

# The Islamic Republic of Iran after 40 years

## New Energy, for a Sustainable Development throughout education

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## The Islamic Republic of Iran and the 40th Celebration of its Foundation: New Energy, for a Sustainable Development throughout Education

### Introduction

This paper starts with an important premise: I do consider myself a friend of Iran. I realize such feeling for this beautiful Country in relatively recent times. About 14 years ago, I had the privilege to visit some academic institutions in Tehran and, immediately, I felt accepted so pleasantly. In my life, I guess, I visited more than one hundred countries, and I do not hesitate to say that I have never experienced a so kind and warm environment as in Iran.

It is important to emphasize these feeling, as my words will be those of a friend that speaks to a special and important friend.

Celebrating a birthday of a friend usually can be the occasion of a “life review”. A 40 years old friend is an adult that has lived a lot but has still a lot of energy to imagine to progress to consolidate his life; even more, looking back, to learn from mistakes (“experience”, by the way, is the term we label our mistakes), trying to value the achievements and invest more energy in the future goals.

The celebration can follow two ways. One is the traditional one: all are happy to emphasize all the good, all the nice things happened during such period, telling how great our friend has always been. This is also the most common way we adopt everywhere, most of the time. It is nice, of course, and in a way has to be so.

The second one is rare, more complex, more difficult to express, sometimes, even, we do risk to be misunderstood but, I do believe, is more precious and more valuable. It consists in a rational analysis of the past, what happened, why it happened, which were the results we expected and which have been achieved.

This second approach can be adequate if between the friends there are common values at the core of the dialogue: **values inspired by respect for each other**. This is true for human relations, and this is true in political context, that, in fact, looks at the human relations inside and outside a country.

The paper would like to propose a vision of the Iranian Islamic Revolution from a Western point of view.

The peculiarity of this analysis is that it does not fit the mainstream thinking that, most of the time, we can read or listen from international media. As anticipated in the introduction, it will neither be an indulgent formal celebration. All the efforts will be devoted to a rational scrutiny adopting a scientific approach, even if we are in the field of the “social sciences” and not in a “pure sciences” investigation.

The conclusions will focus on the Education and Research as the drivers to develop achieving a stronger position. History showed that the economy needs technological developments achieved throughout massive investments in education at all levels. Iran, along its recent history, has had remarkable performances in this area. All experts can confirm that Iranian students, scholars, professors and researchers are among the best in the world in most study sectors. “This is the best natural resource” of the country and nobody can put it under embargo!,... even Mr. Trump can't. By the way, Western Universities benefit from long time of the best talents from Iran.

## 1. The Geopolitics of Iran

Before the analysis and comparison of the most important revolutions in our history, is necessary to make evidence of the geopolitical context in which Iran lives. Actions and counteractions among states and how they expand their influence or collapse, can be seen under the frame of Geopolitics and mainstream theories.

For most countries, the first geographical imperative is to maintain internal cohesion. For Iran, it is to maintain secure borders, and then secure the country internally. Without secure borders, Iran would be vulnerable to foreign powers that would continually try to manipulate its internal dynamics, destabilize its ruling regime and then exploit the resulting openings. Iran must first define the container and then control what it contains. Therefore, Iran's geopolitical imperatives:

- **Control the Zagros and Elburz mountains. These constitute the Iranian heartland and the buffers against attacks from the west and north**
- **Control the mountains to the east of the Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut, from Mashhad to Zahedan to the Makran coast, protecting Iran's eastern frontiers with Pakistan and Afghanistan. Maintain a line as deep and as far north and west as possible in the Caucasus to limit Turkish and Russian threats. These are the secondary lines**
- **Secure a line on the Arvand rood in order to protect the western coast of Iran on the Persian Gulf**
- **Control the divergent elements in this box**
- **Protect the frontiers against potential threats, particularly major powers from outside the region.**

Iran has achieved four of the five basic goals. It has created secure frontiers and controls the population inside the country. The greatest threat against Iran is the one it has faced since Alexander the Great (that posed by major powers outside the region). Historically, before deep-water navigation, Iran was the direct path to India for any Western power. In modern times, the Zagros remain the eastern anchor of Turkish power. Northern Iran blocks Russian expansion. Of course, Iranian oil reserves make Iran attractive to contemporary great powers.

