Islamic Supra-Nationalism vs. Westphalian Sovereignty: 
The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract:

Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the subsequent formation of the Islamic Republic, the Islamization of Iran’s foreign policy has arguably become the newly established state’s primary agenda on the international arena. In accordance with Islamic thoughts on international relations, the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy was constructed on the concept of Islamic supra-nationalism - which places its emphasis on the unity of the global Muslim community (Ummah). Arguably, this supra-nationalist doctrine is incompatible with the current political world order which is based on the concept of the Westphalian nation-state. This incompatibility exists on three levels; firstly, Islam places its emphasis on ideological boundaries rather than political borders and therefore rejects the idea of nationalist states. Secondly, Islam denies current sources of legitimacy with regard to international laws and regulations, and finally, Islam calls for the elimination of cultural, ethnic and geographical boundaries among Muslims in order to unite Muslim communities in a new power bloc within the current political world order. This paper will identify the differences between Islamic supra-nationalism and the doctrine of Westphalian sovereignty. The type of foreign policies implemented by the Islamic Republic to bring about their supra-nationalist ideology as well as the challenges they face in the current political world order will be examined in this paper.

Keywords: Islamic Supra-Nationalism, Westphalian Sovereignty, Foreign Policy, International Relations, Iran
1. Introduction

The direction of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy has been a source of argument among the scholars since the establishment of the revolutionary regime in 1979. Iran’s foreign policy just like its revolution is still a mystery to many researchers as it is difficult to find an appropriate theoretical framework for it. Revolution and how revolutionary states such as China and Cuba view the world and build their foreign relations with other nations have been long discussed in works of prominent scholars including, Van Ness (1970), Armstrong (1993), Walt (1996), Halliday (2002) and Doma-Nguez (2009). However, what makes the foreign policy of revolutionary Iran different from other revolutionary states (mostly Marxist revolutions) and therefore more confusing to study is the Shia Islamic nature of it. “The Islamic ideology is an important constraining factor which limits the choice of an appropriate conceptual framework to analyze the country’s foreign policy” (Nia, 2011). The unpredictable and to an extent confusing foreign policy of Iran has been the source of this division within the scholars to theorize Iran’s foreign policy. With respect to this division, this paper briefly argues that the conflict between the Islamic supra-nationalist nature of Iran’s foreign policy and the current Westphalian system of international relations is the main source of confusion and disintegration in Iran’s foreign policy.

One of the commonly used frameworks to analyze a country’s foreign policy is the Rational Actor Model (RAM). This simple yet effective framework is based on the rational choice theory which “consists simply of selecting that alternative whose consequences ranks highest in the decision maker’s payoff function; value maximizing choice within special constraints” (Allison and Zelikow, 1999:18). The rationality element in this framework therefore makes us predict and explain a consistent trend of policy and action by the state. This means “governments select the action that will maximize strategic goals and objectives” (Allison and Zelikow, 1999). Concepts such as “objectives, calculations, choices, threats, opportunities are the key words, weighing all pros and cons and taking up value - maximizing option regard the major formula in RAM Allison employs” (Kafle, 2004). The rational actor approach shares similarities with neo-realist theory in which the impact of domestic politics on foreign policies is marginalized. Neo-realism argues that it is “the structure of the international system which has the most influence on a state’s foreign policy formulation and execution” (Toni, 1998). In Iran’s case and contrary to the ideologically-bounded representation of Iran’s foreign policy, a number of scholars such as Tarock (1999), Ramazani (2004) and Salehzadeh (2013) trace more pragmatic and realist approaches. Ramazani (2004) argues that “a streak of pragmatic national interest existed even in the earliest, most volatile and ideological phase of Iranian foreign policy” in 1980’s.
Scholars in favor of explaining Iran’s foreign policy through the RAM approach, indicate several historical incidents to strengthen their argument against the claims of calling Iran’s foreign and ideological policies ideological. The Iran-Contra affair is known as one of the main cases to debunk the ideologically led direction of Iran and portrays a more rational actor image of Iran. In 1985 and in the height of the Iran-Iraq war, Iran got involved in a direct arms deal with both the United States and Israel. Based on the Iran-Contra agreement; “American and Israeli arms were to be shipped to Iran in return for Iran's help with the release of Western hostages in Lebanon” (Ramazani, 2004). The impact of war as an international pressure factor to shape Iran’s choice of foreign and security policy was evident in the Iran-Contra affair. In several other periods such as during the rule of reformist President Khatami (1997-2005), Iranian foreign policy was not consistent with its ideological patterns. During this period, Iran was more cooperative and improving relations with western countries especially the EU member states and the members of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The current cooperation of Iran with the world community and the US in its nuclear talks is further evidence of Iran’s rational behaviors in foreign affairs.

