

*Working Paper*

## **Contested Revolutionary Ideology, Dissonant Politics and Iranian Foreign Policy: Implications for Washington and Tehran**

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Several scholars have argued that autocracies born in the crucible of revolutionary change and state ideology are far more resistant to political liberalization than non-revolutionary states. This idea is *not* necessarily belied by the example of the Soviet Union. Indeed, one might argue that the decay of Marxist-Leninist doctrine under Leonid Brezhnev and the emergence of a “post-totalitarian” phase in which cynicism and apathy reigned indicates one possible root that post-revolutionary states can take: the rise to nearly unchallenged power of a strong man like Vladimir Putin. Elsewhere, as in Iran and North Korea, the ruling elite considers the defense and propagation of a state ideology as fundamental to the state’s very existence. This was also for many decades true in Cuba. But as Obama’s March 2016 visit suggests, Cuba’s leaders either feel secure enough in their ideological skin to absorb the normalization of relations with the US, or simply do not attribute as much importance to Cuban communist ideology as they once did.

Yet if the concept of revolutionary state has enough substance to shine some common light on countries as different as North Korea, Cuba, Iran and the former Soviet Union, I would suggest that the political systems in these countries are so different as to question the very utility of any broad generalizations about “revolutionary states.” The impact of revolutionary ideology is a function of distinctive histories, cultures, socio-economic factors and institutional trajectories. These enduring or “path dependent” effects have tremendous importance for the evolving domestic and foreign policies of these states—as the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran shows. Indeed, if we want to understand the revived intensity of political (and ideological) struggles in Iran and their implications for US-Iranian relations in general, and Iran’s security policies in particular, we must grapple with a political system in which revolutionary ideology remains absolutely critical but is hotly and diversely contested, and what is more, linked to other institutional dynamics in ways that US policy makers still find hard to appreciate. The purpose of this short paper is to analyze the roots of what I call Iran’s “dissonant” political system and revolutionary ideology, the fractious contest over defining and applying this ideology, and finally the implications of these struggles for Iranian foreign and security policy in particular.

However, before embarking on this analysis it would be worth taking a short detour by noting how the seductions of academic generalization in the US regarding the assumed qualities of revolutionary states in general, and Iran in particular, hobbled our grasp of Iranian political dynamics. I am referring here to the rise of the “security state” thesis in US academic and especially policy circles during the 2005-2012 period. These years

coincided with the 2005 election --and then contentious 2009 reelection-- of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the rise of a new elite of security apparatchiks and political operators linked to -- or coming directly out of -- a second generation of Revolutionary Guard ultra-hardline leaders. These leaders were variously described by US-based scholars as a sect of political ideologues who had reduced state ideology to a toxic mix of paranoia and Shi'ite apocalyptic messianism, or as a cabal of power hungry operators who were in fact not real genuine advocates of Islamist ideology per se but instead were united by an intense resentment of the former revolutionary leaders --a resentment that made them determined to grab as much loot and power as they could.

These were not, of course, mutually exclusive propositions. What is more they led to the same conclusion: Iran was a post-revolutionary state that had shed whatever positive or rational elements had previously animated its domestic and foreign policies. In its most extreme form, this thesis came with a key corollary, namely that Iran's new leaders *were not rational*. Thus, the argument ran, they had to be hit hard before they engaged in Apocalypse Now by launching a nuclear attack on Israel. Other policy makers rejected such provocative alarmism but nevertheless argued that Iran's new leaders would never countenance a nuclear deal or could not be trusted once they did. In short, the security state thesis led inexorably to a prescription of war or US support for some kind of regime change. By 2010 this thesis became so popular that even former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton openly repeated one version of it even as the Obama administration struggled to define a new Iran policy. Indeed, the concept of an Iranian Security Despotism headed up by a fusion of power and authority between the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards (or perhaps even the subordination of the first to the second) had become the new Washington consensus. The possibility that the 2013 presidential election in Iran could produce any result other than a recapitulation of the new ultra-hardliner order was, almost literally, unimaginable.

