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Iran: Cultural Values, Self images and Negotiation Behavior

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<u>Abstract</u>

Iran holds a unique place in the study of the modern Middle East: it is a non-Arab country, but deeply involved in the heart of the Arab world; after the removal of Saddam Hussein and the "repentance" of Mu'amar Qaddafi, it remains the only overtly radical state in the region with a proclaimed ideological anti-American agenda; it is the sole Shiite regime and the active "exporter" of Islamic radicalism and terrorism, not only to Shiite, but also to Sunnite Islamic movements; and it is actively involved in attempts to disrupt the Israeli-Arab peace process. Above all of these, Iran is worthy of special interest as a regional power capable of creating high levels of tension in the sensitive area of the Persian Gulf, and as a country with an advanced clandestine nuclear weapons program.

Current negotiations with Iran on these issues warrant an effort to decipher the Iranian negotiation code. This study attempts to do so by analysis of key elements of Iranian worldviews, beliefs, mores, communication conventions, social behavior, cultural, linguistic, and social heritage and culture-dependent bargaining norms that the well acculturated and socialized Iranian would perceive as comprising those traits of Iranian "**national character**" (with all the caveats due to such a concept) which may affect Iranian negotiation tactics.

Iran's interaction with its neighbors and other nations is, first and foremost, influenced by a **constant tension between Persian and Islamic identities** and between **conflicting self–images of national superiority and subjugation**. On one hand, it bases its claim for predominance in the Middle East on a highly accentuated Islamic-Shiite identity. On the other hand, Iranian nationalism is highly exclusive. While Iranians identify *pro forma* with Muslims in general and Shiites in particular, the scope of Iranian national identity remains that of the Persian-speaking Shiites within the borders of Iran, and Iranian expatriates. Furthermore, Iranian national identity projects a sense of superiority towards its Arab neighbors and pride of its pre-Islamic imperial past. For Iranians, all that was great in what is commonly referred to as Islamic or Arab culture was actually Persian. This self-image even holds certain racial overtones: it links Iran to a primordial "Aryan" world of settled civilization, far superior to the "primitive" nomadic Arabian culture, but at the same time, one that has been conquered, and humiliated by outside forces.

Similar contradictions exists in the **Iranian attitude towards the West** and its culture; a mixture of admiration for its achievements in the very areas which Iranian culture prides itself (science and arts) along with rejection of its cultural sway and its pervasive influence within Iranian society and a sense of having been victimized and sidelined by the West. It is this very admiration, however, that brought Iranian nationalist intellectuals to liken Iranian civilization to a body that is affected by a poison or virus of the West (*gharb-zadeggi* or "Westoxicated"). The Iranian attitude towards **Israel and the Jews** is also a mixture of religious and ethnic animosity and of admiration.

These perceptions have contributed to a tendency in Iranian political thinking towards **conspiracy theories**, which attribute the course of contemporary Iranian

history to devious Machiavellian-type machinations of coalitions of enemies and foreign powers (primarily Great Britain, the USA, Israel and the Jews) by use of ubiquitous secret associations and intelligence organizations. The belief in conspiracies also renders Iranians receptive to implicit threats even over and above the actual credibility of the threat.

Iranian societal norms reflect a multitude of contradictions. **Individualism** is, by far, the most prominent trait usually associated with Iranians, both by Iranians themselves and by foreigners. Some observers of Iranian culture have described the Iranian proclivity towards individualism as the result of geographic conditions, modalities of family life, or the despotic structure of all the political regimes that have been in power in Iran, forcing the individual to fend for himself and his family and not to trust anyone outside of his intimate circle. Individualism, however, does not imply social atomism. The Iranian Nomenklatura is composed of close knit "old boys clubs" made up of comrades in arms, extended families of the bazaar and the clergy with extensive access to the leadership. The extended family with a network of personal ties provides the mechanism for social mobility, business success, political acceptance, and protection from the arbitrariness of the regime. Iranian social-political circles external to the family are embodied in the institution of *dovreh* (circle), the practice of *party-baazi* (protectionism), and *ravaabet* (connections).

Individualism has been seen as the source of another major trait frequently attributed to the Iranian – **suspicion and mistrust** of anyone outside one's immediate inner circle, and especially of anyone in power, of governments, and of foreign powers. Common Persian adages prepare the Iranian to expect the worse of fate, and even worse of people who have achieved high office and to regard chance as paramount, with the skill of the player necessary in order to maximize the advantage from good throws of the dice, and to minimize the damage and future risk resulting from bad throws.

Iran is exceptional as well in that it is one of the few Muslim societies which have undergone **popular revolutions**. Indeed, intellectual and military rebellions against the Arab domination emerged in Iran from the beginning of the Muslim conquest and in the 20th century alone, Iran went through a series of revolutionary upheavals. Again, in an apparent contradiction, strict hierarchy, acceptance of authority (as long as it lasts) and subservience have also been seen as characteristics of Iranian society. One possible deciphering of the "code" of revolutionarism vs. acceptance of authority in Iranian society is that Iran has through the ages been a "short term society" caught in a cyclical pattern of arbitrary and despotic rule: social uncertainty→growing discontent→chaos→willingness to accept any new regime in order to put an end to the chaos→new despotic and arbitrary rule. This cycle seems to be behind the tendency towards subservience to the incumbent ruler, the ease with which the opportunity to overthrow him may be seized, and the willingness to accept a new despot as long as he provides respite from the period of anarchy.

Iranians pride themselves on traditions of **science, rationalism and pragmatism**. Iranian national ethos takes pride in the image of a hard working and methodical national character. In this regard, Iranians frequently cite the contrast between Iranian "scientific" mentality and Arab "emotionalism". Positive "rational" traits that Iranians tend to ascribe to their own "national character" include "cleverness", patience in negotiation, sophistication, bargaining skills, dissimulative abilities and pragmatic

realism – a predilection towards "playing by ear" and keeping options open with and ability to juggle options and keep them all in the air. Many of these traits are popularly associated with the stereotype of the bazaar merchant (*bazaari*). On the other hand, the popular *bazaari* stereotype is replete with negative characteristics. He is seen as a wheeler-dealer, one capable of selling ice to the Eskimos. He prefers short-term profit to long-term advantages and confidence building; he is calculating, greedy, opportunistic, double-faced, dishonest*,* and manipulative and easily takes bribes (aptly called *pour-cent* or *raant* in modern Iranian Persian). Self-critical Iranians tend to ascribe these traits as well to "national characteristics".