There are two traditional paths into Iran. The northeastern region is vulnerable to Central Asian powers while the western approach is the most-often used (or attempted). A direct assault through the Zagros Mountains is not feasible, as Saddam Hussein discovered in 1980. However, manipulating the ethnic groups inside Iran could

be an option. The British, for example, based in Iraq, were able to manipulate internal political divisions in Iran, as did the Soviets, to the point that Iran virtually lost its national sovereignty during World War II.

The greatest threat to Iran in recent centuries has been a foreign power dominating Iraq —Ottoman or British — and extending its power eastward not through main force but through subversion and political manipulation. A typical example was, during the 1950s, Britain's role of using its position in Iraq to manipulate Iranian politics (the "Mossadegh case") and elevate the shah to power. In fact, every time external forces tried to manipulate Iranian internal politics, the results was heading to opposite directions.

The 1980-1988 war due to aggression of Iraq against Iran, causing millions of casualties on both sides. It also demonstrated a reality: a determined, well-funded, no-holds-barred assault from Mesopotamia against the Zagros Mountains will fail (albeit at an atrocious cost to the defender).

Historically, Iranians also have been concerned about Russian manipulation and manipulation by the British and Russians through Afghanistan.

Further, from the Islamic Revolution, regional powers (Turkey, Saudi Arabia) and external powers (United States and UK) have adopted an aggressive foreign politics with the goal to end (or at least to weaken) the leadership in Tehran. Such politics has failed for many reasons, but one of the most important is the geopolitical context of Iran. Those that still have the pretentiousness to continue in such defiance, would better learning geopolitics or, at least, geography.

## 2. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in a Western Perception

When I heard from the news of the revolution in Iran, I was a 19 years old teenager, starting the University studies in Political Science in Trieste, Italy, the city I was born and raised. I was not able to measure the significance of such major historical event. I must say, by the way, not even the CIA officers in Tehran were able to do it<sup>1</sup>, and this was even harder and full of heavy negative consequences both for Iran and USA relations.

For the very first time, almost sixty years after the soviet revolution, a nation supposed to be "one of the pillars" of USA influence and interests in the Middle East and a barrier to Soviet Union, crack down a "millenary monarchy" and build up a very new state, an Islamic Republic: a real revolution with a religious leadership. Something never seen before in the history and that definitely changed the world. For this reason, the event worth to be compared to few other revolutions that changed the world history: the French

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<sup>1</sup> In a BBC interview in late 1980, a CIA officer in charge of the Iran desk declared: "... *We even did not know what an Ayatollah was!*..."

Revolution, the Russian Revolution and, in a way, also the Chinese Revolution (at least after the middle of the Seventies).

The French Revolution was the revolution of the enlightened bourgeoisie against a decadent monarchy that could not satisfy the minimum of welfare to a large part of the population.

The Soviet Revolution, to make it simple, was the application of the Marxist-Leninist socio-economic analysis that needed to destroy the old society to realize the proletarian's dictatorship.

The Islamic Revolution of Imam Khomeini had a fundamentally different perspective: it was released to all, inside Iran and even outside its borders. First it was announced to Iranians that were suffering the Shah despotism (manipulated by external powers) showing them that another way was possible and necessary. To sum up, the social contract for the Islamic Republic of Iran, was: "Islam is the answer, and the Quran is the fundament of the country as of the new State".

It is not a class (in Marxists terms) for which the Revolution is made and to which is addressed. It is offered to an entire Nation and to all those, in the Islamic world, suffered for exploitation, moral and material corruption, not equal distribution of resources and rents. "*Estiqlal, Azadi, Jomhuri-ye Eslami!*"<sup>2</sup> Is a universal message: not one class that wants to eradicate another.

