

IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE UNITED STATES: RETROSPECTIVE PERSPECTIVE – 1988-1993

Dr Zulfqar Khan*

Abstract

In the Persian Gulf, Iran is the largest and potentially the most powerful country. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran's foreign policy toward the US has been profoundly affected by ideological considerations. The Iranian government's ideology was essentially based upon the late Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini's interpretation of Islam as it applies to the whole structure of society in all spheres of life.¹ According to Shireen Hunter, the Islamic Iran's vision of the world is polarised into two lines: power and ideology. She writes that Imam Khomeini had bifurcated the world into two opposite camps: those countries who are "arrogant" or "oppressors" (Mustakbarin- the then two superpowers, primarily the US), and the "down-trodden" or the oppressed (Muztasafin- Muslim and the Third World countries).² Imam Khomeini believed in the universal validity of Islam and its export to the world. In his words, Islam "is not peculiar to a country.... even the Muslims. Islam comes for humanity.... Islam wishes to bring all humanity under the umbrella of justice".³ Consequently, Imam Khomeini laid the principles of Iran's foreign

* Dr Zulfqar Khan is a Senior Analyst, Ministry of Defence, Pakistan; Visiting Fellow, Islamabad Policy Research Institute; and Visiting Faculty - Department of Strategic & Nuclear Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

¹ Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 36.

² Ibid, 37.

³ *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report-Middle East & North Africa, FBIS-MEA* (Washington DC: 18 December 1979), 10.

policy on the basis of "neither East nor West", and termed the US as the "Great Satan".⁴

Genesis of Hostility

The other factors of Iran's hostile posture toward the US is due to the latter's "original sin" in planning the 1953 coup d'état which overthrew the government of Dr Mohammed Mossadegh. According to this view, the US conspiracy had implanted the seeds of Iranian resentment which "yielded the bitter harvest of the hostage crisis of 1979-80", and its subsequent antagonism with Washington. Shireen Hunter furthermore outlines that the second factor was the "Soviet centeredness" in the US foreign policy, which kept Washington preoccupied with the Cold War and the containment of communist threat thereby distorting the US policy toward Iran.⁵ This led to the US support of the Shah, regardless of the imperial regime's repressive domestic policies and external ambitions. Consequently, the Iranian public opinion identified the US with an illegitimate and autocratic government of the Shah.⁶ Therefore, the forces hostile to the US, when they came to power in 1979, were determined to eliminate the US influence and presence from their country. This culminated in the American hostage crisis, the break-up of their bilateral relations, and an all-out the US and Iran confrontation. According to Shaul Bakshsh, virtually all the economic, military, security and diplomatic relations with the US were severed and Washington, which under the Shah had been Iran's trusted ally, came to be treated as the Great Satan and Iran's arch enemy.⁷

Shah and the Islamic Revolution

The radical nationalist policies of the Shah era downplayed the importance of the Islamic elements in Iran's cultural development and instead glorified the pre-Islamic period. In the 1980s, the Islamic government of Iran had followed an equally extreme policy, vilifying Iran's pre-Islamic culture. This contradiction led to fragmentation of Iranian society and the undermining of its national cohesion. With the coming into power of Iranian radicals opposed to reconciliation with the US, the

⁴ FBIS-MEA, 10 December 1979, 29.

⁵ Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary*, 46.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Miron Rezun (ed.), *Iran at the Cross-roads: Global Relations in a Turbulent Decade* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1990), 115.

estrangement with Washington was quite a natural outcome. On the other hand, for the US:

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, containment of Iranian external influence has been the dominant American objective, accompanied by occasional efforts at engagement and limited bouts of armed conflict. Isolating Iran was relatively easy as long as the country faced hostile adversaries to both the east and west. Thus, it was Iraqi misbehaviour, not Iranian, which first brought American ground and air forces into the Gulf in 1990 and has kept them there ever since. The American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq replaced regimes hostile to both Iran and the United States... With these two adversaries eliminated, Iran and the United States began identify each other as the dominant challenge.⁸

A world dominated by the US political and military power was perceived as a serious cause of concern for Iran, and the Iranian mass-media persistently castigated the US attempt to dominate the world, and warned the Third World states of the US inspired threat to their security. In this context, the Iranian considered the 'anti-American and anti-Israeli elements of Iranian policy have historical and ideological roots', writes Dobbins.⁹ This was utilized by Tehran as geopolitical instrument to directly influence the Arab population. That it was not:

...the Iranian military that its neighbours fear most, but rather the Islamic Republic's appeal to their populations as the ideological bastion of anti-American, anti-Israeli and pro-Shia sentiment, as the patron of Arab rejectionist forces, and as a source of funding, advice and arms for insurgent and extremist groups'.¹⁰

Consequently, the Persian Gulf monarchies were quite fearful and apprehensive of Iran and looked up to the US for protection.¹¹ Conversely, Iran being a revolutionary state also sacrificed a lot, including facing of diplomatic isolation in order to sustain its status as an independent and prestigious regional entity.¹²

⁸ James Dobbins, 'Coping with a Nuclearising Iran', *Survival*, vol. 53, no. 6 (December 2011-January 2012), 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 42.