At the same time, **Iranian society is, at its roots, religious** with widespread acceptance of popular superstition. Iranians today tend to characterize themselves as highly spiritual (*rohani*), in contrast to the materialistic West and Arab world. Iranian "Reformists" are not secular, and do not call for a total separation of religion and State. Even the Shah – despite the present regime's propaganda – was a believing Shiite Muslim. This popular religiosity, however, stands in stark contrast to the low esteem in which Iranians hold their clergy and the extremely negative Persian stereotypes of the *Mullah* as corrupt, hypocritical, avaricious, lascivious, argumentative, and unscrupulous – a person who exploits religion for the sake of his own interests. These stereotypes are ingrained in Iranian lore for centuries and are not the consequence of disenchantment from the present regime.

Both the "bazaar ethos" and the Shiite religious narrative of an oppressed minority are called upon to justify pragmatism. Shiite Islam provides defense mechanisms for survival: passive acceptance of political situations, dissimulation (*ketman*, *taqiya*) regarding their religious identity in order to stave off oppression, religious and cultural syncretism, and allowing for the absorption of non-indigenous practice, and – most important – *ijtihad*, the right of senior scholars to make innovative strategic religious decisions based on their own interpretation of the Koran, and not on legal precedent alone (as in Sunnite Islam). Consequently, **heroic suicidal dogmatism is not a characteristic of Iranian political culture**. Iran, as a nation, has responded to most threats in a pragmatic way, railing against the lack of justice in the way that stronger powers take advantage of their superior strength, but reacting according to a sober reading of the situation.

Iranian **negotiation techniques** reflect many of the cultural traits noted above. Iranian negotiators are methodical and have demonstrated a high level of preparations and a detailed and legalistic attitude. On the other hand, their communication tends to be extremely **high-context**; **ambiguous**, allusive and **indirect** not only in the choice of words utilized, but in the dependence of the interpretation of the message on the context in which it is transmitted: non-verbal clues, staging and setting of the act of communication, and the choice of the bearer of the message. **Procrastination** is another key characteristic of Iranian negotiation techniques. This stands in sharp contrast to American style communication (Get to the point/Where's the beef?/ time is money!) which places a high value on using lowest common denominator language in order to ensure maximum and effective mutual understanding of the respective intents of both sides. This tendency has been explained by an aversion to an assumption that the longer the negotiations last, the greater a chance that things can change in his favor and an intrinsic Shiite belief in the virtue of patience.

Dissimulation, high-level **disinformation** and **manipulation** are widely acceptable. Western diplomats and go-betweens have lamented the fact that Iranian interlocutors were consistent in not maintaining their promises, and that oral statements or promises are often employed by Iranians *pro-forma*, just to get an interlocutor out of their hair, with no intention of carrying out what they have stated. The British Ambassador to Iran in the 1970s, Sir Dennis Wright, summarized his dealings with Iranians as follows: "*The Iranians are people who say the opposite of what they think and do the opposite of what they say. That does not necessarily mean that what they do does not conform to what they think.*"

Iranian negotiators tend to accept frequent crisis as part of the negotiation process and seem relatively unconcerned by the prospect that such tactics may endanger the post-negotiation relationship. Insinuated threats, bluffing, and disinformation are all highly acceptable. Accordingly, the Iranian negotiator may not only be not offended by the use of these techniques by his foreign interlocutor, but may even hold a grudging admiration for the cleverness of his protagonist.

In the light of the significance of Iranian nationalism in the Iranian mindset, it is not surprising that Iranians have had a certain difficulty in accepting a fellow Iranian as a *bona fide* counterpart who speaks in the name of the adversary. Similarly, Iranians tend to look askance at other Muslims who represent the West and to view emissaries of non-Caucasian origin (blacks, Asians) as less authentic representatives of the West.

The ideological constraints of the present regime tend to create a preference for. The Iranian need for collective decision-making is especially evident in the treatment of back channels. Even in high-level meetings, Iranian negotiators will hold talks in the presence of an official interpreter or a clerical "commissar" as a silent witness. Iranian negotiators have been known to make extensive use of back channels and pre-negotiations. In many cases, these channels seem to have been no more than a mechanism for gathering operational intelligence prior to the actual negotiations. Often, though, these channels seem to be in competition with each other or to represent different interest groups within the Iranian leadership, or different people in the close vicinity of the highest leadership who want to be the ones to bring a "prize" to the leadership.

A frequent negotiating ploy used by Iranians is to go off on a tangent into "virtual negotiations" on new and unexpected issues, which become the focal point of the talks. The non-Iranian side finds itself compelled to negotiate back to the original issue, and then finds that it has paid for the return to status quo ante. This seems to be meant to wear out the adversary and to learn his weaknesses before raising real issues, but it also may be a reflection of the "bazaar instinct" and the "love of the game," a demonstration of rhetorical, emotional, and intellectual virtuosity in negotiation that raises the status of the Iranian in the eyes of his colleagues and subordinates, and hence serves a social end, separate from the real goal of the negotiations.

Abstract

Iranian negotiation techniques are notoriously **short-term** focused. Very rarely will Iranians offer a deal in which the quid pro quo from the other side will only emerge years later. Furthermore, the bazaar does not close its doors after a deal has been made. The "price" of the "merchandise" proposed at the outset of negotiations has very little to do with the real price that the Iranian believes he can get. The haggling may even go on after an agreement is struck. This stage of the "post-negotiations" may have to do with implementation of the agreement or even with a re-opening of issues previously agreed upon due to "changes in circumstances."

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Introduction

Iran holds a unique place in the study of the modern Middle East: it is a non-Arab country, but deeply involved in the heart of the Arab world; after the removal of Saddam Hussein and the "repentance" of Mu'amar Qaddafi, it remains the only overtly radical state in the region with a proclaimed ideological anti-American agenda; it is the sole Shiite regime and the active "exporter" of Islamic radicalism and terrorism, not only to Shiite, but also to Sunnite Islamic movements; and it is actively involved in attempts to disrupt the Israeli-Arab peace process. Above all of these, Iran is worthy of special interest as a regional power capable of creating high levels of tension in the sensitive area of the Persian Gulf, and as a country with an advanced clandestine nuclear weapons program.

