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The post 1979 Iranian Foreign Policy : the Emergence of Theocratic Pragmatism?

Rui Faro Saraiva*

Abstract

The overthrow of the Shah Reza Pahlavi's monarchy in 1979, allowed the emergence of a hybrid regime in which the precepts and standards of 12th Imam Shiite Muslim clerics prevail along with republican institutions. The new political regime incorporated a new internal order endowed with elective and non-elective institutions, in which often the boundary between the secular and the religious cannot be distinguished. Explaining Iran's foreign policy raises an immediate question: is Iran's foreign policy based on purely geopolitical and geostrategic interests, through a realist paradigm, or is it, simultaneously or distinctively, shaped by an idealistic element related to Islam? It is legitimate to question whether there is an Islamic way of conducting a foreign policy and what distinguishes Iran's actions from secular states in international politics. The balance of ideology and pragmatism seems to be one of the most persistent and intricate elements of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. This is one of the most important features to consider when developing a conceptual and analytical framework to explain two apparently conflicting elements in the Iranian foreign policy.

Keywords : foreign policy, idealism, Iran, national interest, pan-islamism, realism, secularism, theocracy, 12th imam shi'ism

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1. The Roots of Iranian Foreign Policy

1.1 The Geopolitical context

The search for a causal relationship between geographical factors and their impact on polity dates back to the ancient world. With Aristotle in ancient Greece emerged the study of the relationship between the physical environment and social and political units. To study the foreign policy of a nation may well involve the observation of how certain representations of the geographic space are incorporated in its implementation. The identification of a geographical space and its labeling produces a number of ideas and views about that same place and the policies pursued there. Thus characterizing a particular geographic region as “Islamic” or “Western” implies that when a state defines its foreign policy towards it, this will be based on those views or ideas (Agnew, 1995, pp.47-48).

The actors of International Relations legitimize its foreign policy by presenting certain ideas or assumptions about states and regions beyond its borders. These ideas can be called “Geopolitical Visions,” which are any idea about the relationship between the geographical location of a state and other places, and that involves ideas of (in) security, (dis) advantage and/or invoking ideas about a collective mission or a foreign policy strategy (Dijkink, 1996, p.10). These assumptions will emerge from the political elites of a given society. Societies are pluralistic in the vast majority, including dictatorships. There isn’t only one faction of the elites who determines what the state is and what role it has in the world. The state is a social construction, so its internal and external actions are subject to different interpretations/ visions. This pluralism is not always evident in the foreign policy formulation, as the will of a faction can impose itself on others. Moreover, sometimes the definition of a line of external action is limited by a predetermined pattern of action by decisions/choices made in the past – path dependence – which ends up being imposed on other players, limiting their ability to choose and take decisions. Campbell called “geographical imagination” as the way in which the influential groups in the cultural life of one state define this same state and nation in the world. Campbell also discusses the primary actions of identification and formation of boundaries in which the groups of population within a State are committed (Campbell, 1998, p.80).

The geographic imagination is the foundation of the “geopolitical culture” of a state. This is the product of cultural and organizational processes that shape the State’s foreign policy. But the geopolitical culture within the State itself is not homogeneous and is based on different political and economic interests, which are the result of different views that emerge from the political elites of that same State. This geopolitical culture is also characterized by “geopolitical traditions,” which are the historical canon of thought under the identity of the State, of foreign policy and national interest (Ó’Tuathail, 2004, p.88).

During the last 200 years, the Iranian geopolitical visions have been influenced by diverse experiences that resulted from consecutive foreign interventions. During the 19th century, the Tobacco Revolt (1881-1882) was

followed by the Revolt of the Qajars having made concessions to the United Kingdom in the tobacco industry. Mirza Hassan Shirazi, the *marja-e taqlid* or the *grand ayatollah*, issued an edict that forbade any Shia Muslim to smoke tobacco in Iran. Due to strong pressure from the population, the Government finally withdrew these concessions (Keddie, 1966). However, from the observed external influence during this period and due to the concessions of the Qajar dynasty to foreign powers resulted the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 (Afari, 1996). Later in the early 1950's, Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq created the nationalizations movement, putting under Iranian control English oil companies and the Anglo-Iranian companies. Mosaddeq was later removed from power through a coup in 1953 orchestrated by Mohammad Reza Shah, in cooperation with the American and British intelligence (Katouzian, 1990). Finally, the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 can also be explained through Iran's reaction to the domination by foreign powers and consequent exploration of its wealth and resources.

