

# **The Dominance of Culture over Politics, in the Long Term, in Iran**

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Historians, diplomats, scholars, political scientists and most of all laymen who know about the rich culture, history and religious beliefs and values of Iran, some of whom may have studied it for decades, often long for its expression in Iran's form of government. "*When would we live to see it*", is often the question asked.

When questions arise on the affairs of Iran, the news media, so-called think tanks in major cities, governments and observers rely on knowledge of modern history and political science among experts. In the immediate and short term, indeed, it is largely the political forces that are the predictable determinants of the course that events may take.

Time frames may vary as to what is immediate and short term. But to put approximate bounds around it and roughly define the time frame for clarity, in the present context of a span of a few generations to start with, by immediate term here it is meant within a few days to a week or so; by short term is meant a few weeks to a few months; by intermediate term is meant a few months to a few years; by long term is meant decades and beyond.

The thesis of this paper is that while in the immediate and short term political forces dominate the course of events, in the intermediate term they may hang in the balance, and in the long term it is the cultural forces that dominate and become the determinants of history. Both have their respective influences, and each taken out of their proper domain largely loses its significance. In this context we employ the term culture as inclusive of religious values. This of course is not only true about Iran, but also of other cultures. Case in point is the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Initially a weak minority despised and persecuted by the state – by political forces – in time it spread and grew in the minds and hearts of people, so that the state, Constantine in 325 AD, was left with no choice but to succumb to it. It has become evident that this process has gotten under way in Iran.

Today there is a new and more moderate regime in Iran headed by President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif, backed by the Supreme Leader. Changes that have taken place over the course of the past two decades in Iran such as the progress of women in society, whereby as an example the majority of university students and government office staff are women, are but indications of the emerging cultural forces that will dominate and in the long term shape the course of history.

A review of the background will place this issue into its proper setting. When the Islamic regime came to power in 1979, it was based on a principle stated by the founder of the Islamic Regime Ayatollah Khomeini, that Iran literally may burn, as long as Islam survives, and words tantamount largely to Iran counting in importance as nothing, and Islam as all. The Islamic clergy lamented the fact that in order for the kind of Islam they sought to institute to take root in Iran, really the language of the country has to be changed to Arabic. The Islamic regime reached out to Arab countries, seeking their support, and endorsement of the Islamic Revolution. It was not received among governments of Sunni Arab nations. Historically within Islam, Sunni Arabs and Iranians have been poles apart. The key to peace between them lies in the moderates on both sides having the leadership, and being able to negotiate. On Iran's side the long term influence and dominance of cultural forces foster the growth of moderate political leaders. Since religion and state are not separate in the Middle East, and it is religious law, or *Shari'a*, that is exercised within Islam, religion carries greater significance in the daily lives of citizens that it does in the West, where people are free to change from one sect to another, or change their religion altogether. The Arabs in general follow Sunnism, while the Iranians follow Shiism. As important a factor as religion in identity is the ethnicity of a nation. Arabs, in particular those neighboring Iran, have traditionally referred to Iran and Iranians as '*ajam*', a term meaning non-Arab, outsider, and used so often to refer to Iranians that it has become synonymous with Iranian or Persian in both the realm of Arabs and Iran. Thus the Islamic regime not only lacked the reception it desired from major Arab states, but saw Sunni-controlled Iraq and its financiers the states of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and others in the Persian gulf launched a war against it. Despite sizeable Shiite populations in some Arabic-speaking states, partly because of Sunni dominance of government in most, there was little or no movement among the population to support justice for Iran. Such a war could not be launched against Iran under its previous regime. Indeed Saddam Hussein had designs to that effect, but failed and in 1975 a peace accord was brokered between Iran and Iraq by the Arab states, led by Algeria. But after the ouster of monarchy in Iran, the military, closely associated and identified with the king, was weakened through purges, through removal from office or execution of a considerable corps of officers who did not subscribe to the ideas of the Islamic regime and were seen as a threat to the stability of the new government. General Nader Jahanbani, who had led the Iranian Air Force in a confrontation in which Saddam backed down, prior to the Algiers accords, remained behind during the Islamic revolution, while many leading figures in the regime were leaving the country. His stance was that he was a dedicated professional in the service of his country and any regime that comes to power would need to rely on such professionals in the defense of the country. He was among those executed. Thus with its

military weakened, Iran presented the opportune moment to the Ba'ath regime in Iraq to now abrogate the peace accord it had negotiated.