Despite all the above, the interaction between Iran and the West (and indeed, most of its neighbors, most of the time) is not through armed conflict, but through protracted negotiations and exhaustive bargaining. It is, therefore, worthwhile to understand the aspects of Iranian cultural behavior and mindset relevant to Iranian styles of communication, bargaining, and negotiation.

This study will attempt to depict elements of Iranian worldviews, its "national character and psyche," its cultural, linguistic, and social heritage, and the conditioning which Iranians and others deem to influence Iran's interaction with the outside world. The building blocks for such a picture are the beliefs, mores, communication conventions, social behavior, and interaction that the well acculturated and socialized Iranian would perceive as "Iranian," whereas other, contrasting behavior patterns would be seen by most compatriots as "foreign" and "non-Iranian." This is not to say that all of the elements perceived as Iranian are necessarily seen by all Iranians as proper, acceptable, or commendable methods of dealing with others. As in every cultural community with a degree of self-critique, cultural traits may be seen in different circles of the society as typical, but either positive or unbecoming. These traits are referred to here both in the context of the behavior of Iranian society as a whole and of the individual Iranian when taking part in result-oriented communication: bargaining and negotiation. The detailed description of self-images, social and religious norms and mores, and cultural and mythological icons are meant to provide as comprehensive as possible a picture of culture-dependent characteristics of Iranian negotiation and bargaining norms.

Dealing with "national character" is academically controversial and calls for a *caveat*. Obviously, a study of this sort runs the risk of degenerating into a crass cultural generalization of a large ethnic group. The debate over the legitimacy of attempts to identify national character or modal personality re-erupted recently in the wake of the American policies in Iraq and claims that studies of the "Arab Mind" had inspired those policies.[1] In Iran, as in any cultural group, there are differences between traditionalists and modernists, ideologically oriented people and pragmatic

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[1] Specifically, criticism was leveled against Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind*, which, it is claimed, was widely read by the senior echelons of the American military.

existentialists, people from rural and people from urban backgrounds, common folk and world-savvy sophisticated political elites, men and women, people from different regions and from different age groups. The personal biography of an individual will have a defining influence over the elements of the national mindsets that he integrates.

In light of the above, some definitions of national character as proposed in diverse academic disciplines are in order. Alex Ankeles has noted an important distinction is between national characteristics and national character. The former is seen as "mannerisms, customs, traditions, cultural norms and superficial traits" which vary greatly from one socio-economic sector of the nation to another; the latter, represents a deeper strata of an "enduring constellation of psychological dispositions, motives and values of members of a society (nation) which they share by virtue of their common historical experience, culture, and institutionalized patterns of their social existence and is viewed as a determinant of overt behavior."[2] Related approaches emphasize "recurrent themes and institutions, ideals, values and recurrent fantasies and imagery," or "traits… that are pertinent to the potentially idiosyncratic syntheses of different individuals."[3] Another socio-linguistic approach is based on the methodology of the renowned anthropologist, Margaret Mead. It suggests that the study of national character should be based on an analytic interpretation of the systems of communication within the society, including patterns of regularized behavior, both linguistic and non-linguistic, and that the "impression of …psychological regularities, constituting national character …stems largely from misapplied assessments of the regularities of the communication system employed by that population."[4] A psychological-anthropological approach suggests the term "modal personality" to define the usual result of successful processes of socialization in a given social/national environment. The basis for this approach is that primary institutions (such as subsistence type, child training) produce a common denominator of basic personality that then translates into secondary institutions such as religion, ritual, and folklore. Thus, cultural integration is expressed in a common denominator of the personalities of people who participate in culture. All members of a given society share certain basic experiences; these experiences produce a basic personality structure, which in turn creates and sustains other aspects of culture.[5] These theories have been hotly debated in recent years. This study, therefore, is not an attempt to justify one or other approach, but to describe those phenomena that are widely perceived as belonging to some sort of Iranian national character.

An anthropological and sociological interest in Iran existed even before the Islamic Revolution made the Iranian regime into an adversary of the West. Various studies have been published dealing with "Persian Psychology," Iranian "National

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[2] See Alex Inkeles and Daniel J. Levinson, "National Character: The Study of Modal Personality and Sociocultural Systems," The Handbook of Social Psychology IV (2nd ed.), ed. Gardner Lindzey and Eliot Aronson, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1968) 418–506. This definition is used by Ali Banuazizi, "Iranian 'National Character': A Critique of Some Western Perspectives," Psychological Dimensions of Near East Studies, L. Carl Brown and Norman Itzkowitz (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1977).

[3] Mary Catherine Bateson, J.W. Clinton, J.B.M. Kassarjian, H. Safavi, and M. Soraya, "*Safa-ye Batin*. A Study of the Interrelationships of a Set of Iranian Ideal Character Types," Psychological Dimensions of Near Eastern Studies, ed. L.Carl Brown and Norman Itzkowitz (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1977) 257-273, 260, 261.

[4] William O Beeman, "What is (Iranian) National Character? A Sociolinguistic Approach," Iranian Studies 9.1 1976: 22-43, 23.

[5] See Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934) 1-7.

Character," "Minds, Morals and Misgovernment" in Iran, "Iranian Ideal Character Types," "Iranian National Character – a Socio-linguistic Approach," not to mention the empiric "insights" of Iranians and Westerners (from Herodotus on) who documented their impressions of Iranian culture and society.[6] While the interpretation and proposed etiology of the observed phenomena varies according to the academic (or romantic) bent of the observer, the wide common denominator of many of these studies and observations is striking. Some of these venture as far back as ancient Persia to draw a picture of continuity of national traits, finding the causes of their modern findings in the geography, demography, and climate of the country, whereas others cite the vicissitudes of Iranian history in recent centuries as the formative cultural determinant. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a period of extensive cultural and anthropological interest in Persia, including in-depth accounts by foreigners who lived and worked in the country. These observations can provide insight into fundamental culturally based aspects of modern Iran and possible explanations for the roots of modern incarnations of age-old phenomena. However, they must be dealt with carefully and examined in the light of the current culture of modern Iran.

