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The Transition from Nationalism to Islamism in Iran's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The 1979 Iranian Revolution is a multifaceted phenomenon with intricate causes, complex evolution and far-reaching outcomes. Rooted in the Constitutional Revolution of the early 20th century and the rise to power of the Ayatollahs, its beginnings are distinct but interconnected. Unlike many revolutions of the 20th century, the 1979 Iranian Revolution was a departure from the socialist or communist model and manifested itself as a revolt against both Western and Eastern systems, with unique outcomes.

The 1979 Revolution shook a traditional and established order and paved the way for the rise of Islamism within a new political framework. This ideology, like its predecessors, adopted a singular leadership based on religious doctrine. To differentiate itself from global and regional powers and focus on its unique revolution, the Iranian regime shaped a foreign policy summarized by the slogan "neither East nor West, the Islamic Republic" and aimed to export this ideology globally.

The policy focused primarily on political and ideological interests, resulting in permanent sanctions imposed by the United States. This economic aspect contributes to the changes in Iran's foreign policy towards the United States, from pre-revolutionary Persian nationalism to post-Revolutionary political Islam, emphasizing its strength and adaptability in the face of external pressures.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Iranian Revolution, the US, Shiism, "Look East"

İran'ın Dış Politikasında Milliyetçilikten İslamcılığa Geçiş

Öz

1979 İran Devrimi, nedenleri, gelişimi ve geniş kapsamlı sonuçları olan çok yönlü bir olgudur. Kökleri 20. yüzyılın başlarındaki Meşrutiyet Devrimi'ne ve Ayetullahların iktidara yükselişine dayanan devrimin başlangıcı birbirinden farklı ancak birbiriyle bağlantılıdır. Yirminci yüzyıldaki pek çok devrimin aksine 1979 İran Devrimi, sosyalist ya da komünist modelden farklı olarak hem Batı hem de Doğu sistemlerine karşı bir başkaldırı olarak kendini göstermiş ve benzersiz sonuçlar doğurmuştur.

1979 Devrimi geleneksel ve yerleşik bir düzeni sarsmış ve yeni bir siyasi çerçeve içinde İslamcılığın yükselişinin önünü açmıştır. Bu ideoloji de öncekiler gibi dini doktrine dayalı tekil bir liderliği benimsemiştir. İran rejimi, kendisini küresel ve bölgesel güçlerden farklılaştırmak ve kendi benzersiz devrimine odaklanmak için "ne Doğu ne Batı, İslam Cumhuriyeti" sloganıyla özetlenen bir dış politika şekillendirmiş ve bu ideolojiyi küresel çapta ihraç etmeyi amaçlamıştır.

Öncelikle siyasi ve ideolojik çıkarlara odaklanmış, bu da ABD tarafından uygulanan kalıcı yaptırımlarla sonuçlanmıştır. Bu ekonomik boyut, İran'ın ABD'ye yönelik dış politikasında devrim öncesi Pers milliyetçiliğinden devrim sonrası siyasal İslam'a doğru yaşanan değişimlere katkıda bulunarak dış baskılar karşısındaki gücünü ve uyum yeteneğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dış Politika, İran Devrimi, ABD, Şiilik, "Doğu'ya Bakış"

1. Introduction

Before the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 and the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran in 1925, both countries were characterized by dynastic rule. The Republic of Turkey, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, experienced a radical transformation and then revolutions, varying significantly from the politics and practices of the Ottoman dynasty. This conversion involved the adoption of new principles and reforms aimed at modernizing the state and society.

By contrast, the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran represented a break with historical foundations. An ordinary man from Savad Kooch's village overthrew a monarchy that had been in place for more than two centuries, ushering in a new and relatively untested one-man rule, potentially even a dynasty or religious caste (Meskoob, 1394: 11). These different historical developments laid the grounds for deeply different approaches to statecraft and governance that would define modern Turkey and Iran.

The rule of the Pahlavi dynasty from its establishment in 1925 until the Iranian Revolution of 1979 experienced noteworthy changes. Access to modern technology, European-style development, Persian nationalism, cultural modernization, and later revolution and secularism influenced Iran's evolving

national identity (Bashirieh, 2004: 21). In its search for a new identity, the Pahlavi monarchy constructed a narrative based on mythological elements, Ferdeousi's Book of Kings, Zoroastrianism as the ancient Persian religion and as the legacy of the Persian Empire. It is argued that this new Iranian identity imposed by the Pahlavi regime is an invented, ethnically based, and upper-class construct.

In the route of identifying a new identity for the new state and the nation, the Pahlavi dynasty decentralized a multicultural society. The endeavor to establish a single union as a modern nation-state immersed classification, new laws, and the claim that the Iran is a single nation, a homogeneous society with a single language. Policies were implemented that suppressed linguistic and cultural diversity, such as the elevation of Persian as the leading language, and discrimination against languages other than Persian. These policies included the denial of the existence of Arabic-speaking communities in the southwest of the country, the ethnicization of Azerbaijani Turks as "Azeris", the banning of regional Turkish and Arabic language broadcasting, widespread discrimination against the provinces in favor of Tehran, and the promotion of Persian-speaking languages over non-Persian languages (Katozian, 2000: 433).

In addition, using modern tools such as the media, the Pahlavi government sought to wipe away existing historical narratives in order to construct a new history that legitimized the Pahlavi regime's vision of supranational identity. For example, in the *Shahnameh*, one of the cornerstones of Persian literature, King Dara is depicted as ruling a kingdom encompassing the area now known as the province of Fars, one who goes "from Iran to Kerman", emphasizing how the borders of Iran have changed over time (Ferdeousi, 1387: 1148). The formation of a new and modern identity under the name "Iran" developed over time, but the stages of assimilation were not always plainly carried out and rather progressively took shape after the coups of 1921 and 1925 (Ghani, 2001: 48, 59, 80). Pahlavi finally changed the country's name to Iran after 1934.

