World Views of Aspiring Powers: Exploring National Identities: Iran
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Introduction
Any appreciation of Iran’s regional and international aspirations must account for the country’s historical perspective and world view. This is a view which is broadly shared by wide sections of the political elite as well as the intelligentsia, and the popular nature of the discourse can perhaps be best gauged by the general response to perceived transgressions against the against the national dignity, and Iran’s rightful place in the world. The recent incident with the British sailors was a good example of Iranian sensitivities over their rights in the ‘Persian’ Gulf, and few opportunities were missed to convey this message to a wider audience. But perhaps more telling was the broader discomfort, bordering on popular outrage at the release of the film the ‘300’, which resulted in an official protest to the UN, and a general sense that Iran’s imperial past – seen by many Iranians in a positive light – was being gratuitously denigrated by the West. Although some Iranians publicly parodied the Iranian government’s desire to be seen to protect Iran’s ancient pre-Islamic history, the episode does highlight a number of factors which are important if neglected aspects of Iran’s world view. In the first place ‘History’ (with a capital H) matters; and this history is increasingly drawn from a national narrative of imperial grandeur which belies the Islamic character of the current regime. While Islamic remains fundamental to the core views of many members of the elite, it has been increasingly synthesised with distinctly Iranian world views and aspiration which have tended to subsume the former under the latter. Ahmadinejad himself is a good example of an individual whose Islamic devotion never gets in the way of an intensely nationalist perspective on the world and a profound belief that Iranians, blessed as they are, can achieve anything, if they put their minds to it. Belief and culture remain central to the Iranian world view, and it is consequently important to appreciate Iran’s position as the quintessential ‘soft power’. Indeed, the lessons of history for Iran’s statesmen is that its exercise of power tends to be more successful when administered through soft rather than hard power options. In many ways, this can be seen in the extension of Iranian influence throughout the Middle East today, a success which is predicated on the popular perception of its role as a bulwark against the United States. This final point is perhaps the most important, and the most intriguing of Iran’s means of extending its power: the juxtaposition of its aspirations in a dependent and antagonistic relationship with the United States. Put simply, Iran’s aspirations as a global player depend on its ability to find, retain and overcome, a suitably powerful opponent. Since 9/11, the United States has arguably fulfilled this role with considerable generosity.

An Imperial Mentality
Any world view is guided by a particular state’s historical perspective and inheritance. This of course applies equally to Western states whose tendency to impose their own historical narratives onto others has obfuscated realities and compounded misunderstandings. For example, it is not uncommon for Western commentators to interpret developments in the third world through the language and semantics of the Second World War, alerting citizens to imminent rise of a new ‘Hitler’ or ‘Stalin’, and
appropriating the language of the ‘Holocaust’. The pervasiveness of such motifs is reflected in the fact that during the Suez Crisis of 1956, the British government sought to paint the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, as a Middle Eastern Hitler. More successful narrative impositions involved the development of the communist threat, and the spectre of Stalin, a political mythology of more immediate relevance given the realities of the Cold War. Interestingly, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been described as both a ‘Stalin’ and a ‘Hitler’ – or more generically ‘totalitarian’, with the term fascism often appended to the noun ‘Islam’ – and given Ahmadinejad’s ill advised foray into Holocaust revisionism, the Hitler analogy as acquired some popular resonance. Yet Ahmadinejad’s determination to inquire into the Holocaust, as distasteful as it may be to knowledgeable Iranians, also points to the important reality that the Holocaust, as a singular event, does not occupy a central position in the Iranian historical consciousness, but it instead regarded (if there is interest at all), as part of a broader narrative of anti-imperial struggle. The Holocaust, in this perspective, is incidental to the broader problem of the foundation of the state of Israel, as an exercise and extension of Western colonialism in the Middle East.

This self-perception as a champion of the oppressed and the victims of Western imperialism appeals to both the Left and the Islamists within Iran and of course is familiar to the Left abroad. The fact that Iran sees itself as largely a victim of Western political and economic aggrandizement in the region is at the same time a singular product of the distinctly nationalist narrative of Oil Nationalisation and the overthrow of Dr Mohammad Mosaddeq, in a CIA/MI6 orchestrated coup in 1953. Consequently, three strands of Iranian political thought have merged to produce a particularly powerful and socially resonant myth of victimisation. This is in many ways, a thoroughly modern myth, borne of the experience of Western intervention – an intervention which now has immediate relevance – but which effectively exploits an Islamic sense of victimisation which far predates any encounter with the West, and relates more to a particularly Shia sense of vulnerability and injustice. (Significantly, these characteristics were symbolised by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and central to his election success). Attitudes developed and refined against a Sunni majority, have therefore been transplanted into the modern age with a Western protagonist, although the fact that US allies in the region tend to be Sunni, makes this transition relatively easy.