Iran-Iraq War and the US

The US naval presence in the Persian Gulf and its defence accord with Kuwait soon after the Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm), which could be replicated with the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members worked to further reinforced Iran's fear of being encircled by the US and its allies in the region.¹³ In 1988, Iran considered the US "as the real instigator of the Iraqi" invasion of Iran on 22 September 1980, and in July 1988 Iran accepted the UN-brokered ceasefire after taking into consideration its diplomatic isolation and the US tilt toward Iraq¹⁴ There were many reasons for Iran's acceptance of 20 July 1987 UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 598 on 18 July 1988, which Imam Khomeini had described it as a "cup of poison" in the larger national interests.¹⁵ Before the ceasefire, the Iranian cities were being consistently bombed; the US naval presence was in the Gulf; there were attack on the Iranian oil installations and ships; there was a successful Iraqi offensive on Fao Peninsula; and the rupturing of diplomatic relations with the European Economic Community (EEC – now European Union). All these factors had tremendous effect on the policymakers in Tehran, and thus compelled them to drink the "cup of poison". In addition, the American warship Vincennes on 3 July 1988 mistook Iranian civilian aircraft for an air force plane and shot it down killing all passengers on board. The US government admitted the mistake, but preferred to accord an unofficial apology for the tragedy. This incident along with the other factors enhanced Iran's "sense of helplessness" thereby forcing it to accept the Resolution 598.¹⁶ The military balance by the middle of 1988 had too shifted in the favour of Iraq due to active the US participation in the Gulf. Furthermore, Kuwaiti and Saudi oil tankers were allowed to sail under the US and EEC countries flags, and the moving in of the American fleet in the Persian Gulf had virtually brought Iran into direct conflict with the US. The hardliners, including Ahmad Khomeini, son of Imam Khomeini, had argued for a policy of confrontation with the US. While the comparatively more moderate and pragmatic leaders like Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was then Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and also the Speaker of the Majlis (Parliament), admitted that "our policy was to make enemies, even with countries which stayed neutral (in the war). Now our policy will be not to

¹³ Mohammed Ziarati, 'Iran's National Security', Middle East International, 3 April 1992, 18.

¹⁴ R. K. Ramazani (ed.), *Iran's Revolution: The Search for Consensus* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 57.

¹⁵ FBIS, *Near East and South Asia (NESA)*, Washington, 21 July 1988, 49-50.

¹⁶ Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Basic Books Publishers, 1990), 272-274.

create enemies".¹⁷ Naturally, this apparent change of policy was with the blessings of Imam Khomeini and the President Ali Khamenei.¹⁸

The Iran-Iraq War had alienated Tehran from its neighbours, more due to Iran's assumed ambitious policies in the region. This war further reinforced Iran's image of an expansionist state in the area, and on other hand, Iranians felt that they were victim of the US inspired aggression by Iraq. The Iranian government held the US responsible for the socioeconomic plight of the country that was the result of a long war. In spite of hostility against the US, Khomeini permitted Rafsanjani and President Ali Khamenei to improve Iran's bilateral relations with Europe. According to Shaul Bakhash, Iran after the war improved its relations with at least six countries, including the United Kingdom (UK) and France.¹⁹ Besides, Rafsanjani had expressed desire to effect negotiation with the US to improve their relations, which were under tremendous strain because of the Iran-Contra affair, and the kidnapping of American nationals - especially Col. Higgins by the pro-Iran Shia Hizbollah in Lebanon. The radical clerical leader Ayatollah Mohtashami speaking about the prospects for improved relations with the US remarked that "a wolf is a wolf even in sheep's clothing", thereby neutralising the prospects of improving ties with America.²⁰

Clash over the Foreign Policy Objectives

In this paper, an endeavour will be made to retrace the diametrically opposite nature of Iran and the US foreign policy objectives in the region starting from the end of the Iran-Iraq War till 1993. Special attention will be accorded to the peaceful transition of power in Tehran after the demise of Imam Khomeini in 1989; the role of new leadership in formulating the country's foreign policy; Iran's neutral stance in the Gulf War; their contest over the issue of Iranian activism; the quest for developing nuclear weapons; and Iran's alleged support of terrorism. The Iranian administration in the 1990s contended that the US continues to be hostile to the Islamic Revolution, that it is struggling for world domination, conspiring to oppose Iran's attempt to attain its rightful goal of materialising economic and security arrangements with the Central Asian Republics after the demise of the former Soviet Union (USSR), and that it is articulating a deliberate propaganda campaign against Iran on the issue of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and human rights. After the end of the Cold War, both countries considered the Gulf region important to their interests. On the other hand, the US administration since the break-up of

¹⁷ Safa Haeri, 'Shock, but no surprise', *Middle East International*, 22 July 1988, 4-5.

