

Avoiding the worst case scenario: Iran and the real possibilities of engagement

Ali M. Ansari¹

Iran continues to frustrate policy makers and polarise opinion. This is no more so than in the current situation where attempts to force Iran to cease uranium enrichment have apparently failed and policy appears to vacillate between engagement and condemnation, with more extreme voices calling for military strikes as the least bad option. More worrying perhaps, is the realisation that Western policy remains fragmented, incoherent and narrowly defined. There appear to be limited choices and options, beyond which little is being investigated. In short, in the absence of an extensive reflection and reassessment, policymakers have limited themselves to two unpalatable options: engagement (ill defined), or military coercion, which themselves result in inertia. This inertia itself increases the likelihood that more extreme measures will be adopted as a consequence of what may be termed malign neglect. This briefing paper seeks to argue that alternative options are available, principally through a political route, but that Western policymakers must empower and equip themselves through the (re)acquisition of knowledge and the realities on the ground. Only this will allow for a proactive policy of engagement, with clear goals and objectives that are achievable with the Iran that exists, and not only the Iran which is imagined.

Iran and the global war on terror

Six years after 9/11, Iran has emerged as one of the chief beneficiaries of the US led Global War on Terror (GWOT). With two of its main rivals in the region eliminated through US intervention, and the success of its clients further afield in the Lebanon, US strategy since 2001, far more than the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, has allowed Iranian politicians to think in ways, and about possibilities, which would have been inconceivable to Iranian statesmen for the better part of two centuries. Indeed, through no effort of its own, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been able to conceive of an imperial mantle and role which the monarchy it overthrew could only have envied. This comparatively easy acquisition of power

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and the further opportunities it presents has had a profound impact on the development of both domestic politics and the international projection of power. In short, President Bush has allowed Iranians not only to dream of empire, but to believe that the prospect is within their grasp.

Political consequences

In order to better appreciate Iran's current political disposition the political consequences of the change in US policy need to be understood. Indeed had political strategists in the United States a better understanding of political developments in Iran at the onset of the GWOT, the trajectory of relations and Iran's impact on the region is likely to have been dramatically different, and considerably more constructive.

In 2001, President Bush inherited a policy of prospective *détente*. His predecessor, Bill Clinton had been exploring the possibilities of a thaw in Iran-US relations, which had yielded few formal results, but which nonetheless presented an environment for constructive engagement. Iran had a Reformist President, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, who was an internationalist, and who sought to redefine Iran's relations with the international community on the platform of a Dialogue of Civilisations. While not compromising on Iran's self perception as a 'civilisation' with much to contribute, Khatami's presentation and world view was nonetheless, constructive and revolved around a belief in engagement. He broke with hard line revolutionary ideology for instance, in regularly praising the achievements of Western civilisation, a position, which drew heavy criticism from the hard liners. The subsequent designation of Iran as part of the Axis of Evil, was therefore music to their ears and they publicly berated Khatami for his *naïveté*. Although Khatami's administration and world view had been under attack for some time, it is difficult to under-estimate the impact of this one speech on the internal dynamics of Iran and the inexorably shift to the right it engendered. The ultimate consequence was the seizure of power by Iran's 'neo-conservatives' on an anti-internationalist agenda which sought confrontation not engagement with the West. It may be argued that the ends were similar but the means had undoubtedly changed and given the changing environment, particularly American difficulties in Iraq, the ability to exercise these new confrontational means, was not only facilitated, but seemed to yield success. This perception of success has in turn reinforced the belief that confrontation is the only means to further success, and made the possibility of some sort of *détente* or dialogue more difficult in the short term.

