
Original Article

The attenuation of revolutionary foreign policy

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Abstract Revolutions provide a new domestic order, and sometimes destabilize the international order by threatening to spread abroad. But these ideological implications attenuate as a function both of compromises by the revolutionary state and political stabilization in other countries. Eventually a *modus vivendi* is reached. Iran is a case in point. The Iranian Revolution established a theocratic state, and attempts were made to export revolution abroad at the same time as the new regime served as a beacon for opposition movements in other Arab states. But that revolutionary period is over. Iranian foreign policy is no longer revolutionary. Iran no longer serves as a model for opposition groups elsewhere, and although it still has a revisionist anti-Israel and anti-US policy, it no longer attempts to spread revolution abroad. Recent fears of Iran are driven by the threat of an expansion of Iranian power, rather than its challenge to the legitimacy of existing regimes. *International Politics* (2015) **52**, 626–636. doi:10.1057/ip.2015.29

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Introduction

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 created a new system of internal governance and transformed the grand strategy and foreign policy of the country. The revolution was one of a handful of great revolutions in history. While there is widespread agreement that the revolution had a profound effect on Iran's foreign policy, scholars debate whether Iran's revolutionary foreign policy has been sustained or has long since past.¹

Not surprisingly, therefore, we argue that many misconstrue the character of a revolutionary state's foreign policy, what makes it revolutionary, and how the attenuation of revolution can be ascertained. Although states that experience a revolution, contra realist expectations, typically change some aspects of their foreign policies, states have realigned their foreign policies even absent a political revolution and realignments by themselves do not indicate a revolutionary foreign policy



(Holsti, 1982; Hermann, 1990). The Iranian shift from alignment with Israel and the United States to strong opposition to both does not make its foreign policy revolutionary. Similarly, the existence of pragmatic considerations neither vitiate nor null a revolutionary foreign policy.

Below we characterize a revolutionary foreign policy and indications of its attenuation. We begin with defining a great political revolution and delineating its international consequences. We then describe the rise and attenuation of Iran as a revolutionary state.

The Iranian Revolution as a Revolution

Revolution is a term inconsistently used in a wide array of settings (Yoder, 1926). It can be found with many different adjectives: social, political, cultural, economic, industrial and scientific, among others. And it can be applied to different degrees as well as types of change. Not surprisingly, scholars' lists of political revolutions do not match (Tanter and Midlarsky, 1967; Goldstone, 2001, 2011).²

Great political revolutions bring to power regimes that have a new justification for their right to rule, a new underlying ideology rather than just a change in elites. Such revolutions profoundly affect the foreign policy of the state,³ but also more broadly affect the stability of the international system absent any change in the distribution of power. Whether occurring in a homogenous or heterogenous international system, great political revolutions bring new ideologies and new regime types that challenge the existing order and the legitimacy of other states.⁴ The French Revolution posed an ideological challenge to a continent largely consisting of monarchies. A century later, the Russian Revolution gave rise to still a new regime form that challenged both monarchies and republics that then existed in a heterogenous international system. Such revolutions give rise to more than just a new regime with different domestic and foreign priorities. They embody a new ideological legitimization of rule and thus generate profound shocks through their region and the world. Their very form of government threatens the legitimacy of other states while simultaneously posing their leaders the challenge of maintaining a new regime in a hostile world. Such revolutions are sometimes called 'great revolutions' or 'grand revolutions.'⁵ As one scholar puts it, 'the "Great Revolutions" can be so designated by virtue of the value ideas they enthroned and passed on to posterity' (Arjomand, 1985, p. 41).

By any standard, Iran makes the list of great transformative revolutions (Arjomand, 1985, 1986; Amineh and Eisenstadt, 2007; Selbin, 2009). The Iranian Revolution toppled an autocracy and brought in its wake an Islamic government, an entirely new form of government, one that the world had not seen before, and this 'underlies its world-historical significance' (Arjomand, 1985, p. 61).



The International Consequences of Great Ideological Revolutions

Great political revolutions do not merely install a new government with typically different foreign policy priorities and a shift in inter-state alignments. They bring to power a new form of government. Such new and different regimes inherently pose a challenge and a threat to other states. First, such revolutionary states have a new ideology of governance. The new form of government often embodies an ideology that transcends nationality and threatens to embolden opposition to existing regimes (Nelson, 2014). Great political revolutions, even absent efforts at exportation by its progenitors, constitute a source of inspiration and provide a model for emulation.