To be fair, Hassan Rouhani's "surprise" election was a product of many things, not least of which was the collective action problem that dogged his election opponents (a similar version of which wreaked havoc in the US Republican Party). In Iran's case, none of the hardliners were ready to quit the race before their rivals did likewise, thus producing a divided field that worked in favor of the moderates who united behind Rouhani. But if such contingent calculations happily favored an Iranian leader whose popularity was rooted in hope rather than fear (in contrast to Trump!), Rouhani's election also echoed broader structural forces and logics that were embedded in the very fabric of Iranian politics and society and had survived despite the assertion by some scholars that this society had

become “paralyzed.” The dissonance of Iran’s political system was back (it had never disappeared!), opening opportunities for US diplomacy, but also creating frustrations and contradictions for Iranian advocates of political detente at home, as well as for Iranian and Western advocates of Iranian detente abroad.

Iran’s dissonant system had long pivoted around competition, negotiation and balancing among four broad and fluid factions, two of which were exponents of a more republican (small r) system and two of which advocated some form of theocratic rule. Cutting across these theocratic and republican divides was an economic cleavage between advocates of more market economy and proponents of state regulation and ownership. These four camps-- theocratic right, theocratic left, republican right and republican left—all gained admission to the political game so long as they observed two red lines: first, they had to accept the right of non-elected institutions such as the Council of Guardians, the Revolutionary Guard, and especially the Supreme Leader to act as “enforcers” of the system, a role that included, if necessary, vetoing the will of elected institutions such as the parliament or the president. Second, they had to pledge fealty, or at least basic acceptance of, official revolutionary Shi’ite doctrine as forged and bequeathed by Khomeini, a doctrine known as “the Rule of the Jurist” *or velayat-e faqih*. But in contrast to many other revolutionary systems, in the case of Iran since at least the late eighties an informal rule of the game allowed --and indeed required-- that players get some space in variously interpreting this doctrine and its implications for both political and economic rights. This dissonant space was essential to creating the dynamics of negotiation and balancing, without which the system could become immobilized by near existential ideological battle. The key to preventing this dysfunctional outcome was the Leader, who acted as both Supreme Enforcer and Supreme Arbiter. This patrimonialist logic required a certain level of competition to give the Leader authority. Conversely, if they went too far, efforts by one camp to permanently expel the other could undermine his authority and destabilize the entire system. For the leader, this meant being—or at least appearing to be—somewhat above the political fray and not *permanently* aligned with any one camp.

These rules of the game also had important implications for Iranian foreign policy, particularly regarding the US. Theocrats were in principle opposed to the US for reasons both political and cultural. For theocrats, any opening to the US was a slippery slope to undermining the ideological and religious foundations of the system. While some might countenance a limited deal on key strategic questions such as Iran’s nuclear program, they were wary of “leakage” (so to speak) from any deal. By contrast, republicans were more open not only to a strategic deal on the nuclear issue, but to a wider

engagement with the US if the conditions and terms were deemed consonant with Iran's basic strategic interests and sovereignty. Right of center republicans such as former president Hashemi Rafsanjani highlighted the economic benefits of such an opening, while left of center republicans such as former president Mohamed Khatami emphasized—at least implicitly—political benefits that would accrue to Iran's internal political system with a “dialogue of civilizations” (i.e. engagement the West) including more pluralism and wider debate and competition at home.