The aforementioned events are also related to the Iranian historical experience through the competition with other empires or nations, e.g. the Ottoman Empire and the interference of foreign powers during the past 200 years (Russia, France, the United Kingdom and the United States) (Eshraghi, 1984, pp.27-52). The Iranians were also permeable by several attempts of modernization, starting in the 19th century with Qajar Shah, and after the disintegration of the Persian Empire with the two Pahlavi Shahs (Reza Shah 1921-41 and Mohammad Reza Shah 1941-79) (Bamani, 1961).

In addition, the geopolitical culture in Iran has been influenced by the duality between the Islamic community and the nation-state. The question is whether the Iranians must be identified with the *Ummah* (the Islamic community), as was proclaimed by Ayatollah Khomeini, or with Iran as a nation State, such as the former Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami saw it. These two views are part of the "geopolitical imagination" of different Iranian political elites (Rakel, 2009, p.22).

The geopolitical visions of Khomeini are manifested essentially through two ideological principles of the Islamic revolution related with an international dimension: "neither the West nor the East" (non-alignment) and the "export of the revolution." These principles involve the cooling of relations with Western countries and the support for Muslims in any part of the globe. On the contrary, those who see Iran as a nation-state, consider the country as a major player in international relations, promoting good relations with the West and with neighboring States. The definition of nation-state in Iran is intimately connected with the definition of the boundaries of the Iranian territory and neighboring countries, which led to frequent conflicts (Rakel, 2009, p.22-23). The permeability of its borders could explain the interventionist nature of the 152nd article of the Iranian Constitution, as well as the priority of the regional over the international dimension in its foreign policy.

Iran has a unique geographical location. Of all countries in the world, Iran has the largest number of borders with neighboring countries (currently 15). This fact had a significant influence on the economic and

diplomatic relations with the adjacent countries. A recent example is the legal dispute about the Caspian Sea regime, involving apart from Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Another example is the dispute with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over the island of Abu Musa and the Tunb Islands (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2006, p.90).

Being situated in a region of great instability has been difficult for Iran. This widespread condition of instability still persists today, either through the sectarian conflict in the western flank of Iran, with Iraq or with the fragile states on the eastern border: Afghanistan and Pakistan. There are also some states along the northern border of Iran, whose political, social and economic transformations gave rise to a climate of instability and insecurity in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Regional security depends on authoritarian regimes, which lie to the South, subject to socio-political changes in the future. Such an environment of insecurity fuels regional rivalries, military conflicts or crises, and at the same time promotes a greater presence and direct involvement of major foreign powers. Most of Iran's economic and political assets are being spent in combating these threats. The Iranian leadership's determination to maintain a skilled army reflects national security concerns as a result of this geopolitical context (Barzegar, 2010, p.134). Iran's foreign policy is therefore reduced to a regional dimension, floating between achieving the leadership of the region and maintaining the status quo or some kind of autarchy.

The geopolitical culture in the Islamic Republic of Iran seems to be the result of past experiences, such as the intervention of foreign powers and issues of identity and territorial boundaries. After the Islamic Revolution, Iran's geopolitical culture manifested itself in the institutionalization of the *Velayat-e Faqih*, as was developed by Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1960's. The rivalry between different political factions in the context of the struggle for power also influenced the practices related to Iranian foreign policy. Each faction has a vision about polity, economy, social and cultural affairs. These visions and interests have changed over time and consequently each faction has developed different views about Iran's place in the world and international relations (Rakel, 2009, p.24).

Since the revolution, the Iranian political elite has faced the challenge of balancing between idealism and pragmatism, two approaches of Iranian foreign policymaking. Gradually, the Iranian leadership has been emphasizing the geopolitical factor in the conduct of foreign policy. Since the advent of the Islamic revolution, Iran's regional policies have been driven by ideology but also by geopolitical factors, especially on the relations with other states of the region. The main reason for the importance of geopolitics in the definition of Iranian foreign policy lies in the nature of the challenges faced by Iran. These are marked by multiple sources of insecurity, including the American military threat or Israel. These conditions require the development of Iran's strategic alliances. When considering the Iranian geopolitical reality, its cultural, religious and ethnic characteristics, Iranian national security is without any doubt linked to the rest of the region (Barzegar, 2010, p.145).

