

The Impact of 'Identity Politics' on Iranian-American Relations

Written by Aryaman Bhatnagar

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ARYAMAN BHATNAGAR, JUL 26 2012

The Impact of 'Identity Politics' on Iranian-American Relations Following the Iranian Revolution

The year 1979 is a watershed for Iranian-American relations. An Islamic Revolution and the subsequent establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979 transformed one of the most important allies of America in the Middle East into one of its most important foes. The post-1979 period involved a tremendous demonization on both sides. A politics of identity has come to shape their relations post-1979 and has been a major obstacle in attempts at normalisation.

'Identity politics' refers to a particular set of ideas about a certain political community that policy-makers use and drawn on to legitimate the general thrust of foreign policy.[1] It tends to give more importance to images and perceptions in foreign policy decisions than to an objective reality.[2] Identity politics is almost always recognised as being defined in 'us-them' terms.[3] This implies the creation of certain myths about oneself or 'us', which differentiates and mostly places one's own country at a superior level to the other nations, often seeking to demonize the 'other'.[4] The negative perception of the other is usually based on real short-term experience or shaped by a particularly powerful leader. These myths develop as working hypotheses for how these created groups deal with each other[5], shaping their place and role in the international systems[6] and providing a framework for how their actions are to be perceived[7]. As these socially constructed identities are institutionalised into the political culture of nations, they tend to achieve the status of an objective reality[8] and establish path dependencies from which policymakers may find it politically painful to stray.[9]

This essay seeks to examine Iranian-American relations post-1979 within the framework outlined above. It argues that their relations post-1979 has been defined by such identity politics. It provides a framework for how both countries view the other, with the image of the 'other' acting as the main obstacle in preventing the normalisation of relations. However, at the same time, elements of pragmatism or realism are not completely absent from their equation with each other. This pragmatism was evident in attempts at reconciliation or cooperation, during the lifetime of Khomeini, as well as by the self-vested motives of leaders thereonafter who have sought to demonize the other. But, even then, such pragmatism was couched in identity politics.

This essay is divided into three sections. The first section will look at the image and myths that Iran and USA had constructed of themselves and each other following the 1979 Revolution. Section two will look at how such myths have obstructed the normalization of relations and how it has provided a framework for how their actions have been perceived. Finally, section three examines how this constructivist approach does not eliminate the possibility of realism or pragmatism in their policies towards each other, even during the 1980s.

I

Iranian-American relations centers not on substantive differences or real conflict, but rather on symbolic discourse: both nations construct the "other" to fit an idealized image of an enemy.[10] Moreover, both harbour certain myths about themselves, which has contributed to the wide gulf between them.

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Iran's international orientation has always been shaped by a presumption of greatness and an undiminished sense of superiority over its neighbours.[11] An Islamist dimension was added to this following the revolution, raising 'the nation' to the status of a vehicle of divine substance[12] and cultivating the belief that Iran has always been the origin of all good things and all good deeds.[13] This was the lens through which Iran considered itself to be the vanguard state protecting the oppressed masses against the evil and oppressive hierarchical world order[14], that which they sought to change.

This self-image needed to have an antagonist against which it could define itself[15]. The role of antagonist came to be occupied by the west, particularly the USA. According to Khomeini: "All our problems...All the problems of the Moslems stem from America".[16] It was not only seen as an economically exploitative power that was after Iran's natural resources,[17] but as a culturally exploitative power as well. Americans were blamed for the "westoxification" of Iran[18], which apparently had resulted in the destruction of the cultural and authentic identity of Iran as an Islamic nation.[19] It was this perception of a mortal danger from America and its corrupting influence that the anti-America rhetoric of the revolutionary clerics became institutionalised in the political discourse of Iran, leading it to sever all ties with it.

By this point, America had also developed certain norms about how the international order should be and how each state should conduct itself within such an order. Nations and actors that did not fit this mould were relegated to categories like "irrational", "criminal" and "deviant".[20] Post-revolutionary Iran violated these norms by including ideological considerations in its foreign policy and by adopting a non-alignment policy. The Iranian vision of an alternative social and political order was viewed as a threat to the established world order spearheaded by USA[21] and, thus, Iran was transformed from a reliable ally to a threat to the stability of the international system.[22]

The process of such identity construction, naturally, soured the relations between the two, terminating all formal relations. It created a wall of mistrust and such a strong negative stigma around the other, for both, that it has become virtually impossible to normalise relations, even after three decades. Moreover, it has created a framework that guides and shapes both American and Iranian perceptions about the activities and intentions of the other. This has not only strengthened their negative perceptions of the other, but also strengthened the wall of mistrust between them.