We see that in Arab countries despite Iran's Islamic revolution, it continued to be regarded as the country of '*ajams*. From the point of view of the US, Europe and other countries, Shiites form only a small minority of the billion or so Moslems around the world. The office of Supreme Leader in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, being above reproach, is in many respects modeled after that of the King as head of state. Its main difference is the fact that it is not inherited and is supposed to be subject to checks and balances by other institutions in the Islamic Republic. In actual fact it is plain, and was plain at the time of writing of the constitution, that the office of Supreme Leader in practice acquires so much power that it can only be made subject to such checks and balances after being vacated or in the most dire emergencies in the event it acts contrary to what the vast majority of other major leaders in the regime would believe. The duty of Kingship in Iran has throughout the course of history been to enact social justice. In this the King is be inspired by the higher being, through *farr*, the aura or spirit of kingship which derives form pre-Islamic *khvarenah*, wherein the human being who occupies the throne embodies *farr* and is no longer subject to his own preferences, earthly desires and whims, but enacts the will of God in government. This notion of divine kingship came from Iran to Europe via Greece and Rome and now shows itself in an Islamic garb in Iran itself. The difference between Sunnism and Shiism is little known or understood in the West.<sup>1</sup> Thus "Islam", by default, in the West, is largely seen as Sunnism.

In the 1970s, President Carter in a trip to Iran characterized it as an "island of stability", a notion that later seemed shattered, not too many years after uttered, by the Islamic revolution. Yet, today in the Middle East after three and a half decades that statement seems true. Memoirs of former US National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft reveal that around 1976 US and Europe policy makers decided to replace Iran with Saudi Arabia as its main ally and partner in the Persian Gulf region<sup>2</sup>. After more than three decades now, from all indications, policy makers have realized the detriment of that change to the West's interests over the years that have transpired and sought to reverse course.

Faced with reality, a relatively strong and stable Iran characterized as the regional great power or hegemon, the West now has set about to reverse that course and navigate through the difficulties and animosity created during the Iran-Iraq war and its support for Saddam, to try to make Iran its regional ally. Over the course of the world's history Iran has been a major pillar of civilization, and policies heedless of that fact would act at their own peril. The presence of Iran in the institutions of Western civilization comes via the Persian inheritance of Jews and Judaism during and after the inter-testamental period, and through Greece and Rome's long centuries of interaction with Persia and Persian culture. The founder of the Iranian state, Cyrus the Great (ca. 550 BC), was the gentile Messiah of the Jews (Isaiah 45)<sup>3</sup>. Medieval Europe knew little or nothing of the achievements of Greece and Rome until its interaction with the Middle East during

the centuries of the crusades about one millennium before our time. Knowledge of science, medicine and mathematics was passed to Europeans from Moslems they met and made friends with during the Crusades in despite the war. The great philosopher of the science of history, Ibn Khaldun (ca. 1400), by which we mean great not only in his time but ours, in his timeless *Prolegomena to History*, sheds some light on the issue of the origins of that body of knowledge:

“It is a remarkable fact that, with few exceptions, most Muslim scholars both in the religious and intellectual sciences have been non-Arabs . . . This has occurred in spite of the fact that Islam originated as an Arab sect with an Arab founder.”<sup>4</sup>

To return to the present, we witness Iran under its new regime beginning to work with the US. It would be evident that after more than three decades the Islamic clergy have realized how, regardless of their degree of allegiance to Islam, and regardless of their own origin, many of whom have their roots in Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon and Syria<sup>5</sup> dating back to Safavid times, due to being in Iran they are seen as *'ajam*. The Islamic clergy may not consciously acknowledge this fact, but it cannot escape the attention of any keen observer. The underlying basis of this contrast is deeply embedded in the psyche and national character of both the Arabs and Iranians. The Levantine and Mediterranean Arabs from the point of view of Iran are seen mostly as Arab in language, and their religious beliefs, value and outlook on life stand as in contrast with those of Persian Gulf Arabs, where Iran is seen as *'ajam*. The Islamic regime has realized that where they come to enjoy respect for Iran around the world, much of that respect is based on the pre-Islamic heritage of Iran, on Cyrus the Great. Cyrus was a follower of Zoroaster the prophet of ancient Iran. We find former president Ahmadinejad, while still in office, defending the legacy of Cyrus the Great, so much so that he was put on the spot and accused of supporting the institution of monarchy which Cyrus founded<sup>6</sup>.

The teachings of Zoroaster survive under an Islamic garb in Shiism. The pre-Islamic inheritance of Shiism has been acknowledged by some enlightened officials in the mid-level leadership of the Islamic regime. It is a fact that in the course of history the Islamic regime at higher levels will at some point inevitably move to acknowledge.

