

## **Iran's Preeminent Role and Facing Challenges<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran and the severance of ties between Iran and the United States, due to its geopolitical importance, Iran kept a decisive role in regional developments. On the other hand, neighboring 15 countries and its huge oil and gas reserves have enhanced Iran's importance manifold. Given Iran's political, security and geopolitical position, it is difficult if not impossible, to settle regional disputes without its partnership. At the same time, Iran should also pursue economic progress and development in order to economically compete with its neighbors. While examining the cultural identity of Iranian revolution, the following article largely focuses on the Shiite denomination of Iran's politics and its influence on Shiites in other countries, especially the neighboring states. It also analyzes the ideological and aspirational goals of the Islamic Revolution in Iran—as achievable alternatives to utopian objectives—which are the characteristic of all revolutions in the world.

### **Introduction**

February 2009 marked the beginning of the fourth decade of triumphant Islamic Revolution in Iran. This is while the developments in

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<sup>1</sup> Views expressed in this paper are of the author, without any indication or implication for the current policy positions of the Foreign Ministry of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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the Middle East and world politics over the recent years have boosted Iran's role. Over the past three decades, relations between Iran and the international system have been turbulent and at times tense. Beyond such difficult interactions, a kind of identity gradually came to be recognized in the world as the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

While the Islamic Revolution was an endeavor to bring about changes in the Iranian society, it also adopted a critical approach toward the prevailing situation in the international community. In other words, two issues were the focus of attention in the Islamic Revolution. First, the Iranian society's discontent over their situation which was manifested in the struggle against the former rule. In this process, which deals with Iran's domestic affairs, the revolutionaries were not only against state dictatorship but also opposed its dependence on the West. The slogan of "independence, freedom and Islamic republic" was a result of the multidimensional outlook of the revolution. Therefore, the Islamic Revolution also began to object to the governing international structure which was imposing its rules on others, including the Iranian society.

In the new era, Iran left the Western bloc, but did not join the opposite camp either. The decision to leave the Western bloc was gradually replaced with a conflict between Iran and the West. Justice and independence-seeking strategies topped the agenda of the Iranian foreign policy. Such an ideological view had nothing in common with the Marxist ideology seeking equality in the eastern bloc. Rather, in many ways, it was visibly different from them, especially with respect to philosophical thoughts and views. The aspiration for equality in the Marxist ideology is based on historical materialism and class differences. However, the justice-seeking and idealistic views of the Islamic Revolution are rooted in the political thoughts of Shiite Islam.

Under this political thought, discontent over the prevailing situation and efforts for seeking a better situation were not just motivated by a better materialistic life. Shiism has always been in pursuit

of an ideal society which is a utopia based on their religious teachings. In the framework of the dominant norms of the international system, this was considered to be as a radical move. Such a conceptual divergence in Iran's political actions and international relations affected different fields of interaction in international community. Some of the issues affected by this could include "the attitudes toward state national interests and goals in international relations", "isolation or alliance", as well as "the characteristics and the type of allies" in the international scene, among others. After three decades of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and in light of other developments such as the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the ouster of Taliban government and the Baathist regime, a new political map took shape in the Middle East. Under the new circumstances, the Shiite factor which found its way into world politics through the Islamic Revolution became increasingly influential and evident. As a result, Iran's role and its foreign policy also gained greater importance. Moreover, a great deal of discussions took place on the true identity and nature of these developments as well as the nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy.

This article seeks to discuss issues related to Iran's role in regional and international equations as well as the challenges ahead. Briefly stated, the rising role of Iran concurrently brought new responsibilities as well. The political thought that engendered the Islamic Revolution has turned into an influential element and become the focus of attention of international studies. At no point in history, Shiite forces had such a strong presence in international politics. Such a situation, however, necessitates the interaction and adoption of rational strategies, and calls for avoiding extremism.

### **Movement and State**

In many cases, the foreign policy behavior of states which are derived from a great uprising keeps its revolutionary nature for a long

time. A period of time will naturally pass before a government born out of a movement could actually adjust with the new conditions and provisions. In many cases, this process does not come about without difficulty.

Two points are important in any movement, which need to change after it turns into a government. The first point is the lack of regularization of movements. They are ongoing phenomena and cannot follow static patterns. Therefore, any rules applied to restrict the behavior of movements will be like an inappropriate suit that does not fit. The second point in behavior of the movements is their unpredictability therefrom anything could happen in a movement that might be totally different from previous events. Although some of the sociologists, especially Marxists, have tried to enforce some kind of compulsory rules on the behavior of movements, the very nature of movement is in direct contrast to obligatory rules. Perhaps, that explains why it is so difficult to predict the behavior of movements.

Even after turning into states, these movements tend to preserve their characteristics of unconventionality and unpredictability. To get used to the dreary rules of governance is troubling to them and act as an obstacle to their freedom and flourishing. This has been the case with many revolutions in the world and can explain the similarities between France's foreign policy after its 1789 Revolution and the 1917 October Revolution in Soviet Union, as well as 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, although they had different origins, objectives and ideals.