1.2 The Identitarian and Cultural Context

To better understand Iran's foreign policy a deeper analysis of the identitarian and cultural context of the Iranian foreign policy is necessary. With regard to Iran, the past seems to be always present. We can observe a paradoxical combination of pride in the Iranian culture and a sense of victimization, which also created a fierce sense of independence and a culture of resistance to domination by any foreign power. The Iranian foreign policy is deeply rooted and widely held within these feelings (Ramazani, 2010, p.12).

At the dawn of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called for "independence, freedom, and the Islamic Republic." Thus were declared the Iranian inalienable rights. Before, the Americans had done the same with "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," or the French with the commitment to "liberty, equality and fraternity." Khomeini's principles last to the present day, although the "non-alignment" is not anymore considered in the post-Cold War period. These principles were also incorporated in the Iranian Constitution, and Khatami, during his presidency underlined their "eternal" (Javidan) characteristics (Ramazani, 2008, p.1).

The study of these principles, as well as its cultural and historical context, can deepen our understanding of the interactions between the external and internal policies since the Iranian revolution. The Iranians value the influence of Zoroastrianism on Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They are proud of their thirty centuries of art and artifacts and on the continuity of their cultural identity over millennia, which created the first state of the world, more than 2500 years ago. From Iran the first international society was organized, where different religions and cultures of people under their domain were respected. The Iranians also pride themselves for having freed the Jews from Babylonian captivity, and have influenced the Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, and Turks, not to mention the influence on Western culture indirectly through contributions to the Islamic civilization. At the same time, the Iranians feel oppressed by foreign powers throughout its history, e.g. Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, and more recently, the forces of Saddam Hussein who invaded Iran. The Iranians also recall that the British Empire and the Russians both exploited the country economically and subjugated it politically, invading and occupying the territory during both world wars. The fact that the United States has aborted Iranian democratic aspirations in 1953, toppling the Government of Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddeq, returning the autocracy of the Shah to the throne and, subsequently, ruled the country for a quarter century, is deeply etched in the Iranian collective memory. Similarly, just as the American overthrow of Musaddeq was recorded on the conscience of Iran, the Tehran American hostage in 1979 is still part of American consciousness and perception about Iran. Relations between Tehran and Washington have been shaped not only by a mutual psychological trauma, but also by the collective memory of 70 years of friendly relations (Ramazani, 2010, p.12).

Cyrus the Great (558-530 BC) initiated the search for independence and freedom in its gradual metamorphosis into ideals and principles in the world. The State born by his hands grew during 30 years, forming the Achaemenid and the Persian Empire. The Iranian cultural identity is so ingrained in the

consciousness of a common origin, a shared religion and language, which survived the Arab invasions and other occupations, as well as human and material devastation, and the conversion to Islam that followed. After 300 years of Arab invasions, this sense of identity was expressed eloquently through the heroic epics of the Iranian poet Ferdowsi, which underlined the 30 years needed to purge the Arab from the Persian language (Ramazani, 2008, pp.2-4).

The Islamic era in Persian territory emerged with the Safavid Empire, replacing Zoroastrianism by Shi'a Islam as the religion of the Empire. Like the Sassanids and Zoroastrianism in the past, there was also a close relationship between political power and religious power (the throne and the altar) with the Safavids and Shi'ism. In practice, the Safavids used Shi'a Islam to legitimize and consolidate power and to justify incessant wars against enemies, e.g. the Sunni Ottoman Empire. The result of these wars, together with persistent social problems, corruption in the royal household and the misinterpretation of religion, culminated with the fall of the Empire in 1722 (Ramazani, 2008, p.3).

The Iranian State only managed to reemerge at the beginning of the 19th century, however, now entangled with the European powers competition for his territory. The historical processes of the 19th and early 20th century revolutionized the pre-modern ideas of independence and freedom in Iran. Three factors in particular sparked this historical metamorphosis: 1) the imposed reduction of international borders by foreign powers; 2) the semi-colonization of the state and the society; and 3) the spread of democratic, nationalist, reformist and modernist thinking. In response to this movement the anti-democratic Governments of Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah emerged. The Pahlavi kings tried to match their autocratic regimes with pre-Islamic conceptions and an aura of modern secularism. (Ramazani, 2008, p.4-7).