On the other hand and contrary to the above narration, several scholars such as Nia (2011) and Beeman (2008) reject the application of Rational Actor Model in Iran’s foreign policy and instead emphasize the Islamic supra-nationalist ideology as the main explanatory driver of Iran’s policies. They criticize the Rational Actor Model for overlooking the importance of domestic politics in shaping Iran’s foreign and security policy. They argue “domestic variables since the Islamic revolution of 1979 have had a great impact on foreign policy decision-making” (Nia, 2011) of Iran. The insignificant impact of two major paradigm shifts in international relations namely the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 and the 9/11 attacks in 2011 on Iran’s foreign policy is the backbone of this argument. In fact strategies such as “counter-hegemonism, resistance, justice- seeking, anti-arrogance campaign, anti-American and anti-Israel” (Nia, 2011) as the fundamental principles of the Iranian foreign policy has remained unchanged since 1979.

Unlike RAM, an Islamic supra-nationalist based foreign policy does not view policies merely on materialistic cost-benefit relations or the outcomes of them. Contrary to the most countries in the world, Iran is a Shia messianist state with the mission of passing the state to Imam Mahdi whom Shias believe went into occultation in 874 AD. Supra-nationalist principles such as “the defense of the rights of all Muslims” and “non-alignment with respect to the hegemonic superpowers” are the basis of Iran’s foreign policy and according to the Iranian Constitution, the country “supports the just struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors in every corner of the globe” (Article
The supra-nationalist and pan-Islamic direction of the Iranian government is in favor of *Ummah* (Islamic community) and Islamic unity against nationalist ideologies. Such fundamental principles are incompatible with RAM or neo-realism. The strong support of Iran for Islamic militant groups which are mostly identified as terrorist groups by the world community and Iran’s opposition to Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations are mostly viewed as evidence that Iran’s foreign policy should be viewed from their ideological perspective.

2. The Foreign Policy Doctrine of Iran

“Iranian foreign policy is the product of a dual identity: a quasi-imperial nation pursuing political hegemony and an anti-status quo Islamic revolutionary power” (Hokayem, 2011). The policy was substantially influenced by the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. In line with Gasiorowski’s (1991) argument, which introduces the US-Iran cliency relationship as a predominant factor that facilitated the road to the Revolution, the Islamic concept of the “rejection of all forms of domination” has become one of the key principles of post-revolutionary Iran’s foreign policy. To this end, the new revolutionary state identified the US (and later all Western countries including Israel) as its main rivals in both the regional and international arenas. Shortly after the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, “on November 4, 1979, the Iranian revolutionaries captured the U.S. embassy in Tehran and its staff, holding 52 of them hostage” (Alvandi, 2003). “This seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Iran in November 1979 and the ensuing hostage crisis became an ordeal for revolutionary idealist foreign policy which pitted Iran against virtually every country in the world” (Ramazai, 2001, 62). The hostage crisis lasted 444 days, and among its more lasting repercussions, is the suspension of diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States.

Abandoning ties with the US was not the only move made by the newly established state with regard to its foreign policies. Against the cold war division of states Iran, subsequently adopted the slogan of “Neither East nor West but the Islamic Republic” as the foundation of the Iranian foreign policy. Armed with this vision, Iran joined the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) in 1979 hoping to discover new partners among developing nations who “would meet the foreign policy goals of the Islamic Republic as a Third World state, whereas an alliance with either the East or the West would not fit the Iranian religious, cultural, or historical context” (Sadri, 1998). At the same time, “Tehran also denounced any regional governments with pro-Western tendencies as corrupt and un-Islamic, directly challenging their legitimacy” (Byman, et al., 2001).
Given the religious nature of the Revolution of 1979; “Iran’s foreign policy is essentially based on Islamic precepts in which the religious principles and ideology have a norm-defining function” (Dehshiri and Majidi, 2009). Ideology in this context is defined as “a system of collectively held normative and reputedly factual ideas and beliefs and attitudes advocating a particular pattern of social relationships and arrangements, and/or aimed at justifying a particular pattern of conduct, which its proponents seek to promote, realize, pursue or maintain” (Hamilton 1987). The following sections of this paper will explain the main areas of conflict between the Islamic supra-nationalist foreign policy of Iran and the Westphalian system of international relations.