¹⁸ Sheherazade Daneshku, 'A Painful Time Ahead for Iran', *Middle East International*, 5 August 1988, 13.

¹⁹ Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, 279.

²⁰ FBIS-NESA, 7 October 1988, 57.

the USSR attached great importance to the Muslim Central Asian states due to a fear of spread of Islamic activism there by Iran, while the latter naturally considered this region essential to its national interests. It was primarily due to traditional, cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious affiliations with the peoples of these newly independent Muslim countries. This clash on the strategic policy objectives in the Gulf, Central Asia, and Iran's opposition to the US endeavours to effect peace between the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Israel had proved to be a stumbling block in restoring amicable diplomatic relations.

Imam Khomeini writes Ayatollah Morteza Motahari writes that:

*He (Imam Khomeini) is a gift of Allah to our century, to our age. He is the living manifestation of the promise of the Holy Quran that Allah shall always dispatch, one who is to smash His enemies and bring the wayward back to the Right Path.*²¹

Imam Khomeini and other radical clerical leaders, including Ayatollah Morteza Motahari, considered the Revolution as the first step in a broader Islamic Revolution that would sweep the Arab world. The Gulf states, many with large concentrations of Shia population, were not only allies of Iran's adversary, the US, but also obvious targets for fundamental change, and a test of the viability of the Islamic Revolution.²² The US under the Carter and Reagan administrations, according to Robert Johnson, considered the Persian Gulf "as the third major theatre of the US-Soviet military competition", and went all out to sustain stability and the status quo in order to counter the export of Iranian Revolution to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.²³ The US had brought in its naval forces into the region so that Iran could not dominate the area, disrupt the oil supplies to the West, and accentuate the apprehension felt about the Iranian hegemony during the Iran-Iraq War, and the Islamic Republic's designs to promote their Revolution in the region. Robert Johnson articulates that for Iran "the Gulf war was the ultimate test of Iran's capacity to export its revolution because Iraq has the Arab world's largest Shia community and Iran attempted to bring the revolution to Iraq by force of arms". For Iran, Iraq had invaded it at the behest of the US and with the cooperation of the GCC allies.²⁴ Furthermore, the US had

²¹ Quoted by Amir Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd, 1985), 21. Amir Taheri has also enlisted the important slogans of the Islamic Revolution, and the Sources of Imitation, which amply reflect the authority the Imam Khomeini and his close Ayatollah associates enjoyed in all aspects of life, 326-330.

²² James A. Bill, 'Resurgent Islam in Persian Gulf', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 3, Fall 1984, 108-127.

²³ Robert H. Johnson, 'The Persian Gulf in the US Strategy', *International Security*, vol. 14, no. 1, summer 1989, 122-124.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 149.

primarily established the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) and the Central Command (CENTCOM) in the 1980s to check the expansionism of the Soviet Union after the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and the Islamic Revolution in the region.

After the ceasefire, the hardliners considered the idea of re-establishing ties with the Western powers and the US with disdain, and believed that the so-called pragmatists like Rafsanjani were betraying the ideals of the Revolution by bargaining with its enemies. These radicals advocated a foreign policy in which Tehran's relations would revolve around countries like Libya, Syria, Algeria, and South Yemen. According to this approach, Iran would continue to destabilise and endeavour to export Revolution to the pro- US conservative regimes in the Gulf.²⁵ At the same time, Iran maintained indirect relations with the US through Switzerland, Algeria and Lebanon. All this was anathema to the radical clergy, and this rift in Tehran between the pragmatists and militant leaders continued till the death of Imam Khomeini on 3 June 1989.

Iran's relations with the EEC were affected in February 1989, when Imam Khomeini in a Fatwa (religious decree) condemned Salman Rushdie for writing a book titled - *Satanic Verses*, which was offensive to the Muslims. As Rushdie was British citizen, the European community jointly withdrew their ambassadors from Iran. The Iranian Majlis at the time voted to break diplomatic relations with the U.K. altogether. The Iranian clergy opposed to *rapprochement* with the West capitalised from the Rushdie affair, and argued that the West and the US were inveterately hostile to Islam and as Iran represented and propagated Islam, therefore, amicable relations were not feasible with the US and the West.