Despite Iran's proximity to the heart of the Arab world and its involvement in Arab politics, Iranian cultural behavior cannot be derived from generalizations emanating from experience with the Arab world. This distinction, unnecessary in regard to Muslim countries in South Asia or Africa, is frequently obscured in the Iranian case in the eyes of many outside observers. It is the contrast, however, and not the similarity with the Arabs that forms a fundamental part of the Iranian ethnic self-image. Iranians see themselves as belonging to a unique Persian nation-state, as opposed to its Arab neighbors who are seen as tribal societies artificially forged into states by colonial powers. As a Shiite country, Iran's Islamic culture differs in key points to that of the primarily Sunnite Arab world; as a nation with an old merchant tradition and *bazaar* class, its economic culture differs from that of those newly industrialized Middle Eastern countries which have only recently begun to develop a commercial middle class.

This research encompasses the following areas: Iranian collective **self-images and stereotypes** (of Iranians themselves and by others, and of others by Iranians); characteristics, patterns, and values observed as epitomizing **Iranian society**; and patterns of **communication and negotiation**, including manners, religious and cultural taboos, culture-dependent values, national and religious symbols, family, cultural icons, Persian linguistic traits, high-content/implicit vs. low content/explicit communication, humor, ambiguity, social imagery and status, historic cultural analogies, negotiating and bargaining tactics, values, authority, and hierarchy.

This study is a combination of insights of anthropological and sociological studies and observations of a large number of referents, Iranians and non-Iranians, with various types and scopes of experience with Iran and Iranians. Unfortunately, as an Israel-based research, the study has had to draw on second-hand observations and lacked the opportunity to test them directly in Iran. It is hoped that the rather large number of referents makes up for this deficiency. Along with such observations, Iranians have a tradition of self-critique. This element is evident in today's Iranian reformist press and in the material in Iranian websites – both from inside Iran and

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[6] See Bibliography.

from expatriate Iranians. Popular Iranian humor also provides insight into a variety of social patterns and stereotypes.

- The sources of the research include:
- General literature on national character based on various academic disciplines.
- Specific sociological, socio-linguistic and anthropological studies on Iran.
- Diplomatic documents from the British National Archives (PRO), the Israeli State Archive, and the U.S. National Archive.
- Biographical accounts of Iranians and Westerners.
- Modern Iranian literature and cinema.
- Interviews with Iranians and Western academics, journalists, former officials, businessmen, and others who have had extensive experience with Iran.
- Websites of Iranians, chat forums, and newsgroup discussions of Iranian affairs.

This study is part of a larger study dealing with the Iranian national and religious worldview, decision-making processes, and defense doctrine, previously published by the Institute for Policy and Strategy.[7] Some of the issues treated in this study in a concise fashion are dealt with at length in the previous o

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[7] Shmuel Bar, <u>Iranian Defense Doctrine and Decision Making</u>, Institute for Policy and Strategy, Herzliya:October 2004

Self-Images and Stereotypes

National Self-Image

The prevalent Iranian self-image is a contradictory mixture of positive and negative motifs and a constant tension between Persian and Islamic identities. On one hand, it reflects pride of belonging to an ancient noble and imperial nation which controlled most of the Middle East and which gave the world artistic, scientific, and architectural treasures centuries before Islam came on the scene, maintained its national language and culture after the Islamic conquest, and even succeeded in "cultural colonization" of the new empire in the realms of arts, sciences, economy, and language.[8] For Iranians, all that was great in what is commonly referred to as Islamic or Arab culture was actually Persian. This self-image even holds certain racial overtones: it links Iran to a primordial Aryan (read noble) world of settled civilization, far superior to the "primitive" nomadic Arabian culture. It is well expressed in the continued use of classic Persian names with pre-Islamic and even pagan symbolism.[9] Another expression is the indefatigable quest for original Persian words to replace the Arabized Persian that took root in the Persian language generations ago.[10] Iranian sensitivity to national identity is evident as well in interactions with Westerners: Iranians bristle at references to Western technological or cultural superiority (i.e., the West being the cradle of world culture, democracy, science, etc.) or to any debt that the Iranians hold towards the West.

On the other hand, the same Iranian self-image also embodies the Shiite Islamic narrative, characterized by a strong sense of inferiority regarding power, self-images of being oppressed, conquered, and humiliated by outside forces, and identification with the downtrodden and with self-sacrifice. This facet of the Iranian self-image is epitomized by identification with the Imam Ali, who was usurped as Caliph, and his sons, Hussein and Hassan, who were tricked, defeated, and killed by the treacherous and usurping Umayyad Caliph Yazid.[11]

Iranian cultural studies place much emphasis on the traditional Iranian and Shiite differentiation between the purity of the *baten* (internal) and the corruption of the *zaher* (external). The former is the seat of humility, compassion, generosity, and trust in God. The latter is both the source of suspicion, cynicism, pessimism, and defeatism – all of which are indicative of a lack of trust in God – and of negative or materialistic personal traits which are frequently attributed to Persian culture, such as shrewdness, opportunism, hypocrisy, sycophancy, and insincerity. Ideally, one should combat the latter traits as they appear both in the outside world and in one's self, and be a person

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[8] This is also the judgment of many great Western scholars. See D.G. Hogarth, A History of Arabia (Oxford, 1922): "Never, has captor more swiftly and subtly been captured by his captive than Arabia by Persia." See also Philip K. Hitti, History of the Arabs (London: Macmillan St. Martin's Press, 1970) 308: "The esthetic temperament of [Iran's] population was a sorely needed element in the cultural life of the Semitic Arabs"; Carl Brockelmann, History of the Islamic Peoples (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960) 163–166.

[9] Such as Hormoz, a contraction of Ahura Mazda; Jamshid, after the great King Houshang; Leila, from mythology; or Ardeshir and Mandana from ancient Persian history.

[10] See William Forbis, Fall of the Peacock Throne (New York: Harper & Row).

[11] *Yazid* is still an epitaph in Persian for an evil-minded person.

in whom outside and inside are the same. One of the principal themes of Iranian literature, films, and theater is the tension between the protagonist's internal morality and the seductive pull of the corrupting external world. The existence of the negative external traits, however, are rationalized by attributing them to the corrupting influence of external forces; since these are the rules of the game in interaction with these forces, the moral Iranian has no choice but to play by them.

Social Stereotypes

Almost every ethnic group suffers from (or enjoys) stigmas and stereotypes – some self-inflicted. The Persian is no exception to this rule. Stereotypes and popular anecdotes told by Iranians about themselves might to some extent have been seeded by grains of truth, and in any case generate, in themselves, an accepted self-image. In many, the source of the stereotype (Iran's Arab neighbors or the West) is reflected in the cultural characteristics that the stereotype emphasizes. The following is an attempt to draw a composite sketch of the Iranian drawn on the basis of these anecdotes and stereotypes.

