Principles and Debates in Iranian Foreign Policy

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Despite characterisation of Iran as an ideologically-driven state, expansionist and dominated by Islamic extremism, conventional interests-based pragmatism has been an important element in Iran’s foreign policy, and has often been dominant. Without being uncritical of the Islamic republic, this article explores the ways that revolutionary, pragmatic and nationalist principles have influenced her foreign policy, and concludes that even the revolutionary principle may not necessarily or always be as inimical to the prevailing international system as is sometimes supposed.

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Assertions in the media or by politicians that Iran has or has had an expansionist, hegemonic or ideological foreign policy, aimed at destabilising or dominating the immediate region around her borders, are common. Such assertions are particularly common from states along the southern shore of the Persian Gulf, from some other Arab states dominated by Sunni elites, and from some sectors of opinion in Israel and the United States. But are such views justified by the observable reality of Iran’s behaviour in her relations with her neighbours, and more distant
states? Can we identify some consistent patterns in that behaviour, that might permit general analytical statements or even predictions about Iran’s likely future behaviour? Or is Iran’s foreign policy quixotic, random; the product of radical politics, religious zealotry and inscrutable internal political pressures and therefore dangerously unpredictable (as is also sometimes suggested)?

In this piece I suggest that this is not the case, and that Iran is not the dangerous wild card in the region, as she is sometimes portrayed. I believe that there are three discernible principles at work in Iran’s foreign policy, corresponding in part to specific internal political forces; a revolutionary principle, a pragmatic principle, and a nationalist principle. Specific foreign policy statements or initiatives may draw upon one or two of these, but only relatively rarely upon all three.¹

Advocating direct, comprehensive talks between the US and Iran in 2008, Henry Kissenger said Iran had to decide ‘whether it is a nation or a cause. If Iran thinks of itself as a nation or can be brought to do so, it can be accorded a respected place in the international system’.² This is a characteristically grand Kissenger statement, taking for granted the ability

¹ This article is loosely based on and expanded from a presentation I gave at a seminar in the Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi in December 2009. It draws upon ideas I encountered at a conference on Iranian Foreign Policy held in Durham in March 2005 and especially on RK Ramazani’s work, notably his Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East, Baltimore 1988; his article ‘Iran’s Foreign Policy: Contending Orientations’ in the Middle East Journal, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Spring, 1989), pp. 202-217; and his ‘Iran’s Foreign Policy: Independence, Freedom and the Islamic Republic’ in Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri (eds) Iran’s Foreign policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad (proceedings from the Durham conference of 2005); also on Ali Akbar Rezaei’s contribution to that same volume ‘Foreign Policy Theories: Implications for the Foreign Policy Analysis of Iran’ and Anoush Ehteshami’s earlier ‘The Foreign Policy of Iran’ in Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (eds) The Foreign Policies of Middle East States (London 2002)

² Interview with Stephen Graubard for the Financial Times, available online at http://www.henryakissinger.com/interviews/FinancialTimes240508.html
of the US and her allies to decide who is or is not accorded a place in the international system (an ability that may not forever be what it was in his heyday). But it contains another, related assumption; Iran may have to abandon her cause in order to become respectable, but the cause with which the United States is identified is unquestionable and is indeed part of the structure of international relations itself.

This presents us with the idea of nations or states as causes. Revolutionary states have often framed their foreign policy as reflecting a cause or a revolutionary purpose in the world, aiming at a transformation of one or many aspects of the world beyond their borders. This purpose may be portrayed as such largely for presentational purposes; it may outlive in its presentational function the motivational function with which it began, and the relative importance of the presentational and the motivational may be much debated in any given case. But the sense of a cause or revolutionary purpose was plain, for example, in the conduct of revolutionary France in the period 1789-1799, and indeed afterwards too. It was marked by the removal of aristocratic titles and privileges in conquered territory, the expropriation of religious property, and symbolic acts like the erection of trees of liberty in market squares. Later, in an extension of the same spirit, the French imposed the Code Napoleon; an enduring influence on legal arrangements in many European countries.

The former Soviet Union, another revolutionary state, stood also for the propagation of a revolutionary principle in the world; and although that principle lay in abeyance in the 1930s in the period of ‘Socialism in One Country’ it was applied later, with the extension of the Soviet communist system to the countries of eastern Europe, after the victory of the Soviet red army over Nazism. But in both the French and the Soviet cases, the
original cause eventually became largely a figleaf for exploitation, oppression and the exercise of hegemony.