Iran after Imam Khomeini

Imam Khomeini two months before his death had dismissed Ayatollah Montazeri as his successor designate. Incidentally, Montazeri in the early phases of the Revolution had gained a reputation as one of the radicals who favoured the export of Revolution. Therefore, there were speculations that Khomeini's death would create a power vacuum and infighting between the Islamic Republic leadership. It was during this period that Iran's leadership was engaged in making constitutional amendments in regard to the roles of the President, Prime Minister and the Majlis. In spite of these predictions, the transition of power was peaceful and without infighting. Ali Khamenei was elected as the new spiritual leader, and Hashemi Rafsanjani as the Chief Executive, and later on in the elections the latter received a mandate as President.

President Rafsanjani after elections, abolished the office of the Prime Minister, and removed the hardliner Premier Hossein Moussavi,

²⁵ John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, *The Gulf War: Its Origins, History and Consequence* (London: Methuen, 1989), 221.

who had always opposed the idea of normalising relations with the US. Rafsanjani retained other pragmatist - Dr Ali Akbar Velayati (Foreign Minister), and dismissed radicals like Ayatollah Mohtashami (Interior Minister), Hojatolislam Moussavi Khoeiniha (Information Minister), and the head of the intelligence service, Ayatollah Rayshahi, from his cabinet. According to Shireen Hunter, six new members of the cabinet were the US educated ministers whom the hardliners eyed with suspicion.²⁶ In spite of induction of these moderate leaders, Iran's foreign policy's basic principles of non-alignment, "neither East nor West" were not changed. However, there was a desire from some quarters to improve relations with the West, but controversy on the prospects of normalising terms with the US remained in limbo. President Rafsanjani at a press conference in November 1989, in which for the first-time journalists from the US were allowed to participate, remarked that there was no Iranian expansionist designs neither they were endeavouring to export the Revolution to other countries, and expressed the desire to pursue peaceful foreign policy through diplomatic channels. He asked the foreign powers (indirectly to the US) to end their military and naval presence in the Gulf.²⁷

During this period, the question of the US hostages who were held by the pro-Iran Shia in Lebanon caused serious problems in obstructing the normalisation of their bilateral relations. This caused a lot of problems for the moderate Iranian leadership who were trying to gain support for a review of policy for ending hostility with Washington, and of doing whatever was possible for Iran to secure the release of the US hostages. The US and Iran relations further deteriorated in September 1989, when the Lebanese Shia leader Sheikh Abd-al-Karim Obeid was abducted by Israelis, and on the Israeli refusal to free Sheikh Obeid, the Hizbollah later announced that they had killed Col. William Higgins, and threatened to kill another captive Joseph Cicippio if their demand was not accepted. Subsequently, the US warned Iran of consequences if any the US hostages were harmed, and moved more warships into the Gulf.²⁸ Most significantly, probably for the first time since the Revolution, the US State Department recognised Iran's limitations and termed Iran's attitude toward the hostages as wiser²⁹, and it was also a fact that Tehran at this juncture could not afford a military confrontation with the US.

In September 1989, 186 members of the US Congress in a petition urged the US administration to support the Iranian opposition rather than try to hold moderates in power. This gave another chance to the Iranian hardliners to obstruct the endeavour to improve their relations on the

²⁶ Shireen T. Hunters, 'Post Khomeini Iran', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 68, vol. 5, winter 1989/90, 134.

²⁷ Patrick Clawson and Charles A. Kupchan, 'Iran after Khomeini', *Orbis*, vol. 34, no. 2, Spring 1990, 246-247.

²⁸ Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary*, 75.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

pretext that the US still harboured ill-designs and animosity toward the revolutionary Iran. The Iranian moderate leadership was not strong enough to put their political career at stake on the bleak promise of normalising relations with the US in such circumstances.³⁰ Besides, the anti-Iran Arab governments like Egypt and the other the US allies in the region endeavoured to convince the US policymakers to retain their anti-Iran stance, and also the Israelis leaders came to regard Islamic Republic as a formidable threat to Israeli security than the Arabs.

The US and the USSR rapprochement reduced the US fear of Russian infiltration in the region and Iran; Washington's attitude was that after the end of the Cold War period Iran was strategically no more important to the US and thought that ultimately Tehran will come to their terms. Therefore, Washington continued its policy of "carrot and stick".³¹ While the moderates in Iran continued their efforts to lessen the US hostility, radical elements persistently opposed the idea of rapprochement with Washington.³² It is important to note that the issue of the release of Iranian assets by the US still remained undecided. Shireen Hunter commenting about the conflicting nature of both countries diplomatic relations concludes that:

*the US-Iranian relations have been affected by the political ethos of the two countries.... In Iran's case, the traditional emotional and unrealistic streak of its political culture, its inability to tailor its aspirations to its abilities, and the bravado of its diplomatic style have contributed to its difficulties with the US.*³³

Iran's Neutrality during the Desert Storm

The 1990s changed the doctrine and the basic principles of Iranian foreign policy, especially after the end of the Cold War, rapprochement and later on disintegration of the USSR, and the Gulf War (Desert Storm). According to R. K. Ramazani, the Iranian foreign policy, which was earlier governed by the slogan of "neither East nor West", was now converted to the tenet of "both North and South". Iran under the monarchy had remained a country ambitious in foreign policy objectives, and since the Revolution, this instinct to dominate the region was still evident. Iran is basically not a revisionist state; neither had it had territorial claims on its neighbours. It is a non-Arab state who has fragile and insubstantial relations with even non-Arab and Sunni countries (Iran is predominantly a Shia Muslim state, which also makes it stand-out in the majority Sunni Islamic countries) like Pakistan, Turkey and Afghanistan. Therefore, after

³⁰ Hunter, 'Post Khomeini Iran', 145.