II

Post-revolution, the creation of identities had provided both Iran and America with a framework by which the acts and policies of the other came to be intrinsically linked to its constructed image. Every action was viewed with suspicion and the belief that it was meant to subvert the other, using the action as an example to prove the constructed images. Such a perception was inevitable, given the negative image that had been created for the other. Moreover, speculations were made about the intention of the other based on this image. Since the other had been defined in terms of an antagonistic or a source of evil, it was natural to expect the worst from it. This perception of the nature of the other's regime also had the effect of magnifying the apparent threat posed by the other.

For instance, every action of America was seen as an attempt to reverse the Islamic Revolution.[23] Thus, despite the fact that the terminally ill Shah was allowed entry into USA only for medical treatment and that the shooting down of an Iranian civil aircraft was a tragic accident, not deliberate, according to the Iranian perception, both these acts were seen as deliberative ploys to subvert the revolution.[24] Similarly, the US attempt to develop ties with the provisional government after the revolution was seen as an American conspiracy to strengthen the moderate forces.[25] In more recent times, the economic sanctions on Iran, the exclusion of Iran from the reordering of the Middle East following the 1991 Gulf War, and the inclusion of Iran in the "Axis of Evil" have been viewed as American attempts to discredit and topple the Iranian regime.[26]

The American perception of Iran as an irrational actor was shaped by the hostage crisis of 1979, which has had a lasting impact on their impression of the Islamic Republic. As a result, Iran has become synonymous with worldwide terrorism.[27] It was this prejudice against Iran as the source of all evil that, no matter where terrorism was committed, the finger was automatically pointed at Iran, even in the absence of any evidence.[28] It was simply

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believed to be the kind of thing Iran was most capable of and, consequently, Iranians were condemned for it[29]. This paranoia about the alleged Iranian threat is most evident in the attitude towards their nuclear programme. Despite strong evidence supporting Iran's nuclear programme as meant for peaceful purposes, America is convinced that it is meant to cause harm, particularly to them[30]. To the American eye, it seems natural that religiously motivated people like Ahmadinejad, who hold an apocalyptic worldview, would be a danger to the world if they possessed a nuclear weapon.[31] Moreover, the fact that America had been instrumental in starting the nuclear programme in Iran during the Shah's reign, their paranoia clearly shows a linkage to the nature of the current Iranian regime, rather than generally to the dangers posed by the nuclear weapons.

This continuous mutual demonization naturally makes it difficult for the two countries to work towards resolving their differences. Moreover, since such images have become institutionalised in their political culture, it is extremely difficult for both to shed off their perceptions of each other. These perceptions cloud the judgement of politicians, preventing them from seeing the other in a positive light and from accepting the possible benefits of normalising relations. The anti-other propaganda that has become an accepted political norm in both countries also created a situation in which any attempt at reconciliation with the other has faced the possibility of severe domestic backlash. Thus, when attempts have been made at reconciliation, the image of the "Great Satan" or "Mad Mullah" have proved to overshadow for the entire effort.

In Iran, for instance, even after the death of Khomeini, the US remained as the "Great Satan". Ali Khomeini continued to denounce the US as an aggressive entity whose intentions had always been hostile and, thus, relegating it impossible to have normal relations with them[32]. Both Khomeini and Ahmadinejad believe that relations with the US will bring no benefits to Iran and that, to the contrary, close relations may lead to the cultural contamination of Iran and the subversion of theocratic rule. Infact, coexistence with the "Great Satan" is viewed as tantamount to an appeasement of evil[33]. Thus, it has been considered imperative to keep the American influence away from the land of Iran, with an uncompromising attitude adopted by the conservative elites regarding negotiations with America[34]. Attempts by both Rafsanjani and Khatami consequently proved to be futile, as the two have been blocked by the conservative elites, who control the reigns of Iran's foreign policy[35]. As a result, the pragmatism which had come to shape Iran's Foreign Policy in the post-Khomeini era did not extend to US, which has continued to be mired by the images of the past.