Furthermore, these assimilation policies were met with resistance from numerous divisions of society, especially ethnic and linguistic minorities. Reza Khan and his son, with the support of Britain, put down the uprisings of Koochak Khan, Bakhtiaris, Turks, Arabs and other regional forces until rebellions broke out across the country. This challenge to the central government underscores the complexity of nation-building in both Turkey and Iran during this period of transformation.

2. Persian Nationalism and Iranian Foreign Policy in the Pahlavi Era

Iran's foreign policy in the Pahlavi era was intricately woven with its pursuit of national identity and independence from external influences. This inclination is exemplified by Reza Pahlavi's 1934 visit to Turkey, showcasing the complex interplay between asserting identity and navigating a transforming 20th-century political landscape (Marashi, 2007: 99-119; Ghani, 2001: 401). Reza Pahlavi's official visit to Turkey exemplified the complexity of Iran's foreign policy under Pahlavi and the tension between the country's desire to assert its national identity and maintain its independence from foreign powers. However, it has often been difficult to maintain this balance as Iran navigated the changing political

landscape of the 20th century. Despite this, the pragmatic reality was mirrored in Pahlavi's alignment with Britain, pivotal to his rise to power (Ghani, 2001: 68, 192, 245). However, his extreme nationalism, emphasizing Persianism and Aryanism, and his ambition for Iran's independence from the British umbrella led to a change in the country's foreign policy with the outbreak of the Second World War (WWII), which led to a shift toward Germany during the War and a dream of the Aryan race doctrine led him into his greatest political trap.

Before the WWII, Hitler had the same idea of a world empire and needed partners in the Middle East and oil-rich countries. In fact, Pahlavi was preparing to take on this role. Realizing the common racial "Aryan" ties between Persians and Germans, Pahlavi began to shift his foreign policy orientation from Britain to Germany, forgetting that the British had brought him to power. Pahlavi's betrayal during the war, a move that proved politically fatal, resulting in his exile to the Indian Ocean Island of Mauritius and later to Johannesburg in South Africa (Shawcross, 1989: 59; Kinzer and Muşaddiq, 2003: 45, 121; Bakhash, 2018: 134). This shift in foreign policy orientation eventually led to the replacement of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi by the British in September 1941.

As mentioned earlier, the Pahlavi era, both father and son, was marked by a complex interplay of historical, demographic and institutional factors that shaped the country's foreign policy. The new leaders of the country, with the same system but with different dynasties and new kings, were trying to establish a new nation-state based on a new ideology and principles in a short time and to assert their Persian national identity. We observe that the Republic of Turkey was founded only two years before the Pahlavi dynasty. The continuation of the Qajar State as a Turkish state and the existence of two strong Turkish states in the region would, of course, be contrary to Britain's interests in the Middle East. However, while the ostensibly ultra-nationalist Persian stance became the cornerstone of the new regime, it also became a trap for the Pahlavis, and this politically turbulent period led to a change in the direction of the country's foreign policy. The Pahlavi era, marked by historical, demographic, and institutional complexities, aimed to establish a new nation state with a Persian national identity. This pursuit, though seemingly ultra-nationalistic, became a trap, as Ayatollahs viewed the new state as a pawn in imperial powers' hands. The ensuing dilemma between being a regional enforcer for the U.S. and true independence culminated in the replacement of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the 1979 Revolution.

3. Post-World War II and Mossadegh's Era: A Shift in Trajectory

Post-World War II, Iran's foreign policy underwent a multifaceted transformation. Prime Minister Mossadegh's bid to nationalize the oil industry in 1951 was a pivotal move against decades of British dominance (Ghasemi, 2011: 442-456; Bill and Louis, 1988: 78-95; de Bellaigue, 2012; Elm, 1992: 14, 88, 111, 124, 162, 165, 176, 184, 204; Abrahamian, 2021: 50, 57, 62, 76, 161; Brew, 2022: 82, 86, 87, 88, 91, 108, 117; Heiss, 1994: 511-535). The reason for controlling the oil market was that the British had established a virtual monopoly over Iranian oil since 1909, and in the following decades controlled the vast majority of the country's oil revenues through British Petroleum (BP) and other oil companies, the so-called

“seven sisters” with “the big signs that stick up like lollipops from the roadsides in countries all over the world: Exxon (or Esso), Shell, BP, Gulf, Texaco, Mobil and Socal (or Chevron)” (Sampson, 1991: 18). Thus, despite its potential to end foreign control over Iranian oil, the nationalization of Iranian oil affected Iran’s economic landscape, triggered an embargo, strained foreign relations, coupled with political pressure. Mossadegh’s failure to anticipate foreign interference proved fatal, leading to his removal and the Shah’s return to power.

The nationalization of oil sales could have put an end to this situation and given the Iranian state the right to control and profit from its natural resources. But in fact, by imposing sanctions on Iran’s oil exports during the Mossadegh era, the West knew “the Iranians would be forced to negotiate. For oil was far their biggest export - far more profitable than caviar or carpets - and their oil could no longer be sold. Early in the crisis BP had enlisted the support of the other six sisters” (Sampson, 1991: 146). The sanctions thus set the stage for a predictable coup that could guarantee the unhindered flow of oil to Western countries.

Furthermore, the nationalization of oil also had important consequences for the country’s foreign relations. The British, along with other foreign oil companies, responded to nationalization by imposing an embargo on oil purchases from Iran. This effectively cut off the country’s main source of foreign revenue and put the government in a difficult economic situation (Painter and Brew, 2023: 48, 49; Nephew, 2018: 135, 140, 153, 172). In addition to economic pressure, the government also faced political pressure from the United States and Britain. Then came the famous US and UK backing a coup against Mossadegh in 1953 (Rahnama, 2015: 283). The coup was carried out in two stages. The first coup attempt failed. Three days later, on August 19, Mossadegh was declared the clear winner and urged his supporters to stay at home to avoid further violence on the streets of Tehran (Kruse, 1994: 59; Bayandor, 2010: 172-75; Rahnama, 2015: 34-48). Former Prime Minister Mossadegh’s mistakes were many and multifaceted, but perhaps the most fatal of them was his failure to foresee the level of foreign interference in Iran’s internal affairs (Koch, 1998: 63). There is also the fact of the three Ayatollahs, Boroujerdi, Behbahani and Kashani, the Shia clerics who played a profound and decisive role in the overthrow of Mossadegh and the success of the second wave and the coup. Despite his initial successes, Mossadegh did not take into account the potential for a second coup attempt organized by foreign powers and their intelligence services and operative agents in Iran. The result of this negligence was the US and Britain succeeded in a second coup attempt on August 19, 1953, which led to Mossadegh’s removal and the Shah’s return to power in Iran.