Revolutionary states are also often interested in expanding upon their success or at least making certain that theirs will not be a singular experiment in a world of states governed by other ideologies (Halliday, 1990). They are interested in propagating their regime type.

The international consequences of a great political revolution are evident in the actions of the revolutionary state and the actions and reactions it invokes in others. It attempts to export its revolution, opposition groups elsewhere look to it as a model, and neighboring states challenged by both respond to ward off the political threat posed.

Iran as a Revolutionary State

The Iranian Revolution brought to power a new type of political regime, an Islamic state, one not only ruled under Islamic law, but actually subject to clerical rule. All types of regimes in the region had claimed to be Islamic in some form and degree (Karawan, 1992) and a pan-Islamic orientation is also a feature of state policy in the region (Sheikh, 2003; Ehteshami, 2005). But Ayatollah Khomeini, the architect of Iran's revolution and its spiritual leader for its first decade, argued that Muslim communities could only legitimately be governed by an Islamic state and such a state was to be run by Islamic jurists (Kramer, 1996; Beeman, 2013; Mabon, 2013). And he argued that Islam was incompatible with monarchy and hereditary rule, even if those states proclaimed themselves Islamic (among many others, Milani, 1996; Lafraie, 2009). Secular regimes were non-Islamic and illegitimate rulers of Muslim populations.⁶

The new clerical rulers, especially Ayatollah Khomeini, were eager to export their new revolutionary political system and saw other existing regimes in the region not only as enemies but as apostates, ones who at best paid lip service to Islam (Bakhash, 1989; Marschall, 2003; Rakel, 2007). As Aron (1973) writes of revolutionary France, 'it was in essence *revolutionary*' given the spread of its ideas and the implications (p. 76).

As was the case with the great political revolutions that preceded it, the Islamic Republic's desire to spread revolution in the Middle East was driven both by a missionary impulse and the perception that the revolution at home could not last if it was not secured abroad. The regime sent religious emissaries to neighboring



Gulf states to propagate the Ayatollah's teachings and attack the local rulers (Kostiner, 2009, p. 47). It provided direct aid to subversive groups and made use of the preexisting network of clerics among Shia communities in Iraq, the Gulf states, and Lebanon. In the case of Iraq, the Iranian government made the overthrow of the secular military regime of Saddam Hussein its objective.⁷

Iran challenged the legitimacy of regimes in the region even when those regimes were based on Islamic principles. Most notable was its persistent attacks on the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia, a conservative monarchy for which Islam was central to its identity and legitimacy.⁸ The holiest sites of Islam are in Saudi Arabia and to which those of the faith are to undertake a pilgrimage (Hajj) at least once in their lifetime as long as they are able. Its legitimacy 'rested on a religious basis' (Ochsenwald, 1981, p. 274), and revolutionary Iran challenged the Saudi royal family's 'claim to pan-Islamic legitimacy' (Wehrey *et al.*, 2009, p. 14). Not only did revolutionary Iran attack the monarchy and hereditary rule in general, but attacked the Saudi monarchy as corrupt and decadent and un-Islamic, arguing that it was unfit as custodian of Islam's holy sites. At one point, even in the midst of its war with Iraq, it proclaimed Saudi Arabia as the Islamic Republic's 'main enemy' (Amirahmadi, 1993, p. 139). Iran used its pilgrims to the Hajj as ambassadors of the revolution. They engaged in political demonstrations and violent clashes became a regular occurrence.⁹

The Iranian revolution also emboldened Islamists across the Middle East. It served as a model for revolutionary movements and as a beacon to all radical Islamists who believed that the Muslim world was in a state of apostasy. Both Sunni and Shia Islamists accepted the means and goals of the Iranian revolution and even the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood approached the revolution with an 'unqualified enthusiasm and unconditional euphoria' (Matthee, 1986, p. 263). Sunni and Shia violence against existing governments was evident in the early 1980s in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Kuwait, Lebanon and the smaller Gulf states (Kramer, 1996, pp. 150–51).¹⁰

The Attenuation of Revolutionary Foreign Policy

Revolutionary foreign policies are not sustained and a variety of arguments have been proffered as to why. For some, revolutionary states are socialized over time and accept the norms of the system.¹¹ Others emphasize that there is learning or selection resulting from the competitive nature of interstate relations (Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1996). Still others emphasize the abandonment of revolutionary impulses (Halliday, 1999; Terhalle, 2009), because of shifts in power among domestic factions (Sadri, 1997; Terhalle, 2009) or the replacement of the original revolutionaries (an implication of Colgan, 2013).