³¹ Ibid, 146-147.

³² Ibid.

³³ Hunter, Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary, 77.

the demise of the former Soviet Union, Iran had tried to achieve its security and economic objectives in the newly independent Muslim states of the Central Asia. On the other hand, the US perceived that Iran was supposedly endeavouring to spread Islamic, terrorism, and violating the nuclear non-proliferation ideals, essentially in the region.³⁴ Rafsanjani speaking about the tenets of Iran's foreign policy said that:

*The western countries scream that 'the security of the Persian Gulf is in danger'. In fact the security and stability of the region are endangered so long as the reactionary regimes of the region continue their subservience to the United States and contempt for their own peoples, since this will lead to their being overthrown by their own people.*³⁵

In 1990, Rafsanjani assisted in release of two the US hostages from the captivity of Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine. He was by then convinced that Iran's close association with the hostage taking no longer served its national interests. Even an ideologically committed leader like Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself, while accepting the ceasefire with Iraq had recognised this reality, although reluctantly, that at times the perceived interests of Islam could not be reconciled with those of Iran's political system. United States failure to produce a positive gesture toward President Rafsanjani's overtures to help in the release of two American hostages created a bitter row in Iran. The spiritual leader Ali Khamenei categorically ruled out the future possibility of parleys with the US over the hostage issue, and while the hardliners like Mohtashami said that negotiating with the US would be tantamount to a "breaking of the last straw of Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic".³⁶ The Iranian government wished to secure the good will of the US by assisting in the release of hostages, which could assist Iran to take back its frozen assets in the US. Instead, President Bush reiterated that he would not bargain on the issue of hostages. The US Congress simultaneously voted to recognise Jerusalem as the Israeli capital, and decorated the Captain of the US S Vincennes, which shot-down an Iranian civilian passenger aircraft over the Gulf in 1988. This obviously accentuated more resentment in a cross section of the Iranian society and influenced Iranian foreign policy to further drift away from the US.

President Rafsanjani, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, categorically condemned Iraq for invading a neighbourly country and termed this aggression as a "foolish" act, and suggested that Iran was

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) dispatch in English, 15 July 1992. This was quoted by Shahram Chubin, 'Iran and Regional Security in the Persian Gulf', *Survival*, vol. 34, no. 3, autumn 1992, 65.

³⁶ Safa Haeri, 'The row in Tehran', *Middle East International*, 11 May 1990, 5.

ready to play the role of a “guardian” in the region.³⁷ The Iraqi regime unconditionally withdrew from the occupied Iranian territories, exchanged prisoners of war, permitted a large Iranian community in Kuwait to leave with all their belongings, and recognised the validity of the Algiers Accord of 1975 evidently to woo Iran. Simultaneously, Tehran also wisely declared its neutrality and expressed willingness to support all the UN resolutions, including that of imposition of sanctions against Baghdad. Rafsanjani, fearing the motives of the US forces in the region reiterated that they all must leave soon after the aggressor was punished, and rejected all requests by Saddam Hussein to cooperate with him in order to wage a Jihad against the “world arrogance” and “infidels”.³⁸ The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait proved to be a blessing in disguise for Iran, because the latter had fought for nearly eight years, in spite of huge casualties and destruction costing billions of dollars; but still Saddam Hussein did not withdraw from the Iranian territories, exchanged prisoners, nor accepted the validity of the Algiers agreement. In spite of these benefits, the Iranian leadership was quite bitter about the quick response of the US and its allies, who swiftly condemned the Iraqi invasion, while they in the case of Iraqi aggression against Iran took about week to make a simple denunciation of the Iraqi attack.

