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## *The Sources of Iranian Negotiating Behavior*

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# STRATEGIC

# PERSPECTIVES

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This analysis identifies patterns exhibited by the Iranian government and the Iranian people since ancient times. Most importantly, it identifies critical elements of Iranian culture that have been systematically ignored by policymakers for decades. It is a precise understanding of these cultural cues that should guide policy objectives toward the Iranian government.
- Iranians expect a ruler to demonstrate resolve and strength, and do whatever it takes to remain in power. The Western concept of demanding that a leader subscribe to a moral and ethical code does not resonate with Iranians. Telling Iranians that their ruler is cruel will not convince the public that they need a new leader. To the contrary, this will reinforce the idea that their ruler is strong. It is only when Iranians become convinced that either their rulers lack the resolve to do what is necessary to remain in power or that a stronger power will protect them against their current tyrannical rulers, that they will speak out and try to overthrow leaders.
- Compromise (as we in the West understand this concept) is seen as a sign of submission and weakness. For Iranians, it actually brings shame on those (and on the families of those) who concede. By contrast, one who forces others to compromise increases his honor and stature, and is likely to continue forcing others to submit in the future. Iranians do not consider weakness a reason to engage an adversary in compromise, but rather as an opportunity to destroy them. It is for this reason that good-will and confidence-building measures should be avoided at all costs.

- What Iranians really believe, they usually keep to themselves. Instead, they tell those with power what they think their leaders want to hear. This is the concept of *ketman*, or dissimulation. Iranians do not consider *ketman* (*taqiyah* in Arabic) to be lying. And they have developed it into a fine art, which they view as a positive form of self-protection.
- Western cultural biases regarding, and demanding, honesty make it easy to misunderstand Iranians. Iranians have learned to cope with adverse situations by being warm, gracious, polite, and obsequious. Westerners, especially Americans who place a high value on candor, straightforwardness, and honesty, are often bamboozled by Iranians who know that those in the West are easily taken in by their effusively friendly, kind, generous, and engaging behavior.
- Negotiations are opportunities to best others, to demonstrate power, and to make sure opponents know who is the boss. In politics, Iranians negotiate only after defeating their enemies. During these negotiations, the victor magnanimously dictates to the vanquished how things will be conducted thereafter. Signaling a desire to talk before being victorious is, in Iranian eyes, a sign of weakness or lack of will to win.
- When the West establishes itself as the most powerful force and shows strength and resolve, Iranians will most likely come on board. They do not want to be on the losing side. If military action is eventually required, the targeting of national symbols and leadership strongholds may be enough to demonstrate that the balance of power in Iran is quickly shifting. By applying this principle, the West may not need to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities or launch a large-scale invasion to bring down Iran's rulers and stop the nuclear program.
- Iranians look around them and see that others in their neighborhood such as Russia, Israel, Pakistan, India, and China all have the bomb. To say that Iran shouldn't have the bomb is considered an affront to Iranian patriotism. Using a little ingenuity, we could drive a wedge between the Iranian government and the Iranian people. We should make clear that we are not opposed to Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. We are only opposed to the current government having a nuclear arsenal because it is the largest state-sponsor of terrorism in the world and does its utmost to undermine its neighbors and remove U.S. influence in the region. If the current government acquires nuclear weapons, it might very well use them.
- If the West is to succeed, Iranians must be convinced, in terms they understand, that America is prepared to establish itself as a powerful force and help the Iranian population liberate themselves from the tyranny under which they live.

## UNDERSTANDING KEY IRANIAN CULTURAL CUES

The Iranian regime currently sits on the threshold of developing nuclear weapons, a scenario that endangers the entire Middle East, the United States, and even Iranians themselves. Yet this situation is by no means a new development.

Since the onset of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Iranian government has been using every means at its disposal to terrorize the world. Governments in the West have tried various approaches to dealing with the Iranian regime including appeasement, negotiations, and sanctions. Yet the Iranian government has not been dissuaded from sponsoring and implementing terror tactics, and has not been convinced to halt its illegal nuclear program.

To the contrary, for the past 31 years the Iranian government has been further emboldened by the West's inability to deter the agenda of the Islamic Revolution. The regime, today led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, continues to widen its global axis of influence as it races toward nuclear weapons capacity at an alarming pace.

Time is running short for the international community to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, which will undoubtedly be used as leverage over its neighbors in the region as well as the West, if not detonated.

If the international community is going to succeed in aborting Iran's nuclear agenda, a rapid reassessment of policy is needed. The root causes of 30-plus years of diplomatic failures must be exposed, and alternative strategies must be quickly implemented.

This analysis will not suggest precise courses of action for dealing with the nuclear threat the world now faces at the hands of the Iranian regime. Rather, it identifies patterns exhibited by the Iranian government and, for that matter, the Iranian people since well before the onset of the Islamic Revolution.

Most importantly, it identifies critical elements of Iranian culture that have been systematically ignored by policymakers for decades. It is a precise understanding of these cultural cues that should guide policy objectives toward the Iranian government.

Many of the cultural elements found within Iran do not neatly align with values embedded in Western-style diplomacy. Yet, if our understanding of Iranian culture does not improve, and if Iranian values and cues are not internalized, we may find ourselves outsmarted and bullied by an Iranian government operating under an active nuclear umbrella.

## THE RESILIENCE OF IRANIAN CULTURE FOLLOWING ARAB CONQUEST

The best way to understand the Iranian mind is to examine Iran's storied history, and consider how Iran has survived as a cultural and political entity since the advent of Islam.

