iranian revolution, political Islam surfaced and demonstrated its degree of relevance and viability in the broad mosaic of Iranian sources of identity and political possibilities. From a historical perspective, this was a necessary phase in the

evolution of political thinking in Iran. Postrevolutionary generations will be more balanced, focusing on Iran's national interests. The hallmark of the process during the revolutionary period is that Iranians themselves have carried out and internalized this process. While recognizing the historical roots of Iran's current political behavior—that the country's interventionist policies in the 1980s were essentially a natural extension of its revolutionary posturing, while Tehran's behavior in the 1990s and beyond has essentially been based on seeking security and bargaining chips—the United States must also recognize that Iran's geopolitics, energy resources, and even cosmopolitan aspects of its culture will eventually put the country solidly in the Western camp.

Iran's current political oscillations and posturing are largely the pains of its maturation and will result in no conceivable damage to others; rather, Iranians could prove to be civilizing contributors to evolutionary processes in the Middle East and the Muslim world at large. Given such a framework, a sophisticated and culturally nuanced U.S. approach toward Iran's noncompliant behavior can demonstrate a new, enlightened understanding in Washington with benefits for its relations with the entire Muslim world.

## Notes

---

1. Mahmood Sariolghalam, "Conceptual Sources of Post-Revolutionary Iranian Behavior toward the Arab World," in *Iran and the Arab World*, eds. Nader Entessar and Hooshang Amirahmadi (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 20.
2. See [www.niacouncil.org/pressreleases/press097.asp](http://www.niacouncil.org/pressreleases/press097.asp) (accessed June 19, 2003).
3. See Ghassan Salame, *Democracy Without Democrats* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994).
4. Mahmood Sariolghalam, "Iran's Security and the Persian Gulf: An Inside View," in *Il Golfo nel XXI Secolo: Le Nuove Logiche della Conflittualita*, ed. Valeria Fiorani Piacentini (Milan: Il Mulino, 2002), pp. 489–495, 503–507.
5. Minxin Pei, "The Paradoxes of American Nationalism," *Foreign Policy* (May–June 2003): 32.
6. See Geoffrey Kemp, "How to Stop the Iranian Bomb?" *National Interest* (summer 2003).