Two primary negative Persian stereotypes are those of the *Mullah* (the generic title of the clergy, also *Akhund* or "singer" since the low ranking clergy would be hired to sing at funerals) and the *Bazaari* (a member of the merchant class that controls the markets of the large cities). The two social classes are linked in popular negative stereotypes, as they are in the social system itself.

The *Mullah* is stereotyped as corrupt, hypocritical,[12] avaricious, lascivious, [13] argumentative, and unscrupulous – a person who exploits religion for the sake of his own interests. Iranian proverbs and folk sayings are replete with admonitions to beware of the *Mullah* and not to trust him under any circumstance. [14] This image has even found its way into the most popular of Persian poets, Hafez (fourteenth century), who wrote, "On the pulpit, preachers, goodness display/Yet in private, they have a different way. I have a question to ask of the learned in our midst/Why Confession-

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[12] Every Iranian knows the story of the mullah, who on his way to the mosque for the morning prayers was splashed by a dog shaking himself in a drainage ditch. The mullah, who knew he did not have time to change his clothes, refused to look at the animal and rushed muttering "God willing, it is a goat." This is short in Persian for "let things pass and don't look at them closely." It represents the agreement of the clerics to accept the boundaries between clean and unclean without being too finicky. Roy, Mottahadeh, The Mantle of the Prophet – Religion and Politics in Iran (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 181.

[13] One Central Asian referent with wide experience in doing business with Iranians repeated the following maxim: to buy a *haji*, you need a glass of vodka, to buy a *Hojat al-Islam,* a whole bottle; an Ayatollah costs two bottles and a pair of lovely legs, and an Ayatollah Ozma, more bottles and more legs. His disdain for the moral rigidity of the entire class of clerics actually reflects a popular stigma prevalent in countless reports on attitudes in Iran towards the clerical class, even before the Revolution.

[14] A common Persian anecdote tells of the Mullah who fell into a well but refuses to "give his hand" to the villagers who came to save him. Only when one of the villagers said to him "take my hand" did the Mullah extend his own, "because a mullah will never 'give' anything of his own… The Persian proverb states "No one has seen the eye of an ant, the feet of a snake, or the charity of a Mullah." Simin Habibian, 100 Persian–English Proverbs (Maryland: Ibex, 1999) 94.

Priests, their own repentance delay/Perhaps they don't believe in Judgment Day/They deceive, and to appease God, they pray."[15]

Within the general self-image of the Iranian, the *Akhund* or *Mullah* enjoys a reputation as the most "buyable" type. The negative image of the *Mullah* has brought many of them to prefer the term "roohani" or clergy. Iranians and non-Iranians alike refer to the image of a Mullah's Materialism, which stands in sharp contrast to the ostensibly ascetic ideology. The former prime minister under the Shah, Abbas Hoveyda, warned the British Ambassador in 1975 that "the worst mistake (the Shah) has made, in his passion to save government money, has been to cut off the large subsidy which I used to pay the mullahs, to keep them happy."[16] This image has continued into the era of the Revolution.

The **_Bazaari_** stereotype is no less negative. He is seen as a *zad-o band-chi* (wheeler-dealer), one capable of selling ice to the Eskimos. He prefers short-term profit to long-term advantages and confidence building.[17] It is common in Iran to attribute to the *bazaari* almost every possible epithet in the thesaurus relating to hypocrisy, mendacity, and untrustworthiness. [18]

Iranians widely stereotype each other by their **places of origin**. Common stereotypes include the clever but devious, cunning but stingy Esfahani; the sullen, fanatical, sexually dysfunctional and dull-witted Rashti; the primitive Bakhtiyari and Lor; the red-neck Qazvini; the stupid Azari; the bragging Yazdi; the clever but timid Kermani; the cowardly Kashi; the poetic, hedonistic and politically savvy Shirazi (the city of wine and poetry); and the ungracious and inhospitable inhabitants of Rey and Qom.[19] Aside from political satire, regional stereotypes are the subject of the lion's share of modern Iranian humor. Many of these jokes, Farsi-Tehrani in origin, have extremely derogatory – even racist – stereotypes of various groups. It seems that the butt of most of these jokes is the Rashti, Azeri, Turk and Qazvini. All are portrayed as unsophisticated and uneducated rural types.

A revealing stereotype is that of the *fuzul,* popularly associated with the city Isfahan.[20] The *fuzul* type is a Persian Falstaff: a meddlesome, nosy individual who interferes in the business of everyone around him, is on the lookout for opportunities for personal gain, and never fails to take advantage of them. He is always politically correct to the point of being seen as utterly hypocritical. He has few scruples, if any, and defines "good" as synonymous with his own personal interests. Nevertheless, the *fuzul* is not a negative character; he is admired for his mechanizations and benign Machiavellianism, and though he may place his own personal gain over and above

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[15] Hafez, <u>*Ghazzal 199*</u>, trans. Shahriar Shariari, 1999. <http://www.hafizonlove.com/ /divan/04/199.htm>.

[16] See Anthony Parson, <u>The Pride and the Fall: Iran, 1974-1979</u> (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984) 61.

[17] In this regard, Iranian business ethics, insofar as they are influenced by the bazaar mentality is quite different to the long-range, trust oriented East Asian stereotype.

[18] One typical anecdote is that the *bazaari* will sell a carpet that is not pure wool, and when asked, will stroke his beard (*pashm* in Persian, which also means wool) and say, "this is very fine wool." Robert Kaplan, <u>A Bazaari's World</u>.

[19] A. Reza Arasteh and Josephine Arasteh, <u>Man and Society in Iran</u> (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1964): 42. See also jokes and chats in Newsgroup *soc.culture.iranian*; <http://www.jokestan.com>.

[20] A similar literary figure, which embodies popular Persian stereotypes is the novel *My Uncle Napoleon* by Iraj Pezeshkzad (trans. Dick Davis).

everything else, he is not unsympathetic to allowing others to gain a share of the good life.