Iranians have a strong sense of patriotism and loyalty to their country.<sup>1</sup> Unlike most other Muslim countries in the Arab world, Iran has existed as a cultural and political entity for more than 2,500 years, long before the advent of Islam. Thus, Iranians have always had a distinct sense of unique cultural and political identity.

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Prior to the Arab-Islamic conquests of the seventh century, Iran had a long tradition of conquering other nations and absorbing other peoples.

In order to protect its longstanding history, when conquered themselves, Iranians allowed themselves to become subjected to foreign rule, yet developed a resiliency to the politics and culture of their conquerors. Iranians essentially persuaded their conquerors, "Come in and rule us, but do so using our ways, and assimilate into our culture."

In the 630s, Arab Muslims poured out of the Arabian Peninsula to conquer the world in the name of Islam. Within 100 years they had captured the Arab world, crossed the Straits of Gibraltar into Spain, and had expanded eastward into what is today Pakistan. By 750, most of what we know today as the Arab world – the Middle East and North Africa – had become Arabicized, linguistically and culturally. The local languages and cultures were decimated. But not in Iran.<sup>2</sup>

During the 300 years that followed, the few Iranian documents and literature that came out of the period were almost exclusively written in Arabic and are Islamic in nature. Yet by the 900s, history notes an incredible transformation. The Persian language re-emerged as the spoken and written language of Iran, albeit written in Arabic letters and with many Arabic words, but it was, linguistically and culturally, distinctly Persian.<sup>3</sup>

These Persian-speakers were now Muslims, but unlike their neighbors to the West, they did not become Arabs.

To understand how this transformation occurred is to understand the resiliency of the Iranian people. As a former conqueror, the Iranian population included senior government officials who had the experience of ruling empires. The nomadic Arabs who conquered Iran did not have experience ruling large territories and foreign peoples. They needed help.

Persians stepped in and taught the nomads how to rule, and to do so in the Iranian style. As a result, Persian culture was able to absorb its invaders and teach its conquerors how to rule. Gradually, the new rulers became culturally Persianized, even if they were Arabs.

Within approximately 150 years of the Arab-Islamic conquests, Persian/Iranian political culture became dominant in much of the eastern part of what we today know as the Middle East, and in the eastern Islamic world which extended deep into today's India.

In approximately 750, Abu Muslim, of the northeastern Iranian province of Khorasan, led a revolt against the Arab-Islamic Umayyad dynasty that was ruling the Islamic world from Damascus. Abu Muslim installed a descendent of the Muslim prophet Muhammad's uncle Abbas as the new caliph. The Persians essentially put the Abbasids in power and taught them how to rule a large empire using Persian political culture as their guide. The Islamic capital was moved from Damascus eastward to Baghdad, a city much closer to the Iranian cultural orbit.<sup>4</sup>

Persian political culture soon began to dominate the capital of the Islamic Empire in Baghdad. And the sophisticated and cunning Iranians, who were responsible for creating the Abbasid dynasty, similarly developed a new Islamic culture based on a synthesis of the dynasty's Arab rulers<sup>5</sup> and Persian culture. As such, Iranian culture was able to successfully withstand its Arab conquerors. The Abbasid dynasty would reign 500 years until 1258, when the Mongols sacked Baghdad.

## MAJOR PRINCIPLES OF IRANIAN CULTURE

Many of the Iranian cultural concepts that were identified in classical Islamic times are present in Iran to this day. Understanding these concepts provides insight into how to deal with contemporary Iran's government and its people.

What follows are a series of important principles or aspects of Iranian culture, with vignettes and episodes that illustrate these principles in action. It is important to note that both humor and proverb provide deep insight into a culture, and Iranian culture is rich in both.

### 1. RESPECT FOR POWER, HERO WORSHIP

Iranians expect a ruler to demonstrate resolve and strength, and do whatever it takes to remain in power. As such, it is the prerogative of Iranian rulers to be magnanimous or cruel. Iranians fear but respect cruelty as a tool of maintaining power. Rulers are expected to be cruel, and Iranians have a long tradition of placating their rulers.

The Western concept of demanding that a leader subscribe to a moral and ethical code does not resonate with Iranians. Telling Iranians that their ruler is cruel will not convince the public that they need a new leader. To the contrary, this will reinforce the idea that their ruler is strong.

Iranians respect power. What Iranians don't respect is weakness. It is when a ruler appears weak that Iranians quickly turn on him, and look for another ruler to "worship."<sup>6</sup>

It is only when Iranians become convinced that either their rulers lack the resolve to do what is necessary to remain in power or a stronger power will protect them against their current tyrannical rulers that they will speak out and try to overthrow leaders.

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***Khomeini retrieves the honor of Iran and of the Muslim world and humiliates the U.S.***

For centuries, it appeared to the Muslims that the non-Muslim world had been conquering and dividing up the Muslim world. The West had thus humiliated the Muslims, who proved powerless to stand up for themselves. The greatness of Ayatollah Khomeini, from a Muslim point of view, was that he was able to make the West answer to his dictates, in particular, humiliating the U.S. and restoring the Islamic world's honor.

Khomeini provided a model to the Muslim world, which observed carefully as America submitted to Khomeini's demands, particularly during the 444-day U.S. Embassy hostage crisis.

While America and the West had the opportunity to restore their own honor and respect, and stop Khomeini in his tracks, they did not. The Western display of weakness encouraged Khomeini to escalate the situation and continue to humiliate America.

That is why so many young Muslims – both Shiite and Sunni – affixed Khomeini's picture everywhere throughout the Muslim world. Khomeini restored Islam's honor. And Iran is continuing to follow Khomeini's model today through its dogged pursuit of nuclear weaponry and its undermining its neighbors. Moreover, Iran's regime is strengthened by what is, at best, the West's weak response.