This critical link between domestic detente at home and global (and regional) detente abroad was essential to the reformists but also *vastly complicated* the efforts of leaders in the two republican camps to advance their agenda. Echoing the experience of other Middle Eastern states, the struggle over domestic policy in Iran was also a struggle over foreign policy. Thus as Khatami and his allies pushed their domestic agenda in the late nineties and early two thousands, they inadvertently united the theocratic camp against them and spurred the Council of Guardians, Revolutionary Guards and the Leader—all three of which were (*and remain*) ideologically far closer to the theocrats than the republicans—to endorse the near total expulsion of the republican left by 2005. The election of Ahmadinejad that year also ushered in a new elite of Islamist Jacobins who—like our Tea Party movement-- were suspicious of all veteran politicians and standing political institutions. The new president shared and often articulated such suspicions but acted more as a classic strongman a la Caesar, Napoleon (or Trump), and thus adopted positions on domestic and foreign policy issues (including the nuclear question) that were less about principle and more about enhancing his own political standing and leverage. In the wake of the 2009 contested election and Green Movement protests Ahmadinejad supported efforts to finish off the republican left and even expel the republican right—an effort that Rafsanjani openly defied in ways that tested revolutionary red lines. The Leader, as we know, supported ultra hardliners' hegemonic efforts, but in a manner that eventually undercut his own role and authority. The events of 2009-10 not only seemed to shine more light on the President than the Leader – a dynamic that Ahmadinejad found irresistible; *they deprived Khamanei of the multiplicity of factions he needed to exercise and demonstrate that his authority as Ultimate Arbiter*. Thus what some US-based experts saw as the ultimate crowning of a seemingly putschist elite's efforts turn the Islamic Republic into an Islamist Security State was in fact the high water mark of the ultra-hardliners (sometimes referred to as the “neo-principlists”) bid to consolidate their power by permanently excluding their rivals. Subsequent events, including the election of Rouhani in 2013 and the 2016 parliamentary elections, signaled the complicated (and

up-hill) bid by estranged political elites and the forces they represent to reenter the system and make their voices and interests heard.

This struggle to effectively reassert the dissonant nature of the Islamic Republican system did not come out of the blue, and was not, as I have noted, a mere consequence of contingent or strategic factors including the choices of leaders such as Rouhani or his rivals. Instead, it was a product of classic modernizing dynamics such as the growth of the urban middle class and the key role that the expansion of public university education played in this growth. These dynamics sustained and even reinforced the structural foundations of Iran's dissonant system--even as other economic dynamics magnified social disparities in ways that galvanized a new elite of ultra hardliners.

Sensing the importance of the above processes, in 2008 Farideh Farhi and I assembled and co-chaired a United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Iran Study Group. Its mission was to examine struggles over institutions, power, ideology and social policy during the 2005-2012 period, in short precisely the period that was marked by what some analysts argued was the ultimate victory of the new hardliners. The results of this study group, just published by Indiana University Press in a volume entitled [\*Power and Change Iran\*](#), highlights not only the tenacity of contentious political competition and its structural foundations: it also demonstrates the paradoxical and unintended consequences of the ultra hardliners' bid for hegemonic power, namely a counter-bid by an emerging, diverse and fragile alliance of leaders to push back and reopen the political game to leaders and forces that had been forced out or isolated. While we should not equate this effort with democratization, it surely indicates a quest to redefine a political bargain or pact that could revive and enlarge the domestic negotiating dynamics of the Islamic Republic, a process which, if it survives, could create its own momentum.

Our book also suggests a third conclusion which will help us circle back to the key themes of this essay: efforts to close or narrow the political space in Iran were affected by and partly dependent on the persistence of US-Iranian conflict. Hardliners count on this conflict to reenergize their base and their vision of revolutionary ideology. Thus their intense desire to thwart engagement with the US and silence any Iranian leaders making a case for such a policy. Conversely, efforts to widen the domestic political space depend in part on achieving some kind of reopening to the West and possibly a new opening to the US--*but without provoking retaliation from ultra hardliners*. Walking this fine line is no easy task.