The nationalization of oil, the ensuing embargo and then coup had a profound impact on Iran’s foreign policy trajectory and domestic politics. It demonstrated the country’s determination to assert its national sovereignty and control over its resources, as well as the lengths to which foreign powers would go to maintain their influence and control over the country’s economic and political affairs. While the Mossadegh era laid the groundwork for a more assertive and independent foreign policy for Iran, it also led to continued foreign interference in the country’s internal affairs.

The Mossadegh era left an indelible mark on Iran's foreign policy, symbolizing the country's determination for sovereignty. Yet, it also paved the way for continued foreign interference, and a significant shift in Iran's post-Mossadegh foreign policy, with the country's top leadership once again moving closer to the United States. Iran's leadership, once again, aligned with the U.S., establishing a military dictatorship with American support and creating *Sāzmān-e Ettlā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar* (SAVAK) with American and Israeli assistance (Asnad, 2016; Keddie and Gasiorowski, 1990: 154). The democratic process was subverted, as the office of Prime Minister was no longer elected but appointed by the Shah (Farsoun and Mashayekhi, 1992: 165; Axworthy, 2013: 48; Petherick, 2006; Obama, 2020: 450-451). Yet years later, the Shah's sister Ashraf Pahlavi once recalled "it was not [the Shah's] wish to create, as some have said, a kind of gulag atmosphere or a security force of yes-men" (Pahlavi, 1980: 151). The takeover of oil assets, one of the main elements of Mossadegh's agenda, was reversed, and the bulk of the oil industry's profits were reaped by American and European companies. This was an important turning point in Iran's history, and Mossadegh's oil agenda was reversed, putting Iranian wealth back under foreign control.

This shift in post-Mossadegh foreign policy underscored the complex dance between asserting national sovereignty and engaging with the international community. The legacy of Mossadegh's era resonates in Iran's ongoing struggle for autonomy amidst foreign interference.

4. The Shah's Reign: A Tainted Legacy

It is clear that the events of the Mossadegh era had a profound and long-lasting impact on Iran's domestic politics and foreign policy. The determination to assert national sovereignty and control over resources met with brutal resistance from foreign powers, resulting in the establishment of a pro-Western dictatorship "where spiritual and moral decline was obvious and whose political chaos at times had led to the horrors of fascism, racism and military and/or political dictatorships" (Shakibi, 2021: 309) and the erosion of democratic institutions. The legacy of these events continues to shape Iran's political landscape today and underscores the ongoing struggle for autonomy and self-determination in the face of foreign interference.

The Shah's close ties with the U.S. led to speculations of Iran becoming a "client state", with critics branding him as a defenseless American puppet. Abbas Milani believes that "after that August [1953] the Shah never shook off the tainted reputation of being a puppet" (Milani, 2011: 175). Then came the Shah's foreign policy mistakes, summarized as the "seven foreign policy mistakes of Pahlavi", which further complicated Iran's role in the global arena. These mistakes, combined with economic mismanagement and human rights abuses, fueled discontent.

The reign of Mohammad Reza Shah was marked by a series of major foreign policy mistakes. From the post-revolutionary Iranian perspective, the so-called "Pahlavi's seven foreign policy mistakes" include giving up Bahrain, granting Saudi Arabia an island, the Algiers Agreement, military intervention in Oman, supporting Pakistan during the Baluchistan uprising, agreeing with Afghanistan over the

Helmand River and establishing relations with Israel (Parto, 1394/2015). These events continue to shape Iran's foreign policy and have led to ongoing debates about the country's role in the region and the world. Shakibi argues "Pahlavism, unlike other dominant ideologies of the Middle East, was wary of Third Worldism mainly because it considered Iran a primordial member of the elite 'Western' club" (2021: 151). They are also a reminder of the delicate balance that must be struck when pursuing national interests and maintaining international relations. In addition, the Shah began to distance himself from the US, especially in the area of regional politics, as he sought to assert Iran's dominance in the Middle East.

These foreign policy mistakes, along with other factors such as economic mismanagement and widespread "human rights abuses", ultimately "instigating a nationwide anti-Shah protest movement by mid-1978", led to the overthrow of the Shah in the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Saikal and Schnabel, 2003: 170). Given these efforts, the Shah's reputation as a loyal puppet of the United States persisted even when his decisions had negative consequences for the Western and American economies, such as the oil price problem. As Gary Sick, a former member of the National Security Council under Presidents Ford, Carter and Reagan, noted, "Despite these efforts, the Shah's reputation as a staunch puppet of the United States persisted, even in instances where his decisions had negative consequences for the Western and American economies, such as the oil price issue" (Sick, 1985: 173). The United States and other Western countries were heavily dependent on Iranian oil, and the sudden rise in prices had a significant impact on their economies. As Mark Ghaziurovsky has noted, the Shah's peaceful foreign policy approach was instrumental in stabilizing Iran and promoting growth during this period. Gasiorowski argues that only 10 years after Mossadegh's overthrow and based on the Shah's regional policies, an autonomous Iranian state was firmly established and had a strong foreign policy (Gasiorowski, 1991: 187). Despite contributing to stability and growth, the Shah's legacy remained tarnished. The post-revolution US rejection of the Shah and refusal to accept him as a political refugee underscored the complexity of Iran's foreign relations. The Shah's apparent submission to Western interests, as expressed by Queen Farah Diba, exposed the dichotomy between seemingly independent yet dependent foreign policy goals. Iran's Queen Farah Diba recounts the post-revolutionary rejection of the Pahlavi dynasty by the revolutionary government and the subsequent refusal of the United States to accept "the Shah" as a political refugee. Quoting the Shah of Iran, she writes:

During the Arab oil embargo in 1967, I opened Iran's oil taps to the West and Israel and did not allow the wheels of the Western energy industry to turn at the expense of Iran's relations with the Arabs. During the 'Dhofar War', I sent Iranian soldiers to fight against leftist rebels to ensure the security of the mouth of the Persian Gulf and the safe passage of oil to America, Japan and Europe. I spent my entire life suppressing communist and leftist forces to protect the interests of the West and above all America. During the Vietnam War, I supplied the Americans with petrol, gasoline and aviation fuel and even supplied Iranian fighter planes to the American command in South Vietnam. I wholeheartedly accepted whatever they told me and obeyed their regional and extra-regional orders like a slave. Every year I spent billions of dollars from the national budget to buy weapons from American companies and gave hundreds of millions of dollars in grants to American educational and social institutions (Pahlavi, 1387: 872).

Diba also links the Shah's ultimate goal of protecting Western and US interests with his lifelong quest to neutralize the influence of USSR communist ideologies. In this grandiose, seemingly independent but dependent, seemingly peaceful but expansionist foreign policy, the importance of strengthening positive and mutually beneficial ties with other countries was emphasized.

In essence, the Shah's reign, marked by a series of foreign policy missteps, economic challenges, and human rights violations, culminated in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The persistent perception of the Shah as a loyal puppet of the US, despite negative consequences for Western economies, mirrored the delicate balance needed in pursuing national interests while navigating international relations. Both the rapprochement with the US after the coup and the mistakes made in foreign policy decisions have created a significant deviation from the previous foreign policy trajectory of the country, which was trying to defend its independence and national sovereignty.

5. The 1979 Revolution and The Islamic Republic Of Iran

The overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 marked a pivotal moment leading to the emergence of two enduring themes deeply embedded in the official Shia-based religious movement. These themes are prominently displayed at the entrance to the Iranian Foreign Ministry. The Islamic Revolution signaled a radical departure from the existing status quo, giving rise to a new ideology known as the "third way" (Panah, 2007: 50, 150). This ideology aimed to reconcile the seemingly incompatible ideologies of capitalism from the United States and its Western European allies and communism from the Soviet Union and its Eastern European counterparts. The phrase "Neither East nor West, Islamic Republic" encapsulated this ideology, serving as the driving force behind the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran for the past forty-four years. During this time, Iran has experienced both positive and negative transformations compared to the pre-revolutionary era. The population has surged from 35 million to 86.5 million, with ambitious plans to reach 150 million, as articulated by Iranian leaders (Khamenei, 2014: 573-575; Tasnim, 2022). Since the Pahlavi era, Iran has not only experienced political transformation, but has also undergone changes in the social and economic organization, cultural and religious dimensions, social structure, and identity definition. The main factors driving these changes have also shaped Iran's foreign policy. These changes have been caused by various factors, involving ideological goals, historical legacy, political leadership, and external pressures.

The United States, a stronghold of capitalism, was the first country to recognize the new Iranian regime, followed by the British government, a traditional ally of the US. However, the attack on the US Embassy on November 4, 1979, and the subsequent 444-day hostage crisis underscored the "idealistic revolution" of Iranian foreign policy. This policy aimed to assert independence internationally and resist Western hegemony. Despite these new "idealistic" and "revolutionary" changes over the years, Iran's desire to establish itself as a legitimate contributor to regional problem resolution, rather than a source of instability, remains a core tenet of its foreign policy.

Along with Pakistan, Syria, Mauritania and Libya, the Soviet Union was among the first countries to recognize the new regime, which represented a clear departure from the traditional alignments of the Cold War era. Soviet support for the new regime in Iran five days after the revolution can be seen as a positive development in terms of the transformation of borders in a system dependent on the United States and a clear indicator of the changing dynamics of global politics. In the context of the anti-Iranian foreign policy with the US and the West, it became a sustainable credo in a changing environment and in fact rejected the principle of permanent change, which should constitute the basic philosophy of foreign policy.

The Islamic Republic's foreign policy has been a subject of scrutiny, with a focus on the evolution of its goals and strategies. Two distinct periods, under Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei, reflect changes influenced by leaders and varying presidential ideologies. The concept of national interest, often associated with secular schools of thought, is not explicitly addressed, as Ayatollah Khomeini emphasized a focus on "*ummahs*" as the keystone of the initial global Islamic movement, is satisfied to admit that the route it has comprised under the direction of the "hidden Imam" has gratefully progressed. Today, Iran's global and regional plan aims to increase the commitment of Muslims to this radical revolutionary journey, whose eyes are not on the "nation-state" but on the respected leadership of the Revolution and the political Islamic Doctrine of *Velayat-i Faqih*. The highest state authority in Iran is the religious and political leadership led by Ayatollah Khomeini and then Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, referred to as "*Vilayat-i Faqih*", a unique concept in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran underwent a significant transformation after the 1979 revolution, leading to the establishment of numerous state institutions based on Islamic standards. The highest state authority is the religious and political leadership, known as "*Vilayat-i Faqih*" (Sorush, 2000; Kadivar, 2004: 64). This theocratic and juridical leadership interprets and implements Islamic principles of governance. The "Divine-Political Testament" of Ayatollah Khomeini outlines a comprehensive understanding of the principles and foundations of the Islamic Republic. It emphasizes the dynamic and evolving nature of the system, responding to changing needs and aspirations while adhering to the principles of justice, sovereignty, national interest, and self-determination.