2.1 *Ummah* vs. Nation-State

The Islamic ideology emphasizes unity among Muslims regardless of their race, ethnicity, nationality or social status. For this reason, it is Muslims’ believing in Islam which makes them different from other citizens of the world. Therefore, Islam does not recognize the current political borders among countries as legitimate means of separating people. Within the Islamic system, the world’s population is divided between the two sections of *Ummah* (the global Muslim community) and the non-believers. In this system, the political loyalty of citizens is not to nation state but the Islamic community in whole. This supra-nationalist view finds its origin in several Quranic verses including; “And surely this your nation is one nation and I am your Lord, therefore be careful (of your duty) to Me” (Quran, 23:52). According to such verses, the only path to redemption for human being is to be surrendered to the will of Allah. For this reason, differences such as nationality, language or race must be ignored.

However, the main problem of this approach in the current setting of the world is its incompetency with the existing international rules and regulations. The Islamic approach towards international relations is in direct contrast with Article 2 (7) of the United Nations which clearly declares that “nothing should authorize intervention in matters essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state” (UN Charter, 1945). The Islamic system is also in conflict with the 1648 treaty of Westphalia, “which upheld the right of sovereign states to act freely within their own borders” (The Economist, 2008).

In the case of Iran, it is clear that the Iranian constitution is confused between holding to the ideological principles of the 1979 Islamic revolution and adhering to the necessities of the current international order. Article 16 of the Iran’s Constitution clearly frames the foreign policy doctrine of the country on “the basis of Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unsparing support to the *mustad'afiin* (the oppressed) of the world” (Islamic Republic of Iran
Constitution, 1979). Such criteria cover a wide range of foreign policy components that encompasses international relations, citizenship and Islamic *Ummah* (global Muslim community), sovereignty, protection and security of the citizens and foreign military relations. Among the fundamental principles of the Iranian foreign policy which has played a critical role in shaping Iran’s international behavior is the concept of utilizing Islamic supra-nationalism and the *Ummah* (global Muslim community) to reject domination by “oppressors”.

In accordance with Shia Islamic thoughts on international relations and as it was argued earlier, the Iran’s foreign policy is constructed on the ideology of Islamic supra-nationalism - which places its emphasis on the unity of the global Muslim community (*Ummah*). Arguably, this ideologically-based supra-nationalist doctrine is in many ways incompatible with the current political world order which is based on the concept of the Westphalian nation-state. As Huntington (1997) describes, “throughout Islam and small group and the great faith, the tribe and the *Ummah*, have been the principal foci of loyalty and commitment, and the nation state has been less significant.” The importance of Islamic supra-nationalism was also emphasized greatly by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Iranian revolution: “Islam is not peculiar to a country, to several countries, a group, or even the Muslims. Islam has come for humanity. Islam wishes to bring all of humanity under the umbrella of its justice” (FBIS-NEA, 1979).

Contrary to the above principles, there are several other articles in the Iranian Constitution which against the Islamic system of international relations, recognize the Westphalian nation-state approach including, “In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the freedom, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of the country are inseparable from one another, and their preservation is the duty of the government and all individual citizens” (Article 9), “All changes in the boundaries of the country are forbidden” (Article 78) and “the hierarchy of the executive authority, will be determined by law, in such a way as to preserve national unity, territorial integrity, the system of the Islamic Republic, and the sovereignty of the central government” (Article 100).

The conflict between the Islamic system of international relations and the Westphalian nation-state concept has created an inconsistent trend in Iran’s international behavior. While justifying its support of radical Muslim groups around the world based on its Islamic ideological values, Iran is absolutely careful not to be identified as a country with a desire to expand its territorial borders based on its Islamic supra-nationalist ideologies. This can be observed in Iran’s insistence on recognizing Iraq as the aggressor in the eight year war by the world community through the UN Resolution 598.
2.2 Ideology vs. Expediency

Another important conflict between the Islamic system of international relations and the Westphalian nation-state order is their views on the source of laws and regulations. Based on the Islamic ideology, Allah’s will is the sole source of all human laws and regulations regardless of their race and ethnicity, therefore, establishing institutions to ordain laws and regulations based on national interests is in conflict with Islamic values and principles. In the Westphalian system, “states are the sole subject of international law, having final and absolute authority within their sovereign territory” (Engle, 2004). This very core principle of the Westphalian system is challenged by the Islamic principles.