However there another side to this coin which is largely neglected by observers in the West, in part because the Islamic Republic does not overtly express it as part of its ideological worldview. This is the acute sense of Iran as an imperial power of historical standing who functions as the benign patriarch of the region. This image is drawn in good measure from the popular appreciation of pre-Islamic, when three Iranian empires held sway in the Near East, and when Iran could justifiably be recognised as a super-power, but in contrast to the narrative constructed by the Pahlavi dynasty (1926-79), it also depends heavily on an interpretation of Islamic history which sees Iran’s role as central to its inherent strength and wider dissemination. For Iranians, Islam moved from being an Arab to a global religion when the genius of the Iranian mind was applied to it. By such synthesises are Islam and Iran reconciled, though of late the emphasis of Iran, and the distinctiveness of ‘Iranian Islam’ have increasingly come to the fore. This can be seen in
the discussions of Iran as a ‘civilisational’ force, rather than a nation *per se*, and one of
the three ‘mother-civilisations’ of Asia, along with India and China. Whereas many
considered for example that President Khatami’s call for a ‘Dialogue of Civilisations’,
was a call for a dialogue between ‘Islam’ and other cultures, there should be little doubt
that the Islam in question was thoroughly Iranian. The emphasis on the Iranian aspect has
ironically gained ground during the Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, when motifs
from Iran’s pre-Islamic national mythology have been increasingly interspersed with
those of Shia Islam. A very good example occurred during the public celebration of
Iran’s nuclear achievements in Spring 2007, when a song specially composed for the
occasion, drew together in one sentence (and somewhat ahistorically) the fact that a pre-
Islamic Iranian mythical hero (Arash) had been empowered by Imam Ali (son in law of
the Prophet and the first Shia Imam). Such was the emotive force of this association, that
it brought President Ahmadinejad (very publicly) to tears. The impression of Iran’s
imperial mission has been gaining ground since 2003 when the elimination of Saddam
Hussein provided Iran with a practical opportunity it had not enjoyed in several centuries
to exercise its regional influence. It is an impression which has been reinforced by both
Arab and Israeli fears of Iranian hegemony in the region; the vociferous expression of
which has gone some way to convincing Iranians that they are indeed a rising power. (A
particularly absurd example of this occurred in the aftermath of the release of the British
sailors in April 2007, when domestic criticism of President Ahmadinejad’s was abruptly
overtaken by quotes taken from Western commentators – largely hard-line – that Britain
had been woefully out-manoeuvred by Iran’s cunning president. With confirmation of
Iran’s genius coming from the likes of John Bolton, domestic criticism quietly gave way
to an air of triumphalism!)

This fear often seems misplaced when compared to Iran’s own statements about the
peaceful nature of its foreign policy and its very civilised and cultured attitude towards
international relations. One or either side must be guilty of deception or misinterpretation.
Yet such attitudes are not necessarily mutually exclusive when one remembers Iran’s
perception of itself, is not as a military power extending direct political control
throughout the region, but as a pre-eminently cultural power.

*Soft Power v Hard power*

Despite the hyperbolic nature of the rhetoric directed against the ‘Iranian threat’, it is
worth bearing in mind that the exercise of Iranian power remains pre-eminently cultural,
economic and political. In sum, the expression of Iranian power can be described as ‘soft’
as opposed to ‘hard’. This may seem at odds with the widespread assumption in the
Western world at least, that Iran supports ‘terrorist’ groups, especially in the Palestinian
territories and the Lebanon. But even this support, is simply the tip of a much deeper
political-cultural iceberg and to deal with the actions of terrorists, or resistance groups as
Iran would define them, is simply to deal with the symptoms and not the roots of the
problem.

It may appear counter-intuitive to recognise it as such, given the negative image which
Iran enjoys in Western circles, but the projection of Iranian power is fundamentally based
on the dissemination of ideas; ideas which appear more attractive when juxtaposed with
the contradictions of Western power in the region. In effect, Iran has been able to
skilfully exploit the gaps in Western rhetoric and to support its ideas with political
support, financial help and resources. This is an important distinction which is rarely
appreciated in Western circles – or it would seem in contemporary Iranian ones – that the
power of Iranian ideas is relative and dependent, not absolute. At the same time, this
relative growth has been cultivated and supported. In Iraq for instance, for the better part
of 18 months from April 2003, the Iranians injected political and financial capital into
both northern and southern Iraq with a view to building a social network and
infrastructure. This infrastructure was almost wholly involved in welfare and was largely
welcomed by coalition forces as useful, with the qualification that the network thus
constructed could easily be used to disseminate guns as well as money. This is in fact
what the Coalition alleges has occurred, and it is important to recognise that where
Iranian soft power translates into hard power, it is largely through the medium of proxies.