It is sometimes overlooked in this context that the United States originated with a revolution, and can therefore also be seen as a revolutionary state. Leaving aside the questions of how or to what extent that can still be said to be true nearly two and a half centuries later, or that of how much the US has had in common with those other revolutionary states, it is nonetheless clear that, like them, and perhaps rather more consistently, the US has represented a cause in its foreign policy – the cause of democracy, political freedom and national self-determination – especially since the Presidency of Woodrow Wilson 1913-21, and above all since 1945.

So perhaps it is less that Iran is a cause – more that Iran’s cause is perceived to conflict with the US cause. But is that conflict intrinsic, necessary or inevitable?

At the time of the revolution, and since, Iran too has stood for certain ideas in its foreign policy – ideas connected with the Islamic ideology of the 1979 revolution, including a defence and assertion of Islam (especially Shi‘a Islam), anti-imperialism, anti-Americanism, and an anti-Israeli position (viewing Israel as an illegitimate, Zionist entity established by or with the connivance of imperialist powers, to the detriment of Islam, within the traditional territory of Islam and resulting in the displacement and persecution of Muslim Palestinians). Some of these ideas appeared in the new constitution established by the Islamic republic (and approved by popular vote in a referendum) in 1979. One significant provision included a mention in the Preamble to the
Constitution that the Revolutionary Guard would be responsible inter alia for ‘fulfilling the ideological mission of jihad in God’s path; that is, extending the sovereignty of God’s law throughout the world.’ – and again in Article 10 –

‘In accordance with the verse: “This your nation is a single nation, and I am your Lord, so worship Me,” all Muslims form a single nation, and the government of the Islamic republic of Iran has the duty of formulating its general policies with a view to the merging and union of all Muslim peoples, and it must constantly strive to bring about the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Islamic world’

This could be, and has been, interpreted to signify a mission to spread the revolution to other Islamic countries. Especially in the time of Khomeini, the foreign policy field was fruitful for the production of revolutionary neologisms and clichés (many of the terms were first used by Khomeini himself). Imperialism was javan-khor (world-devouring) – the United States was shaytan-e bozorg or estekbar-e jahani (the great satan, or world arrogance). It produced a jargon of stridency and intransigence.

These features, of strident revolutionary rhetoric linked to an ideologically driven foreign policy, were prominent in several events of the early years after the revolution, especially in 1979-82. One example is the occupation of the US embassy in November 1979 and the ensuing hostage crisis, which has had a deep effect on US attitudes to Iran down to the present day. Another is the campaign of vilification against the Baathist regime of Iraq in the first half of 1980, part of which was

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exhortation to the Iraqi Shi‘a population to rise up in revolt. Some⁴ have suggested that this campaign of destabilization left Saddam Husein with no choice but to invade Iran in a preemptive strike in September 1980. This is a misleading exaggeration; there were other more important causes for the war,⁵ and Saddam has to bear the prime responsibility, but Iranian revolutionary rhetoric was certainly significant as a contributory factor in raising tensions. A third example was the establishment of Hezbollah with Iranian help in Lebanon in the early 1980s; an action which sprang from fellow-feeling with the Arab Shi‘a of the southern Lebanon at the time of the Israeli invasion of June 1982, but which has developed over the years into a strategic alliance against Israel,⁶ and is today probably the single most important active instance of ideologically-driven foreign policy.

Various personalities and groups over the years were associated with Iran’s involvement in Lebanon, but the most consistent have been the Qods Force of the Sepah-e Pasdaran, the Revolutionary Guards Corps. In general, this unit is the one identified and tasked with those responsibilities set out in the parts of the constitution mentioned already above.