Within the context of Islamic thoughts and Fiqh (jurisprudence), supra-nationalism is based on the two key binary concepts of Darul-Islam (territory of Islam)/Darul-Kufr (territory of disbelief) and Darul-Islam (territory of Islam)/Darul-Harb (territory of war). Darul Islam is referred to “region of Muslim sovereignty where Islamic law prevails” (Oxford Islamic Studies, 2014). In this concept, the existence of an Islamic state (not a nation-state) is the necessary condition for regarding a territory Darul-Islam, and Islamic laws must be enforced by the state in that territory. Consecutively, Darul-Kufr is referred to regions of non-Muslim sovereignty where Islamic law does not prevail.

To overcome the clashes between this ideological system and the reality of today’s relations between the states, the concept of ‘expediency’ is introduced to the Islamic jurisprudence. Based on this concept, Muslim states are conditionally permitted to deal and interact with non-Muslim territories that are not at war with them. Using this concept in foreign relations has been accepted by a majority of Islamic countries. In the immediate years after the Islamic revolution of 1979, the Iranian regime has adopted the more radical binary approach of Darul-Islam (territory of Islam)/Darul-Harb (territory of war). Darul-Harb refers to “the territories where Islam does not prevail. Symbolically, the Darul-Harb is the domain, even in an individual's life, where there is a struggle against or opposition to, the Will of God” (Glasse, 2002). Based on this approach, Jihad as a divine institution of warfare should be declared on such territories to defend and restore the rules and regulations of Islam. This principle was both a fundamental component of Iran’s foreign policy and of its security in its first decade after the Islamic revolution of 1979.

However, like many other revolutionary states, the influence of radical Islamic principles in the foreign policies of Iran faded away by time. The impracticality in following Islamic principles in
the current world order forced Tehran to seek religious justifications for shifting its ideologically based foreign policies towards more practical ones. The ‘expediency’ concept seemed to fulfill this goal properly. For this reason and with the direct order of Iran’s Supreme Leader, the Expediency Discernment Council of the System was established in February 1988. In 2005, the Supreme Leader granted the council “supervisory power over all branches of government – delegating some of his own authority as is permitted in the constitution” (BBC, 2009).

2.3 Supporting the Global Oppressed

As it was mentioned earlier, the Iran utilizes Islam as its point of reference with regard to foreign policy therefore; it does not recognize nationality based on political borders or nation-states. This is because in Islam, nationality is a faith-based concept. “Non-Muslims are always aliens and Muslims all around the world are nationals of the universal Ummah” (Nakhaee, 1997). Therefore, the Islamic state of Iran is responsible for the affairs of Muslims anywhere in the world irrespective of political borders. This phenomenon is well framed in the Article 154 of the Iranian constitution as “it supports the just struggles of the mustad’afun (the oppressed) against the mustakbirun (the oppressor) in every corner of the globe.”

Clearly, this approach conflicts with the current world order that is based on the sovereignty of nation-states. Shortly after its establishment, the Islamic Republic went on to “export revolution” as its way of assisting and supporting oppressed Muslims around the world. In general, the policy’s aim was to spread Shia revolutionary ideas “against Arab “apostate” governments in the region, force a clash of civilizations with the “infidel” West, and assert leadership over the Arab Middle East - particularly in the oil-rich Persian Gulf” (Shapira and Diker, 2007). Implementing such a policy created a tense and distrustful relationship between Iran and its neighboring Arab nations, particularly those with large Shia populations - including Bahrain, Iraq and Kuwait. “The Iran-Iraq war was perhaps the first example of Iran’s new foreign policy ideology in action. The war could be described as a confrontation between Khomeini’s pan-Islamism and Saddam Hussein’s pan-Arabism” (Toni, 1998).

As a result, “the Persian Gulf countries were frightened as they suddenly found themselves in the much broader context of the Islamic world in which Islamic groups and segments of population were responding to the Iranian revolution” (Marschall, 2003). The result of this approach was the regional isolation of Iran, which in turn did little in convincing the revolutionary state to change its ideologically based foreign policy. Particularly because such policy has become the backbone of the ideologically-based foreign policy doctrine of Iran since 1979,
“regardless of the political differences between the political figures coming to the power” (Cakmak, 2013).