From Khomeini has emerged a dimension of basic principles in Islamic Iran along with revolutionary principles. This rejected what he called to "idolize the nation" and justified the prefix "democratic" to the Islamic Republic, based on the thought that the Islamic democracy is superior to other existing democracies in the world. In fact, Khomeini also rejected the post Westphalia paradigm, considering that the international system of nation-states was not a God creation but one of the Human mind. In Khomeini's international relations theory, all other views of the world, especially the socialist and the capitalist, were considered outdated. When he wrote to the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, Khomeini underlined the ideological vacuum that exists in the West and in the East. He also suggested him the study of the Islamic view. Nevertheless this Islamic view never overlapped the interests of the Islamic Iranian state. The purchase of arms to the "Great Satan," the United States, during the war with Iraq, or the acceptance of the UN resolution that called for a cease-fire with the Iraqis in 1988, are an example of such. Khomeini declared then that he was taking the necessary steps for the interest and survival of the revolution (Ramazani, 2008, p.8).

Unlike the Western and Israeli representation of the Iranian foreign policy as "irrational," Iran has a tradition of prudent statism that was developed through centuries of experience in International Affairs, beginning with

Cyrus the Great more than 2,000 years ago. Iran has committed many mistakes in his long diplomatic history, which can serve as a history lesson for the present Iranian political elite. In the post-revolution period, especially in its early years, provocation, agitation, subversion, hostage taking and terrorism often characterized Iranian foreign policy. More recently, Iran's international image has been tarnished by a reckless rhetoric of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Israel and the Holocaust, ignoring the importance of international legitimacy and the Islamic Iranian *dictum* of *Hekmat* (wisdom) (Ramazani, 2010, p.13).

A historical approach allows us to get acquainted with the designs and the structuring principles that form the psychological and cultural context in which the decision-making process at the level of the foreign policy of a state is formulated. As Cicero said, to remain ignorant about what happened before we were born, is how to remain always like a child (Cicero, *in* Ramazani, 2008, p.2). Winston Churchill also said: "The further you look backward, the further forward you can see" (Churchill, *in* Ramazani, 2008, p.2). Similarly, when we look at the Iranian past, the way it shaped its culture and the character of the Iranians, we can therefore perceive a glimpse of the Iranian policymakers' thinking when formulating Iran's foreign policy.

2. The Religious Dimension: The 12th Imam Shiism and Iranian Foreign Policy

The basis of the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the system of the *Velayat-e Faqih*, which finds its origin in the Shia tradition, within Islam. Originally, in Islam, there was a distinction between the state power and religious thought (Lambton, 1980, p.404). The Prophet Muhammad was both temporal and spiritual leader of Islam, and established the core principles of the religion. After the death of Muhammad, the legitimacy of his successor has become a dispute between the Sunni and Shiite branches of Islam (Amineh, 2007, pp.353-375).

Shi'a Islam became politically institutionalized in Iran when Shah Ismail I founded the Safavid Empire and adopted Shi'a Islam as the official religion of the State in 1501. This separated the empire and identified him as opposed to the Sunni Ottoman Empire. Thus, since the Safavid Empire, Shi'ism has served the construction of Iranian national identity and state building (Thual, 2002, p.33).

The politicization of Shi'a Islam can be traced from four developments: 1) the *usuli* triumph over the *akhbari*; 2) the *ijtihad*; 3) the *marja-e taqlid*; and 4) the *khums*. During the 17th and 18th centuries emerged a theological debate between the Shiite clergy about the right to interpretation of the law, the *ijtihad*. Two schools evolved from this debate, the *akhbari* and the *usuli*. The *akhbari* school believes that since the disappearance of the 12th Imam, no one could be granted the right to interpretation, and the *hadiths* (tradition of the words and deeds of Muhammad) were a proper legal source for the Islamic jurisprudence. So it would not be necessary to follow the interpretations of the higher clergy, the *mojtahed* versed in the scriptures. In contrast with the *akhbari*, the *usuli* school believes in the *ijtihad* and the *mojtahed* interpretations. The *usuli*

won the contest between the two schools and therefore legitimized the formulation of policies in the context of Shi'a Islam (Keddie, 1995, pp.97-98). The *usuli* school's victory over the *akhbari* paved the way for the modernization of the Shiite clergy and the formation of an autonomous clerical state body. Only the *mojtahed* or the *ayatollah*, and later in the 19th century the centralized leadership of the *marja-e taqlid*, were entitled to the *ijtihad* (Roy, 1996/1999, p.557).