Immediately after the Iranian revolution in 1979, Iran's political system underwent a significant transformation with the establishment of a large number of complex and interrelated state institutions established in accordance with the adopted constitution. During the years of the revolution and according to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, foreign policy was based on Islamic standards and commitments to brotherhood with all Muslims and was organized on the basis of protecting all oppressed peoples of the world, emphasizing the importance of joint struggle against oppression and injustice (Naserzadeh, 1993: 65; Saikal, 2021: xxiii). Iran's foreign policy is marked by a strong anti-American stance, often portrayed as resistance against Western influence (Panah, 2007: 164). Moreover, after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the main objectives of Iran's foreign policy were to support Muslims, oppressed peoples and oppressed nations and to export the ideology of the Revolution. This

was followed by border tensions and the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, the ideal of liberating Jerusalem, the first Qibla of Muslims, and Palestinian liberation movements such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. But the above examples also show what happened. The foreign policy approach involves supporting and assisting third-world countries, especially in the Middle East, to liberate them from Western and Eastern hegemony. The export of the revolution has been a consistent feature, with support for Shia and Sunni groups in neighboring countries.

According to its Constitution and the statements of its political leaders, the Islamic Republic of Iran derives its power and influence in the region from its privileged structure based on the Koran and Sharia law. In other words, it is founded on the doctrine of *Velayat-i Faqih*. Iran's foreign policy is based on a dynamic system that responds to both internal and external influences through attempts to develop relations with various regional and even global countries. Due to the reliance of *Velayat-i Faqih* on political Islam, an Iran-centered foreign policy, and the perceived injustice of the international system, two groups of countries and peoples around the world have adopted the export of revolution as a central discourse, aligning themselves on either the "oppressed" or the "oppressor" side and thus including Third World countries in their discourse (Khomeini, 1980). Ayatollah Khomeini once said, "The main mission of our revolution is to pave the way for the emergence of a universal Islamic civilization that will eliminate oppression and cruelty in the world" (Khomeini, 1979: 23). However, Iran's policies over the years clearly show that the alleged support for the "oppressed of the world" within the framework of the "Second Step and Foreign Policy Declaration" is not an all-encompassing sentiment and that the country has tended to be selective in the past. This is evident in instances where Iran has refrained from supporting certain Muslim groups, such as the Uighurs, Chechens and Azerbaijani Muslims, and in some cases even pursued policies contrary to the interests of the Islamic world and "oppressed" nations. This can be attributed to the fact that China and Russia, with which Iran maintains "strategic" relations, pursue policies in line with their own interests. Thus, we find Iranian post-Revolution foreign policy approach has evolved, influenced by changing international environments, the end of the Iran-Iraq War, and a rational, professional posture in regional and global relations. Dialogue with the West, despite periods of tension and isolation, is a pivotal point in Iran's foreign policy under conservatives and reformists and has been recognized as essential for regional stability.

The discourse surrounding the role of Sharia law and Islamic values in the Islamic Republic of Iran has been a contentious issue, with various groups holding widely divergent views. From one point of view, conservatives consider Sharia law to be valid and supreme in the Republic and strictly enforced, while from another point of view, reformists may claim that Islamic values are eroding in the country and that the Republic has failed to meet the demands of secular freedom. It is worth noting that, as in any political system, the issue of extremism is present in Iranian politics and government, leading to highly polarized attitudes and assessments among the population.

In addition to ideological underpinnings, other factors shape Iran's foreign policy, including resistance to the Holocaust, nuclear diplomacy, exporting the revolution, an influential presence in Latin America,

and an emphasis on the East. While these elements contribute to the complexity of Iran's foreign relations, they do not fundamentally alter the underlying principles or objectives of the country's international stance.

Ayatollah Khomeini, the founding leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, laid out a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the principles and foundations of the Islamic Republic in his "Divine-Political Testament", which was read from the rostrum of the Assembly of Experts on June 4, 1989, following his death. In this document, Ayatollah Khomeini emphasized that the Islamic Republic is a unique and distinct political system based on the principles of Islamic theology and jurisprudence and aims to establish an Islamic order that is not limited to the realm of personal piety but encompasses all aspects of individual and collective life.

My testament to the leaders and the leadership council in this era, which is the era of the superpowers and their extensions inside and outside the country attacking the Islamic Republic and indeed Islam under the guise of the Islamic Republic and in the ages to come, is that they should devote themselves to the service of Islam, the Islamic Republic and the deprived and oppressed people who are left behind; and do not think that leadership in itself is a gift and a high position for them, but it is a heavy and dangerous task that will result in eternal shame in this world and the fire of Allah's wrath in the next world, unless Allah wills it-he said (Khomeini, 1368/1385: 423).

Ayatollah Khomeini also argued that the Islamic Republic is not a static or unchanging system, but rather a dynamic and evolving system that responds to the changing needs and aspirations of the Iranian people and the global political environment. He emphasized that the Islamic Republic is not a theocracy disconnected from the realities of the world, but a system based on the principles of justice, sovereignty, national interest and self-determination (Khomeini, 1368/1385). Therefore, it can be said that Ayatollah Khomeini's "Divine-Political Testament" is not only a testament to his political vision, but also a guideline for its practical implementation as a political system to be implemented in the later stages of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the powers of the "*Faqih*" were expanded with the appointment of Ayatollah Khamenei by the Khobregan Council or Council of Eminent Persons. In Iran, the armed forces, the judiciary, state television and other key government institutions are under the control of the country's Supreme Leader, which ensures a high degree of cohesion and centralized control within the regime (Khalaji, 2023: 111-112). Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, only two Leaders have held office, and the current Leader has been in office since 1989, contributing to the stability and continuity of the regime.

The Islamic Republic's foreign policy has been the subject of much scrutiny and debate since its inception, with most analyses focusing on the evolution of its goals and strategies. This is not surprising

given that the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, like that of its predecessor, the Pahlavi dynasty, has undergone significant changes over the last four and a half decades. However, when it comes to Iran's foreign policy towards the United States, the picture has changed little compared to other countries. These changes can be divided into two distinct periods: Ayatollah Khomeini as Supreme Leader and then Ayatollah Khamenei. It seems possible to argue that these changes are also more closely linked to who is at the highest levels of government, the reformist or conservative president. Whatever the reason, it is undeniable that the essence of the first decade of change in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy was shaped by two main elements: revolutionism and Islamism. Under Ayatollah Khomeini, these elements, while not mutually exclusive, formed the foundation on which the Islamic Republic's foreign policy was built and played an integral role in shaping the nation's understanding of the nation-state and national interest.