From the beginning however there was also a pragmatic strand in Iranian foreign policy; sometimes in conflict with the revolutionary principle, and sometimes eclipsed by it. So for example, in the time of the

⁵ these are discussed in Axworthy 2013, pp 188-9
Provisional Government in 1979, Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan conducted talks with the United States (at the beginning of November, in Algiers) aimed at the resolution of disputes over arms contracts left over from the time of the Shah, but also other matters. These talks were heavily criticized by leftist groups at the time, and that criticism contributed to the febrile atmosphere of the autumn of 1979 that culminated in the occupation of the US embassy, which in turn led to the resignation of Bazargan. Pragmatism (one could call it the tradition of interests-based diplomacy) was pushed out by the revolutionary principle. One of the most strident advocates for the revolutionary principle (and particularly of support for Lebanese Hezbollah) in the first half of the 1980s was Hosein-Ali Montazeri, who at that time was expected to be Khomeini’s successor. But within a short time after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, pragmatism began to reassert itself. In 1986 the two principles came into conflict in the Iran-Contra episode. There is not space here to go into the detail of Iran-Contra, but from the Iranian point of view the essence of it was that it was an exercise in realpolitik, aimed at the acquisition of vital high-technology weapons and weapons spares at a time when the country was under desperate pressure in the war with Iraq. In return the Iranians used their influence in Lebanon, via Hezbollah, to bring about the release of Western hostages held there. To secure a deal on weapons supplies, Iran was prepared to do a covert deal with the US, and accept deliveries from Israel (in fact arms deliveries from Israel appear to have been going on for several years even before the Iran-Contra talks began\(^7\)). The deal flew in the face of revolutionary ideology, but was a pragmatic necessity in wartime. It was managed by the arch-pragmatist within the Iranian system, Hashemi Rafsanjani, and

\(^7\) Parsi, Trita Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the US, Yale 2007; pp 185-93 and passim
one can see the greater emphasis on pragmatism through the war (culminating in the decision to accept a ceasefire and end it) as closely related to the rising influence of Rafsanjani within the Iranian system over the same period. As the pragmatic principle waxed, so the position of Montazeri waned. Given the extreme political incorrectness of many aspects of the Iran-Contra episode, one might have expected there to be a brutal reckoning after it became public; but in fact the only casualty was Mehdi Hashemi, a close associate of Montazeri and an enthusiast for contacts with Lebanese Hezbollah, who had been responsible for making the scandal public by leaking details of it to a Lebanese newspaper. Mehdi Hashemi was executed after a period of custody and interrogation. Eventually, in 1989, Montazeri was removed from his position as successor; the Mehdi Hashemi affair had been important in his slide out of favour.

Significant also in the story of pragmatism during the Iran-Iraq war was the origin of Iran’s alliance with Syria. Again, one might not think the Assads’ regime in Syria would be a natural ally, given the aggressively secular and Arab nationalist origins of their Baathist regime. But (along with Israel, perhaps) they were Iran’s best allies in the 1980s, and have continued so to this day. Beyond the straightforward alliance between the two states, based initially on hostility to Saddam’s Iraq, Syria has been important to Iran as a link to Hezbollah in Lebanon. It has been strongly in the Iranian state’s interest to continue to support the Syrian regime,


9 Montazeri later, after 1997, became a stern critic of the Islamic regime and an inspiration for the reformist movement in Iran, but that is another story
even after the mass insurrection since the beginning of 2011; and wider world opinion, having been critical of Iran’s support initially, shifted subsequently toward acquiescence as the Sunni insurgency against Assad’s government turned more extreme and jihadist.

Part of the US motivation in the Iran-Contra episode was to establish and deepen contacts with the more pragmatic-minded element in the Iranian system, associated with Rafsanjani, with the expectation that it would be this element that would be dominant in Iran after Khomeini’s death. After Khomeini died in June 1989, less than a year after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian system underwent a convulsion. Changes were made to the constitution (these had been begun while Khomeini was still alive), Ali Khamenei became Leader in Khomeini’s place, and Rafsanjani became President. Rafsanjani was very much the mastermind behind these developments, carrying out what he claimed to have been Khomeini’s wishes, and initially he was politically dominant; probably the most powerful President there has been under the Islamic republic. He was committed to post-war reconstruction, and to a new, pragmatic approach in foreign policy (the two were connected – a prime motivation was to secure inward investment and access to western technological expertise – especially for the oil industry, the infrastructure of which had deteriorated badly over the war period) - expressed here in a speech in 1991 –

The Islamic Republic now needs a prudent policy more than it needs anything else ... we need a prudent policy, both for inside the country, in order to strengthen our base, and for our foreign policy, so that we can have a presence and help people without being accused of engaging in terrorism, without anyone being able to call us fanatics. We have no need
to speak fanatically. We have no need to chant impractical slogans. We do not need to say things which are not acted upon, needlessly frightening people and blocking our own path.\textsuperscript{10}