In general, a revolution is a fundamental transformation in any nation whose consequences go beyond the national borders. All revolutions claim to bear new messages. Crane Barinton in 'The Anatomy of Revolutions' states that all revolutions have throughout history tried to promote and get their messages across the world. Therefore, it is in the nature of every revolution to export itself. (Barinton, 1965: 192) This is due to the spirit of the revolution.

It seems each revolution has come to believe that it has found new things previously unbeknown to the world and if they offer them to the world, the situation will change for the better to everyone. Indeed, the selfless spirit of the revolutionaries who intend to build the utopia, wants to help others equally enjoy the benefits. The French and the Russian revolutions pursued such a path. Perhaps, the American Revolution was an exception. This is because the American Revolution, as stated by Hanna Arendt, was more like a local and introvert event in America of which the isolationist nature caused little or no intention of transferring its ideals to the rest of the world<sup>1</sup>. However, the United States adopted an expansionist policy in the 20th century that went against the fundamental principles of the American Revolution and introduced itself to the world as an imperialist superpower.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran was greatly influenced by the political thoughts of Shiite Islam as well as its perception of cosmopolitanism. In the ideal Islamic city, there are places for every ethnic group, nation and individual. The main axis of the political thoughts of Shiism is justice. From the viewpoint of Shiite Islam politics is not separated from justice. Therefore, the main characteristic which theoretically became an integral part of the Iranian foreign policy after the Islamic Revolution was the issue of justice.

Justice has always been the main concern of the majority of political scholars. Be it Greek or contemporary philosophers, they have all somehow spoken of it. For the Greek philosophers, justice was a kind of virtue. Social theorists like John Luck and Jean-Jacques Rousseau likewise paid great attention to the subject of justice. Emmanuel Kant also paid special attention to justice in his intellectual thoughts. His 'Deontologist'<sup>2</sup> ethics and practical philosophy only become meaningful with justice.

Also, many of the contemporary theoreticians have come up with theories on justice in social and political domains under the influence of Kant. John Rawls, who is known as the most influential philosopher of

the 20th century in the field of social justice (Dahl, 2006: 36) views justice as a virtue. He has paid special attention to Kant and the apostles of social arrangement in his famous book 'The Theory of Justice'. (Rawls, 1972) However, Rawls views justice within the framework of equality. Therefore, he tries to classify and define justice in the domain of social movement. He then reduces its disjunctive angle and brings it closer to the political movement that helps promote equality and democracy. (Rawls, 1972:3 & 7)

Therefore, justice is a global and common concept. However, there are different interpretations of this common word. Differences come to the surface when the quality of justice is brought under scrutiny. Justice in the political thoughts of Shiism has nothing to do with the interpretations of Kant or the followers of social contracts. In the political thought of Shiism, justice has an abstract meaning. The originality of justice is such that it is not affected by any expedience. By the same token, the political thought of Shiism views justice as a pivotal element without which it will be impossible to pursue politics or even perform the worship. In addition, justice in the political thought of Shiism is placed next to elements such as divine guidance and grace. (Allameh Helli, 1972; Danesh-Pajhoh, 1976)<sup>3</sup>

The perfectionist view of Islamic Revolution based on the Shiite political thoughts manifested an ideological outlook in the contemporary international relations. The meaning of perfect human being, which has been adopted from the theosophical view of Shiism, lays emphasis on the importance of achieving perfection only through religion and the religious path alone. Invitation, guidance, as well as religious Islamic maxim of "promoting the meritorious and proscribing the vice" which are the mainstay of religious jurisprudence, have been introduced to guide the masses. Consequently, "the identicalness of 'the religion' and 'the political'" became one of the main theoretical ideas of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. As a result, the idealistic outlook of the Islamic Revolution, which adopted such a political thought, was challenged by the dominant world powers. The late Imam Khomeini's view on

exporting the revolution was influenced by his deep religious thoughts and beliefs based on the necessity of commanding the international community to pursue virtue and prohibiting it from vice as well as saving the oppressed nations of the world dominated by the colonial powers. (Khomeini, 1986: Vol. XX: 227-242)

Despite of their different viewpoints, almost all revolutionary leaders wanted to export their revolutions. Some revolutionaries believed that the main objective of the Islamic Revolution is to export its ideals and if this is stopped, the revolution will degenerate from within. On the other hand, there were others who thought otherwise. To them, the main objective of the Islamic Revolution was to build a society that could be a role model for other neighboring nations. And establishing such an exemplar society could be the best possible way to export the revolution. (Martyrs Foundation..., 1982: 326)

The debates over this issue have continued till today. Because of the experiences earned throughout all these years by the Islamic Republic and the statesmen, there is now less talk about exporting the revolution. However, despite the passage of three decades since the victory of the revolution, the talk of exporting the revolution is still a hot topic of discussion and a matter of dispute in the society. Former President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami once brought up the subject of exporting the revolution during a conference at Gilan University on May 3, 2008. The reactions to his comments demonstrated the contentious capacity of such a concept in Iranian political society.<sup>4</sup>

During the first decade of the Islamic Republic, the country adopted a confrontational strategy in its foreign policy against the international system. Anthony Parsons, the British diplomat in Iran in 1970s introduces the Iranian foreign policy in the first decade of the Islamic Revolution with the characteristics of "anti-imperialist" and "non-alignment". In his view, since the US Embassy hostage crisis of 1979-80 in Tehran until the Iran's strong reaction over the blasphemous book of "Satanic Verses", the Iranian foreign policy behavior was opposing the international rules and norms. Parsons claims that foreign

policy behavior of Iran was not only against the West, but also confronted the non-aligned approach. (Parsons, 1991: 27)