## *Iranian students in 1978: “Death to the Shah, Long Live Khomeini, Who is Khomeini?”*

During the earlier and mid-stages of the Iranian Revolution when the Shah was still in power, an American studying at a university in a religious city in Iran related the following story:

He asked his fellow students which of six Grand Ayatollahs<sup>7</sup> their families followed – including the as-yet-publicly-unheard-of Ayatollah Khomeini. The students either feigned ignorance or mentioned the name of the well-known, non-political, Chief Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Shariat-Madari.<sup>8</sup>

Shortly thereafter, people began rioting in the streets against the regime. After the Shah proved either unable or unwilling to put down the riots, these same Iranian students began demonstrating in the streets, chanting, “Death to the Shah, Long Live Khomeini.”

***In the Islamic Revolution of 1978/79, Iranians saw that power was shifting and quickly gravitated to Khomeini, the new strong man, even though most had no idea who he was.***

At the time of the revolution, the Shah proved he was weak because he did not put down the riots, and this grand ayatollah named Khomeini kept saying publicly what he planned to do after the Shah left. The Shah and his allies either did not or could not stop Khomeini from talking.

The students, who felt the current shifting, believed they had better jump on Khomeini’s bandwagon to protect themselves. What these students shouted at these demonstrations meant little to them emotionally. What really mattered was that they not end up supporting the losing side.

Somewhat surprisingly, these same students, after demonstrating for Khomeini, contacted the American studying with them and asked him, “Who is Khomeini?”

The students wanted to know about Khomeini, for whom they had just demonstrated, and remembered that the American had previously mentioned Khomeini’s name. They assumed he knew more about Khomeini than they did, so they contacted him. Iranians saw that power was shifting and, in typical Iranian fashion, quickly gravitated to the new strongman, even though most had no idea who he was.

From the Western point of view, this teaches us a great deal about the Islamic Revolution of 1978/79. While it appeared that the country genuinely supported Khomeini, most did not even know who he was.

## 2. RESPECT FOR IRAN'S HISTORY

Iranians are proud of their 2,500-year history and want to see their nation's pride restored. Iranians feel humiliated that their beloved country is vilified abroad, and a large number know that their tyrannical, terrorist rulers are the reason their country is seen as a pariah. They want to be able to travel the world freely, as citizens of a highly-respected country, as they had done under the Shah.

Yet this desired return to normalcy is unlikely under the current regime. Positive change is unlikely to occur until Iran is ruled by a regime that seeks freedom for the Iranian people, ends its support for international terrorism, and supports an inclusive polity where every Iranian has an opportunity to succeed.

Nevertheless, as long as the current leadership is perceived as the strongest power in the country, Iranians will not rise up to overthrow their rulers. And unfortunately, the balance of power within Iran is unlikely to shift without support – probably both overt and covert – from the outside.

### *How Iran became Shiite*

Before the Safavids came to power in Iran in the early 1500s, all of the states surrounding Iran were ruled by Sunni Turks who adhered to the (relatively liberal) Hanafi law school.

By choosing Shi'ism, the Safavids – who were themselves Turks – provided Iran with another layer of protection against the surrounding states and thereby gave Iran another way to preserve its unique cultural and political identity. Even more amazing is that most of Iran, which had been overwhelmingly Sunni prior to the Safavids, converted to Shi'ism within 100 years.

### *Has the Iranian government made the Iranian people anti-Muslim?*

Even though the regime calls itself Islamic, many mullahs loathe the regime because they believe it is destroying Islam. It is estimated that more than 75 percent of the mullahs oppose the regime but do not do so actively because public opposition might get them arrested or worse.

Today, many mullahs are afraid to walk the streets in religious garb because drivers "accidentally" go through puddles and splash dirty water on them, or throw things out the window at them and drive away. When mullahs travel on buses or walk the streets in clerical garb, the other travelers often subject these mullahs to scorn and harassment.

### 3. COMPROMISE AND GOOD-WILL AS SIGNS OF WEAKNESS

To those in the West, compromise and gestures of good-will are seen as useful tools displaying reasoned thinking, to accomplish mutually beneficial results. Iranians internalize these concepts very differently.

In Iran, compromise is seen as a sign of submission and weakness. Compromise actually brings shame on those (and on the families of those) who concede. By contrast, one who forces others to compromise increases his honor<sup>9</sup> and stature, and is likely to continue forcing others to submit in the future.

Good-will and confidence-building measures are interpreted as a lack of strength or resolve. To Iranians, these measures are seen only as concessions, in the most negative connotation of the word.

One coming from a position of strength will only make a concession if he is absolutely sure that doing so will actually consolidate and therefore increase his power. If one believes that his adversary will gain even the slightest advantage through such a measure, he will never concede an inch.

***Iranians do not consider weakness a reason to engage adversaries in compromise, but rather as an opportunity to destroy them.***

Iranians loathe weakness. Iranians do not consider weakness a reason to engage adversaries in compromise, but rather as an opportunity to destroy them. It is for this reason that measures of good-will and confidence-building should be avoided at all costs.

#### *Talking with the Iranians*

In late 2006, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq and the U.S. commander of the Multi-National Force in Iraq held talks with the Iranian ambassador to Iraq. From the Iranian cultural vantage point, the fact that the U.S. was willing to sit down with Iran was proof that the U.S. was weak and looking for a way out of Iraq. The Iranians responded by escalating the attacks against the U.S. inside Iraq. These attacks only subsided when the Iranians saw America show resolve militarily by responding with great force. Only then did they back down.