But Rafsanjani made only limited headway with his change of policy. Other countries were sceptical that Iran really had changed its position. There were political, personal and institutional reasons for this in the US in particular\textsuperscript{11}, but there were more direct and overt reasons also. One was the Rushdie affair; a classic piece of revolutionary policy, reminiscent in many ways of the hostage crisis of 1979–81, which may have been pursued by Khomeini in his last months deliberately in order to ensure continuing adherence to revolutionary principles (and to prevent rapprochement with the West) after his death. If so, it was remarkably effective; its shadow over Iran’s foreign relations was not lifted until 1998. In addition, there were a series of terrorist incidents in the early 1990s with more or less clear connections back to the Iranian regime. Set against this, the Iranian government hoped that its efforts to secure the release of the last hostages in the Lebanon (achieved by mid-1992) would yield benefits in their dealings with the West. But no – the US in particular took the view that Iran could not benefit from ending an abuse that it should never have encouraged in the first place.

The interplay between revolutionary and pragmatic principles was apparent through the first two decades of the Islamic Republic. At its simplest, one could characterize this as a conflict within the system, over whether it should, for the benefit of the country, have conventional

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\textsuperscript{10} Federal Broadcast Information Service, 23 December 1991 – ‘President Urges ‘Prudent Policy’ Above All’

\textsuperscript{11} some of these are explored in Axworthy 2013 pp 318-9
diplomatic dealings with the wider world (and especially the US and other Western nations) or whether such dealings were inherently subversive of revolutionary principles. That conflict corresponds largely to the internal conflict between democratic and Islamic elements in the constitution, and is still unresolved. In Rafsanjani’s time the Foreign Ministry became the natural home of the pragmatic principle; sometimes at loggerheads within the system against the Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, who tended to advocate a more trenchant, ideological, revolutionary line. Suspicion of the Foreign Ministry for being insufficiently attached to Iran’s revolutionary mission was part of the justification for Ahmadinejad’s removal of Iran’s ambassadors to Western Europe at the beginning of his Presidency in 2005. But one should not over-emphasise division and factionalism in this context – since 1989 foreign and security policy has been tightly coordinated within the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC); chaired by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, within which all the main organs of state are represented.12

But another, separate principle has also been involved in this already complex interplay, and arguably has grown in influence over time – the principle of nationalism. Perhaps it is necessary first to justify inclusion of this third principle. Nationalism was after all part of the ideological apparatus of the revolution – should it not be regarded just as a part, an aspect of the revolutionary principle we have already explored? The point is that nationalism has affected foreign policy in ways that are observably distinct, not directly related to the ideology or the rhetoric of

12 For a detailed account (though now a little dated) of the workings of the Iranian governmental system, there is still no better guide than Wilfried Buchta’s *Who Rules Iran?* (Washington 2000)
the regime, with roots in popular political attitudes unrelated to the appeal (or lack of appeal) of revolutionary ideology. One could think of it as an ideological motive that goes beyond pragmatism and the calculation of interests, that could be expected to motivate Iran even if it were not an Islamic republic.¹³

One example of this is related to the perceived threat from separatist groups. The nascent Islamic republic was quick to repress burgeoning separatist movements in Kurdestan, Khuzestan, Baluchestan and among the Turkmen of the north-east in the years 1979-81 (and after), showing a degree of nationalist chauvinism and disregard of declared revolutionary principles in so doing. One would expect Iran to be on friendly terms with the new state of Azerbaijan (formerly the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan), as a predominantly Shi’a Muslim state on Iran’s North-Western border. But because Azerbaijan, especially under its first elected prime minister after independence, Abulfazl Elcibey (a historian), declared its aspiration toward unification with the Iranian province of Azerbaijan (of which Tabriz is the capital) to create a greater Azerbaijan, and is suspected by Iranians of encouraging occasional outbreaks of Azeri separatism within Iran, relations between the two countries have often been poor. Iran supported the Christian-dominated Republic of Armenia in its dispute with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, and in other matters too. Azerbaijan has developed links and agreements with Israel in response.¹⁴

¹³ This is an important point. Iran could be expected to remain an awkward interlocutor for Western statesmen in many respects even if she were not an Islamic republic. To illustrate the point: in his heyday in the early 1970s the Shah gave the West various headaches – one example being the oil price shock of 1973, of which he was the prime architect – it is probably true to say that no act by the Islamic republic has been as damaging to Western interests as that act by the Shah

Preservation of national borders can reasonably be, and often would be taken as a state interest, and therefore this example might also be thought to be governed by the other of my first two principles, the pragmatic one. There may be an element of that, but it seems that the response to perceived separatist movements indicates more than just state pragmatism at work. It often includes an assumption (justified or not) that the movements are instigated or helped by third parties – an assumption derived from or at least influenced by a nationalist reading of Iran’s history.