Similarly, America continues to believe that it has been at war with Iran since 1979[36], resulting in a continuous demonization of Iran in the American legislative halls.[37] The persistence of such an attitude has been made possible because American foreign policy being in the hands of particular politicians whose prejudices against Iran had been formed during the 1980s.[38] In addition, in more recent years, neoconservatives in American politics have been successful in carving out a 'rogue' image for Iran[39]. As a result, Iran has consistently been viewed as an inherently anti-American nation, dominated by radical forces.[40] Accordingly, all attempts made by Iran at reconciliation have been met with scepticism.[41] This includes the landmark 'dialogue among civilisations' speech of Khatami, which was probably one of the best opportunities for America to negotiate with Iran. Similarly, America refused to acknowledge the role that Iran had played during the Afghan War of 2001, and, in fact, worsened relations by including it as part of the "Axis of Evil". These examples reflect American hostility towards Iran and their hesitation in engaging with Iran, especially if doing so would be beneficial to the latter[42]. Moreover, the continuous American rejection of the Iranian efforts at reconciliation, in turn, has strengthened the Iranian conservative faction and undermined the moderates, who have been willing to reconcile with Americans.

Thus, from the discussion so far, it seems fairly obvious that identity politics has had a disastrous impact on Iranian-American relations. The belief that the nature of the regime is responsible for its conduct has ignited the worst of expectations of the other, by both Iran and America. The construction of such images has made it impossible to view the actions of the other rationally, due to the negative stigma attributed to it. While, at the same time, the continuing misperception of the other's image and intentions has also created a barrier of mistrust, making the normalization of relations virtually impossible.

III

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It would be wrong to assume that the impact of identity politics has left no room for any pragmatism in Iranian-American relations. Elements of realism continues to exist in their equation. This was evident in attempts at reconciliation, as discussed above, as well as in the attempts to cooperate with each other during critical moments. It was also pragmatic concerns that led political elites in both Iran and America to intensify the negative image of the other so as to strengthen their own position or further their interests. Finally, this section will show that their differences have been motivated by actual concerns, not only by ideological factors.

The post-Khomeini era marked the beginning of pragmatism in Iranian foreign policy in order to ensure the economic survival of the country and to reap the opportunities presented by the post-Cold War era. As seen above, attempts were made by both Rafsanjani and Khatami at reconciliation. While Rafsanjani had attempted to provide economic incentives to the American oil companies, Khatami gave tremendous importance to an increasing cultural exchange between the two countries as a measure of reconciliation[43]. Moreover, the Iranian leaders had seen 9/11 as an opportunity to mend fences with the US and increase its prestige among its policymakers. Because of this incentive, Iran had provided crucial services that essential for American success in Afghanistan[44]. Even the hardliners were willing to cooperate with America in the Afghan war, as they wished to vanquish their historical nemesis, the Taliban, and believed that this would deflect the anger and aggressiveness of America away from Iran[45]. It is for this very reason, of pragmatism, that Iranians also contemplated forging an alliance with USA in the run-up to the Iraq War[46].

Even during Khomeini's lifetime, the Iran-Contra Affair clearly demonstrates the dominance of such pragmatic factors. American and Israeli arms were to be shipped to Iran to provide the much needed assistance in its war against Iraq. In return, Iran was to facilitate the release of the American hostages in Lebanon[47]. This affair clearly showed the desire of both the US and Iran to do business with its arch enemy, so as to boost each's own interest.[48] Thus, despite America being a perceived moral abomination, its support was needed to defeat Saddam. At the same time, America needed Iran's support to release its citizens[49] and prevent Iran from falling into the hands of the Soviets[50].

The construction of images for each other has also been motivated, in part, by pragmatic desires or vested self-interests. For instance, Khomeini initially did not intend to sever ties with Washington,[51] but the internal struggle for power with the provisional government made it imperative for him to adopt a belligerent position against America and to create the myth that the "Great Satan" was attempting to subvert the Iranian Revolution by aiding the Shah[52]. The hostage crisis, which was an outcome of this propaganda, enabled Khomeini to galvanize the populace behind his cause and overthrow the provisional government[53]. Similarly, the persistence of anti-American rhetoric has been an act of self-endorsement for a regime that gains legitimacy for many by maintain its role in confronting global imperialism. Thus, such rhetoric importantly serves to preserve the revolution, which has actually lost much of its appeal in the recent years,[54] and also prevents closer ties with America, as that may lead to the subversion of theocratic rule.