The centralization of power among the clergy was accompanied by financial centralization and autonomy of the clergy from the State, through the concentration of *khums* and *zakat* (religious taxes) at the hands of the *marja-e taqlid*. The *khums* are an exclusive of Shi'ism. Originally representing 1/5 of the annual net income, the *khums* were paid to the *ulamas* (representatives of the clergy) at a local or provincial level. This resulted in direct contact between the clergy and the population, along with an increasing political influence of the traditional *bazaari*. With the emergence of the *marja-e taqlid*, the *khums* were concentrated in his hands (Enayat, 1982).

Partial financial dependence of the clergy from the *bazaari* has prevented the Shi'a clergy to support policies that might go against the interests of the Iranian economic sector. However, the independence of the clergy from the state has been particularly important during some periods of political crisis, as in the case of the Tobacco Revolt, the Constitutional Revolution, and the Oil Nationalization Movement carried out by Mosadeqq, and finally during the Islamic Revolution (Mirbaghari, 2004, p.557). The politicization of Shi'ism culminated in the years 1960/70, still during the Iranian monarchy, with the Constitutional Revolution and the post constitutional clergy being highly criticized by religious intellectuals. Ayatollah Khomeini and Ali Shari'ati are two prominent figures in this context (Rakel, 2009, pp.25-26).

Khomeini challenged the traditional Shi'ite dogma on mundane political power, with his innovative ideas about the *Velayat-e Faqih* system. The origins of this system can be found in the discussions between the *akhbari* and the *usuli* school in the 18th century. It was also Khomeini that developed the concept and made it a political project, institutionalized in the Islamic Republic of Iran later on. Khomeini not only restored some Shi'a traditions but also began an ideological revolution within Shi'a Islam. According to the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, the Supreme Leader is the rightful leader of the entire Muslim community, the *Umma*. The Iranian Constitution was changed in 1988 giving larger powers to the *faqih*. This is also known as *Velayat-e Faqih Motlaqah-e Faqih*, the Supreme Jurist's Absolute Government, giving greater powers to the Supreme Leader on all Muslim community. Since the Islamic revolution, this system and its basic principles have been the basis of the power structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and at the same time one of its biggest obstacles to democratization and implementation of reforms. After three decades since the Islamic Revolution, there has been some debate among religious intellectuals about what should be the role of religion in politics. These issues touch the essence of Shi'ism, and this debate includes considerations on the level of legitimacy of the Iranian political system, while it should not be forgotten that Islam continues to play an important role

in the life of most Iranians (Rakel, 2009, pp.26-27).

The foreign policy formulation requires the identification of the goals and the means by which it is to be implemented. Both objectives and means, however, emanate from a source, in which the polity is originated. In the West, or in liberal democracies, these sources are generally regarded as an emanation people's will. Governments derive their mandate from the people they represent. Theoretically, every foreign policy is related to the mandate of the Government that represents the will of the majority. In Shi'a Islam, however, the source of political decision-making is God. This difference between the West and Shia Islam can be viewed through the origins of the words "political" and "*siasat*." While the first refers to the concern of keeping people happy, the second strives to bring the evolution and the development of the population, even if it means to go against her will. The majority of Shia scholars agree with this basic premise. Yet there are wide disparities between the various interpretations of this concept. According to a more radical interpretation (conservative), the will of people must respect the will of God, which will be interpreted by religious jurists. The goals are set and defined by ideology. The Western political framework defines, in general, foreign policy objectives in terms of national interest. Shi'a conservatives define its foreign policy goals in accordance with the terms of its doctrine, as understood and interpreted by a religious lawyer. This may help to explain the goal set by Shah Ismail I in an attempt to defeat the Ottomans. There is no doubts about the Iranian objectives in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict to have been largely influenced by religious orientation (Mirbaghari, 2004, pp.558-560).

Although God is the source of the polity to all Shiites, the foreign policy stance varies according to different interpretations. As for the means and tools by which a policy must be implemented, there is again a substantial difference between the Shiites and the West. Diplomacy is based on rationality and is the most common tool regarding the implementation of foreign policy. Even the Soviet revolutionaries gradually replaced their radical revolutionary approach by conventional diplomacy, following the October revolution of 1917. A conservative feature of Shi'a Islam is the jurisprudence that replaces rationality as means of implementing the policy. Even though the political decision-making process does not cease to be rational, the reference point will be the islamic jurisprudence (Mirbaghari, 2004, pp.560-562).