Iran's perception of its role in the region

1. An imperial mentality

For all the emphasis on Iran's role as an Islamic power, the one consistent drive in the policies of successive administrations both before and after the Revolution, has been the determination to restore Iran's Great Power status in the region, if

not in the international community as a whole. During the Monarchy this was interpreted in overt military terms, while after the Revolution, this drive has taken a more political-cultural form. The aims are however similar and are driven by a belief that Iran's enjoys the natural position of regional hegemon and was only deprived of this position by the domestic weakness of the Qajar dynasty in particular, and the ruthless exploitation of this weakness by malevolent foreigners – in this the West. It is important to bear in mind that until 2003, this 'imperial' drive, even under the military expression preferred by the Pahlavis, was conceived in terms of the projection of power and influence in the region. Irredentism was never an option, though governments emphasised the protection and extension of territorial boundaries whenever possible. Mohammad Reza Shah made great play of the fact that his reign was the first in over century to see the expansion of Iran's borders through the seizure of the Persian Gulf islands of Abu Musa, the Greater and Lesser Tumbs, while the Islamic Republic criticised him for having on the contrary, 'given up' Bahrein. The Islamic Republic meanwhile, argued that it was the only government in the modern era not to lose territory and drew attention to the defence of Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. The theme in these cases was the projection of influence (policeman of the Gulf), and the defence of territory. Since 2003 however and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, it would be fair to say, that the United States has allowed Iran to imagine itself in a wholly different way.

2. Nationalism and civilisation

It is important to recognise Iran's self perception of itself as both a nation of historical depth and a civilisation which has on the whole, provided positive contributions to mankind. Iranians increasingly think of themselves as distinct from the Middle East, but while the Shah sought to align Iran with Europe and the Europeans, contemporary Iranians increasingly see themselves as a distinct civilisation on a par with India and China – the three mother civilisations of Asia. As such the concept of the nation-state would not apply in quite the same way, because, as a civilisational hub, Iran is bound to be multi-ethnic and to an extent cultural pluralistic. This is considered a strength and not a weakness as some proponents of ethnic subversion would like to think.

3. Islam

There is little doubt that Iran does see itself as a leader of the Islamic world and that President Ahmadinejad in particular, energetically cultivates his role as a Muslim leader who can speak truth to power. His popularity on the Muslim street is well known and it is quite apparent that many Sunni Arab leaders are anxious about this popularity. More importantly however, is the anxiety expressed at a more specifically Shia level, as Iran's political popularity and the success of Hizbollah last summer against Israel, has apparently led to an increase in conversions to Shi'ism among the Arabs. This development has also been highlighted by fears among the Sunni Arab states, of a resurgent Iraq under Shia leadership. At the

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same time, it is crucial for our overall understanding to recognise that for all the belief of individuals like Ahmadinejad, Iran's approach to Shiism in the region is heavily influenced by notions of Iranian-ness. In sum, Iran's use of religion is highly instrumentalised and where a conflict between religion and national interest arises, it is not uncommon, for national interests to take precedence. Even in the rhetoric of Ahmadinejad, the national dimension comes through loud and clear. A good example would be the announcement that Iran is producing enriched uranium on an industrial scale. During this ceremony, a song was written in commemorations (during which the President cried) which alluded to motifs from both the Iranian national epic (the Shahnameh) and Islam. It is a synthesis of narrative which is increasingly common.

4. History and myth

In this vein it is important to recognise the depth of historical experience and the role of myth in constructing Iran's image of itself in the region and the world. A good way to appreciate the influence of history and its associate mythologies is to contrast Iran with the United States. In comparison with the United States, Iran's perception of itself can definitely be described as *longue durée*, and its strategies are on the whole constructed on the notion that Iran has existed for a long time and will continue to exist long after others have disappeared (this is particularly apparent in dealings with Iraq). On a particular level, it is also reflected in the fact that historic events are often recounted as if they occurred yesterday and very immediate – this is most obviously exhibited in Iranian accounts of Western perfidy, especially the coup of 1953. For Americans, such events can seem an age away, although it is important to bear in mind that the United States has its own complex mythologies, that Iranians may ignore (cf 1979 and the Hostage Crisis).