Iran's quest for independence in its post-revolutionary foreign policy, like that of Pahlavi Iran, includes a desire to reclaim its rich history and cultural heritage, a sense of victimization by foreign occupiers, and experiences of semi-colonial or imperial encounters. Iran's desire to position itself as a legitimate contributor to the resolution of regional problems, rather than as a source of instability, has become one of the fundamental principles of its foreign policy. The population's sense of victimization by foreign occupiers and experiences of semi-colonial or imperial encounters have contributed to the development of a national identity infused with both Islamic and revolutionary elements. While Iran has historically sought to infiltrate neighboring states militarily, it has also sought to exert ideological influence through the establishment of Shiite organizations. However, despite these efforts, Iran has faced significant obstacles in achieving the desired level of influence. Homeira Moshirzade explains Iran's independence and desire for independence under three factors: "Iran's glorious past, historical victimization by the invaders, and (semi-)colonial/imperial encounters that led to Iran's dependence and backwardness" (Moshirzadeh, 2007: 529). These experiences contributed to the development of a national identity characterized by both Islamic and revolutionary elements, which gave an ideological character to Iran's dominant discourse (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2008). Years later, the leader of the Iranian Revolution explained this dependence in this way:

The best choices for America and Britain were Reza Khan and Mohammad Reza, because the same plans, the same culture, the same dependence, the same backwardness and the same cover-up of inner abilities that the West wanted, were being carried out in the country by those who were ostensibly Iranian (Khamenei, 1384).

According to Iran's Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, there is a strong link between science, progress, self-sufficiency and independence in foreign policy (Khamenei, 1392). Ayatollah Khomeini often cited the lack of genuine Islamic rule, especially in the backward Middle Eastern countries, and the exploitation of the Third World by the imperialist states - Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union - as the main reason for this. In fact, Iran's military presence in the region and in neighboring countries over the years owes a lot to US policies in the Middle East, which opened the door for Iranian intervention in Iraq, Syria,

Yemen, Lebanon and Afghanistan.

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is a multifaceted phenomenon and despite facing challenges in establishing, managing and implementing foreign relations, tactical changes have not changed the basic principles of Iran's foreign policy. The essence of Iran's foreign policy principles remains unchanged and the country continues to pursue its ideological goals through hegemonic means. According to Zarif, Iran's foreign policy interests focus on "constructive engagement and effective co-operation" (Zarif, 2014: 49-54, 55-59). In an article, Zarif cites Rouhollah Ramezani, one of the leading experts on Iranian foreign policy:

He described Iran's foreign policy over the last five hundred years as follows: "Iran has sought to reclaim the territories it once possessed, often failing to understand the distance between these goals and the means available to realize them." Throughout history, we have set our goals according to our desires and ignored our capabilities (Zarif, 2023).

Rouhollah Ramezani describes Iran's historical foreign policy as a struggle to regain lost territories without fully grasping the gap between these goals and the means available. This history highlights a tendency toward tactical changes in Iranian revolutionary state foreign policy, with the principle of "expansionism" persisting under the banners of "Persian nationalism" during the Shah's reign and "Shiite Islam" post-revolution. However, after the revolution, new concepts were added, such as anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism and aggressive policies towards the United States, as well as continued support for anti-Israeli Palestinian groups. These features are considered the main principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy, and even changes between Iran's conservative or reformist politicians do not affect, sometimes even strengthening and intensifying them. According to Iran's institutionalized foreign policy, any effort to reconcile with Israel is seen as a betrayal of the Islamic world and Palestine (Tabatabai, 2019; Juneau, 2015: 146; Alden and Aran, 2017: 5; Baabood, 2017: 30-31). To comprehend the intricacies of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, it is imperative to examine the values and normative system derived from Islamic-Shia ideology. This ideology has guided the country's foreign policy since its inception, requiring an understanding of the historical, theological, domestic, and international contexts shaping Iran's worldview. This includes understanding the historical and theological context that has shaped the Islamic Republic's worldview, as well as examining how the country's foreign policy has been shaped by its unique domestic and international circumstances. Ultimately, this holistic understanding will enable scholars and policymakers to gain a deeper understanding of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy and its role in the world and the region at large.

The concept of national interest, although intensely debated, is predominantly associated with the secular school of thought, particularly Hans J. Morgenthau. Morgenthau argues that state behavior is fundamentally driven by the pursuit of power (Morgenthau and Thompson, 1997: 102). He also argues that national interests act as a guiding principle for government officials in foreign policy and as a standard for thought and action. As a result, foreign policy is seen as being motivated by the calculation

of power to maximize national interests in the international arena. This approach to foreign policy decision-making articulated by Morgenthau emphasizes that policymakers should eschew normative principles and ethics and instead focus on the pursuit of national interests. He warned leaders not to sacrifice their interests for the sake of adhering to vague views of moral behavior. However, especially during the Ayatollah Khomeini era, the issue of the “nation-state” was not explicitly addressed because Ayatollah Khomeini emphasized “*ummahs*” and stated that what happened to the Islamic world was due to “nationalism”. He argues:

writers should explain these issues to the people and introduce Islam to the people and say that Islam is not for a particular nation and does not belong to Turks, Persians, Arabs or non-Arabs. Islam belongs to everyone, race, color and tribe. And language has no value in this system and this book is the book of everyone and the propaganda that this is Arab, this is Turkish, Persian or Kurdish is propaganda that foreigners are spreading to loot the reservoirs in these countries and Muslims should be careful not to be influenced by these advertisements (Khomeini, 1357/1385: 187).