War and its Aftermath

After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Iranian concern about its exclusion from the security of the Persian Gulf was quite great, because Tehran considered that the US and its GCC allies still suspected Iran's designs in the region. President Bush speaking about the regional security prospects in March 1991 had excluded Iran from the future security plan in the Gulf, and the GCC members, including Egypt and Syria, under the Damascus Declaration of March kept Iran out on the pretext that Iran was a non-Arab nation and maintained that an “Arab peace force” was not being established against Iran.³⁹ According to R. K. Ramazani, during the Gulf crisis of 1990-91, Iran had used all the available diplomatic forums to find a peaceful solution to the Kuwaiti problem in order to minimise the future chances of the US military involvement and presence in the Gulf. The US President in a joint session of the Congress in March announced an increase in the US naval presence in the area, and increased its military collaboration with the GCC members.⁴⁰ The Iranian President Rafsanjani reacted quite vocally against the military involvement of the US in the region, and said that they had “never liked that and always criticised it, and we will continue to do so in the future. There are many other peoples

³⁷ Safa Haeri, ‘Happy Days for Rafsanjani’, *Middle East International*, 31 August 1990, 17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Ramazani, ‘Iran's Foreign Policy: Both North and South’, 403.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 402.

in the region who do not approve of the presence of the American", and after the materialising of ten years defence accord between the US and Kuwait in September 1991; Rafsanjani expressed "extreme concern" over these developments.⁴¹ In fact, Iran's neutrality had earned it a considerable worldwide reputation and credibility, but stalemate in its relations with the US still continued. This is because internally there was still widespread hatred and resistance in Iran to improve bilateral ties with the US. At this juncture, even the US failed to make a single gesture of reconciliation toward Iran until Tehran accepted all the US demands, including release of hostages in Lebanon. Ahmad Khomeini, son of the late Imam Khomeini, opposing the idea of improving relations with the US, articulated that Iran must stay away from Washington and remarked that "our relations with them always remains as those between a lamb and a wolf".⁴²

Iran hosted an International Conference in October 1991 for the support of the Muslim Palestinian People's Revolution in Tehran ostensibly to neutralise the effects of the Palestine National Council's decision to attend the US sponsored Madrid Conference. Ali Khamenei in a message to the delegates attending the conference in Tehran bitterly criticised the Arab states, including Syria, with whom it earlier had cordial relations for participating in Madrid parleys. In contrast, President Rafsanjani adopted a moderate attitude and merely castigated the US and its Arab allies and expressed scepticism that Arabs were "naive in believing that Madrid will solve anything".⁴³ Some of the Iranian radical leaders believed that pressures from the US on Iran regarding its nuclear programme primarily stemmed from Iran's opposition to the US brokered Middle East Conference at Madrid.

Regime's Legitimacy

Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp note that, the foreign policy of Iran has been an important instrument in the hands of ulema (clerical leaders) to maintain politically motivated masses, and to retain the regime's legitimacy through its emphasis on the propagation of Islamic ideals. Secondly, the external threats posed to the Islamic Republic served as an alibi to the leadership in order to justify socioeconomic and other hardships faced by the people; and a renewed people's "commitment to the revolution".⁴⁴ Since 1991, Iran tried to formulate a policy whereby it could bring itself back into the region and possibly enable it to regain its

⁴¹ Quoted by Ramazani, 'Iran's Foreign Policy: Both North and South', 403.

⁴² Safa Haeri, 'Charming them Home', *Middle East International*, 17 May 1991, 13.

⁴³ Safa Haeri, 'The Anti-conference', *Middle East International*, 25 October 1991, 12.

⁴⁴ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, 'Domestic Politics and Territorial Disputes in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula', *Survival*, vol. 35, no. 4, winter 1993/94, 11.

pre-revolution clout when it enjoyed hegemony in the Gulf, as Tehran was then an important pillar of the US global security system. Obviously, the Revolution changed the entire edifice of Iran's pre-eminent position in the area, and its most trusted ally the US became an impeccable enemy. This animosity and hostility toward the US is still a significant source of political legitimacy, and revolutionary fervour. The Iranian mass-media still portrays the US as an evil empire that was conspiring to crush the Islamic Revolution, and of course, the ulema and the general public was still obsessively anti-US. This mutual mistrust and ideological polarisation had further accentuated after the end of the Cold War and disintegration of the former the USSR. The increasing Iranian influence in the Central Asian Muslim states; and on issues like Iran's alleged patronising of 'Islamic fundamentalism'; with the potential threats to Western and the US interests in Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, and the region stretching from Afghanistan to Morocco dominated US-Iran mutual perceptions. The US administrations, including that of President Clinton, also considered that Iran had designs to assemble nuclear weapons, and that it was allegedly abetting terrorism through hardcore Muslim organisation like Hamas in the Middle East, and in the Persian Gulf littoral states.