The best literary rendition of the type is to be found in the novel *The Adventures of Haji Baba of Ispahan* written in 1824 by the British Representative at the Court of Persia, James Morier. The book was translated into Persian and is widely perceived as one of the masterpieces of nineteenth century Persian literature (despite its being a translation). It is popularly recommended by many Iranians as a *vade mecum* for understanding Iranians. Hajji Baba is "always putting his nose into affairs that do not concern him, and always getting involved in difficulties from which he extricates himself by a triumphant display of wit and resourcefulness. He is no respecter of persons. He talks with kings as insolently as he talks with women, landlords, and viziers. Gregarious and friendly, he scorns the world's malice and comes up laughing in the end."[21]

Perceived Character Traits and Values

Negative Traits

In field studies, Iranians tend to be extremely self-critical (at least towards the "national self"). Asked to characterize negative traits that are typical of Iranian social behavior, they describe themselves (or more precisely the Iranian urban elite – usually the Tehrani and Isfahani) with negative characteristics such as being manipulative (*zad-o–ban-chi*), calculating (*hesabgar*), opportunistic (*forsat–talab*), hypocritical or double-faced (*motezhor, do-ru*), dishonest (*posht–e–ham–andaz/ chaakhaan*), "greasy" or obsequious (*charb-zaban*) and of demanding a commission *(rant-khaar)*.[22]

The custom of taking bribes or demanding a commission in state business deals (aptly called *pour-cent* or *raant* in modern Iranian Persian) is widespread. Therefore, an Iranian who engages in (and is paid for) services for outsiders does not incur the same stigma that his Western counterpart would.[23] A wide range of Iranian public officials (and their sons) are well known for having received "percentages" from foreign companies, and while this has been exploited by the opposite political side, it has not – as yet – produced the downfall of any public figure. This characteristic of Iranian society has been the focus of much of the Reformist movement's political and economic agenda, but with little or no real results. This is not to say that bribery is perceived as socially positive. The paradigms of Iranian national heroes – either

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[21] Robert Payne, The Splendor of Persia: The Great Kings (New York, 1957) quoted in William Stearns Davis, Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*,* Vol. 2: Greece and the East (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912) 58-61.

[22] Bateson *Safa-yi Batin*, 262. They were tested against the Iranian respondents of this study and found to be still widely accepted.

[23] The level of high tolerance of Iranian society towards corruption raises the question regarding the effectiveness of running "agents of influence." According to a former British diplomat who served in Iran, such "operations" have been short-term and conditional. Acceptance of benefits or even direct payments did not create a sense in the eyes of the Iranian recipient that he is utterly obligated to the foreigner. In many cases, the Iranian "agent of influence" did not renege directly, but rather created circumstances that rendered impossible the act he had to perform (private communication).

mythical or historic – are not those who take or give bribes; however, the prevalence of the phenomenon is such, that it is perceived as one of the more negative elements of Iranian society.

"Cleverness"

Iranian national ethos takes pride in the image of a hard working and methodical national character. In this regard, Iranians frequently cite the contrast between Iranian "scientific" mentality and Arab "emotionalism". In this context, the perceived personal trait of *zerangi* (cleverness) is seen as typical to Iranians and, as such, both a potentially negative trait and one that is, albeit occasionally grudgingly, highly admired. It is said "the rules of the game required and rewarded trickery. The clever crook and the plausible charlatan lost nothing in popular estimation or moral standing, provided they 'got away with it.'"[24] Iranian popular humor is replete with stories in which a clever person succeeds in getting his way as a result of his *zerangi* being so highly appreciated by the person in authority he has tricked.[25] In essence, this is the moral of the famous *The Thousand and One Nights*;[26] Scheherazade must use her cunning every night to achieve a stay of her execution, meanwhile bearing the King three children and finally gaining both her own pardon and the marriage of her sister Dunyazad to Shahriyar's brother. It may even be claimed that moral justification of *taqiya* (dissimulation) and trickery to achieve one's goal takes place entirely in ancient Persia in the biblical narrative the Book of Esther. Esther is told by her uncle, Mordecai, to hide her religion; when faced with the threat of Haman's conspiracy, she does not go directly to King Ahasuerus to plead for her life and those of her people, but (like Scheherazade) uses trickery and flattery to lure Haman into the trap.[27] It seems that a large number of modern Iranian children's books portray a hero who uses trickery to outwit an opponent.

Even today examples of *zerangi* in political affairs are rife. During the heyday of British influence in Iran, many British attempts to influence local politics were frustrated by a popular tactic of playing both ends against the middle and maximizing the strength of being weak. Rumors and gossip are staples of Iranian domestic politics and much weight is accorded to local public opinion, at times real and at times self-induced.[28] Similar stories circulate today regarding machination of the heads of the present regime. [29]

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[24] Arthur C. Millspaugh, <u>Americans in Persia</u>, (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1946): 80.

[25] William S. Haas, Iran (New York: Columbia Press, 1946): 124. One such story which deals with political corruption (nepotism, caprice), the ability of the oppressed to overcome this caprice, and the appreciation that the ruling class is purported to have for such shrewdness goes as follows: A merchant in Isfahan was sentenced by the governor of the city, for not paying a tax, to be banished to Shiraz. The merchant protested that the governor's brother was the governor of Shiraz. Then the governor proposed he be banished to Kashan, but the merchant retorted that the governors other brother is the chieftain of Kashan, The governor then said to the merchant: "then you can go to Hell". The merchant rebutted: "Your late father is probably the governor there". The governor freed the merchant and paid all his taxes… Similar jokes appear on Iranian joke sites on the Internet.

[26] The "Arabian Nights" may have originated in a Persian book by the name of *Hazar Afsanah* (A Thousand Legends), translated into Arabic around A.D. 850. In any case Shahriyar and sharazad were Persian.

[27] Esther 2:10; Esther 5:1-8, Esther 7:1–10.

[28] A prime example is the following anecdote from the 1950's: The British Embassy in Tehran tried to gain political influence by funneling funds to various figures in the elite, in return for certain rights (oil

Individualism

Individualism is the most prominent trait usually associated with Iranians, both by Iranians themselves and by foreigners. One expression of this trait is the ease with which Iranians tend to adapt abroad, even without a supportive Iranian community.[30] The typical Iranian is described as resourceful, clever, and capable of overcoming overwhelming odds in order to extricate himself from seemingly hopeless situations. Whether or not this is typical, all these traits, as we shall see below, are perceived by Iranians as such – and more significantly – as social behavior which is worthy, and hence to be encouraged.

