

Iran's Islamic Revolution at 40: On the Way to a Post-Revolutionary Society

by Walter Posch

Forty years ago, in February 1979, the Islamic Revolution, which had originally begun as a civil society protest, triumphed in Iran. This not only ended the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty, which had ruled the country autocratically since the end of World War I, but was also the harbinger of a new era in which the confrontation with political Islam slowly began to replace US-Soviet bipolarity.

The revolution altered the country's position in both domestic and foreign policy. Domestically, the group of revolutionaries led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini astounded their opponents with their ability to quickly hijack and run the affairs of state.

Whereas at the beginning of the revolution a loose alliance of various leftist, Islamist and bourgeois-nationalist groups ruled the country,

Khomeini's supporters soon succeeded in dominating the political spectrum. First, discipline was imposed on Islamist groups, e.g. by uniting the various militias which had sprung up spontaneously, to create the Revolutionary Guard. Then, all other groups were neutralised.

Without doubt, the outbreak of war with Iraq in 1980 played into the hands of Khomeini's supporters. By 1982, Marxist leftist groups had been crushed, while the left-wing-Islamist People's Mujahedin (MEK) left the country and became subordinates to the Iraqis, before coming to an arrangement with the US after the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

More interesting and important, however, was the relationship between the Khomeinists and the nationalists. If the latter were representatives

** Walter Posch is a Middle East expert focusing on Iran, Iraq, Turkey and the Kurdish issue with the Austrian National Defence Academy.*

*First published in German as "40 Jahre Islamische Revolution", in *Tiroler Tageszeitung*, No. 54 (23 February 2019), p. 22. Translated from German by Christopher Schönberger, Austrian Armed Forces Language Institute.*

of political civil society, they were eliminated from power just like other groups, but were still the only ones to be tolerated on the fringes of the political spectrum. This may be due to their insignificance and the fact that their political home is the democratic national movement of the popular Mohammad Mosaddegh, who was overthrown by the Pahlavi regime and the CIA in 1952.

More important for the regime than the Muslim-democratic and bourgeois-nationalist forces, however, were the monarchist Iranian nationalists in the security apparatus, who quickly came to an arrangement with the new masters after the dynasty's ignominious flight from the country. The reasons for this are obvious: the Marxist groups argued that the army and the intelligence service SAVAK be disbanded. The already prevalent security vacuum led to a strengthening of separatist autonomy movements, especially in Kurdistan, in the Turkmen Sahra and to a lesser extent in Azerbaijan and Baluchistan.

In addition, the Soviet Union had invaded neighbouring Afghanistan in 1979, and Iranian nationalists thus feared that the country could end up in Moscow's orbit. Following negotiations, Khomeini issued a general amnesty for the security apparatus on 21 March 1980, the Persian New Year. This amnesty expressly applied to members of the army, police and the gendarmerie as well as members of the intelligence services, provided that they could not be convicted of human rights violations against supporters of the new regime. The SAVAK may

have been officially disbanded at the beginning of the revolution in 1979. It endured, however, and was eventually re-established in 1984 as the Ministry of Information, VAJA.

This amnesty had two consequences: firstly, it ensured that the army was loyal to the new masters, and, secondly, cooperation between state and revolutionary security institutions was made possible and institutionalised. This explains why the country's security institutions were not in a state of disintegration, as previously assumed by many observers, so that, in 1980, Iran was able to repulse the Iraqi attack and wage the Iran-Iraq war for the ensuing eight years.

The war and political purges produced huge social upheavals. Especially noteworthy was the rise of an Islamist youth movement, mainly from the lower classes, swathes of whom poured to the front, demanding their share of the country's politics and wealth after the war. To the extent that they were not absorbed into the Basij mobilisation units, they became, as Hezbollahis, a movement on the fringes of the political spectrum calling for a permanent Islamic revolution. This movement received regular defeats in Iranian elections, but is disproportionately represented in the security apparatus and is regarded as the most efficient "network of networks", serving the economic and political interests of both radical clerics and the laity.

These groups generate the greatest resistance against all attempts to moderate the regime in foreign and domestic policy. In its security and

foreign policy, however, the Islamic Republic has succeeded in establishing an efficient consultation mechanism between state institutions and political movements, so that Iran is regarded as a rational, albeit anti-US, actor in the region. The conclusion of the nuclear agreement in Vienna in 2015 can be regarded as proof for the efficiency and effectiveness of Iranian institutions.