Meanwhile, Fred Halliday refers to Iran as one of the most independent countries in the international scene that, as a result of the Islamic Revolution, has become an important force in the international community, "although it incurred great and unnecessary costs". He is of the opinion that Iran on different occasions has made costly miscalculations in its foreign policy which originated of contending thoughts in Iranian society that can hardly reach consensus over any matter. He also claims that the failure to reach consensus and the miscalculations in hostage crisis, not only cost Iran dearly, but the ending compromise was in favor of the United States. He goes on to state that this was also repeated with regard to the Iraq-imposed war against Iran and over the Salman Rushdie's "Satanic Verses". (Halliday, 1991: 6)

The Islamic Republic of Iran has gained many experiences following years of upheavals. It has also gone past being a movement and become a strong state. Since the establishment of a provisional government upon the decree of the late Imam Khomeini in the early days of the revolution, nine presidents have been elected by the people thus far. People have also participated in eight parliamentary elections. Legal bodies and the necessary regulations have been established to help govern the country. Four five-year socioeconomic development plans have been ratified and implemented by the parliament and the government. The country now has well-established domestic and foreign policies. Iran's Twenty Year Prospect Plan (2025)<sup>5</sup> has been also devised and notified for implementation.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is now viewed as an influential and responsible state on the international stage having broad relations with many countries. Just like any other government, meeting public demands, stabilizing employment, providing security, promoting socioeconomic development and presence in the international community are high on the agenda of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In

view of all these developments, it can be safely concluded that the Islamic Republic of Iran has grown up and matured.

Going past the stage of being a movement and having an influential government in place is acknowledged even by the opponents of the Islamic Revolution like Henry Kissinger. As a prominent realist theoretician who was always in favor of including the military option against Iran (Kissinger, 2005), now he is of the opinion that Washington should hold talks with Tehran. He is of the opinion that Iran is no longer a movement; rather it is a nation and a government. Therefore, the US dialogue with Iran could prove useful. (Kissinger, 2008)

Zbigniew Brzezinski is another strategist who had criticized Iran's foreign policy, blaming it for the instability in the Persian Gulf. This so-called destabilizing force in Iran's foreign policy, Brzezinski claimed, included hostage takings, threats to cut off oil supply routes, meddling in Lebanese internal affairs, and challenging the existence of Israel. He maintained that the United States should never remain indifferent toward these behaviors. However, as time went by, he has come to the conclusion that the past US policies on Iran have failed and that Washington should pursue another strategy vis-à-vis Tehran. He criticizes the policy of "carrot and stick" while emphasizing that such rhetoric should also change. (Brzezinski & Odom, 2008: A13)

Iran needs constancy in its behavior and predictability in order to fully cross the movement phase and achieve further state power. At this stage, priority should be given to increasing the role of the country in regional and international policies, having a greater share in producing knowledge, increasing national wealth, and broadening influence and national prestige. The Twenty Year Prospect Plan (2025) - notified for implementation to the heads of the three branches of government by Supreme Leader of Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on November 4, 2003- has been devised with such a status in mind. Under this strategic mid-term plan, Iran shall possess advanced know-how with the capability of undertaking technological production, based on its indigenous human and material resources in 2025. In the 20-year plan, Iran is perceived as the top scientific, technological and economic

powerhouse of the region with an Islamic and revolutionary identity, interacting constructively and effectively in international relation. (Iran's Twenty Year Prospect Plan- 2025)

Adopting of such a national plan based on cultural, social, economic and environmental conditions of the country is a preliminary step for devising more successful plans, since it outlines an image of a desirable future in which the country is safe, independent, united and equipped with a deterrent defense mechanism. Preparation of development plans and annual budgets, quantitative indexes such as investment rate, income, gross national product, inflation and employment rates, income gap among social groups, cultural promotion, education, security and defense requirements should all be regulated on the basis of the same vision.

The document also illustrates the ideals of the Islamic Republic given its experiences. "Factors such as stable and continuous growth, competitiveness, social equality, national security, judicial development and regional equilibrium based on ground realities, being an exemplar model in the Islamic world through reinforcement of religious democracy, sustainable development, ethical and dynamic society and intellect that could forge Islamic and regional convergence based on Islamic teachings and the late Imam Khomeini's thoughts shall be the main prerequisite for realizing the national vision. (Iran's Twenty Year Prospect Plan- 2025)

Meanwhile it should be noted that predictability does in no way mean making compromises or sidestepping the values as is perceived in the common culture. Rather, it strengthens calculation and rationality in the decision-making process and stability in behavior, mainly because having power and protecting and increasing these power factors in any country are directly linked to predictability and rationality.