Islamic Activism, Terrorism and Nuclear Non-proliferation

According to Samuel M. Makinda, Iran was patronising of the "Islamists in Algeria, Sudan and in the Central Asian Republics has heightened Western fears about Islamic activism. It has threatened to turn national movements into radical regional forces". Continuing his comments, he furthermore states that the US and Western nations threat perception was nourished during the Imam Khomeini's decade long rule from 1979 to 1989.⁴⁵ After the fall of the USSR and communism, the Iranian *ulema* took it as a "prelude to the downfall of the Western bloc", including the US, and they were apparently convinced that final victory would be gained by the Islamic Revolution in the area and in the world as a whole.⁴⁶

Amin Saikal talking about the perceived Iranian Islamic activism remarked that both the US and Israel had similar views about the alleged Iranian patronisation of radical elements in the Middle East, and that

⁴⁵ Samuel M. Makinda, 'Iran, Sudan and Islam', *The World Today*, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, vol. 49, no. 6, June 1993, 108-109.

⁴⁶ Farhang Jahanpour, 'Iran-I: War among the heirs', *The World Today*, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, vol. 46, no. 10, October 1990, 187.

Israel's expulsion in December 1992 of some 400 followers of Hamas was partly designed by Israel to "reinforce the American belief that the threat of Islamic activism was expanding".⁴⁷ The Iranian ulema too believed that all the Islamic movements, which do not agree to the US expectations, policies and standards, are termed "fundamentalist" by Washington. Amin Saikal also outlined that the American and European interpretation of Islamic activism was "a dangerous misrepresentation of reality", because the West has been obsessed with the "Cold War mentality"; therefore, they were making this "misrepresentation".⁴⁸ Simultaneously, the Americans were apprehensive about Tehran's true motives in organising the Economic Co-operation Organisation (ECO) with the Central Asian and Transcaucasian Muslim states, and thought that it could be a prelude to the establishment of a Muslim bloc in the Southwest Asia dominated by Iran; because some 'Islamists' had already launched armed struggle in the Central Asia against the Russian influence in this connection.⁴⁹

The Iranian spiritual leader Ali Khamenei (popularly called the Rahbar - leader) maintained that the presence of the US forces in the region were "in the interests of Zionism and arrogance, to the detriment of Islam and Muslims and against the Islamic Revolution", and he further drew a parallel between the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to the US "aggression against Grenada and Panama". He viewed that the US had manipulated the whole scenario in order to invade and subsequently to gain complete control over the Persian Gulf region.⁵⁰ The other hardliners also considered the US involvement in a similar way and took it as Washington's strategy to increase its influence, effect hegemony, and ultimately to pose a threat to the Islamic Revolution.

The Persian Gulf region is obviously significant both for the US and Iran. Dr Velayati, Iranian Foreign Minister, speaking about the importance of this region stated that "our most important and strategic border is our southern coast-line, the Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the Sea of Oman. This region is vital to us...we cannot remain indifferent to its fate".⁵¹ Moreover, as long as both countries remained adamant in pursuing their respective national interests in the region so inflexibly, then their bilateral relations were expected to remain hostile. Prima facie, Iran, primarily due to its geographical constraints and realities, continued its anti-US policies; because if it endeavoured to compromise anyway with the US on this issue then its entire revolutionary edifice, which was basically based upon anti-US and West stance, would get eroded. Besides, the hardliner's influence was still paramount in Iran and the moderates were not strong enough to

⁴⁷ Amin Saikal, 'The West and Post-Khomeini Iran', *The World Today*, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, vol. 49, no. 10, October 1993, 197.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 200.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 198.

⁵⁰ IRNA in English, 15 August 1990.

⁵¹ Quoted by Mohammed Ziarati, 'Iran's National Security', 18.

bring about such a dramatic change in the foreign policy, and neither such a setback to Islamic Republic was in a position to sustain.

Another stumbling block against the restoring of cordial and amicable relations was America's constant accusation against Iran that its nuclear research programme was weapons oriented and aggressive in orientation. The other issues included the alleged Iranian militarization programme ostensibly to rehabilitate its armed forces strength to the pre-war level, and the declaration of Iranian sovereignty over the controversial island of Abu Musa in April 1992, and its opposition to the PLO and Israeli accord of 1993. In addition, Iran and Russia had signed an agreement in 1989 to sell weapons to Tehran, and the US administration believed that Russian policy was deliberately undermining its endeavours to politically isolate Iran in the region. In spite of the arms agreement, the Iranian leader was not oblivious of Russian "suppression of the Tajik Islamists during winter 1992-93 and made clear its difference with Moscow on this matter, the Iranian leadership promised to remain neutral and not to intervene in the internal affairs of Tajikistan".⁵² Daniel Pipes and Patrick Clawson commenting about Iran's foreign policy in 1993 remarked that it still remained "bellicose", and the clerical leaders, including moderates also stood for an aggressive brand of Persian nationalism ostensibly to create a "sphere of influence that includes Iraq, the Transcaucasus, Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf".⁵³