The central question is whether the Shiite doctrine is inherently compatible with the Iranian national interest. Shi'ism follows the will of God, jurisprudence and ideology. The difference is clear in relation to the Western conventional wisdom of adoption of people's will, rationality and national interest, as means and objectives of foreign policy. Rationality is also used in Shi'a Islam, but generally in favor of the doctrine and ideology. History has shown that Shia believes that the best way to serve the cause it represents, is in the preservation and survival of the country, as well as maximizing its power. As such, Iran's domestic and foreign policy is often geared towards that goal in harmony with its national interest (Mirbaghari, 2004, p.563).

3. The balance between Idealism and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy

One possible way to analyze and explain Iranian foreign policy can be achieved through a theoretical approach to International Relations (IR). The IR theory debate since World War II, have in general provided the necessary tools for the observation of international events, including those related to the Islamic Republic or the Middle East. Although foreign policy analysis has been included in the scientific field of international relations, this began to emerge as a sub-discipline through Richard Snyder, H. W. Bruck and Burton Sapin, the founding fathers of foreign policy analysis. Despite having received important contributions from the IR field, foreign policy analysis challenges great theories, such as Idealism or Realism. The need for a specific and appropriate approach, as the contradictions between existing theories, among other factors, resulted in the emergence of this specific field. Nevertheless foreign policy analysts will not be able to say with certainty what is going on inside the “black box” of states and their foreign policies (Snyder, 1962). A mature foreign policy analysis is not expected at this point, but the attempt to do so is by itself an acceptable academic evolution in the field. The study of Iranian foreign policy, being one of the most complex case studies on this field, can assist in the development of foreign policy analysis as sub-discipline of international relations.

Revolutions, even though they are essentially internal affairs of a certain State, have an effect on the current international system, breaking with the *status quo* and the normal flow of diplomacy. The religious-based revolution in Iran was no exception. This revolution dismantled the intricate network of relationships that were sustained by the Pahlavi monarchy, and on the other hand, determined priorities that are consistent with the perceptions and values of the revolution and the new Islamic Iranian elite. The Iranian revolution ended the reign of a secular, pro-Western regime, which is strategically important to the Middle East region. Inevitably the waves that resulted from this Revolution were felt throughout the region, despite its non-Arab and Shiite characteristics. Like other revolutionary regimes, Tehran was determined to encourage the growth of its ideology and “export” it whenever possible. This regime emerged and consolidated during the Cold War, finding a new place in the rigidity and inflexibility of the bipolar international system. However, after ten years of its creation, the slogan “neither East, nor West” was abandoned to witness the end of the Cold War. The hegemonic US and a weakened Russia had to redefine its strategic presence in a new world order. Soon Iranian foreign policy was going to reflect not only the complexities of a revolutionary state emerging in a highly dynamic international environment, but also the strategic importance of the Middle East region. Iranian foreign policy therefore addressed the complexities of the new post Cold War order, along with the complexity and contradictions of the Islamic Republic and its own domestic policy (Ehteshami, 2010, pp.127-128).

In practice, Iranian foreign policy has evolved towards a series of pragmatic decisions, together with some ideological approaches. In fact, Iran's international relations have not been notably controversial, despite its

anti-Western rhetoric. The revolutionary Iran, despite its theocratic characteristics, remains a relatively normal state within the framework of the definition of its foreign policy. Iran remained a loyal member of almost all the international organizations of which the Pahlavi monarchy had also been part, and in this sense, at least, has acted more like a *status quo* power than a revolutionary power (Ehteshami, 2010, p.128). Indeed, until the late 1990's, Iran had also maintained a commercial pattern similar to that of the old regime (with the exception of trade patterns with the United States). Trade relations with the West dominated well into the 21st century. These relationships have weakened only with gradual impositions brought by UN sanctions, since December 2006. Regarding the Muslim world, Iran's position has been irregular in a theoretically closer region to its regional constituency. The irony of the 1980's stressed Iran's good relations with some Muslim States of secular trend, such as Algeria, Libya, and Syria. It is possible to affirm that there wasn't a "Muslim World first" in Iranian foreign policy, despite the tone and open Islamic rhetoric. Nevertheless, Iran's international posture continues to concern the international community. The mixture of religious nationalism and a revolutionary populist propaganda, together with a policy of opportunism, anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism, brought Iranian foreign policy to an aura of difficult understanding (Ehteshami, 2010, pp.128-29).