### **A Rising Star**

Elaine Sciolino wrote an article in the New York Times on October 28, 2008, under the name of "Iran, a Rising Star" that's Now Too Influential to Ignore. (Sciolino, 2008) In reviewing Robert Baer's book 'The Devil We Know, Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower', she states that Iran is too influential to ignore. She continues: "As the end of the Bush era draws near, it is clear that its policy of treating Iran as a country that must be weakened, punished and perhaps even overthrown has failed. Suddenly it has become fashionable to say that Iran must be recognized, respected and dealt with as the increasingly influential nation that it is." (Sciolino, 2008) The increase in the power of Iran and its regional/international influence has come about through a gradual process and with the help of a number of factors.

The general view in the United States and to a great extent in the Western world is propagated as that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a destabilizing and troublemaking force. It has been claimed that Iran is the biggest sponsor of what the US calls terrorism. Also, they think Iran is seeking nuclear weapons through different ways which could pose a serious threat to the West. The threat against Israel is one of the main views of the United States regarding Iran. And this view is not just raised during their theoretical discussions. Over the past 30 years, the US governments have pursued the containment strategy vis-à-vis Iran as a top priority in their foreign policies. They have at times even raised the possibility of a military confrontation between Iran and the US. However, it appears that all these policies have failed. On the contrary, they have in some cases even helped enhance Iran's power and influence.

At present, moderate circles in American politics are coming round to determine the scope of Iranian power and influence. Robert Baer in his new book maintains that "there is no reason why the United States would ever want to confront an influential Iran. (Baer, 2008: 5)

He is of the opinion that the Iranian psyche is seriously obsessed about reviving the Persian Empire. He has extensive knowledge about the Middle East because of years of studies on the region and says, "Iran is the only stable country in the region and a player with particular goals." Despite some of his exaggerations, such as "disintegration of Iraq and handing over its oil-rich regions in the south to Iran", which by the way Iran does not want at all, he has made some realistic analyses. He clearly points out to Iran's deterrent power and its defense doctrine based on asymmetrical defense tactics and maintains that "such a defensive doctrine does in no way mean Tehran has an expansionist policy in mind." (Baer, 2008: 7, 45 & 73)

An important point worth mentioning is Iran's cultural influence throughout the region. Many of those who researched Iran habitually declare the country a regional power by focusing attention on its military prowess, alleging that it seeks nuclear weapons and supports militia groups in Lebanon and Palestine. There are many discussions in this respect. Naturally, Iran does not accept the way it is being treated in these analyses, viewing them as one-sided and antagonistic.

However, Iran's cultural influence deserves a closer look. Developments that took place in Iraq after the collapse of the Baathist regime demonstrated how deep the Iraqi people had been under the influence of Iranian culture and civilization, despite extensive efforts made by the Saddam's regime to cherish antagonism against Iran in Iraq.

In fact, the Iranian cultural influence in the region has been far greater and more effective than the Shahab 3 missile. Such a cultural influence has brought about strategic prowess and greater security for Iran.

### **Iran's Growing Geopolitical Status**

The Middle East has witnessed a wide range of developments in recent years. Many of these developments have helped boost Iran's influence in the region.

The fall of Taliban in Afghanistan at the end of 2001 as well as the collapse of the Baathist regime in Iraq in early 2003 helped strengthen Iran's strategic role in the region. Both the Taliban and the Baathist regimes were Iran's arch-foes and a great security threat. Their collapse not only removed the security threat against Iran, but also paved the way for the resurgence of Iran as a regional power.

Just as importantly, it is necessary to point to the 33-day war of 2006 between Lebanon's Hezbollah and Israel. Although the war was between Hezbollah-a Shiite group that supports Iran- and Israeli regime, Hezbollah's praiseworthy resistance similarly helped strengthen the status of Iran in the region. Some have even referred to the Hezbollah-Israeli war as a proxy war between Iran and the United States (Darwish, 2006).

The US war against Iraq was also important from another perspective. From the Iranian viewpoint, although the war led to the ouster of Saddam's regime and boosted the role of Shiites in Iraqi politics, it also got the US stuck in a deep quagmire. The longer presence of US forces in Iraq gradually became a foreign policy disaster for Washington. Joseph E. Stiglitz and Lind J. Bilmes in their new book 'The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of The Iraq Conflict' (Stiglitz & Bilmes, 2008) have made astonishing revelations about the US war in Iraq. They maintain that there is no doubt whatsoever that the US invasion of Iraq was a huge blunder. They use reliable documents and evidence to prove that the war in Iraq has cost the US economy more than \$3 trillion so far.

Under the 2008 fiscal budget plan, the US spent an average of more than \$12.5 billion per month in Iraq. By adding the cost of war in Afghanistan, the final figure will be \$16 billion per month, equal to the UN's annual budget. (Stiglitz & Bilmes, 2008:1 & 9) According to them, the war in Iraq has cost three times more than the Vietnam War and twice the costs of World War I.<sup>6</sup> Only the cost of World War II have been more than the cost inflicted by the ongoing war in Iraq.