Later, when the Obama administration signaled its desire to sit down to negotiations with the Iranians, the Iranians hardened their stand on the nuclear issue. Talking before winning shows weakness, and the Iranian government interpreted Obama's attempts at dialogue as a sign of weakness. What we in the West see as good-will, the Iranians understand as weakness, so they had no incentive to soften their positions. And when Iranians smell weakness, like others in the Middle East, they go in for the kill.

### *Iran's diametrically opposite reactions toward the U.S. and the USSR following responses to acts of Iranian aggression*

During the 1978-79 revolution, why did the Iranians react so vehemently and violently against the Americans, who though not Muslim believe in God, yet kowtowed to the Soviets who were atheists?<sup>10</sup>

The Iranians feared the Soviets. When harmed, Russians have a reputation for killing people. Americans, on the other hand, have a reputation for trying to negotiate. Our leaders and diplomats often say, "Oh, what have we done to offend you? How can we put it right? Perhaps we can make some kind of compromise?" Iranians see the typical Russian reaction as exhibiting strength. They see America's reaction as exhibiting weakness.

### ***Iran released the U.S. diplomats it had held hostage for 444 days an hour before Ronald Reagan became president. They believed Reagan was a cowboy and feared he would "level" Tehran.***

When the Iranian terrorists took U.S. diplomats hostage in 1979,<sup>11</sup> they originally expected to hold them for a few days, hoping to sabotage meetings then taking place in Algiers between U.S. National Security Advisor Brzezinski and Iranian Prime Minister Bazargan. President Carter and his advisors called for negotiations to "end the crisis." The Iranians understood the American reaction as fearful. No one asks to negotiate before he wins. The "student" terrorists saw they had a good thing going and extended the hostage crisis for 444 days. Muslims around the world admired them for humiliating the Americans and restoring Iran's – and the Muslim world's – honor.

When and why did the hostage-holders release the American diplomats? Iran put the hostages on a plane less than an hour before Ronald Reagan became president. The hostages left Iranian airspace when Reagan raised his hand and took the oath of office. The Iranian "students" believed Reagan was a cowboy and feared he would "level" Tehran.

Interestingly, during the hostage crisis, a group of Iranian terrorists also occupied the Soviet embassy in Tehran. But they quickly left, because Moscow informed Tehran that if the Iranians did not leave the Soviet Embassy within hours, Tehran would be bombed.

In both the American and Soviet cases, what determined Iranian actions was the credible threat of force versus a position of compromise, not Shari'a laws regarding Christians and atheists.

#### 4. **KETMAN/TAQIYAH: MASKING ONE'S TRUE THOUGHTS – DISSIMULATION**<sup>12</sup>

Iran is a “top to bottom” society. The flow of information emanates from above and almost never from below. Leaders tell the population what they are expected to do, and the population falls in line. Iranians do not reverse the flow of information. Unless their leaders appear weak, the people do not stand up and tell their leaders the truth.

What Iranians really believe, they usually keep to themselves. Instead, they tell those with power what they think their leaders want to hear. This is the concept of *ketman*, or dissimulation. Iranians do *not* consider *ketman* (*taqiyah* in Arabic) to be lying. And they have developed it into a fine art, which they view positively as a form of self-preservation. Through the rampant use of this device, it is nearly impossible to determine what Iranians really believe.

It comes as no surprise that when Iranians think they aren't being observed, they often do the opposite of what they may have just said they believe. As a result, Iranian rulers have almost no way of knowing what people think, and must resort to manipulation and force to keep themselves in power.

*Ketman* makes it very difficult to measure public opinion, because the primary consideration of people being interviewed is whether and how the interviewer could hurt them. Iranians will only say what they truly believe when they are absolutely sure they will not suffer adverse consequences.

#### *The Onion*

It is not surprising that Iranians love the symbolism of the onion to describe their culture. The core of an onion is surrounded by many layers. For more than 2,500 years, Iranians have surrounded themselves like an onion with layers and layers to protect their core. The core is so well protected through layers of obfuscation that Iranians themselves often may not know what their core beliefs are regarding many issues.

## 5. DEALING WITH *KETMAN*/TAQIYAH

Western cultural biases regarding, and demanding, honesty make it easy to misunderstand Iranians. Iranians believe that history has been unkind to them, and have learned to cope with adverse situations by being warm, gracious, polite, and obsequious. Westerners, especially Americans who place a high value on candor, straightforwardness, and honesty, are often bamboozled by Iranians who know that those in the West are easily taken in by their effusively friendly, kind, generous, and engaging behavior.

### ***Iranians put a great deal of thought into determining what they think we want to hear.***

Iranians put a great deal of thought into determining what they think we want to hear. Furthermore, when obvious contradictions are pointed out that Iranians don't want to address, they usually just stare back as if they do not understand or see the logical inconsistencies.

Iranians oftentimes will express empathy and sympathy with beautiful and kind words. But these words will usually not be backed by any action and can often be rendered meaningless. Iranians are very skilled at lulling individuals into traps and pulling the wool over unsuspecting eyes.

It is because of *ketman* that Iranians themselves attach little meaning to words, which are often empty, and place much more emphasis on action. Westerners should similarly judge Iranians primarily by their actions, and place diminished reliance on statements.

### ***Compartmentalizing reality: Iranian Ambassador on ABC's "Nightline"***

Shortly after the Iran-Iraq War started, Ted Koppel of ABC's "Nightline" program invited Iranian Ambassador to the UN Mansour Farhang to appear on his program and explain Iran's stance on the war. Farhang had spent many years in the U.S. and was well acquainted with American culture.