It should also be noted that the differences between the two nations have been motivated by more than ideological or cultural factors. For instance, strategic concerns prevented Iran and America from forging closer ties. Iran wanted to create a new order in the Persian Gulf region, under its dominance, post-1991. This had obviously been contrary, and a threat, to American interests in the region[55]. Both Iran and America were unable to resolve their ambitions in a manner that could salvage their relations. Moreover, the continuous snubbing of Iran by America has further widened the gulf between them[56]. The Iranian hostility to Israel, the close ties between Israel and USA, and the presence of a strong and influential Jewish lobby in USA has also prevented the two from forging close ties. Whenever an American administration has contemplated cultivating close ties with Iran, its attempts have been thwarted by Israel or the Jewish lobby[57]. Finally, in the post-Cold War context, Iran has become increasingly irrelevant to America, with no need to cultivate close ties with Iran, as it would serve no purpose for them[58].

Despite the existence of such "realism" in the Iranian-American context, one should also not overemphasise its importance as it too was shaped by 'identity politics'. For instance, irrespective of the real intentions behind constructing images for each other, it is important to keep in mind that it was identity politics, which was used as a mechanism to fulfil the vested interests. Moreover, one cannot undermine the genuineness of Khomeini and his

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successors' commitment to the ideological antagonism against America. Moreover, even, the strategic differences between the two have been couched in identity politics. For instance, in order to prevent the emergence of Iran as a regional hegemon, America has resorted to the demonization of Iran to prevent it from securing the support of other countries in the region.[59] Finally, the fact that such identity politics have been successful in thwarting all the efforts made at reconciliation bears testimony to its importance in the Iranian-American relations.

Conclusion

In the ultimate analysis of Iranian-American relations post-1979, it would be wrong to state that realism or pragmatic concerns have not been present at all. However, it identity politics that have taken precedence over any other factor in facilitating the transformation of Iran from a 'faithful ally' to a formidable foe controlled by 'Mad Mullahs' and of America from a patron state to the 'Great Satan'. Moreover, even the apparent pragmatism that has occurred has also been coloured by identity politics. Identity politics was instrumental in institutionalising a certain image of the other in the political culture of both nations, images that have been impossible to shed, even with the passage of time. This has not only created a wall of mistrust between the two, preventing them from reconciling with each other, but has additionally led to generalisations about each other's intentions and conduct, based on the image created for them. This has naturally furthered the divide between them. The impact of identity politics on Iranian-American relations can be best summed up in the words of Dennis Ross, special Middle East coordinator at the White House: "Certain images get formed, and...even when there are behaviours that seem to contradict the image...you give much more weight to those that tend to confirm it, and you dismiss those that should point you in a different direction...".[60]

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[9] See n.7.

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[10] See n.5, p.4

[11] R. Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Ages of the Ayatollahs*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p.2

[12] See n.8

[13] See n.7

[14] See n.8

[15] See n.11, p.19

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[18] See n.8

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[22] See n.7

[23] T. Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Iran, Israel and the United States*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

[24] See n.5

[25] See n.11

[26] See n.5 and n.11

[27] See n.21

[28] J.L.Esposito and J.P.Piscatori, 'The Global Impact of the Iranian Revolution: A Policy Perspective', In: J.L.Esposito (ed.) *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact*, Miami: Florida University Press, 1990

[29] See n.5

[30] J. Cole, *Engaging the Muslim World*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009

[31] See n.8

[32] M. Panah, *The Islamic Revolution and the World: Global Dimensions of the Iranian Revolution*, London: Pluto Press, 2007

[33] See n.11

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[34] See n.32

[35] See n.19

[36] See n.23

[37] See n.5

[38] A. Ansari, 'Iran and the US in the shadow of 9/11: Persian and the Persian Question Revisited', *Iranian Studies*, 39 (2), 2006, pp.155-170

[39] See n.8

[40] See n.23

[41] A. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Roots of Mistrust*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2006; R.K. Ramazani, 'Idealism and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy', *Middle East Journal*, 58(4), 2004, pp.1-11

[42] A. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Roots of Mistrust*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2006

[43] Ibid. And see n.11

[44] See n.23

[45] See n.11

[46] See n.30

[47] R.K. Ramazani, 'Idealism and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy', *Middle East Journal*, 58(4), 2004, pp.1-11

[48] See n.19. And G. Sick, 'A Selective Partnership: Getting US-Iranian Relations Right', *Foreign Affairs*, 85 (6), pp.142-146

[49] See n.23

[50] See n.11

[51] See n.23

[52] See n.11

[53] Ibid.

[54] See n.32

[55] See n.23

[56] See n.11

[57] See n.23

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[58] A. Lake, 'Confronting Backlash States', *Foreign Affairs*, 73 (2), 1994, pp.45-55

[59] See n.19

[60] See n.23

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Written by: Aryaman Bhatnagar

Written at: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

Written for: Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

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