During World War II, 16.3 million US soldiers were directly involved in the conflict for four years. The cost of that war, by calculating the exchange rate of dollar in 2007 and reducing the rate of inflation, stood at around \$5 trillion. By taking into account all troops who fought against Germany and Japan, the cost for each soldier (at today's dollar rate) has been less than \$100,000. In the Iraq war, the figure for every soldier is around \$400,000. (Stiglitz & Bilmes, 2008: 9)

The US presence in Iraq has been longer than what had been originally assumed. It has been in Iraq for more than five years now. A glance at the American involvement in other conflicts will reveal that this has indeed lasted too long. The US fought in World War II for three years and eight months. It fought for 26 months in World War I and about three years and a month in the Korean War. Even the civil war lasted for about four years in the United States. (Stiglitz & Bilmes, 2008:71) Moreover, its involvement in the Iraq war for more than five years has had little results thus far for Washington.

The US war in Iraq showed that under the present international circumstances, war is not a suitable tool to settle global matters. Of course, many reasons could be given regarding the inappropriateness of these tools in the past. In the words of Clausewitz, "war is the continuation of politics but through other means". (Clausewitz, 1974: 119) This is still a focal point for strategists and politicians. However, the inability of war in resolving disputes and the costs it inflicts upon nations serve as further proof that the age of Clausewitz and the application of war as a political means has indeed long gone. It is possible to quickly defeat an enemy as has been the case in Iraq and Afghanistan in which the US and its allies used state-of-the-art military warfare and technology. But does defeating an enemy really mean attaining the stated goals of a war? For the neoconservatives in Washington, the first goal of the Iraq invasion was to establish democracy in that country before democratizing the whole Middle East. Subsequently, peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis would

follow in the interim. After five years since the US invasion, none of the above-mentioned goals has been attained yet.

The involvement in Iraq took away a huge amount of American resources. Therefore, it is now trying to at least settle its disputes with Iran through peaceful means without having to opt for a military option. Although from time to time, the US officials state that with respect to the Iranian nuclear dispute "all options are on the table." (Bush, 2005) This means there is a possibility of the use of military force, yet the lesson learned from the invasion of Iraq forces them to take extra precautions before doing just that.

The US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan brought about other repercussions that are not desirable for Iran's foreign policy either. Now Iran has become a neighbor of US and its allies. Iran is not pleased to see the presence of US in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such proximity could endanger Iran's security. Tensions could arise and exacerbate between Iran and the US, when Washington accuses Tehran of supporting the insurgent groups in Iraq, or arrests and detains Iranian nationals under unfounded pretexts.

On April 11, 2008, the US Navy ship Typhoon received bogus messages from somewhere that quickly raised the possibility of an imminent confrontation with the Iranian coastguard boats in the Persian Gulf. This was an alarm that showed how an incident or human error could easily trigger an all-out war between Iran and the United States in the region. (VOA, April 4, 2008)<sup>7</sup> Given three decades of antagonism and distrust, the Iranian-American neighborhood will not be easy and trouble-free.

### **The Rising Power of Shiites**

The developments of recent years helped Shiites rise as an influential and powerful force to be reckoned with. This has simultaneously enhanced Iran's status in the region. Some analysts

believe that the rise of Shiites has changed the power balance throughout the region (Nasr, 2006: 58). The ouster of Iraqi dictator Saddam in 2003 and the failed Israeli efforts to crush Lebanon's Hezbollah during the 33-day war in 2006 were watersheds in the Middle East history. Israel was not happy from the final outcome of the 33-day war against Lebanon.

Since the formation of the Zionist regime, it was the first time that Israel has truly been powerless in attaining its stated goals through a complex war. Hezbollah was not eliminated and, quite the opposite, emerged as a hero in the eyes of the Arab world. The 33-day war made it necessary for Israel to reevaluate its strategies all over again.

In addition, a new discussion arose about the political repercussions of having a new influential force in the region. After the clouds of the war settled, political circles began to talk about the renaissance of the Shiite force under the Iranian leadership. Such a development caught the attention of many.

There are three different views in this respect. One view is that the Sunni world is to some extent concerned, envious and resentful. The second view deals with Shiites' own perception over how to clarify their new-fangled status. Such a view is at times accompanied with an untrue self-complacency that could end up in disaster or a dangerous misadventure. However, the Shiite elites are taking extra precautions to protect their new achievements by keeping a low profile and shying away from religious-sectarian rivalries and disputes. The third prevailing view concerns those who are not from the region but have somehow made themselves a partner in the region's fortune. This view belongs to the world powers, which have strong military and political presence in various parts of the Middle East. They seek to define the present circumstances within the context of their strategies for the region.

### **Iraqi Developments**

Shiite groups rose to power after the ouster of Saddam and his Baathist regime. Although Shiites comprise 65 percent of the Iraqi population, the Baathist regime never allowed them to hold any key positions in the government. The Shiite groups were under immense pressures during the reign of Baathists. The regime did not allow them to perform their religious rituals and duties such as mourning the martyrdom anniversary of Imam Hussein (AS), the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

After the fall of Saddam and the end of Baath party's rule, grounds were prepared for a greater presence of Shiites on Iraq's political stage. The Shiite leadership and effective political measures taken by their spiritual leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani proved valuable.

Shiite groups and politicians took key positions in the government after winning the majority of votes in the general elections, which was unprecedented since the country's independence. Some Sunni states of the region got uncomfortable by the strong presence of Shiites in the Iraqi political arena and they are still not happy to see Shiites in power in Iraq, as this will have long-standing effects on the region's geopolitics. The pro-Baath and pro-Al-Qaeda terrorists by bombing and terrorizing the Iraqi citizens are taking revenge from the elected government in Iraq.