This peculiarity makes the Imam Khomeini revolution a unique cultural, social and political experiment: *Velayat-e faqih* فقيهه ولايت The government of the Jurist, as we translate in the West, is the pillar of this new political structure.

In foreign policy, this peculiarity was confusing and scaring the foreign countries: The US administration, that supported the Shah until the end, was not able to realize the dimension of the problem: It was convinced that they were facing just a *coup* as many in the developing countries. In fact, the US administration, and its strong strategic partner, the Saudi Arabia, could not admit a destabilization of the Middle East and a radical change in the regional equilibrium. Independence and freedom were certainly not the values of the surrounding regional powers.

In the "American Empire" context of those years, the Middle East was the oil supplier of Western Europe. To guarantee this task along the years, the US administrations established an economic structure and a military support the Middle East states that were geopolitically strategic to achieve such goal.

The Gulf monarchies, and among them the biggest for oil sources, the Shah regime in Iran, the Turkish republic, all were part of the containment doctrine, as the US Truman President

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<sup>2</sup> "indipendenza, Libertà, Islam"

adopted facing the Soviet Union. This was not new. Eisenhower US President reiterated this concept, in 1957, addressing it explicitly to the Middle East. A support to the Gulf Monarchies and well out of the Persian Gulf, to countries that represented a barrier to the Soviet expansion (i.e. Turkey and Iran) or that were in danger of influence of Communism in their national political context (Italy and Greece among others).

For those familiar with Geopolitics and its theories, that one of the fathers of Geopolitics, Mackinder, was the theoretical support to such vision.

Iran, already in the 1950s, tried to opening the way to an alternative vision of the context: a nationalist movement that was starting to open breaches into the colonialist front. Prime Minister of Iran, Mossadegh, as Nasser in Egypt, clearly understood a country cannot be independent without controlling (extraction rate, overall production and, of course price levels agreement) its natural and economic resources.

On the opposite side, the symbol of the old imperial power, The United Kingdom, France and the rising superpower, the USA, in their vision, could not accept such uprising that was perceived as inspired by the Soviet Union. This was the logic of the Cold War, but was also the beginning of the profound fracture between the national movements in the Middle East and the West.

The Mossadegh nationalization of the Anglo Persian Oil Company and the Suez Canal nationalization of Nasser were the two episodes that marked for decades the negative reputation of the Western powers in the area. From Tehran, and for most of the Developing World, the Western powers were seen and perceived as enemies, as “double standard” democracies, as neo-colonialists that were ready to cut the wings of nations in quest of independence.

Although we have not the pretention to re-write the history of Iran and the journey that drove the country to the Islamic Revolution, nevertheless, I will try to identify some issues that could help a better understanding from a foreigner point of view.

From the political point of view, comparable to the France revolution, and to the Soviet revolution, external forces attacked the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) to kill the new born Republic.

These forces, in the region and out of the region, had the illusion to easily win a so young regime, supposed to be too young to organize and restructuring the state according to the new model. What happened shows, again, as we never learn enough from history: As in revolutionary France and in Soviet Russia, the ideological and political motivations merged with the patriotic feelings that belong to every human being that wants to protect his family, his home, his land from invaders. It was the same for Iran, and the Revolution was not defeated, at the contrary, it become stronger and consolidate.

This “history rule” should be remembered by those that still today think Iranian people are opening their arms to a foreign attack and occupation. Iranian are not less patriotic than other countries, at the contrary, their love and pride for their Nation is vibrant.

Enlarging the comparison among revolutions that marked the modern history, in economic terms, the fall of Soviet Union and the Economic Revolution in China look stimulating to be compared.