Conclusion

Iran's foreign policy, especially in regard to ties with the US, is unlikely to change in the near future. Both the US and Iran's national interests collide on almost all the vital issues, and both the countries have been *prima facie* reluctant to compromise on their strategic and regional objectives. This conflict between Iran as a potential core regional power and the US as a sole superpower had intensified after the demise of the former the USSR. The growing the US dependence on the GCC and its Arab allies for the import of oil had landed it in an ideological conflict with Iran. The influence of Islamic revolutionary ideology and clergy was still supreme in Iran, and obviously anti-US. Daniel Pipes and Patrick Clawson observed that the Iranian regime had openly expressed their hostility toward the US through major ways: their alleged support of terrorism; the Islamic Revolution's continuous struggle to export revolution; its efforts "to de-stabilise Western allies" in the region; provision of financial and other material assistance to Hamas; an aggressive attitude toward the GCC states; its declaration of sovereignty over the Persian Gulf island of Abu

⁵² Roland Danureuther, 'Russia, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf', *Survival*, vol. 35, no. 4, winter 1993, 106.

⁵³ Daniel Pipes and Patrick Clawson, 'Ambitious Iran, Troubled Neighbours', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 1, 1993, 125-126.

Musa; and Tehran's extensive rearmament programme.⁵⁴ The other major contentious collision issues with the US were apparently over Iran's ambitious nuclear weapons oriented programme, and its expansion of "Iranian military power and exerting influence over a huge contiguous region" even under the Presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani.⁵⁵

Iran's relations with the US took a further negative turn in 1993, when the Turkish Foreign Minister made an official visit to Israel after the PLO-Israeli Accord, and Tehran considered it as a conspiracy at the behest of the US to isolate Iran in the region. The Turkish government apparently attempted to improve its bilateral relations with Israel after the latter's peace agreement with the PLO in 1993. Besides, Ankara accused Tehran of supporting the Kurdish separatists in Turkey. The PLO-Israeli agreement alienated Iran from the conservative Arab states in the Middle East, including Syria (Iran's only ally in the area), who later on also held peace negotiations with Israel. R. K. Ramazani talking about the alleged dissension between the moderates and the hardliners stated that the leaderships of Ali Khamenei and Rafsanjani were divided between "the secular President and spiritual 'leader of the revolution'", moreover, both the leaders still fundamentally adhered to the principles of "the rule of the Jurisprudence (Velagat-e-Faqih)", which is an integral and pivotal part of Islamic Republic's constitution?⁵⁶ For Ramazani, the disintegration of the former the USSR had neutralised the Iranian foreign policy's principles of "neither East and nor West" concept, and now Tehran had adopted "both North and South" principles.⁵⁷

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran had cultivated special relations with the Muslim and the Third World countries, and endeavoured to sever its dependent links with the US whom it regarded as the oppressor and arrogant state. While the US considered Iran a country that was sponsoring terrorism, Islamic activism, and pursuing an aggressive foreign policy; this American perception was primarily fostered by the US Embassy hostage crisis. The image of Iran was further deteriorated due to the continued incarceration and abductions of the US, British, and French hostages in the 1980s and early 1990s by the pro-Iran Hizbollah in Lebanon. Iran had used hostages "as a bargaining chip" after the Iran-Contra scandal when their secret links with the US were compromised and severed (Imam Khomeini had termed the US as "wounded snake" after the Iran scandal).⁵⁸ Ali Khamenei during his address to the UN General Assembly Session on 22 September 1987, categorically stated that Iran believed in the "non-reliance on either East or West was another

⁵⁴ Ibid, 126-127.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 127.

⁵⁶ Ramazani, 'Iran's Foreign Policy: Both North and South', 394.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 393, 412.

⁵⁸ John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, *The Gulf War: Its Origins, History and Consequences*, 222-223.

exceptional characteristic of this revolution which is now the fundamental policy of our revolutionary system".⁵⁹ But, since the demise of the former Soviet Union, the hardliners like Ali Khamenei and Ahmed Khomeini still resented the idea of rehabilitation of their relations with the US. Even by the end of 1993, Ali Khamenei speaking about the role of America in the PLO-Israeli Accord urged Palestinians to "learn from Iran, from Ayatollah Khomeini. They must obey Islam to free their country", and dubbed Arab countries talking peace with Israel as traitors who were being trapped by the conspiracies of the imperialist and the Zionist.⁶⁰ This Iranian perception vis-à-vis the US and the Arab states still persists to this day. This amply reflects Iran's foreign policy's directions, and its continuous adherence to the philosophy of Islamic Revolution. Moreover, the present day Iranian nuclear controversy too is guided by the principles of the Islamic Revolution's and traditional nationalist philosophy.

⁵⁹ Ayatollah Ali Khomeini's address to the UN General Assembly Session on 22 September 1987, and it was published as a booklet by the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, London, 1987, 6.

⁶⁰ Safa Haeri, 'Iran's Ferocious Opposition', Middle East International, 24 September 1993, 13.