Although foreign occupation is giving a strong justification for the ongoing violence and carnage, the main target of suicide bombers is to demoralize Iraqi government and raise the financial and human costs of Shiite rule. Their suicide bombers target Shiite pilgrims and mourners in the holy shrines not for the sake of fighting occupiers, but for the sole purpose of terrorizing the Shiites and offending their sentiments.

### **Hezbollah and the 33-Day War of Lebanon**

In the summer of 2006, the war between Israel and Hezbollah strongly disturbed the whole Middle East. The victory of Hamas in the Palestinian parliamentary elections came as a shock to Israel as well. To make the Palestinians regret their vote for Hamas, Tel Aviv tightened border checkpoints, attacked populated areas, and arrested and imprisoned a number of Palestinian lawmakers and Hamas government members.

Under the pretext of seeking to release two captured Israeli soldiers, Tel Aviv embarked on a devastating war with Lebanon. The war was waged at an extensive level, suggesting that it had been planned meticulously in advance for the sake of a specific agenda. Israel was pursuing the goal of establishing a Greater Middle East that had earlier been raised by American officials. To fulfill this goal, the so-called terrorist groups, namely Hamas and Hezbollah, had to be eliminated or forced to change their policies. The Israeli goal, as stated by this regime's foreign minister, was to uproot the resistance movement of Hezbollah once and for all.

The all-out war razed the infrastructure of Lebanon and inflicted heavy human costs. But Israel quickly realized that its stated goal of terminating Hezbollah was out of reach. Hezbollah rockets hit targets beyond the Lebanese borders, making life unbearable for Jewish settlers in occupied areas. Israel got the bitter message when Hezbollah rockets hit the port city of Haifa and turned it into a war zone. The port was forced to shut down, crippling the Israeli economy.

Hezbollah's capabilities and huge volume of its arms were more than what the Israeli commanders had estimated before the conflict. In addition, Hezbollah managed to easily hit central parts of Israel. Ultimately, Israel was forced to retreat from its original strategy (elimination of Hezbollah) and accepted a ceasefire, handing over the

responsibility to the international community to deal with Hezbollah instead.

Shiites played major roles in both Iraq and the 33-day war on Lebanon. Hezbollah Chief Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah, who became an Arab hero, is a Shiite clergyman. (Murphy & Naguib, 2006) The young Hezbollah fighters are also Shiite and inspired by Iran's Islamic Revolution. These are bitter events for the Sunni governments of the region, especially seeing that they had been defeated by Israel in the past on numerous occasions and had accepted Israel's superiority in the region. The two important developments were not what they had really desired. It suffices to state that Israel's inability to rout a small militia could have been a fortunate event for the Arab leaders, but instead their reception was cold and in some cases mixed with disappointment. Some of the irritated Arab leaders even went far to condemn Hezbollah's actions against Israel. (The International Herald Tribune, August 3, 2006)

The first in line was Jordanian King Abdullah who expressed his concern over the so-called "Shiite Crescent" that stretches from Tehran to Beirut and threatens the entire Middle East. (Shaffer, 2007) In his belief, the Shiite Crescent is deeply influenced by Iran and stands against the Sunni Arch. It is also a threat to the existence of Israel and the Arab rulers. The crescent is a geopolitical explanation for a region that encompasses countries in which Shiites are in the majority or are the largest minority. In his view, the Shiite Crescent starts from Iran, stretches to Iraq and Syria, and ends with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine.

The world's biggest fossil fuel reserves from the Strait of Hormuz to the Caspian Sea are also located in this crescent. The extended operations such as those by Hamas and Hezbollah have helped the Islamic world to advance and seek to destroy Israel. In an interview with the Agence France Press, King Abdullah said that he only brought up the subject matter of Shiite Crescent to put in plain words a geopolitical reality without any intension to antagonize Shiites or Iran. (AFP, January 6, 2005)

The perception of Shiite Crescent by King Abdullah can be criticized from different perspectives, though. Some of the countries or groups which have been placed within this semi-circular are not Shiite at all. For instance, Syria which has been placed within the crescent is in fact a follower of Alawi schools of thought which are not entirely Shiite. Just as importantly, some of the resistance groups in the Middle East which are fighting against the occupation of their lands, such as the Palestinian factions, are Sunni followers. However, his viewpoint got a warm reception politically by some, especially in the Arab world and became a hot topic of discussion among many political and elite circles. At the moment, the Shiite Crescent has become a political term in the Middle East studies.

Those who are against this vision, see it as a coup in the priorities and an attempt to distract the attention from the Palestinian cause by directing it towards the alleged menace of Shiism. Fahmi Huwaidi is of the opinion that this has been raised by the US and Israel in order to create a gap between Arabs and their identity which has long been intertwined with important matters such as the Palestinian issue. (Huwaidi, 2006) Likewise, Abdul Bari Attwan is of the opinion that the Arab world is unaware of the conspiracies spawned by the great powers. He argues that the subject matter of Shiite Crescent was raised by the West to face up to Iran and forego the Palestinian issue. In his belief, the deception of Arabs has a long history and they are possibly being conned yet again. Their uprising against the Ottoman Empire and their alliance with England to split Palestine between Paris and London was just one case of Arab deception in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They are unaware of the fact that the very same tricks are still being played on them in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a new form.