Our argument is somewhat different. A revolutionary foreign policy is about challenging the legitimacy of others and exporting one's domestic political system.¹² It makes, in other words, interstate relations into an ideological competition as well as

a power-political one. Such efforts are made possible and viable by the existence of opposition groups in other societies who seek to emulate the revolutionary state. Attenuation occurs when the revolutionary state's efforts at exporting the revolution fail – when opposition movements elsewhere have been co-opted, repressed or no longer look to model themselves after the revolutionary state. Failure successfully to export the revolution and realpolitik adjustments result in a changed assessment of the prospects for a revolutionary foreign policy.

Attenuation of Iranian Revolutionary Foreign Policy

The ideological implications of the Iranian Revolution were already largely attenuated by the late 1980s.¹³ A combination of failure successfully to export the revolution, repression by regimes threatened by Iranian-inspired Islamists, and disillusionment abroad with the Iranian revolution resulted in an end of the international impact of the revolution.

In 1988, Iran and the Ayatollah finally accepted failure in its attempt to topple Saddam Hussein and agreed to 'drink the poison' and accept a ceasefire to end the bitter 8-year long war. The Gulf Arab states' fear of contagion had motivated them to underwrite Iraq in its war against Iran. In 1989, Khomeini died. There was widespread recognition that the Iranian revolution had not resulted in another Islamic republic elsewhere.

The new leadership in Iran ended efforts to export the revolution. It 'shifted its focus away from the internal composition of the Gulf states' (Takeyh, 2009, p. 131). And it made no effort to export its revolution to the new states with Islamic majorities on Iran's borders that emerged in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union (Herzig, 2004; Shaffer, 2006). Although they remained hostile to Israel and supportive of groups against it, they refrained from denouncing other regimes in the region as illegitimate or supporting their violent overthrow.

The Iranian revolution's role in emboldening Islamists across the Middle East had resulted in repression of Islamist forces throughout the region. By the end of the 1980s there was also little interest in emulating the revolution. The Iranian government's ideological compromises indicated their willingness to sell out Islamic revolutionaries. This had an early effect on its appeal to Sunni Islamists. Iran had developed ties with Syria as a means of opposing Iraq and Israel. Propping up the rejectionist front supported Iran's anti-imperialism platform, and having an Arab ally weakened the Persian versus Arab rhetoric. But supporting a secular regime that was facing a Islamist insurgency (whom initially supported the Iranian Revolution) disillusioned not just Islamists in Syria, but in Egypt and elsewhere (Matthee, 1986, p. 265; Sivan, 1989, p. 26). Iran not only stood by while Syria brutally crushed its Islamist opposition, they specifically denounced the Islamists. One partisan stated, 'No miscalculation of the Iranian Islamic Revolution could have given greater gratification to its enemies than its ties to the



Asad regime, and sincere Sunni supporters of the Islamic Republic could only stand back in disbelief' (Abd-Allah, 1983, p. 182).¹⁴

Even among Shia groups, the Iranian revolution lost its luster (Green *et al.*, 2009). For example, the leadership of the principle Shia Islamist group in Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Revolution Organization, left Tehran for Damascus and then London as the revolutionary fervor in Iran faded. The spiritual godfather of the movement, Ayatollah Mohammad al-Shirazi, originally a supporter of Khomeini, became a critic of the revolution. The Islamic Revolution Organization became the Reform Movement, and in 1993 it cut a deal with the Saudi regime (Ibrahim, 2006, pp. 140–208; Louër, 2008, pp. 183–196).

These twin effects, the end of Iran's exporting its revolutionary ideology and the end of any interest in emulating the Iranian revolution is captured in the statement of Turkmenistan's President Saparmurat Niyazov that he 'could see neither an exporter nor anybody who can use such exports' (quoted in Hunter, 2003, p. 140).

Conclusion

The international impact of great political revolutions is the fear and hope that the new regime type created will spread through the system. A revolutionary foreign policy is not best conceived of as dissatisfaction with the international system (Kissinger, 1957, p. 2), because this is not unique to states that have just experienced a revolution. Rather, a revolutionary foreign policy is the policy of a state to spread its new regime abroad.

Iran pursued a revolutionary foreign policy and functioned as a revolutionary state in the Middle East for its first decade. By the end of the 1980s, the Islamic Republic of Iran was no longer a source of emulation and it had ended its efforts to export its revolution.