The Islamic republic’s rhetoric of resistance to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war could be presented as a further example. The regime used Islam to motivate troops and the general populace, and contrariwise, used the war to help cement the regime’s Islamic basis. But as the war went on the regime’s leaders increasingly appealed to popular nationalism; including by using pre-Islamic national motifs, of the Achaemenid and Sassanid empires, for example, in ways reminiscent of their use in the time of the Shah.\textsuperscript{15}

Another example of the importance of nationalism is the one that has become so central over the last decade - that of the nuclear programme. Leaving aside the question of the real or declared or suspected purposes of the programme, whether it is aimed at the production of a nuclear weapon or (as the Iranian government have always claimed) is aimed solely at the creation of a civil nuclear industry for the generation of electricity, it is plain enough that the policy is linked to a nationalist,

\textsuperscript{15} For this argument see Ali Ansari \textit{The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran} (Cambridge 2013) pp 212-6 and 219-10
populist political motivation. This is most evident in the argument from the regime that the nuclear programme is part of Iran’s right as sovereign nation to the legitimate exploitation of her own natural resources, and that attempts to limit or obstruct it are (again, rightly or wrongly) down to the nefarious actions of Iran’s traditional enemies. This argument (especially the natural resources element) has special resonance in Iran because of the memory of the premiership of Mohammad Mosaddeq, when British and US secret services instigated a coup in order to remove a prime minister who had had the temerity to nationalize the Iranian oil industry. Mosaddeq enjoyed huge nationalist support from ordinary Iranians. The history of the Mosaddeq episode is so present in the memory of Iranians that reference to it does not have to be signalled by use of his name; phrases like ‘national rights’ and ‘natural resources’ are sufficient. Support for Iran’s nuclear policy appears to have been strong among ordinary Iranians, though there have been dissenting voices, and increasing pressure on the economy and living standards from sanctions 2011-14 may have had a contrary effect. Striking evidence for the nationalist instrumentality of the nuclear question came in the autumn of 2009, in the tense period of confrontation after the disputed Presidential elections of June 2009, when the reformist Mir Hosein Mousavi, Ahmadinejad’s prime opponent in the elections, criticized Ahmadinejad

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16 received wisdom about the coup has been questioned by Darioush Bayandor in an important book (Iran and the CIA: The Fall of Mossadeq Revisited, London 2010), which suggested that Mosaddeq’s eventual fall was at least as much due to internal Iranian political factors as to British or US intervention. Nonetheless, there is no question that the US and UK bear a heavy responsibility for setting the ball rolling, at least.

17 Sadegh Zibakalam, Professor of Politics at Tehran University and a well-known public commentator in Iran, was sentenced to 18 months’ imprisonment in June 2014, in part for questioning the utility of the nuclear programme. At the time of writing the sentence was still subject to appeal.
for selling out Iran’s national interests when he appeared to signal the possibility of a compromise with the West on the nuclear question.¹⁸

Revolutionary, Pragmatic, Nationalist – all three principles have been at work in Iran’s foreign policy. Often two have been at work at the same time. If one accepts that Iran has at least been seeking a potential nuclear weapon capability (ie the ability to produce a weapon at short notice in a security crisis, such as an invasion) then it is immediately apparent that the policy has a large pragmatic element, as a deterrent against aggression, as well as the nationalist element already discussed. Geography and history (especially the experience of the Iran-Iraq war) would be in themselves a sufficient explanation for a desire for an Iranian nuclear deterrent in some form. I would suggest that, notwithstanding the renewal of revolutionary rhetoric in the time of Ahmadinejad, the pragmatic principle has in fact been the predominant one in Iran’s foreign policy for most of the period of the Islamic republic, with the partial exception of the earliest years, 1979-1984.