In the information age and communication revolution, spaceships and internet, conspiracies have also become ever more complex. Overlooking these important developments, Arabs have geared themselves up to take part in the US-led anti-Iran campaign. Attwan

warns the Arabs that Iran has advanced missile technology and warfare capabilities. Arabs should take note that it will be difficult for Iran to hit the US soil in a likely war; yet it can easily hit targets within the Arab countries and Israel with huge costs for the Arabs. (Attwan, 2006)

Those who bring up the subject matter of Shiite Crescent point to the Arab worries about Shiite minority groups in their lands. They see the rising power of Shiites a direct threat to their interests. The following table (Nasr, 2006: 58-74) shows the population of Shiites in regional states.

Country	Shiite Population %	Total Population	Shiite Population
Iran	90%	68.7m	61.8m
Pakistan	20%	165.8m	33.2m
Iraq	65%	26.8m	17.4m
India	1%	1.096 billion	11m
Azerbaijan	75%	8m	6m
Afghanistan	19%	31.1m	5.9m
Saudi Arabia	10%	27m	2.7m
Lebanon	45%	3.9m	1.7m
Kuwait	30%	2.4m	730,000
Bahrain	75%	700,000	520,000
Syria	1%	18.9m	190,000
United Arab Emirates	6%	2.6m	160,000
Qatar	16%	890,000	141,300

As illustrated in the table, the population density of Shiites does in no way address the point (threat) made in the Shiite Crescent theory. Still, there are many other realities in this argument that demand a closer look. Shiites are in majority in some of the Arab states, but have no roles in the government. In other places where Shiites are a minority, it is

impossible for them to get key political positions. In places where Shiites are in majority, their frustrations are more evident, though. Just like other social groups, Shiites have every right to strive for political inclusion and equal rights. It is not possible to discount their basic rights simply by bringing up subject matters such as the Shiite Crescent or allegations and assumptions that the Shiite force is trying to dominate the Middle East. Also this does in no way justify dashing their efforts in attaining their basic human rights. Irrespective of the notion of religion, the Arab world needs to pay greater attention to the human rights of their citizens.

### **Iranian View**

This issue is very important for Iran. As a country that triggered many developments in the region, Iran is sensitive about issues related to Shiites. The perception of Shiite Crescent and any probable threat over the issue posed by the leaders of certain extra-regional powers and regional politicians would naturally challenge Iran. That explains why Iran reacted to this issue. The reaction came from the highest political echelons of Iran, which indicates its seriousness. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei said the issue of Shiite Crescent has been brought up to frighten the Sunni peoples and governments from the rising power of Shiites. He stated, "The enemies of Islamic nations are trying to pit us against the threat of neighbors in order to push their agenda of dispute and discord among Islamic nations ... However, the reality is that Shiites and Sunnis have throughout history lived peacefully beside each other. They are now united and determined to fight occupiers." (Iranian Leader's speech, 2006)

Also speaking at a conference in Tehran to commemorate Ibn Meisam Bahrani on February 14, 2006, once more he reiterated that "The Islamic Revolution is an Islamic and not a Shiite revolution. If our revolution was Shiite and one separated from the Islamic world, they

(the enemies) would have never objected to the revolution. The Islamic Revolution has been the most serious defender of Palestinian rights.” (Iranian Leader’s speech, 2006)

Iran appreciates the fact that Shiites are in a better situation now than at any time in the Middle East. Yet, it has never tried to use it for threatening the Sunni world and despite the pivotal role of Shiite thoughts; it has always tried not to present its revolution as a Shiite revolution. Instead, the country has adopted a pragmatic policy of not inciting anti-Shiite sentiments in the Arab and Sunni masses and at times it has even won their hearts and minds. Such an approach is perfectly in line with the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Despite incitements by trans-regional and at times regional forces, the Arab and Sunni masses by and large have a high regard for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### **Challenges Ahead**

The Islamic Republic of Iran is facing numerous challenges. These challenges include a chain of internal issues and international difficulties. High population and unemployment rate are among the most pressing issues that could give way to socioeconomic malaises. Based on official statistics, “to keep the present situation in check, one million new jobs will have to be created annually and this will require the allocation of at least 500,000 billion rials per annum”. (Jahromi, 2006)

Such a huge amount of money cannot come from domestic resources alone, which implies that Iran needs to absorb foreign direct investments. In an atmosphere of distrust and uncertainty, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, even to encourage domestic investors to participate in national development projects.

Under the circumstances, the flawed process of capital flight and unproductive economic model will persist and investments will be directed toward non-productive economic activities with quick returns.

That explains why priority should be given to the policy of absorbing domestic and foreign investments. Failure to do so will only open up the Pandora's Box of social and political crises that would automatically overshadow other government projects and plans.

Iran is at loggerheads with the influential powers. The most difficult challenge for Tehran has to be its dispute with the current international system over its civilian nuclear program. No other issue has ever been as complex as the nuclear dispute. The referral of Iran's nuclear case to the UN Security Council and the approval of consecutive resolutions might not have immediate consequences for the country, yet in the long run it could prove costly. Iran cannot invalidate the UN resolutions by ignoring them.