The international relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran may be divided into four distinct periods: a period of confrontation (1980-1989), a period of accommodation (1989-1997), a period of *détente* (1997-2005) and a period of rejection (post-2005). This temporal classification of different stages of foreign policy is directly linked to the various leaders/presidencies: Khomeini (1980-1989), Rafsanjani (1989-1997), Khatami (1997-2005), and Ahmadinejad (2005-). This demarcation should not disguise the various elements of continuity of Iranian foreign policy, even in relation to the policies of the Pahlavi era. Similarly, it should not also cover the wandering nature of Iran's foreign policy. In this context The Economist wrote in March 29th, 2008: "The country's foreign policies look erratic, too. Iran has condemned jihadist terrorism, but sheltered al-Qaeda fugitives. It has backed the government of Iraq's prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, yet has abetted militias opposed to him. It champions Muslim unity but creates division by vilifying pro-Western Muslim rulers, backing Shia factions and expecting Shias everywhere to bow to Mr Khamenei's authority." (The Economist, 2008).

The Iranian foreign policy suffered many oscillations during the past 30 years. During this period the revolutionary regime developed its foreign policy based on a balance between pragmatic and idealistic views of international affairs. Any revolutionary Government in its early days develops a tendency to pursue an ideological approach to its foreign policy. However, after a period of maturation, some more pragmatic considerations are developed, as the State's survival depends largely on the realities of the outside world. This may explain the cooperation between the US and Iran, on Afghanistan and Iraq. Iranian leaders viewed the stability in these two countries as a vital factor for their national interest. Pragmatism prevailed, although ideology seems to be a priority in other cases, e.g. when Iran has adopted a policy of neutrality in the conflict

of Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia, a Christian State, and the Republic of Azerbaijan, an Islamic State with a Shiite majority. Nevertheless it is not the regime ideological fervor that validates Iran's aspiration to become a major regional power. On the contrary, the educational level of its 70 million inhabitants and its natural resources makes Iran the natural candidate to regional pre-eminence, strengthening their ability to play a leading role, reflection of its geopolitical weight. In contrast to the general perception of Iran as a revolutionary country, its foreign policy is addressed and largely based on its cultural heritage of moderation and close regional ties (Saghafi-Ameri, 2010, pp.136-138).

To explain the Iranian foreign policy irregularities, some scholars assumed a rationalist position, which argues that Iranian foreign policy became "increasingly cautious" since the revolution, through a gradual maturation and reconsideration of the Iranian national interest. However this approach, as Ramazani says, can't explain why Iranian foreign policy is "not linear or dialectic, but kaleidoscopic." This important point about Iranian policymaking shows that the idealists of today may be the royalists of tomorrow, and vice versa. The observation and acceptance of this fluid nature seems to be an important conceptual step to explain the conflicting elements in its foreign policy (Ramazani, *in* Ehteshami, 2008, p.28).

The decision-making process analysis and its elements has been one of the central issues of the theories of foreign policy analysis. Some analysts try to explain the contradictory characteristics of Iranian foreign policy through the complexity and seeming chaos of the Iranian political system. However, the Supreme Leader oversees this whole process and often appeals to consensus. The result is an inconstant foreign policy, where sometimes dominates the revolutionary imperative, and on other occasions considers more pragmatic or realistic premises (Rezaei, 2008, p.28). In this way, as Ramazani says, the balance between pragmatism and ideology at the level of Iranian foreign policy decision-making has been the most persistent, and one of the most complex and difficult issues of Iranian history, since the 6th century BC (Ramazani, *in* Rezaei, 2008, p.29). By considering the complex nature of the Iranian hybrid political system, being simultaneously a republic and a theocracy, along with the balance between ideology and pragmatism as one of the most persistent and intricate elements of the Islamic Republic foreign policy. It is possible to characterize post 1979 Iranian foreign policy as a form of "theocratic pragmatism," a fluctuation between idealism and pragmatism in which religious considerations are an important source of inspiration for decision makers, although rationality and national interest prevail.

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