The reasons of the fall of a State and its ideology to which, in a way or another, almost a billion of people were looking as a reference are complex and would be trivial to speak about it in just few lines. Nonetheless, the failure of the Soviet economic system was flagrant and absolute. This was not the result of an embargo against Soviet Union or any aggressive economic war against Soviet Union. It was the collapse of a system that was not able to guarantee the soviet social contract: “little for everybody, forever”. The cost of the war in Afghanistan (the “Vietnam” of the Russians) and the competition with the USA on the military strategic weapons were not sustainable for the low productivity of Soviet economy.

Additional component, and lethal factor, was the fall of oil prices of the 1983-1986 years. Again, the oil prices levels were significant in the geopolitical evolution. Russian people are traditionally prepared to immense sacrifices admitted the government can offer them protection and leadership. If the government is not able to guarantee them, the population starts to lessen the consensus.

When the Soviet empire felt down, the Russian Federation rose up and a new economic system was set in a chaotic way. Seventy years of the most important social experiment of the history left the floor to an “anarchic market economy”. The new (old) leadership transformed the political institutions driving the economic system to a “mockery of the market economy”. The combination of a rigid ideological framework with an inefficient economic system in the hand of the state drove the Soviet Union to a defaulting end.

The Chinese experience was completely different. After the “long March” that Mao Zedong won against the nationalist forces, a communist system was created but adapted to the peculiar cultural and economic structures of China. State Orthodoxy and economic pragmatism are the two key words that help to identify the Chinese (r)evolution experience.

In fact, when was clear that China could exit from the starvation crisis that affected the country time to time, and that a modern economic structure could not be based on agricultural sector and heavy industries, the pragmatic Confucianism culture mixed with the leadership of the Communist Party of China reacted to the inflationary crisis of 1979.

The Deng Xiao Ping famous statement: “... *does not matter if the cat is white or black, admitted it can catch the mouse...*” opened the door to a new economic system that scholars in Economics would hardly conceive: the Socialist Market Economy”.



The Chinese political leadership, to consolidate the structure of the political system, and to avoid possible damages or even worst consequences, stimulated the entire society to express a new engagement towards market economy but driven and moderated by the political leadership of the Communist Party. This was a very different take from the one of Russia. This was true also for the economic diversification: from natural resources exploitation to modernization in all industrial sectors. China became the “factory of the World”. Nevertheless, the development strategy was set forth to modernize agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. The “four modernizations” were at the core of the Chinese economic miracle.

Today, we all know the economic performances of China brought this country to the top of the world economy with a higher GDP than the one of the USA. China became the “factory of the world” making the traditional south coast the richer part of the country the core of the Chinese economy. Hong Kong is the financial capital of the country while Beijing remains the core of the political and military power.

China today is an economic giant, a financial power that detains 40% of the US public debt, but is not a superpower yet. China made enormous impressive progress in military sector. Today China has “denial capacity” for those that would like to attack the Chinese coasts. It has not the capacity to project sea power in blue waters of South China Sea. They are, of course working on that but it will take time and huge investments.

Russia apparently is successful in its attempt to regain international prestige and power projection (Syria, Mediterranean, maybe Venezuela). Nevertheless, Russian economy is suffering for an economy that is based and stuck on the energy rent. This made the post-soviet Russia prisoner of the international oil prices: when they are high, all is for the good and Moscow can subsidize the regions of the biggest country in the world. When oil prices fall down to the bottom, the consensus lacks and the cohesion of the system is in danger.

Russia did not invest in the education and research at same speed and intensity as China did. Russia, also for cultural reasons, is more rigid in comparison with the flexible Chinese system. Also, the demography trends are putting Russia in a uncomfortable condition of a declining population country.

Iran had to face and still is facing major challenges and offensive from regional and outside powers and is not the first time in its history. **If** Iran will choose to believe in education and research as part of a modern economy keeping in mind the social contract of the Revolution (**Independence, Freedom and Islam**) with a pragmatic approach, the threats from outside will not succeed.

All the best for the Iranian people and their so beautiful Country, that I am learning to appreciate every day more.



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