Having thus realized the manner in which it is perceived from outside, whether among Arabs or the US and Europe, and under outside pressure, the Islamic regime after these decades has begun to shape its policies and act more in line with Iran's heritage - although this may be vehemently denied by hardliners. It is thus that we witness the accession to power of an administration headed by President Rouhani, that Islamic hardliners in Iran have called “not of us”.

While political forces at times operate violently and create a spectacle, cultural forces operate subtly and gently, over a course of time. They represent the quiet triumph of humanity over the sword. What we find now is the result of cultural forces operating over decades. While in the short run there may be futile and artificial attempts by hardliners inside Iran and others outside to

manipulate or tamper with this course, in the long run there is virtually no stopping it. Indeed those attempts have already taken place while president Khatami was in office, and failed. We are at the second round. Any attempt to stop it again would be tantamount to a return to a failed era and failed policies for both Iran and the US, in their respective positions. For conditions to warrant impeding that progress, it would take the passage of some decades such that lessons learned would no longer be current in the minds of policy makers. It is conceivable that mankind again embark on a course of learning through practice, the hard way, what is known through principles theoretically and attested and demonstrated historically. When the lessons of history are not heeded history repeats itself until such time as they are.

As Joseph Arthur, le Comte de Gobineau, observed of Iran, often cited by scholars, through the upheavals of history Iran may be likened to its native cypress tree : It will bend in the face of storms, but return to its upright position afterward. Time and again this has happened. As Richard Frye stated in his interview with CNN “it is in the course of history. This has happened before, it has happened many times before”, a fact he had realized in his earliest years in Iran and in the study of Iran :

“The central fact of this culture is not so much that Persians of all classes know their history, for they do not, nor that they hearken back to Iran’s glorious past, though this they do. It is rather this somewhat intangible feeling among the people that Persian culture – traditions, outlook on life, and the like, - will always survive political domination and the onslaught of new ideologies, and that it is a privilege to partake of this culture.”<sup>7</sup>

Through cultivation and the spread of agriculture and irrigation on a great scale, Iran (and other agrarian nations in the region such as Armenia) had naturally become wealthy and with it become a target for forcible confiscation of wealth from less civilized, non-agrarian tribes. They suffered multiple invasions in the course of history, beginning with Alexander. But Alexander, soon after his invasion of Iran (ca. 320 BC) adopted Persian habits and customs, married a Persian princess, had ten thousand of his officers marry Persian women, and his actions in ordering the death of a close Macedonian who had desecrated the mausoleum of Cyrus the Great demonstrate that he upheld the legacy of Cyrus.

Subsequent to the Arab invasions of Iran (early-mid 600s AD) and the first dynasty of caliphs (Omayyads to about 750 AD), the capital of the Islamic caliphate was moved from Damascus to Baghdad under Persian influence. Iraq, where the capital of Iran was then located, had been a part of Iran for centuries until the Arab invasions following the advent of Islam. The Persians brought to power the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad who adopted Persian manners and customs and ruled ca. 750-1250, so much so that the Abbasids are seen as a continuation of the Sasanian dynasts (who ruled Iran ca. 225-650 AD).

After the Mongol (early 1200s) and Tartar (late 1300s) invasions, and their widespread destruction and massacres in Iran, within two generations those who had settled in the country that their grandfathers had tried to destroy growing up with Persian became its ardent supporters and proponents.

The observation of M. Philips Price century ago holds today, as it did for the preceding centuries:

“Throughout all the ages, in spite of Arab, Mongol and Tartar invasions and devastations, Nature through the agency of the fertile oases has restored to Iran the damage inflicted on her by man and has given the Persian that material wealth which has enabled him to build a culture of undying fame . . . The Persian is always being conquered by the sword, but in turn always subdues the conqueror by his intellect.”<sup>8</sup>

In times past, before the modern era in the ancient world, oracles or prophets saw political trends and unfolding events, and predicted the future characterizing them as *ordained*. In part that was due to the fact that such forces were ultimately rooted in belief systems, which each nation associates with the higher being, in the manner they understand their higher being. In our day scholarship while reasoning its way, reaches much the same conclusions.

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## References

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<sup>3</sup> Afshin Zand, *Persian Heritage of Judaeo-Christianity*, 1997.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard N. Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia*, 1975, p. 150.  
Charles Issawi, *An Arab Philosophy of History : Selections from the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldun of Tunis (1331-1406)*, 1950, p. 61-63.

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<sup>5</sup> Afshin Zand, *Origins of the Islamic Clergy of Iran*, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmadinejad's interview, and praise of Cyrus the Great:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2DhEECrRdg>

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<sup>7</sup> Richard N. Frye, interview with CNN. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYjVGZmY8k4>

<sup>8</sup> M. Phillips Price, *War and Revolution in Asiatic Russia*, 1918, p. 33-34.

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