Some observers of Iranian culture have described the Iranian proclivity towards individualism as the result of geographic conditions,[31] modalities of family life,[32] or the despotic structure of all the political regimes that have been in power in Iran, forcing the individual to fend for himself and his family and not to trust anyone outside of his intimate circle.[33] It has also been attributed to the centuries of invasion, foreign domination, and anarchy [34] that atomized Iranian society and created a cultural ethos which favors the individual who proves his ability to best fend for himself and protect his close kin.[35]

Observers who have delved into this trait have linked it to a preference for family, local and regional identity, and cohesiveness, at the expense of national interests ("local and regional individualism")[36]. One approach differentiates Persian individualism from its Western counterpart in that the former "lacks an emphasis on

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etc.). Frequently, the Iranian would take the money and use part of it to pay off opposition figures in the area where the transaction was to take place to attack him for his support of the British. Then he would come back to the British and report that he could not deliver because the leaks (of course from the British side) precluded it (Private communication).

[29] An example given is the *modus operandi* of Rafsanjani, who is seen as the consummate *Bazaari* Machiavellian. It is said that he intentionally spread rumors that Khamene'i was about to nominate Ayatollah Shahroudi as his successor. These rumors caused a furor due to the fact that Shahroudi is seen as an Iraqi (who does not even speak Persian well). The rumors embarrassed Khamene'i in his power base of Qom and strengthened Rafsanjani by "clipping the wings" of Shahroudi and enhancing the Rahbar's dependence on him. Another story imputes to Rafsanjani hiring of a thug to attack his daughter during the election campaign in order to create sympathy for her and to guarantee her election. Whether the story is true or not, it expresses the level of Machiavellianism that is attributed to the political leadership.

[30] Lt. Col. Sir Arnold T. Wilson, "National and Racial Characteristics of the Persian Nation," *Asiatic Review* XXV.82 Apr. 1929: 300-311, 301.

[31] Millspaugh 77. An agricultural economy based on subsistence farming with units of cultivation remote from each other gave birth to a "self-centered individualism… scarcely conscious of any larger community except to distrust and fear it."

[32] See Gable, Culture and Administration in Iran, 416.

[33] Haas Iran, 118; Richard W. Gable, "Culture and Administration in Iran," Middle East Journal, XI 1959 416-417 attributes Iranian individualism to the influence of family life which places the individual, socially, in a limited context of the family alone. Outside the family he lacks a social frame of reference

[34] See Reza Benham, Cultural Foundations of Iranian Politics, 98-99: "Unstable administration in Iranian society over the years seems to have encouraged a strong sense of individualism in terms of personal, community, and regional loyalties since Iranians were left to fend for themselves… The individualism that has characterized Iranians is unlike that known to developed societies…[it] has been marked by distrust based on the assumption that all people are in pursuit of personal interests." Also Ali Banuazizi, Iranian "National Character": A Critique of Some Western Perspectives, 224.

[35] Haas 118; Gable 407–521; Millspaugh 77.

[36] Haas, Iran 118.

personal integrity and the worth of the individual" and determines that "the Persian tends to think of himself and his family first, then of his large kinship group or tribe and lastly of his nation."[37] In contrast, the renowned scholar of Iranian culture, Ann Lambton, maintained "society in medieval Persia had essentially a corporate basis. The individual acquired status only as a member of a professional or religious corporation, of a tribal or local group…"[38] The two approaches need not be seen as contradictory, since the issue at hand is the legitimacy of individualism within the social group and the capability of the individual to survive and adapt outside his natural reference group.

A less flattering term that some observers have used to characterize what has been called above individualism, is "egoism" and the preoccupation of the Iranian with his own self and his own point of view. This is said to exist both on the personal and the national plane; the interests of the individual – or of the collective whom he represents – are so paramount that there is virtually no room to take the needs of the other side into consideration. This interpretation refers to a seeming lack of capability (or will) on the part of Iranian interlocutors to empathize with the needs and constraints of their counterparts; a clear preference for short term gain over long term relationships; a willingness to confer favors only in return for a clear *quid pro quo*; and a tendency to present one's own needs and constraints as principles which cannot be ceded.[39]

Mistrust

Individualism has been seen as the source of another major trait frequently attributed to the Iranian – suspicion and mistrust of anyone outside one's immediate inner circle, and especially of anyone in power, of governments, and of foreign powers.[40] Every Iranian can quote the popular adage "there are many devils in the guise of men, therefore be careful whose hand you put your hand into." This wary view of the world also engenders feelings of insecurity in all contexts outside the family, and conforms to the legitimacy of *aqiya,*[41] dissimulation and hiding of one's real intentions and thoughts.

The view of the world most commonly attributed to Iranians is one of extreme pessimism and suspicion (*bad-bini*). The sociologist Raymond D. Gastil put together a list of ten "beliefs, attitudes or dispositions" which characterize Iranians (specifically middle class Iranians in the city of Shiraz, where he performed his study). Most of these beliefs express a form of mistrust: men are by nature evil, power-seeking, and irrational (mistrust of human motivations); everything is in a state of flux and change (mistrust of stability); acceptance of exaggeration in verbal communication (hence mistrust of the verbal communication of others); distrust in interpersonal relations; the need for manipulation in the struggle for life (and hence, expectation that others will try to manipulate); lack of belief in altruism; hostility

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[37] Gable 414.

[38] Ann K.S. Lambton, "The Impact of the West on Persia" International Affairs XXXI 1957: 15.

[39] See cable by L. Bruce Laingen to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance on August 13, 1979, published later by the New York Times 31 Jan.1980. Laingen attributes "Iranian overriding egoism" to the history of instability and insecurity which put a premium on self-preservation, and leaves very little room for empathy or for understanding the other side's point of view.

[40] See Andrew Westwood, "The Politics of Distrust in Iran," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences 358 Mar.1965; Millspaugh 78.

[41] The popular admonition, "conceal your gold, your intentions and your religion."

towards government as an exploiting enemy; a belief that nothing can change for the better.[42] As a field study, Gastil's research leaves much to be desired; however, his questionnaire reflected a subject that was, and is, central to a common Iranian worldview.