Iran is a responsible state and integrated with the international community. It has to quickly settle its nuclear dispute with the West since its prolongation could seriously affect the country's long-term development plans. This is not about whether or not the behavior of the UN Security Council and its members has been unfair; there are indeed many cases of injustice in the international system. The most pressing issue for the Iranian officials at present is that this dispute should be settled as quickly as possible. They should settle the dispute by respecting Iran's inalienable right and ensuring that the nuclear case is returned from the UN Security Council to the International Atomic Energy Agency. Of course, this riddle apparently has no easily obtainable solution.

The current global financial turmoil, which continues to spread, is another challenge facing the country. The crisis began in the world markets and Iran played no part in it. So in the short run, it may suffer less than countries that have been deeply integrated with the global economy. However, in the mid- and long-run, Iran will not be secure from the devastating effects of the global downturn. The current global crisis has been the biggest ever since the Great Depression of the 1929. Therefore, it would be wrong to expect the crisis to end quickly. The sharp drop in crude oil prices and the falling demand for non-oil

products would severely reduce Iran's revenues. A reduction in revenues will first impact national development projects. This could create problems for projects aimed at creating new jobs and eliminating poverty. So it is necessary for the government to come up with efficient policies and plans to minimize the negative impacts of the global financial turmoil.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past three decades, Iran's role in regional and international politics has undergone fundamental transformations that can be examined through different perspectives. In brief, the following points could be stated:

Iran is known in world politics for its distinctive political thought. It enjoys an independent and exceptional identity in the international system. As a result, Iran's cultural and political influences have been felt beyond its geographical borders. Iran has faced numerous security threats, but its stability and security have been remarkable in a neighboring environment known to be center of crises. Efforts to promote democracy and public participation in political affairs have been successful and unprecedented, especially when compared with the past eras. This does not mean the situation is perfect, as there are still shortcomings that need to be addressed.

A realistic assessment of this transformation will show that Iran has rapidly gone past the stage of being a movement and that its political system derived from the Islamic Revolution has now matured. Consequently, it has to deal with new requirements and expediency to realize its long-term strategic objectives.

Certain developments in global and regional politics have enhanced Iran's status. For instance, the disintegration of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s turned Iran from a second-class neighbor of a superpower into an active player among the newly established republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

More importantly, developments inside Iraq and Afghanistan in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century also played a part in boosting Iran's role. There were other factors behind these developments, but Tehran made the most out of them.

At present, Iran's political and cultural influence in the region is highly evident. The Islamic Revolution helped turn the Shiite factor into an influential force on the international stage, especially in the Middle East. At no point in history did the Shiites ever have such a strong status than at present.

By adopting the strategy of Muslim world unity, Iran has tried to avoid the abyss of sectarianism and antagonism with the Sunni world. Despite differences in opinion with certain regional governments, the policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran have appealed to the masses on the streets of Arab capitals. This status makes it inevitable for Tehran to formulate efficient policies and balance the existing demands and limitations. Iran continues to face a number of challenges. This chain of challenges includes domestic and international issues. This has also put the country on a difficult path.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy performance at the present juncture is of high importance. As a strong government, Iran's ability to resolve disputes will significantly affect both its role and the regional structure. This explains why its actions are now closely examined by both the people of the region and foreign forces.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As stated by Arendt, the French revolution was a limited struggle against shortfalls and inequalities. However, the American Revolution was the ultimate struggle for political freedom. Nevertheless, the French revolution ended in

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disaster but changed the world. The American Revolution was a local incident that only changed that country.

<sup>2</sup> Deontologism

<sup>3</sup> These two sources are among too many sources on the reasoning of Shiism.

<sup>4</sup> Former President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami gave a lecture at Gilan University on May 3, 2008 on spreading revolution from the standpoint of the late Imam Khomeini. He said: "What did the late Imam want and what did he really mean by exporting the revolution? Did he mean we take guns, plant bombs in other countries, form terror cells, and carry out sabotage operations in other countries? The Imam was firmly against such violence." The opposition political groups inside the country and the foreign media, which opposed the Islamic Republic of Iran, reacted harshly to Khatami's remarks. Some of the lawmakers also wrote a protest letter to the intelligence minister urging him to confront the president. They later withdrew the letter.

<sup>5</sup> This plan refers to a mid-term development strategy, approved by the supreme leader of the I.R. Iran, and pursues higher status of economic, scientific, and technological development for Iran, upon which Iran takes the first place among Middle Eastern countries in 2025. (Editor)

<sup>6</sup> The Persian Gulf War of 1991 lasted for about two months. Some 694,550 soldiers were dispatched to the region. In total, 147 American soldiers were killed and 467 were wounded during the fight. The US allies (Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) covered the war costs. In general, the Persian Gulf War turned out to be a free of charge battle for the United States. However, later on, the US had to cover the treatment costs of wounded war veterans and the disabled suffering from the so-called Persian Gulf War Syndrome. The annual treatment costs stood at around \$4.3 billion in the US budget.

<sup>7</sup> It was reported by VOA from US Navy officials that a US ship encountered three small Iranian speed boats on Thursday in the Persian Gulf.