Farhang accused the Iraqis of violating international law by having invaded Iran. Koppel responded indignantly, asking Farhang, "How dare you talk about violating international law? You are now holding 51 American diplomats hostage, in flagrant violation of international law. Farhang responded without batting an eyelash: "Your diplomats are our guests."

From Farhang's facial gestures, a viewer would have had no idea that Farhang thought he was lying. And there was nothing Koppel could do to make him say otherwise.

## 6. TRUST, LOYALTY

When the Shah's regime began to totter, many people who had been loyal to the Shah for years went over to the side of the Islamic Revolution. They did this overnight, hoping to protect themselves, their families, their investments, etc.

It is extremely difficult to know precisely where an Iranian's loyalty lies. What matters most to Iranians is survival. Iranians will often make bargains as a means to protect themselves, not as a means of aligning with likeminded individuals.

Iranians are typically not willing to sacrifice much, let alone their lives, for an idea or for a leader. (And when they do, it is almost always as part of large groups.)

Opinions and deeply-held beliefs are secondary. Most Iranians are prepared to diametrically change their opinions the moment they perceive it to be in their interest to do so.

### *Being pro-Shah and pro-mullah at the same time*

Before the revolution, an American noted that a certain family in Tehran hung pictures on the living room wall of themselves with the Shah and the Shah's wife. This family had many American friends. When the mullahs took over in 1979, this family remained in Iran. This seemed strange since, to the outside observer, their wall pictures and friendships with Americans were recipes for trouble with the new regime.

About five years later, another American visited this family in Tehran and dined at their home. The American visitor was told by their mutual American friend about the pictures that had been on the wall. The American visitor noticed that there were photos on the wall of this family with senior mullahs, taken about 10-15 years previously.

After dinner, while drinking coffee in the salon, the American visitor casually mentioned that their mutual American acquaintance had described a very different set of pictures on the wall. The family members laughed and said, "Tell our mutual American friend that the pictures now hanging on our walls were in a very safe hiding place during the previous regime. And tell him also that the pictures he remembered from before are in that very same hiding place."

Iranians, in short, believe they must be ready for anything and these pictures were proof that whatever happened, this family could demonstrate that they supported whoever was in power. Iranians have developed a fine sense of being able to know the exact moment to display whatever pictures or other evidence they need to prove fidelity.

Curiously, this is similar to the old American political adage often heard in Washington: "I have one set of principles. But if you don't like them, I have another."

## 7. KEEP YOUR OPTIONS OPEN: HAVE FRIENDS IN EVERY CAMP

Rulers can change their minds in an instant. Coups can happen without notice. For this reason, it is good to have connections – and especially relatives – among all groups vying for power.

It is not uncommon to observe several sons of a single family aligned with various groups. One son may be in a religious seminary, others in various opposition groups, and still others in the bazaar (in the business world). On the surface, it might appear that these sons hold views that are diametrically opposed to each other. But Iranians see this as hedging their bets. Regardless of who comes to power, their family and interests are protected.

### *The importance of having connections everywhere*

A young Iranian was studying engineering in an American university. He had a brother who was studying to become a mullah in Qom, another brother working with their uncle in the bazaar in Tehran, and another in the Tudeh – i.e., the Iranian Communist party. Still another was very active in an opposition group in Los Angeles. When asked how it was possible that brothers and extended family members seem to be in almost every camp, the student laughed and in a moment of candor said, “You don’t understand us. Like any good Iranian family, we hedge our bets. None of us believe in anything in particular. All we care about is our own security. By having someone in every camp, we know that whoever ends up ruling our country, our family will be protected.”

## 8. THE ART OF NEGOTIATION

Negotiations are opportunities to best others, to demonstrate power, and to defeat opponents. Iranians do not see bargaining as an opportunity to establish win-win situations. Contracts are little more than pieces of paper Iranians will sign, if these papers can advance their interests. Their signatures are not guarantees that they will carry out the terms of the contract.

***With Iranians, offering to come to the negotiation table before winning can escalate violence and invite demands for further concessions.***

In politics, Iranians negotiate only after defeating their enemies. During these negotiations, the victor magnanimously dictates to the vanquished how things will be conducted thereafter. Signaling a desire to talk before being victorious is, in Iranian eyes, a sign of weakness or lack of will to win.

Iranians will usually attempt to capitalize on a perceived weakness. When dealing with Iranians, it is important to understand that offering to come to the negotiation table before winning can escalate violence and invite Iranian demands for further concessions.

### *The art of “besting”: Business dealings with Iranians*

American businessmen in Iran in the 1970s learned that Iranians often violate signed contracts. If a contract called for twelve monthly payments for work performed over a year, the Iranians typically refused to pay the last payment if it was due after the work was completed. Taking them to court didn't help.

Some smart Americans then devised a creative way – using what they had learned about Iranian culture – to get all of their money in later contracts. The Americans divided up the sum they wanted for the contract into eleven payments and added in a little more money for good measure, with the twelfth payment essentially a bonus for them, knowing that they would likely never receive it. This guaranteed that the Americans got paid what they wanted, and allowed the Iranians to believe they were besting the Americans. Two can play this game.

## **9. PATIENCE: AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN IRANIAN LIFE**

Iranians are known for the production of beautiful rugs. Rug-making is an art and each rug can take months or even years to complete. Patience is therefore an essential component of rug-making. There is no timeline. The rug is simply finished when it is.