A similar process can be seen at work with Hizbollah in Lebanon, where the military
wing of the movement is only an aspect of the social network supported by Iran. In the
aftermath of the Lebanon war of 2006, Iran gained further credibility by donating the
relatively modest sum of $200m to rebuild houses and infrastructure in southern
Lebanon. This was a fraction of the sum donated by Saudi Arabia, but since the Kingdom
was at the same time making a substantial purchase of US military hardware, its own
contributions to the Lebanese recovery enjoyed a limited public impact.

Further afield, Iran has sought to expand its reach through the establishment of Islamic
centres with a view to promoting Shi’ism, although the influence of these centres has not
always been clear cut. The Iranian diaspora has not always reacted favourably to these
centres, whose influence is perhaps more keenly felt among Arab Shias. Iranians on the
other hand have tended to react favourably to the dissemination of cultural nationalism,
through events, television and radio. The Islamic Republic has been a keen purveyor of
satellite television, although its Persian language stations are more successful than its
forays in to the English language medium.

This is not to deny that Iran has indulged in the exercise of hard power, largely as noted
above, through the sponsorship of proxies. But it is a fundamental flaw of Western
approaches towards Iran that Western countries largely ignore the soft power dimension
and subsequently fail to engage with this process. As will be seen in the next section,
Iran’s emergence is no small measure a consequence of its opponents misjudgements.

**Rivalry with the United States**

Of all the aspiring and major powers being discussed, Iran is probably unique in that its
emergent power is dependent on a particular relationship on whom it measures its
strength. The United States has been a central feature of the Islamic Revolution since its
inception and despite the absence of diplomatic relations there is little doubt that the
United States enjoys a presence in Iran which far exceeds the normal cultural
appropriation which one may assume in a globalised world. Indeed, in many ways the
Islamic Republic of Iran defines itself against the United States, and inasmuch as America is regarded as the political rival of choice – an aspiring power and global
revolution must have a suitably great enemy – the United States and its policies are as much if not more of a presence in Iranian political discourse and culture than most other countries. Part of this relates to the mythology of the United States within Iranian history but the fact is that little has been done to deconstruct this myth over the last three decades and if anything hardliners in Iran have excelled at exploiting every opportunity afforded to them by their counterparts in the United States to accentuate the myth.

Indeed, if there have been times over the last fifteen years when the politicians have sought to reduce tensions, the relationship has remained both competitive and intimate. Since 9/11 however, despite initial attempts to forge a more constructive relationship during the Afghan War, relations have declined into an almost wholly antagonistic one. More-over US policy in the Middle East, and in particular the invasion and occupation of Iraq, has enabled protagonists of conflict in Iran to argue that Iran has more to gain from exploiting American weakness, than the reduction of tensions. As events in Iraq have deteriorated into a war of attrition, hardliners in Iran have become emboldened and have been able to effectively sell the image of an empowered and re-emergent Iran to a wider public. This sense of imperial resurrection is intoxicating to a public weaned on a narrative of decline. Yet the important, if neglected, facet of this emergence is that it is almost wholly dependent on the failure of others rather than on the positive achievements of Iran’s politicians. Iran’s power has not been built on stable internal foundations.

**Conclusion**

Power which is won cheaply, and largely through the failure of others, is rarely managed effectively, and another important aspect of the fragility of Iran’s re-emergence as a great power in the region, is the eclectic and reactionary management of its situation. While strategic thinkers abound in Iranian foreign policy making (the ubiquitous ‘chess players’), few of these people occupy positions of political influence and importance within the current government. Instead Ahmadinejad has made much play of his ability to ‘instinctively’ manage Iran’s foreign relations pointing to Iran’s ‘successes’ as proof that his methods work. Every apparent success is trumpeted – the closure of Iran’s nuclear file for example – laying the groundwork for a further emboldened foreign policy. Yet for all his bold if grandiose visions, Ahmadinejad’s method has been largely tactical, short term and reactionary. The strategic approach, the cultivation of allies and the establishment of networks, normally part of Iran’s foreign policy arsenal has been increasingly superseded by the need for immediate short term successes predicated on a belief of terminal US decline.