5. Soft power

So engrossed has the West become with the statistics of hard power, that it has tended to neglect the complexities of soft power. For all the discussion on Iran's nuclear file, comparatively little attention has been given to Iran's exercise of soft power – which recent experience might indicate, Iran does well. Even the acquisition of nuclear technology is driven less by the prospect of a valuable deterrent, and more by the belief that success in such a key technological field will provide Iran with prestige and influence. The ability to exercise soft power, (persuasion, subterfuge), has allowed Iran to punch very much above her weight, and the fact that the West fails to engage on this key level and effectively given Iran very much a free hand, and greater power than it might have had. This only encourages the more hard line and reckless elements within the regime. A good example would be the recent debacle over the British sailors, which was almost entirely self-inflicted (the British authorities clearly felt that the 'truth' would vindicate them), and resulted in deep humiliation and the near resignation of a British defence secretary. Iran would have achieved this without ever firing a shot!

A programme for action

No one would doubt that Iran is not an easy country to deal with and that encounters can prove frustrating but the West has had an unfortunate tendency to make life far more difficult for itself by neglecting strategies and ignoring realities. Any programme of action should consider the following:

1. Recognising the Revolution

The Revolution has had mixed results for both Iranians and the international community, but the tendency of the United States in particular to deny it, prevents any progress being made on a number of issues. The Revolution was a complex event with differing trends and positions. While the Europeans have tended to accept the Revolution as a reality which needs to be engaged with, it would be fair to say, that even they have done a superficial job of understanding the revolution and its consequences. Recognising the revolution as a reality of history and seeking to engage with its myriad parts, allows a whole range of hitherto untried strategies to be pursued. At present the United States repeats the language of 'regime change' or retains an unhelpful ambiguity which simply forces disillusioned members of the Iranian political establishment to stick with the regime they know.

2. Recognising Iran's status

Much can be achieved if the West, and the United States, can come to terms with the reality of Iran in the region, and its role as a prospective Great Power. This has determined Iran's foreign policy for the better part of two centuries and while the British in the 19th century had to deal with the decline of the Iranian state, the contemporary problem is one of the reintegration of the Iranian state (Islamic Republic or otherwise). At present, every security arrangement which is reached tends to exclude Iran and the most obvious example of this perspective in action is the determination to pursue policies in both Iraq and Afghanistan without paying any attention to Iran.

3. Nuanced engagement

By this it is meant that the West needs to engage Iran on its own terms – soft power, politics and diplomacy – becoming involved on a range of levels and on a range of issues. The West must distinguish between the nation and the state, recognise the potency of nationalism and engage on topics on which it can contribute. To take one example: the West continues to deal with Iran on the legal technicalities of the NPT, but fails to see that the argument in Iran is a nationalistic one. If this is the case, then what the West must do is shift the focus onto broader nationalistic issues and challenge Ahmadinejad's claim to be defending Iran's national interest. This can be targeted onto other issues such as civil rights and elections, issue on which the current Iranian government is very weak. It is only relatively recently that the United States for instance has accepted, definitively, that Iran was entitled to a civil nuclear programme. For a considerable period the ambiguous rhetoric

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from Washington talked of dismantling the nuclear infrastructure which was easily read in Iran as a blanket attack on any right to hold nuclear technology. The public therefore could easily be persuaded that the West was against Iran's economic development.

4. The development of expertise

In order to facilitate the above, the West must develop and replenish its expertise. It is a remarkable fact that until the summer of 2006, the total number of people on the Iran desk in the State Department was one. This has now improved considerably, but there is still room for further expansion. This means language experts and those with an empathy for the culture and the nuances of culture. *We need more than translators, we need interpreters.* Iran's political and social system is highly personal; what is needed is a cadre of individuals who can build relationships.

5. Deconstructing myths

The relationship between the West and Iran is so replete with myths and narratives of victimisation, that the process of de-mythologisation and the reconciliation of narratives needs to be started – in earnest. At present, the West and Iran sing from two different hymn sheets. An essential task is to make sure these hymn sheets are at the very least, as familiar as possible, with a shared vocabulary. ■

Endnotes

- ¹ Dr. Ali M. Ansari is Reader in Modern History and Director of the Institute of Iranian Studies, at the University of St Andrews. He is also Associate Fellow of the Middle East Programme with reference to Iran at Chatham House