As a result, Iranians have learned how to wait and steadily prepare to reach their goal. By contrast, Western culture calls for delivering instant results. In the Iranian view, the one who can wait out an opponent usually wins.

## **10. THE GAME OF CHESS AS A WINDOW INTO THE IRANIAN MIND**

Many centuries ago, Iranians either invented or adopted the game of chess as their national game. This is a game of skill where players calculate at least two or three moves ahead, and similarly calculate the moves that will be made by their opponents.

***Iranians adopted the game of chess as their national game. In a conflict, they think several moves ahead, and carefully consider the moves their adversaries will make in response.***

Iranians are therefore excellent planners and have a keen ability to compartmentalize thought. In a conflict, they think several moves ahead, and carefully consider the moves their adversaries will make in response. Iranians are great game planners and do their best to leave as little as possible to chance.

### *A chess move to protect the Iranian flank: The Iranian government's attempt to return assets to a former senior Iranian official who is well-connected to senior U.S. government officials*

Many former high-ranking officials under the Shah escaped to the West in 1979. The assets of these officials were nationalized by the Islamic Revolutionary regime. Many of these officials kept out of the limelight, and stayed away from Iranian politics either within Iran or abroad until the mid-2000s.

In the mid-2000s, one of these former officials related the following story: This official had begun to meet with people well-connected in both the American and European governments. As senior Iranian officials began to learn of these meetings, Iran's current government officials sent documents through mutual acquaintances that demonstrated that the family properties had never actually been nationalized, and that the assets of this official living abroad still belonged to him. Moreover, the Iranian government made it clear that it was even prepared to buy the property and transfer the money in dollars abroad.

Why did senior Iranian government officials do this? Because they wanted to ensure that if things go wrong for them in Iran, that they have good contacts outside the country that might be able to provide them a soft landing. The Iranian government officials did not offer to return the property to its rightful owner because it was "the right thing to do." These current officials were simply looking for ways to "prove" that they had been working with the opposition all along, should the current Iranian regime fall. As every Iranian knows, it is important to have allies/contacts in all camps.

Additionally, by dangling the possibility of the return of these properties to their owners living outside the country, the Iranian government also neutralized them. Many of these exiled Iranians realized that if they spoke out against the current regime, they might lose the opportunity to regain their Iranian assets.

In one chess move, the Iranian government managed to neutralize its potential enemies and set up a situation that can protect them from possible revenge, should their government fall.

## **11. THE PURPOSE OF HOLDING MEETINGS**

***The fact that a meeting takes place matters much more than what is said at such a meeting. Meetings confer legitimacy and offer prestige.***

Meetings hold enormous symbolism for Iranians. The fact that a meeting takes place matters much more than what is said at such a meeting. Meetings confer legitimacy and offer prestige. When Westerners request a meeting with a particular Iranian, it is perceived as a granting of legitimacy and power that they otherwise might not have.

## 12. WORKING TOGETHER/COOPERATION

Though they often profess great loyalty to causes and people, at the core Iranians do not trust each other and they don't trust outsiders. Iranians, therefore, have great difficulty working together. This is one of the primary reasons it is difficult to create a united Iranian opposition movement. Getting Iranians to work together can be like "herding cats," i.e., it is nearly impossible.

Each opposition group leader sees himself as a little Shah, and almost always badmouths or belittles the others until a single force emerges as most powerful. This situation can be immobilizing to policymakers in the West because it becomes exceedingly difficult to know whom to believe and whom to support.

That said, there is a way to make Iranians cooperate. If the Iranians are clearly shown that the strongest powers in the West – the U.S. and its allies – support a particular leader or group, history demonstrates that Iranians will almost assuredly flock to that leader.

## 13. WESTERN STRENGTH

When the West establishes itself as the most powerful force and shows strength and resolve, Iranians will almost assuredly come on board. They do not want to be on the losing side. If it looks like the West will help to establish one opposition group or individual as leader, Iranians can be expected to jump on the bandwagon.

It is important to note, however, that when confronted with Western power, Iranian leaders, given the nature of their culture, would almost assuredly "modify their views" in an attempt to protect themselves. Faced with American strength, Iranian leaders can be expected to instantly change and oppose exactly what they claimed to support beforehand.

If the West wants to bring about a different type of regime in Iran, it must support those forces inside Iran which demonstrate by their actions that they support Western values and freedoms. At that point, the West is likely to find that Iranians living outside Iran will help provide whatever financial, technical, and political assistance may be necessary to change the regime.<sup>13</sup>

Military action may be used as a complimentary tactic to help accomplish the goal of regime change. If military action is eventually required, the targeting of national symbols and leadership strongholds may be enough to demonstrate that the balance of power in Iran is quickly shifting. By applying this principle, the West may not need to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities or launch a large-scale invasion to bring down Iran's rulers and stop the nuclear program.

As Iranians spend a lot of time trying to determine whether a particular party actually wields power, any confrontation – military or diplomatic – is to be avoided until one is clearly prepared to use overwhelming force. Otherwise, any victory will be pyrrhic at best.

### *How did the Iran-Iraq War end?*

One week before Khomeini called for an end to the Iran-Iraq War, the USS *Vincennes*, an American naval ship stationed in the Persian Gulf, mistakenly shot down an Iranian civilian airplane, killing all 278 people on board. For the U.S., this was a terrible tragedy. The U.S. government apologized profusely for having made such a horrible blunder. For Khomeini and most Iranians, however, this was a sign that the U.S. was now prepared to exercise its power. Most Iranians were absolutely sure that the U.S. had intentionally shot down the plane. To them, this act “proved” that America was showing strength and resolve.