The main reason for this is that Iran has never been a single “nation” and “ethnicity” and in order to prevent civil wars, autonomy and regional ethnicity laws were mentioned after the revolution, included in the constitution but never implemented. Those who try to question the non-implementation of the Constitution, especially Articles 15 and 19, are branded as separatists and imprisoned for years or sent into exile. These elements should therefore be considered in the context of the concept of the “universal homeland”, which plays an important role in the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy, and it should be remembered that “*ummah*” is intertwined with a kind of Islamic internationalism.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most prominent features of Iran’s foreign policy after the Iranian Revolution is its constant confrontation with the United States. Characterized by a fervent anti-Westernism, anti-Americanism, anti-Sovietism, and a plethora of other “anti” ideologies, the post-revolutionary government has become a constant movement that has shaped the country’s foreign policy differently from other nations in the region.

Jalal Dehghani Firoozabadi, a partisan theoretician, in his work *The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, explores the intricacies of Iran’s foreign policy. For the last 40 years, he argues, the basis of this foreign policy has been defined as “anti-arrogance” (Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2008: 132). In foreign policy terms, the term can be associated with the strong anti-Americanism in Iran’s foreign policy rhetoric, where the US is portrayed as the primary enemy or the “Great Satan” and American hegemony is referred to as “global arrogance” (Beeman, 1983: 191-217). The second and third articles of the Iranian Constitution reflect the same idea, and the principles of Iranian policy clearly emphasize that the arrogant imperial states will not be allowed to interfere in its domestic and foreign policy (Iran’s Constitution, 1989). We must not forget that the articles of the Iranian Constitution are based on the ideas of Ayatollah Khomeini: “Our duty is to fight against oppression” (Khomeini, 1385: 92-93). The founder of the Islamic Republic

made anti-arrogance the main slogan of both domestic and foreign policy with the slogan “Neither East nor West”. For example, Paragraph 16 of Article 3 of the Iranian Constitution stipulates that “the foreign policy of the country on the basis of Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unsparing support to the mustad’afun (oppressed) of the world”. And the article 9 defines independence as follows:

The freedom, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of the country are inseparable from one another, and their preservation is the duty of the government and all individual citizens. No individual, group, or authority, has the right to infringe in the slightest way upon the political, cultural, economic, and military independence or the territorial integrity of Iran under the pretext of exercising freedom (Iran’s Constitution, 1989).

In the tense Middle East region, Iran is making the peoples of the region aware of the existence and the real face of US arrogance and imperialism and making them ready to fight in the ranks, organizations and proxy forces formed by Iran. As a result of this tense regional reality, both Iran and the United States have relied on neo-realist ideas to maximize their role in maintaining the regional balance of power as well as sustaining and implementing their policies.

The overall aim of the Iranian Islamic Revolution was to provide support and assistance to third world countries, especially those in the Middle East, to liberate them from the hegemony of both the West and the East, to export the revolution to these countries, and to serve as a source of discourse and institutional rhetoric in Iranian Foreign Policy. Immediately after the revolution, Iran began to actively support and provide financial assistance to Shia groups and in some cases Sunni groups in Shia-minority countries such as Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Lebanon, guiding and playing an important role in the anti-regime uprisings in these countries with the ultimate goal of achieving “true Islam”. Eva Patricia Rakel argues:

Post-revolutionary Iran’s foreign policy approach can be summarized as follows: in the first ten years after the revolution, when Khomeini was the Supreme leader, it was dominated by two main ideological principles: 1. Neither East nor West but the Islamic Republic, which translated in Particular into an aversion to Western (US) influence; and 2. “Export of the revolution” in other to free Muslim countries and non-Muslim countries from their oppressive and corruptive rulers (Rakel, 2007: 160-164).

The unifying aspect of this support was the emphasis on a common “Muslim identity” and the willingness to act together against repression (Gündoğan, 2011: 98). This foreign policy approach has been a consistent feature of the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy and continues to shape the country’s relations with other countries in the region and beyond.

The organizational behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s post-revolutionary foreign policy, as a feature of religious “ideology”, is variable both in theory and in practice. While the pre-revolutionary

totalitarian systems of the 1970s fluctuated between two ideological approaches, an ideological unity was clearly evident among the Iranian revolutionaries. The most obvious example of this should be the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran and the subsequent severing of diplomatic relations between Iran and the US. On the other hand, the death fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie for a book published a year after the end of the war is an important example of Iran's foreign policy ideology and has been cited for years as a factor driving a wedge between Iran and the Western world.

The change in Iran's foreign policy can also be attributed to the changing environment outside the international system, especially the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, which lasted 8 years and was the second longest war in the second half of the 20th century. The war had a profound impact on the shaping of Iran's foreign policy, and with the end of the war, Iran became a more rational, professional and active player in regional and international relations. Moreover, dialogue between Iran and the West has the potential to serve as a catalyst for peace in the Middle East, provided that both sides are willing to engage constructively. During these years, despite its reputation for religious zealotry, Iran also established itself as a rational actor in the eyes of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Brzezinski, Gates and Maloney, 2004: 31, 51). This underscores that the Americans are now as willing to be belligerent as they are to sit down at the table with the Iranians.

Foreign experts believed that engagement between Iran and the West, especially after the September 11 attacks and the subsequent events of 2001 and 2003, could break Iran's international isolation and pave the way for a brighter economic future (Maleki & Afrasiabi, 2014: 141, 166). However, the foreign policy of the Bush Doctrine was characterized by a defensive and tactical policy of military aggression against countries perceived to be harboring or providing aid to a terrorist organization hostile to the United States. The Bush administration's use of the term "Axis of Evil" and its labeling of Iran as part of this axis, the imposition of economic sanctions and the threat of military intervention have increased feelings of hatred and resentment against the West (Bush, 2002; Fathi, 2002; Maleki & Afrasiabi, 2014: 51; Amanpour, 2019). Describing Iran as a rogue state, President Bush cited Iran's alarming weapons programs and links to terrorism and said that in Iran "an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom" (Bush, 2002). With the new US doctrine, Iran has been forced to change the principles of its policy towards the West, and this has had the greatest impact on the region. The rapid spread of revolutionary ideas, including the Islamic Republic, the Palestinian and Lebanese movements and the revolt of liberal and political Islam, the American presence in the Middle East, conservative Arab governments committed to the status quo in the region, and Israeli strategic interests have all contributed to the complexity of the current scenario.