The above calculations help to put in broad relief the importance of the nuclear issue in Iran and the related efforts to settle it through diplomacy. International sanctions complicated the lives of middle class and market-oriented business forces even as their numbers expanded in the 2000s. Sanctions also worked in favor of the ultra hardliners because they sustained conflict with the US, and because veto groups such as the Revolutionary Guard were best positioned to expand their economic interests under sanctions. But removing nuclear-related sanctions was dependent on a deal whereby their elimination would be linked to a vast diminishing of Iran's nuclear program—a prospect that Iran's hardliners (as well as hardliners in Israel and the US) *always assumed or hoped was next to nil*. To their utter shock, they were wrong. While the aggregate negative effect of sanctions on Iran's economy was enormous, the Obama administration realized that halting a nuclear program that by 2009 was spinning more centrifuges than ever before required serious talks, a realization that eventually prompted secret US-Iranian negotiations months before anyone could imagine Rouhani's 2013 victory.

That victory was propitious: it signaled the return of political forces which might mobilize domestic support for such a deal and thus give it the electoral blessing of the Iranian citizenry. Still, this ongoing effort to link domestic and foreign policy dynamics has surely not unfolded easily. On the contrary it has provoked a hardline backlash on the one side, and the other, efforts by Rouhani to deflect this backlash by forging a coalition that cuts into the vast and multi-dimensional "conservative" camp. This has involved appointing cabinet ministers who have very unsavory pasts and a focus on economic as opposed to political opening at home and abroad. Some Western observers, including human rights activists, argue that such pragmatic concessions to hardliners illustrate Rouhani's weakness, or worse, the effort of a clever fox in sheep's clothing. But Rouhani's calculations, while surely pragmatic, are not so different from those of other prudent advocates of modest political openings in autocracies: they are not seeking to bury as much as save the system, but they are doing so in ways that could eventually produce new and even positive dynamics. Although Rouhani has probably not read the master transitions guide, [\*Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies\*](#), he seems to understand its basic message, which is the need to strike a tricky balance between the push for political and economic change and the imperative to make accommodations with those who wield coercive power. The results of the 2016 parliamentary elections suggest a process of social learning--which began during the late nineties when the Reformist movement sought far greater change—has instilled in the populace and in many elites a desire to find this common ground, as hard as it is to reach. *Getting the nuclear*

*agreement was a necessary if far from sufficient condition for pursuing this goal.* That deal has helped revive a dissonant political game, one that cuts both ways by both opening and limiting the space for political competition and shaping domestic and foreign policy.

Over the last year, events in the Middle East and Syria in particular have not helped Rouhani and his allies. For Iran's leaders, the country's capacity to defend its vital strategic interests depend on maintaining the alliance with Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Assad regime in Damascus. In 2013/14 it was possible that Foreign Minister Javad Zarif envisioned a political process that would have eventually ease out the Syria President: it is hard to know. Zarif's [\(and thus Iran's\)](#) exclusion from the second January 22, 2014 Geneva Conference on Syria certainly embarrassed him; but it is far from clear that he ever had the domestic space to push for a different Iranian position on Syria even if the Saudis hadn't insisted on excluding the Iranians. The result of Iranian and Russian support for Damascus has been a humanitarian disaster that will haunt the Middle East, Europe and the US for decades. Victory for Assad and his regional allies could also complicate the *tache* of Iranian leaders attempting to push forward the reform agenda that Rouhani is struggling to sustain. After all, that victory underlines the constraints that that the system places on the president and the forces he supports to shape policy on the home and regional fronts—especially when Iranian security policy is driven by hardliners and blessed by the Supreme Leader.

In short, the link between domestic and foreign policy in Iran can be as much a liability as an asset, a rule of thumb that applies to the dissonant features of Iran's political system. What advocates of change in Iran must hope for is that the international community in general, and US and Iranian leaders in particular, will find a face-saving but not unreasonable solution to the Syrian disaster. But that will depend on many things, not least of which is the vagaries of domestic politics in both Iran and the US, and especially the enduring efforts of their respective Tea Parties and Napoleons to mobilize the discontented groups that have paid the price of both economic growth and decline, groups whose shared resentments can suddenly come crashing forth to wreak havoc for advocates of moderation however defined.