***One week before Khomeini announced an end to the Iran-Iraq War, the USS Vincennes, an American naval ship stationed in the Persian Gulf, mistakenly shot down an Iranian civilian airplane, killing 278 people. Most Iranians were absolutely sure that the U.S. had intentionally shot down the plane in a show of strength.***

About a week later, Khomeini publicly announced an end to the bloody, eight-year war, saying that Iran had to swallow this “poison” in order to prevent dire consequences for the country. From an Iranian point of view, the *Vincennes* incident proved that the U.S. was willing to use power mercilessly and Iran had therefore no choice but to give in to the apparent American demand to end the war.

## **14. MODERN DISDAIN FOR ISLAM**

Today, even religious figures who love Islam are watching the younger generation of Iranians live the most un-Islamic lifestyles they can get away with. For example, the rage in Tehran among teenagers is to come to parties and take off their outer clothes, revealing amazingly suggestive outfits. They then engage in activities which are un-Islamic to say the least. When asked about Islam, a large number of youngsters, who are very well-informed about the latest trends outside Iran,<sup>14</sup> laugh; and when they feel safe, explain that they are at best indifferent to Islam and at worst disdainful of their religion.

Iranians love to tell anti-Muslim and anti-mullah jokes. Many see Islam as an Arab imposition on Iran. Iranians look down on Arabs and call them lizard-eaters and/or rodent-eaters.

## *The sudden emergence of the Baha'i faith*

In the 19th century, the Baha'i faith emerged in Iran. Their prophet, Baha-ullah who was an ex-Shiite, claimed that God sends prophets in every age. This is an anathema to traditional Islam. Traditional Muslims believe that Muhammad was the final prophet; God would send no others after him. The Baha'is disagree.

Converting to the Baha'i faith is apostasy according to Muslim law, which is punishable by death. But as the Baha'is won militarily, significant numbers of Iranians converted to the Baha'i faith. When the tide turned and the Shiites started winning, people re-converted to Shi'ism, often claiming that they never had converted to the Baha'i faith in the first place.

The people's reactions were typically Iranian. In each case, they shifted their allegiance to the winner. This begs the question of whether Iran could leave Islam. In the end, Iran adopted Islam as a way of protecting itself against the foreign conquerors. Could it be discarded if no longer needed?

This story might also explain why numbers of Shiite Iranians in the West are converting to Christianity,<sup>15</sup> but other non-Iranian Muslims are not.

## **15. THE NUCLEAR ISSUE**

The Iranian government claims that it needs nuclear power for domestic energy consumption. This claim is curious because Iran has the second largest proven energy reserves in the oil-rich Gulf, and because the country exports electricity to both Iraq and Afghanistan. So if Iran needed energy, it could use the power it exports for its own internal needs.

For the Iranian government, the nuclear issue plays a double role. When Iran acquires nuclear bombs, it will gain the political independence it needs to dominate the Middle East, and to promote its form of Shi'ism throughout the Muslim world.

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Iran's leaders are being very sly in this regard. Iran's government knows that all Iranians, wherever they live, feel personally attacked when Western leaders say that Iran should not be allowed to have nuclear weapons. Iranians look around them and see that others in their neighborhood such as Russia, Israel, Pakistan, India, and China all have the bomb. To say that Iran shouldn't have the bomb is considered an affront to Iranian patriotism.

Using a little ingenuity, we could drive a wedge between the Iranian government and the Iranian people. We should make clear that we are not opposed to Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. We are only opposed to the current government having a nuclear arsenal because it is the largest state-sponsor of terrorism in the world. If Iran had a government which was more concerned with the welfare of its own people, instead of meddling in the affairs of others, it would be much less likely to use such weapons if it had them.

If the current government acquires nuclear weapons, it might very well use them and cause the outside world to retaliate against Iran. We should remind the Iranian people that if the current Iranian government had nuclear weapons and used them, the outside world would have to retaliate, which could result in the deaths of countless Iranians.

### *Ahmadinejad's popularity among the (non-Iranian) masses throughout the Muslim world*

Ahmadinejad was a virtual unknown in the Muslim world before the Revolutionary Guards/Basij engineered his first presidential election.<sup>16</sup>

And while Iranians would normally pursue their agenda non-confrontationally, by sweet-talking their enemies, Ahmadinejad has been acting in surprisingly atypical fashion, by being direct and crass with the so-called enemies of the Islamic Republic.

Ahmadinejad has denied the Holocaust, called for the liquidation of Israel, and has stepped up the pursuit of nuclear power – in blatant violation of UN resolutions.

The passive reaction of the international community to Ahmadinejad's words and actions have demonstrated to the Muslim masses – especially to the Sunnis – that their own leaders are traitors because they either could not or would not stand up to the West and help restore Islam's honor.

This is why Ahmadinejad's picture has been put up throughout the Muslim world, even in places such as Malaysia and Indonesia where there are few, if any, Shiites. And this explains why he has become something of a folk hero throughout the Muslim world.<sup>17</sup>

Many Muslims, especially among the Sunni masses, believe that Ahmadinejad and Khamenei – even more than Khomeini – is succeeding in restoring Islam's honor by acquiring the most powerful weapon in the world. (This, of course, petrifies/terrorizes the Sunni Arab kings, tyrants, and dictators who realize that a nuclear Iran is even more threatening to them personally than to Israel, Europe, and the U.S.)

## CONCLUSION

Clearly, in many aspects, Iran's ancient culture is very different from the West. It is, therefore, not surprising that we are often perplexed by how Iranians act. Unfortunately, all too often we have insisted on employing mirror-imaging, or seeing Iranians as we see ourselves. This has enabled Iran to continually outsmart the West.