One position set against this is the so-called Shi’a Crescent theory, which claimed in the early years of the new millennium that Iran was attempting to foment an arc of instability in the Middle East, manipulating Shi’a minorities in the region from Lebanon to the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia. The theory, brought forward first by king Abdullah of Jordan, and taken up by others like Hosni Mubarak, Tony Blair and various politicians from the Sunni elites of the states along the southern shore of the Persian Gulf, pointed to Iran as a threat to the region, aimed at exporting revolution and creating an Iranian hegemony. This article

¹⁸http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/03/world/middleeast/03iran.html?_r=2&ref=world
cannot be devoted to debunking the theory, but it is hardly necessary to do so, because it has by now, thankfully, been widely accepted to be bunk.¹⁹ In reality, although Iranian clerics have an influence beyond Iran, it is seldom if ever a controlling influence, and each Shi‘a community outside Iran has, unsurprisingly, and without exception, its own separate political dynamic, which has much more to do with particular local conditions (often oppressive). The relationship between Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon is closer, but even there it is not the case that Iran is the master and Hezbollah the servant.

The exaggeration of the threat from Iran according to the Shi‘a crescent notion served as an alibi for its proponents, in a variety of ways. Blaming Iran for unrest among Shi‘a Muslims and others in the region distracted from the failure of Sunni elites to give properly representative institutions to ordinary people, of whatever sect or group, in their own countries; and from the fact that most of the terrorism originating from the Middle East was inspired and perpetrated by Sunnis, not Shi‘as. For Western leaders like George W Bush and Tony Blair, blaming Iran in 2005-7 for their difficulties in Iraq distracted from the political and military mistakes they themselves (and their subordinates, under their direction) had made, and again, from the extent of funding from Saudi origins for the Sunni insurgency that was their main problem. The inflammatory and confrontational rhetoric of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and others that was current at the time made it easier to put Iran in the role of scapegoat.

¹⁹ Perhaps the most painstaking and effective debunking of the theory came from Laurence Louër’s excellent book *Transnational Shi‘a Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London 2008)
In the first decade of the new millennium Iran’s position in the Middle East was undoubtedly strengthened; primarily by the removal of two neighbouring hostile regimes - that of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and that of the Taliban in Afghanistan. But in both cases those regimes were removed by US-led coalitions, not by the Iranians. It was misleading or foolish or both to attribute Iran’s stronger position to an expansionist or hegemonic policy. Iran does not have the force levels or the military spending for such a policy, and any idea that Iran might try to use a nuclear capability as a short cut to hegemony ignores the history of nuclear weapons since the 1950s, which is that they have been effective only as a deterrent. Any projected analysis of a possible case in which they might be used by Iran in such a way is impossible to sustain. First use of a nuclear weapon by Iran would bring down an overwhelming nuclear response by the United States or Israel, or possibly both; that is so clear as to render ineffectual any idea of aggressive threat of use of a nuclear weapon by Iran.

More recently, since the Arab spring, emphasis has shifted somewhat to the danger of sectarian conflict in the Middle East. This debate has been more balanced, but initially showed a tendency to see Iran and Shi‘ism as a threat in familiar terms. With serious negotiations on Iran’s nuclear

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20 Iran’s military spending has been lower than most other Middle Eastern states for the last two decades, and much lower than that of Israel and Saudi Arabia for example, even allowing for the difficulty of assessing the amount spent on the Revolutionary Guard. The figures produced by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute show this clearly – available at http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database. See also the discussion in Axworthy 2013 pp 394-5

21 see the articles by Gregory Treverton and Anthony Cordesman in the January 2014 edition of Prospect Magazine - http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/iran-versus-saudi-arabia-how-far-will-it-go and http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/the-arms-race-gathers-pace (and letters in response from myself and Lord Lamont the following month). Voices from the Al
programme in the background, criticism of Iran was nonetheless more muted than previously, and there was a rather greater awareness of the much greater danger of instability in the region induced by Sunni extremism funded by elements within Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-led states. This new perspective was massively confirmed by the fall of Mosul to ISIS forces in June 2014. Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps advisers found themselves in an unlikely position as de facto US allies against the advancing Sunni extremists. US policy against the Assad regime in Syria had already realigned itself in recognition of the greater danger there from ISIS. Previous Saudi policy of backing such groups was also forced to adjust; signalled by the removal from office of Prince Bandar bin Sultan in April 2014.

