VI. Iranian Foreign Policy since the Iranian Islamic Revolution: 1979–2006

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes Iranian foreign policy since the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979. The main questions to be dealt with are: what influence has the Iranian Islamic revolution had on foreign policy orientation and formulation of the Islamic Republic of Iran? What influence has Shi’ism had on foreign policy formulation in Iran? What impact have Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the three presidents Hojatoleslam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Hojatoleslam Mohammad Khatami, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had on foreign policy orientation? Have there been major shifts in foreign policy orientation during their tenures or has the overall foreign policy approach that was introduced by Khomeini after the revolution in 1979 remained the same? The chapter will first discuss the history of Shi’ism in Iran and its impact on politics since the introduction of Islam as state religion in the beginning of the sixteenth century by the Safavid Empire. It will then give an introduction to power relations in Iran since the Iranian Islamic revolution and analyze foreign policy orientation in Iran in four phases: (1) from 1979 to 1989, when Khomeini was the Supreme Leader; (2) from 1989–1997, during the presidency of Rafsanjani; (3) from 1997–2005, during the presidency of Khatami; and (4) since Ahmadinejad’s presidency began in 2005.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyzes the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) since the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979. The main questions to be raised in this chapter are: what influence has the Iranian Islamic revolution had on foreign policy orientation and formulation of the IRI? What impact have Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the three presidents Hojatoleslam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Hojatoleslam
Mohammad Khatami, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had on foreign policy? Have there been major shifts in foreign policy orientation during their tenures or has the overall foreign policy approach that was introduced by Khomeini after the revolution in 1979 remained the same? What is the impact of “Shi’ism” on foreign policy formulation?

The Islamic revolution can be partly understood as one in a series of events in reaction to the domination of Iran by foreign powers and exploitation of its wealth and resources by foreign firms. These events were the Tobacco Monopoly revolt (1890–1891), the Constitutional revolution (1905–1906), the Oil Nationalization Movement of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq (1951–1953), and the Iranian Islamic revolution (1978–1979). In all four revolts/revolutions, the ulama (clergy), as representatives of the nationalist movement, played a prominent role.

All of these events were intimately linked to Iran’s historical experience of foreign influences and penetration: first, its rivalry with other empires (e.g. the Ottoman Empire); then, over the past 200 years, interference in its internal affairs by France, Russia, Britain, and the United States (US). They were also influenced by failed attempts at modernization, first in the nineteenth century by the Qajar Shah, and later after the disintegration of the Persian Empire and the establishment of Iran as a nation state by the two Pahlavi Shahs (Reza Shah, 1921–1941, and Mohammad Reza Shah, 1941–1979) (see also this book’s Introduction).

During the reign of the last Shah—Mohammad Reza Shah—Iran was a close ally of the US and aspired to a prominent position in the Persian Gulf region. The Iranian revolution was a total break with the Shah’s policy.

Generally speaking, post-revolutionary Iran’s foreign policy approach can be summarized as follows: in the first ten years after the revolution, when Khomeini was the Supreme Leader, it was dominated by two main ideological principles: (1) “Neither East nor West but the Islamic Republic,” which translated in particular into an aversion to Western (US) influence; and (2) “Export of the Revolution,” in order to free Muslim countries and non-Muslim countries from their “oppressive and corrupt rulers.” The second principle served as a means of mobilizing the Iranian people to support the eight-year war with Iraq (1980–1988). Thus foreign policy orientation during the first ten years after the revolution was mainly ideologically driven, inspired by a certain interpretation of the Shi’i ideological doctrine to be explained below. During the presidency of Rafsanjani (1989–1997), a more pragmatic approach prevailed, focusing on post Iran-Iraq war economic reconstruction and the country’s reintegration into the international economy. A priority of Rafsanjani’s foreign policy was to improve relations with Persian Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, but also with the newly independent states of Central Eurasia (CEA) and Russia. Khatami’s presidency (1997–2005) aimed to continue Rafsanjani’s foreign policy towards