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April 2016



**The 1979 Iranian Revolution has cast a long shadow over Western attitudes to Iran
by Peter Jenkins CMG**

It was just ten months after the departure of the last Shah, a temperamental but lucrative Western client, that student revolutionaries over-ran the US embassy in Tehran, took the occupants hostage and held them for 444 days. Many Americans continue to resent that humiliation (which was compounded by the abject failure of a rescue attempt in April 1980).

The revolution also led to a settling of scores with the Shah's "establishment", internecine conflict between the Islamic and Marxist wings of the revolution, assassinations on the streets of Western capitals, and attempts to export the revolution to parts of the Middle East.

Iran's alliance with Lebanese Hezbollah was a product of that export drive. The alliance resulted in Iran being held largely responsible for the destruction of US marine barracks in Beirut in October 1983 – 241 marines killed - and for more hostage-taking, this time in the Lebanon, during the second half of the 80s.

The Islamic Republic's evolution away from its revolutionary roots towards a more conventional Non-Aligned status began after the end of a seven-year war with Iraq, provoked by Saddam Hussain, the death of the republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the election, in 1989 of a pragmatic president, Hashemi Rafsanjani (who was succeeded in 1997 by the reform-minded Mohammad Khatami).

During the 90's and early 00's Iran helped to secure the release of Americans held hostage in the Lebanon, gave assurances to the Saudi monarchy that it would not foment revolution there, made advances that were rebuffed by three US administrations, helped the US to expel the Taliban from Afghanistan, and made European exporters and investors welcome.

If Western attitudes failed to adjust fully to this evolution, it was in part because the Islamic Republic's behaviour still lent itself to demonization by the Republic's enemies and fell short of Western wishes.

Iranian clerics continued to deny the right of their leading enemy, Israel, to exist. Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps maintained a close relationship with Hezbollah, not least to deter Israeli attacks on Iran, and opened up weaponry supply channels to Hamas. The secret police and judiciary continued to arrest and torture those whose tolerance of the regime was suspect (maintaining a pattern set by the Shah's Savak).

On top of all that came, in 2003, the discovery that Iran had been secretly developing a capability to produce the highly enriched uranium with which nuclear weapons can be made. In the absence of proof, the West assumed that Iran intended to acquire nuclear weapons. European and US threat assessors began to see Iran as a strategic threat.

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Relations between Iran and Europe started to cool. They went into the deep freeze after the election as president in June 2005 of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had been involved in the 1979 hostage-taking and came across as a hang-over from those early years of the revolution – as well as because Iran refused to abandon the development of an enrichment capability, claiming to need it for the production of reactor fuel (and seeing it as a mark of Iranian prestige).

Since the election of Hassan Rouhani as president, in June 2013, the movement is once more in a pragmatic and conventional direction. Skilful diplomacy has dispelled European concerns about the nuclear programme. Rouhani and his able foreign minister, Javad Zarif, have stressed their commitment to moderation and the international rule of law. Their foreign policy is geared to the defence of Iranian interests, not the export of revolution or territorial expansion.

But Iran still has enemies in Washington, Riyadh and Jerusalem, and it continues to produce grist for their propaganda mills. It has been true to its longstanding alliance with the Assads in Syria. It is suspected of support for the Houthi's in Yemen. Its alliance with Hezbollah flourishes. It supplies and guides Shi'a militia in Iraq, albeit with the Iraqi government's consent. In Iran human rights abuse continues. And periodic medium-range missile tests are easily portrayed as an emerging threat to Israel and Saudi Arabia, even though Iran is as entitled to possess conventionally-tipped missiles as any other state.

The Jekyll and Hyde nature of the Islamic Republic at this stage in its evolution can be ascribed to unresolved differences between pragmatists and conservatives. The conservatives are more ideological than the pragmatists and more contemptuous of international norms.

The pragmatists have been in the driving seat since winning the 2013 presidential election. President Rouhani enjoys the confidence of Iran's ultimate arbiter, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and parliamentary elections in February 2016 demonstrated that popular support for pragmatism – and the opening to the West to which it aspires – is strong.

It would be rash to hope that Iran's current course will never suffer corrections. But if President Rouhani is re-elected in 2017, and if, when Supreme Leader Khamenei dies, his successor is equally ready to restrain conservative elements when necessary, then the odds will be weighted towards the next 37 years of post-revolutionary life being less turbulent than the first 37.

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