Iranian foreign policy has been a sometimes confusing mix of pragmatism and ideology; but a cool view of it shows the tendency for pragmatism to dominate, and all the more so the closer one comes to Iran’s own borders. This is shown in Iranian policy toward Iraq and Afghanistan. In both countries Iran supported groups opposed to the previous regimes for years (SCIRI in Iraq and the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan) and continued to back their leaders when those leaders took power with Western support after the US-led invasions brought down the Taliban in 2001 and Saddam in 2003. In both countries allegations of Iranian support (through the Qods force) for insurgents fighting Western troops in those countries (and opposed to the Karzai and Maliki governments) have been frequent, but hard to substantiate with solid evidence. There was rather better evidence for Iranian activity behind the Khalifa regime in Bahrain claiming that the unrest against them has been driven by Iran have been unconvincing. Given the scale of support for the Shi’a opposition in the country, and the brutality with which they have been treated, Iranian policy has been remarkably restrained (and pragmatic).
groups acting against the British before their withdrawal from Basra in 2007.\textsuperscript{22} Despite this, Iranian support for stability and for the democratically-elected governments supported also by the West has been declared and consistent – as well as being plainly in Iran’s best interests. At points it has been suggested that the Iranians were too blinkered and too partisan in a sectarian sense in their support for Maliki in Iraq. If so, there was a congruence with the Western support for Maliki, albeit for other reasons,\textsuperscript{23} but by August 2014 it seems the Iranian regime pragmatically recognized the need for an Iraqi leader with a broader base of support. An Iranian official was reported by Reuters as saying – ‘We have reached the conclusion that Maliki cannot preserve the unity of Iraq anymore … There are not many candidates who … have the capability to preserve unity of Iraq [sic]. Our ambassador to Iraq has had some meetings in the past days with relevant groups and some of the candidates,’\textsuperscript{24}

The regime of the Islamic republic is autocratic, often oppressive. It frequently denies its citizens essential rights, and has evolved to serve the interests of a restricted ruling clique. Motivated by ideology, paranoia or other motives it has instigated or perpetrated unacceptable actions beyond its borders as well as within them. There is no place for naivety or whitewash about the operations of the Iranian regime (though it is necessary to say also that there are many regimes in the Middle East that are as bad or worse in most or all of these respects). But it is necessary

\textsuperscript{22} see discussion in Axworthy 2013, pp 392-3
\textsuperscript{23} for this, although it is a personal and rather partisan piece, see the article by Ali Khedery in the Washington Post, 3 July 2014, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-we-stuck-with-maliki--and-lost-iraq/2014/07/03/0dd6a8a4-f7ec-11e3-a606-946fd632f9f1_story.html - accessed 8 July 2014
not to veer in the other direction, as has often happened, to see Iran as more dangerous, more threatening and more incorrigible than she really is. A calm, objective assessment is specially necessary at a time of possible change, as appears at the time of writing to be on offer from the government of President Rouhani (protégé, of course, of the arch-pragmatist Rafsanjani).

Particularly significant for this, perhaps, within the terms of this article, has been Iran’s support for democratic political structures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran was instrumental in persuading the Northern Alliance to agree to these structures at the Petersberg conference at the end of 2001\(^{25}\), and was helpful in a similar direction in Iraq in 2003. Pragmatic, or revolutionary? We should not forget that the revolution of 1979 set up a constitution that included a large democratic element in Iran. Most analysts would have major reservations about the way that democracy has functioned since then, but there have been regular elections, and they have changed governments. Whatever the success or failure of democracy within Iran, a commitment to at least a form of democracy is part of the ideology of the state:\(^{26}\) that connects through to foreign policy, and has been a significant factor in Iran’s position toward Iraq and Afghanistan. We should not regard Iran’s revolutionary principle as necessarily inimical to the West in all aspects – not necessarily isolationist and extreme. If, as now seems possible, there is to be a realignment of Iran’s position in the world, building upon a hoped-for success in the nuclear negotiations, this is perhaps, along with the many

\(^{25}\) Slavin, Barbara *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the US and the Twisted Path to Confrontation*, New York 2007 pp 197-9; see also the report from James Dobbins (leader of the US delegation to the talks in Bonn) in the Washington Post, 22 July 2007

\(^{26}\) Hooman Majd’s important book *The Ayatollahs’ Democracy* (New York 2010) is an important reminder of this aspect of modern Iran
convergences of interest between Iran and the West, something to build on.  

27 Another precedent that gives some cause for optimism is the so-called Grand Bargain offer of 2003, in which the Iranians offered, inter alia, a de facto recognition of Israel (see Axworthy 2013, pp 359-361)