Iranians may be skilled chess players, but the West has produced many more world-class chess players than has Iran. With a little ingenuity and gamesmanship, the West should be able to outfox the Iranians at their own game.

Using the ideas presented above, Western leaders might consider meeting publicly with opposition leaders, supporting Iranians who want to liberate their homeland from tyranny, and numerous other measures which could weaken the current regime's control and eventually bring it to its knees.

But if the West is to succeed, Iranians must be convinced, in terms they understand, that America is prepared to establish itself as a powerful force and help the Iranian population liberate themselves from the tyranny under which they live.

In short, if the West will step back and consider how best to understand and use Iranian culture in order to accomplish policy goals, there is a good chance of devising policies that will benefit the West, the Iranian people, and the world.

## NOTES

1. Sunni Arabs' loyalty lies primarily with the Arab people, not necessarily with a particular country.
2. Until the Arab conquests, the overwhelming majority of the peoples of today's Arab world spoke Aramaic, a language closely related to Arabic. The peoples of North Africa (mostly the Egyptians and Berbers) spoke Hametic languages, which are linguistically related to the Semitic languages. Iranians spoke what we today call "Middle Persian," which was an Indo-European language.
3. Persian was first revived in Samarqand and Bukhara, in today's Uzbekistan. These cities were and still are culturally and linguistically typically very Persian. (Since the Soviet period, Persian has been called Tajik in Central Asia. Yet Tajik, Dari in Afghanistan, and Persian in Iran are different names for dialects of the same language.)
4. Even the name "Baghdad" is Persian, meaning "God gave."
5. We only know about the male line. According to classical Islamic rules, the ruler of a state must be descended from the male founder of the state. For Muslims, the mother's line is rather unimportant and we know very little about the rulers' mothers. It would not be surprising if we someday learned that their mothers were Iranians/Persians.
6. Interestingly, the Iranians call themselves "*Bod Parast*," which means "idol worshippers." "Idol" here means a strong leader. (As an aside, the word "*Bod*" originally comes from the word "*Buddha*," whose statues were destroyed by the Taliban in Afghanistan.)
7. Theoretically, Shiites are supposed to pattern their lives after a grand ayatollah, meaning they are to follow his religious dictates and support him financially.
8. These students would not have gotten into trouble by mentioning his name because he was known to keep out of politics.
9. For Iranians and other Middle Easterners, honor here mean "what others say and think about you." This view of honor has little to do with the Western view of honor – i.e., doing the right thing.
10. In Islam, atheists such as Communists, in this instance, are to be offered the choice of Islam or death. By contrast, Christians and Jews are allowed to live under Muslim rule, as long as they submit to the rules of the "*Dhimma*," which means that they accept their position as being politically and socially inferior, as second-class, tolerated citizens.
11. What follows is taken from the memoirs of the Iranian "student" hostage-takers.
12. *Taqiyah* is used by the Shiites, but not rejected by the Sunnis. It appears in the Quran, where Muhammad tells Muslims that under threat of death, you may renounce Islam publicly as long as you do not do so in your heart. *Taqiyah* and *ketman* are Arabic words which were adopted into Persian and are used interchangeably in Persian.
13. There is a large and very wealthy Iranian diaspora which has the resources and connections to fund such an opposition.
14. It is thought that Persian is either the 3rd or 4th most commonly used language on the Internet, and young Iranians are ingenious at getting around their government's censorship of the Internet.
15. Shiites are converting to Christianity specifically in the Netherlands and southern California.
16. From what we know, it appears that Ahmadinejad's 1st and 2nd presidential victories were election coups by the Revolutionary Guards/Basij. During the first election campaign, it was obvious that he would lose. After the election booths closed, the vote counting began. From what we know, Ahmadinejad was trailing by a large margin. Around 2:00 a.m., the Revolutionary Guards/Basij entered the place where the votes were being counted and, miraculously, an additional 7.5 million votes for Ahmadinejad were found. He thereby "won" the first round of the elections. Ahmadinejad then easily won the next round of voting and was elected president. As for Ahmadinejad's 2nd election "victory," Iranians understood that the government-announced election results were at best a farce. The government announced the nationwide election results within an hour of the polls closing. If these election officials are to be believed, that would mean that Iran has a much more sophisticated technological system for tabulating election results than all Western countries – a remarkable feat indeed.
17. Parallels between Ahmadinejad and Adolf Hitler during the 1930s are striking. Hitler's generals urged him not to invade the Saarland because they feared the West would react militarily and thereby further humiliate Germany. Hitler thought otherwise. When the West did not respond to Germany's re-militarization of the Saarland, Hitler went further, annexing Austria, and after Munich, gobbled up the Czech lands. After each aggressive act, the West either appeased or remained silent. Thus, Hitler proved to his generals that the West was a paper tiger.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Harold Rhode studied in Iran at Ferdowsi University in Mashhad in 1978 at the early stages of the Islamic Revolution. In 1979, he received his Ph.D. from Columbia University in Islamic history. He joined the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense in 1982 as an advisor on Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. Since then he has served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and as advisor on Islamic affairs on the Pentagon's policy planning staff. From 1994 until his recent retirement, Dr. Rhode served in the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment. He is currently a Senior Advisor at the Hudson Institute, New York.



The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs is a leading independent research institute specializing in public diplomacy and foreign policy. Founded in 1976, the Center has produced hundreds of studies and initiatives by leading experts on a wide range of strategic topics. Dr. Dore Gold, Israel's former ambassador to the UN, has headed the Jerusalem Center since 2000.

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