From a historical perspective, after the end of the Cold War, the United States has increasingly focused on strategic issues in the Middle East region. The aftermath of 9/11 prompted a heightened focus on its foreign policy regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran, leading to a notable increase in interventions in the Middle East compared to the pre-9/11 period. Therefore, with the US decision to change the international system after the Soviet collapse (Holsti, 1991) and especially under the new world

order after the events of September 11, the US was to be used against “other still-significant threats to international stability - rogue states, failed states, terrorists, and a host of others who refused to acquiesce to pax Americana” (Kumar, 2012: 76). Iran, which had an ideological foreign policy after the revolution, became more pragmatic with US foreign policy in the Middle East, thus preparing itself for changes in US policies.

In addition to the ideological underpinnings of Iran’s foreign policy, there are several other factors that shape the country’s international relations. These include Holocaust denial, nuclear diplomacy, exporting revolution, an influential presence in Latin America as a US backyard, and a focus on the East. These elements have helped shape the perspective of Iran’s foreign policy but have not fundamentally changed the underlying principles or objectives of the country’s international relations. However, the power shift between the two presidents and the US stance against nuclear sanctions further radicalized Iran’s foreign policy stance. Over the years, Iran’s nuclear activities have become an integral part of Iran’s foreign policy in terms of enrichment and its involvement in many issues in the Middle East region, particularly in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon, because of the sanctions imposed against Iran until the Nuclear Deal signed between Iran and the P5+1 in 2015. This has led to a harsher and more uncompromising approach to foreign policy, especially under conservative presidents, with increased hostility towards the US and other Western countries, as well as a more aggressive stance towards Israel and other regional actors. This was particularly evident during Ahmadinejad’s presidency.

Therefore, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is unique and draws its strength as claimed from the Quran or Sharia law, while its ideology is based on the doctrine of *Vilayat-i Faqih* as discussed earlier. Understanding Iranian Foreign Policy is like understanding the medieval religious leadership of the West and requires an understanding of religion and religion-based political relations and doctrines rather than the political theories prevalent today. It can be argued that to fully understand Iranian Foreign Policy, we need to look beyond traditional Western-centered theories of international relations e.g., Realism, Liberalism, Marxism, Constructivism, etc. This is because the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy is based on the doctrine of *Velayat-i Faqih* and requires an understanding of religion-based political relations rather than traditional international relations theories. Tactical changes in different governments are observed, but these are considered tactical rather than strategic shifts. For example, in the recent war between Israel and the Palestinian Hamas, the Iranian leader refused to directly participate in the war on behalf of any country, while former Parliament Speaker Haddad Adel emphasized that this war was a Palestinian National War and presented Iran’s participation rather as an Israeli demand (Khabaronline, 2023; Farsi Alarabiye, 2023; Radio Farda, 2023). Attempts to improve relations with various countries have seen successes and setbacks, shaped by the global geopolitical landscape. Iran’s foreign policy history remains dynamic, responding to both internal and external influences.

However, the underlined points of Iran’s diplomatic principles actually represent all these Western-centered theories as a whole. In the context of Iran’s foreign policy, change is not a simple or tolerant branch. In other words, change efforts in different governments, even if desirable, should be considered

tactical rather than strategic. These tendencies were observed during the reformist or moderate presidencies of Hashemi Rafsanjani, Khatami and Rouhani, as well as during the radical Ahmadinejad and Raisi administrations. Attempts to improve relations with Saudi Arabia under Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency, with the US and the EU under Mohammad Khatami's presidency and to resolve the nuclear issue stalled between 2003 and 2005 and were abandoned under Ahmadinejad's presidency. These issues are still being addressed today. Ex-president Rouhani has tried and succeeded in bringing together the ideas of his predecessors to solve these problems. However, the intervention of the Trump administration has reversed the progress made and the agreement reached, and thus, for Iran's foreign policy, history has once again returned to the 2003.

6. Conclusion

Iran's foreign policy toward the United States can be delineated into two distinct epochs: pre- and post-1979 Revolution. The former period was characterized by a decidedly pro-American stance, while the latter witnessed a marked shift towards an anti-American orientation. Each miscalculation in this post-revolutionary phase has resulted in the depletion of national resources, with strategic missteps translating into a regional setback.

This article delves into the multifaceted dynamics of Iran-US-Middle East interactions, exploring the ideological underpinnings of Iran's national interest-driven foreign policy and examining its stance within the broader context of Iran-US relations. The intricate relationships among Iran, the United States, and regional partners, especially in the 21st century, have been shaped by Iran's nuclear enrichment activities, the imposition of sanctions, and, ultimately, the intricacies of the Nuclear Deal.

Confronted by a robust US presence in the Middle East, coupled with encirclement from three directions, the US withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal, and the subsequent re-imposition of sanctions, Iran has pivoted towards an eastern-oriented foreign policy. This shift has manifested in a strategic initiative termed "Looking East" as Iran endeavors to secure its position within Chinese-led organizations. Concurrently, Iran persists in its pursuit of a "regime export" policy, relying on proxy powers in the region.

It is noteworthy that the operationalization of these Iranian foreign policy principles encounters a backdrop of ongoing conflicts and disputes with the United States, providing Iran with a distinctive vantage point on both the global and regional stages. Despite alterations in approach across different periods, Iran's foreign policy retains its foundational principles and ideologies, evident in the nation's conduct on the international stage.

Moreover, the nexus between Iran's foreign policy and the nuclear issue is a complex interplay of ideological, national interest, strategic, and tactical factors, influencing the policies of all involved parties. This intricate web of considerations underscores the nuanced nature of Iran's engagement with the international community on the nuclear front.

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