The end of Iran as a revolutionary state has not meant a return to its prior foreign policy positions and alignments. Features of Iranian foreign policy remain constant from pre-revolutionary times and sustained during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period. These included Iran's preferences for OPEC oil policy, competition with Arab neighbors for predominance in the Persian Gulf, and continuing interest in a nuclear weapons program. The foreign policy shifts ushered in by the revolution and maintained ever since have been its anti-Americanism and opposition to Israel.¹⁵ Such policies may be deemed revisionist but are not revolutionary.¹⁶

Continuity does not negate the possibility of a revolutionary foreign policy, and some shifts need not reflect the existence of a revolutionary state. In the last decade, there has been a renewal of alarm in the region directed toward Iran, especially in Saudi Arabia. The two nations had restored relations in 1991, and their rapprochement culminated in a 2001 security agreement. Renewed Saudi fears, however, have not been driven by the ideological threat Iran poses, but the expansion of Iranian



power because of the collapse of a balancer in Iraq and the Iranian nuclear program. Iran has in fact strained to maintain good relations with Saudi Arabia.

Post-revolutionary Iran has maintained some of the alignment shifts wrought by revolutionary Iran but it has shed the features of a revolutionary foreign policy. Its role as a challenger to the legitimacy of existing regimes, as an exporter of its regime type and acting as a beacon to others, is no longer.

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Notes

- 1 Most argue that the state embodied a revolutionary foreign policy and see the end of its revolutionary foreign policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. See for example, among others, Afrasiabi (1994), Mozaffari (1999), Tarock (1999), Rakel (2007), and Hunter (2010). Hunter (2003, p. 139) characterizes Iran's foreign policy as 'becoming de-ideologized as early as the mid-1980s'. Some argue that its revolutionary character and zeal have been sustained (Adib-Moghaddam, 2005, 2008; Panah, 2007; Terhalle, 2009; Friedman, 2010). Still others argue that internal Iranian politics is riven by factions some of whom press a revolutionary agenda whereas others are pragmatic (Marschall, 2003; Bakhsh, 2004) and that Iranian foreign policy has oscillated as a function of which group dominates politically at any moment (Calabrese, 1994; Arjomand, 2009).
- 2 The differences can be ascertained simply by looking at book titles and the countries treated as experiencing revolutions. Parsa (2000) treats Nicaragua and the Philippines along with Iran, whereas Sadri (1997) discusses Cuba, China, and Iran, and Shakibi (2007) compares France, Russia, and Iran.
- 3 In and of themselves, such changes undercut realist presumptions of an unchanging national interest rooted in geopolitics.
- 4 The distinction between heterogenous and homogenous systems is discussed in Aron (1973).
- 5 Some scholars reserve the designation 'great revolution' for countries that experienced both a political and social revolution. Our focus is on 'great political revolutions', ones that embody new ideologies of political legitimation, irrespective of the occurrence of a social revolution as well.
- 6 In an earlier age, secular military regimes posed a challenge to monarchies, and now both were challenged by the Islamic Republic of Iran (Nahas, 1985).
- 7 Some argue that Iraq's attack on Iran in 1980 was itself a response to the ideological challenge posed by the Iranian revolution, that it was driven by fear rather than opportunism (Karsh, 1990; Gause, 2002; Nelson, 2014).



- 8 On Saudi–Iranian relations, see Bahgat (2000), Chubin and Tripp (1996), and Al Toraifi (2012).
- 9 For the role of the Hajj in Saudi–Iranian relations, see Kramer (1990) and Amiri *et al.* (2011).
- 10 Sivan (1989, p. 25) argues that although Iran ‘evoke[d] sympathy and even enthusiasm among Sunni radicals’ because it demonstrated that what had been feared as impossible had taken place and it provided ‘practical lessons on taking power’, it nonetheless ‘was never for a single moment conceived as a model to be emulated’.
- 11 This is emphasized by the ‘English school’ (Armstrong, 1993) but can also be found in neorealist thought (Waltz, 1979, pp. 73–77).
- 12 It should be noted that this does not mean that the revolutionary state is either irrational or non-strategic. Tactical adjustments differ from goal reorientation.
- 13 The change is noted by most analysts of Iranian foreign policy, so much so, that for many 1988 was associated ‘with the creation of a second Islamic Republic’ (Ehteshami, 1995; Fürtig, 2002, p. 93).
- 14 On Iran–Syria relations, see Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (1997) and Goodarzi (2006).
- 15 As Goodarzi (2006, p. 11) notes, ‘the overthrow of the Pahlavi throne naturally brought with it a reversal in the pattern of Iran’s alliances and enmities’.
- 16 As Hinnebusch (2002, p. 18) notes, ‘revisionism is endemic in Middle East societies’.

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