Due to its ideologically-based foreign policy, Iran pays particular attention to Muslim countries with large Shia populations such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain and Afghanistan. Syria, together with Iraq and Lebanon, form the Shi’a Crescent in the Middle East. “The Shi’a Crescent is seen by the Arab Sunni elites as an attempt by Iran firstly to engage the masses in the region; secondly, to build an ideological belt of sympathetic Shi’a governments and political factions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf region (Barzegar, 2008).” The Shi’a Crescent provides Iran with invaluable strategic and ideological depth in the region against Israel and other Sunni Arab states. The importance of the Shia Crescent in Iran’s foreign policy is easily traced in Tehran’s response on the Arab Spring. In line with the Islamic concept of “rejection of all forms of domination”, Iran warmly welcomed the Arab Spring by calling it the “Islamic awakening” against the US and its regional Arab allies.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

A closer look at the history of Iran’s foreign policy since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 indicates a pendulum-like trend of behavior. This spectrum of behavior varies from the total rejection of the current Westphalian system of international relations based on Islamic supra-nationalist ideologies to desperate attempts to be accepted as a part of this system. The source of such a paradox is rooted in the disintegrated approach of Iran towards the world. As it was discussed earlier, on one hand, Iran is trying its best to remain loyal to its ideological revolutionary principles while on the other hand, as a member of the international community it needs to adhere to the current world order. This paradox can be best understood in historical context. In the first decade of its establishment and under the leadership of ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic denied most of the globally accepted phenomena of international relations such as national government, national interests, international institutions, international laws and geo-political patterns of power. In this stage, establishing a utopic Islamic state was the main goal of the revolutionary regime. In this period, concepts such as national interests or international cooperation were viewed as taboos and in contrast with Islamic principles and values. However, in the second decade of the revolution and during the reformist President Khatami (1997-2005), Iran gradually shifted its confrontational foreign policy to more conciliating one. This shift is argued mostly as a result of political and economic pressures put upon Iran by the international community. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that for the
same paradox, the shift in Iran’s foreign policy towards conciliation with the international community did not reach a tangible conclusion. By the election of President Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), Iran once again shifted its foreign policy towards confronting the international community. The movement was labeled as returning to the fundamental principles of the Islamic revolution. In line with this pendulumlike trend of behavior, Iran’s foreign policy has once again shifted towards conciliation with the world upon the election of President Rouhani in 2013.

As it was discussed, the cause of such drastic convergence and divergence in Iran’s foreign policy is rooted in its paradoxical ideological approach. Iran’s foreign policy tends to accommodate both Islamic supra-nationalism and Westphalian system at the same time within its structure. To achieve this goal, an ideological interpretation of “expediency” is manipulated by Iran to ensure the survival of the Islamic state. In the complicated structure of the Iranian foreign policy, expediency “can be accurately interpreted as nothing less than a cost-benefit approach to decision making” (Tarzi, 2011). This approach posits that until the survival of the state is at threat, Iran bases its initial foreign policy on Islamic supra-nationalist objectives instead of rational ones within the Westphalian system. However, when such a threat materializes, Iran retreats from its initial ideological objectives in favor of adopting pragmatic approaches (recognizing the Westphalian system), at which point it is prepared to either covertly or overtly negotiate its idealist objectives – sometimes abandoning them altogether.

As long as Iran does not confront survival threats at the international level, it continues to pursue its respective ideologically bound foreign policy. In this phase, the ruling elites – consisting of the ruling political administration as well as the military and security apparatus, are primarily responsible for achieving the state’s ideological foreign policy. However, upon facing conditions that threaten the survival of the state, the state adopts a more flexible attitude whereby its foreign policy decisions become more rational in nature within the Westphalian system. The degree of the State’s flexibility is in direct relation with the severity and proximity of the threat to the state’s survival. This pattern is especially tangible in today’s Iran’s foreign policy approach where Tehran found its state survival in immediate danger under the crippling international sanctions. As a result, Iran resumed to the negotiation table with the international community and involved into direct talks with the US for the first time since 1979. It is apparent that in this period of time, the Islamic supra-nationalist principles are halted in favor of the Westphalian values.
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