The nuclear agreement was not only intended to de-radicalise foreign policy, but also to finance the domestic reforms planned by the new President Hasan (Feridun) Ruhani. Ruhani comes from the Iranian security apparatus and is aware of the continuing popularity of Mohammad Khatami's (1997-2005) policy of reform. In contrast to Khatami, a philosopher oriented toward civil society, Ruhani reminds the state institutions of their duties by endeavouring to strengthen the rule of law. This was made possible by the stance of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, who has prioritised economic policy for years.

To attract investors, however, the nuclear agreement is not enough; rather, the legal foundations must be modified and the rule of law applied. As it is impossible to grant legal certainty and protection to foreign companies and their employees but to deny it to the Iranian population, Ruhani drafted a civil rights charter in 2013, in which the relationship between citizen, ideology and regime was re-codified.

With this charter, Ruhani also wanted to accommodate the financially and culturally eroded educated classes, who are hurting under mediocre Islamist

elites and whose qualifications on cultural issues, the liberal professions, science and education are vital for the survival of the Iranian nation.

Whereas liberal and human rights groups criticised the charter for not going far-enough, other forces were aware of the dangers which might emerge for them if the new government took transparency and legal certainty for individual citizens seriously, regardless of their social, ethnic or religious backgrounds. Resistance to Ruhani initially emerged in the cultural arena and concerned issues such as concert permits, public morality checks and the irksome headscarf question.

Western observers misunderstand these measures as a conservative backlash against a society that is essentially liberal. In reality, it is the principle of permanent revolution that stands in the way of any strengthening of the fragile rule of law. If Ruhani prevailed, it would mean the end of the road for the Hezbollahi gangs and their freedom to bully society and harass citizens for ideological reasons.

Ideology, however, is only a pretext to intimidate the public in order to choke off any debate about the financially powerful parallel world of the "pious" foundations (*bonyad*). In all areas of the Iranian economy and politics the Foundation of Imam Reza in Mashhad or the Foundation of the Oppressed and Disabled in Reyshahr are active and mostly unchecked.

Any meaningful economic reform must therefore start with the reform of these Iranian foundations. Resistance to this

reform is only natural; which is why the chairman of the Mashhad based Foundation, Ayatollah Reisolsadati (called Reisi), had himself nominated as a rival candidate against Ruhani in the last election – and failed. If the Ruhani government had been able to benefit from the nuclear agreement, these foundations would have gradually lost their influence due to international economic investments and the concomitant market liberalisation.

The US's unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear agreement initially means the slow end of the economic reforms geared towards globalisation and the normalisation of Iran's relationship with the world economy. This inevitably leads to a strengthening of the parallel economic world of the foundations and to a weakening of the state institutions with the exception of the security apparatus.

The looming isolation of the country and the establishment of an economic regime reminiscent of the oil-for-food programme with Iraq by means of a Special Purpose Vehicle propagated by the EU have two far-reaching consequences for the country: First, out of sheer economic necessity the security apparatus merges with the parallel world of the foundations, so that, what remains in the end, is a quintessential regime, and not a state with functioning institutions. Secondly, the educated middle class or bourgeoisie, which has remained loyal to its homeland for four decades in spite of revolution, war and mismanagement, loses all hope and emigrates from the country.

What remains is a typical post-revolutionary society, culturally and materially depleted, with a political system that will either continue to stagnate as in Cuba or, due to its regional-political significance and activities, find itself in a dramatic confrontation with the United States and its regional allies.

20 March 2019

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), two book series (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)

- 19 | 22 Walter Posch, *Iran's Islamic Revolution at 40: On the Way to a Post-Revolutionary Society*
- 19 | 21 Riccardo Alcaro, *On Speaking Terms: Europe-Iran Dialogue on Regional Flashpoints*
- 19 | 20 Gianni Bonvicini, *Italian Populists Scramble in Search of Allies for the European Election*
- 19 | 19 Nicholas Westcott, *The International Impact of Brexit*
- 19 | 18 Harry Tzimitras, *Eastern Mediterranean Hydrocarbons Prospects: In Need of a Pragmatic Geopolitical Assessment*
- 19 | 17 Mustafa Ergün Olgun, *Can Hydrocarbons Catalyse New Out of the Box Thinking on Cyprus? A Turkish Cypriot Perspective*
- 19 | 16 Charles Ellinas, *East Med Gas: The Impact of Global Gas Markets and Prices*
- 19 | 15 Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, *Italy and the EU: On a Collision Course?*
- 19 | 14 Jean-Pierre Darnis, *The Political Rollercoaster of Italian-French Relations*
- 19 | 13 Silvia Ainio and Alessia Vittorangeli, *Enabling Energy: Access to Clean Energy Can Enhance Refugee Economic and Social Empowerment*