According to many observers, the Iranian is acculturated to expect the worse of fate, and even worse of people who have achieved high office.[43] The game of life, in Persian eyes, has been likened to "a game of hazard, where incalculable chances, good and bad, emerge and disappear, like bubbles on the surface of the water. There is no meaning whatever in this play, but he who wants to incur the risk may try to avert the evil and to seize the favorable opportunity."[44] Many observers of Iranian history and society have indicated the assumption of extreme uncertainty in the course of human affairs: frequent changes of ruling powers or dynasties, reversal of fortunes of elites, and the lack of certainty that a person's wealth will be inherited by his children and grandchildren have been noted as primary elements of the Iranian psyche.[45] The element of chance is paramount, and the skill of the player is employed in order to maximize the advantage from good throws of the dice, and to minimize the damage and future risk resulting from bad throws. In practice, he achieves these ends by cunning, shrewdness, positive opportunism, and willingness to engage in the game, i.e., to take well-calculated risks for gain. *Vaqi'bini* (realism) is a necessary condition for survival.

Many observers over the centuries have even attributed Persian military failures to the inherent mistrust and incapability for teamwork[46] engendered by the hyper-individualism of Persian generals. It has been claimed that even the Iranian criminal underground is too individualist to voluntarily organize itself as a mafia or yakuza, or to perform sophisticated crimes such as bank robberies, which call for a high level of trust and cooperation.[47] The belief in conspiracies also engenders a perennial mutual suspicion regarding the true intentions of others.

Acceptance of Conspiracy Theories

Mistrust is intimately linked to the Iranian proclivity towards acceptance of conspiracy theories.[48] The interpretation of current events through the prism of these theories tends to create a focus on issues or facts that may seem totally irrelevant to the uninitiated outsider. For the most part, these theories attribute the course of contemporary Iranian history to devious Machiavellian-type machinations of

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[42] Raymonds D. Gastil, "Middle Class Impediments to Iranian Modernization," Public Opinion Quarterly XXII.3 1958: 325-329.

[43] This is illustrated by the story of *Mullah* Nasseradin who had a dozen marbles and asked children if they want him to divide them among them. Upon receiving an affirmative reply, he asked whether they want him to distribute them as God would or as man would. The children immediately preferred the divine option, and the *Mullah* then gave two to one child and ten to the other…

[44] Haas 119. The Persian poet Omar Khayyam used the simile of polo, with the human being the polo ball: Peter Avery & John Heath Stubbs (trans.), The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam, (London: Penguin, 1979): 92, quatrain 167.

[45] See Homa Katouzian, Iranian History and Politics – The Dialectics of State and Society, (London: Routlege Curzon, 2003): 23.

[46] Iranians have rarely excelled in team sports, and even use the English word team for that institution.

[47] Marvin Zonis, The Political Elite of Iran (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971): 214.

[48] Iranian proverbs and adages are full of admonitions such as "under the perfect plate, there is a broken one" or "the half empty glass is actually full (of surprises)".

coalitions of enemies and foreign powers envious of Iran's riches and potential, by use of ubiquitous secret associations and intelligence organizations. These theories are taught in schools and are widely accepted by academic circles in Iran. According to a common Iranian perception, **conspiracies of global forces** have been woven against Iran ever since the defeat of Greece in the Peloponnesian wars, with the goal of annihilating Iran's spiritual essence and political predominance by the Hellenization of its culture. The tentacles of the conspiracy are international movements such as Zionism, Freemasonry, Bahais, Manicheanism,[49] and even the Shiite 'Ulama themselves (brought to power in order to plunge Iran back into backwardness). These forces are also said to engage in super-technological conspiracies through genetically modified foods.[50] Popular Iranian conspiracy theories that color day-to-day thinking include two major motifs – conspiracies by colonial powers (Great Britain, the United States); and conspiracies led by amorphous and hostile global forces or international movements.

Great Britain[51] is seen as almost the prime mover of Iranian history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. British conspiracies are implemented through cunning, ubiquitous economic and cultural presence, [52] patronage of the 'Ulama and the Iranian elite,[53] and manipulation of other powers and the media (the BBC).[54] Since the mid-twentieth century, the **United States,** primarily through the CIA, joined the British as "stars" of Iranian conspiracy theories.

The receptivity of Iranians to conspiracy interpretations of events is attributed to a combination of cultural, religious, social and psychological elements.[55] On the cultural level, it is said to feed off the Zoroastrian dualistic belief in the struggle between good and evil (Satanic) forces in the world, in which the human individual is little more than a pawn, and off the legitimacy of *egrag-e sha-erana* (poetic license or exaggeration) in normal discourse. To this, one may add Islamic and Shiite religious concepts such as the belief in predetermination, the inherent contradiction between *zaher* (that which appears) and *baten* (the inner truth), and *taqiya* (the principle of

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[49] The Freemasons are considered either a tool in the hands of the British or an extension of Israel and the Zionist movement, and are said to have control over tribal chiefs, 'Ulama, politicians, bankers, etc. The Bahai and World Jewry, or Zionism, work hand-in-hand to destroy Iran. Ehsan Yarshater (ed.) Encyclopedia Iranica, VI (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers):139.

[50] According to one persistent rumor making the rounds in Iran, Israel (famous in Iran since the days of the Shah for special agricultural techniques) is said to have genetically modified the egg-laying chickens in Iran as part of "genetic warfare."

[51] Yarshater 139.

[52] A case in point is the David Reddaway affair. Reddaway, a British diplomat who had served in the embassy in Tehran, spoke fluent Persian and was married to an Iranian. He was appointed in January 2002 by the UK as ambassador to Iran, but rejected by Teheran on the grounds that he is a Jew (because his name is David) and an intelligence agent (because he speaks Persian). The rejection was, *inter alia*, a reflection of a genuine deep suspicion of any foreigner (especially a Briton) who has a deep knowledge of Iran.

[53] A well know Persian joke claims that the *Mullah* wear a beard in order to hide the writing "Made in England" or the Union Jack under their chin. Even the Shah told the British Ambassador "if you lift up Khomeini's beard, you will find "Made in England..." Anthony Parsons, The Pride and the Fall, Iran 1974-1979, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984): x.

[54] The late Shah had a profound belief in the diabolical role of Western media, particularly the BBC, and frequently called the British Ambassadors to demand that they rein in the anti-Iranian and pro-clergy forces in Bush House. A. Pahlavi, Faces in the Mirror – Memoirs from Exile (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1980): 15, 199-200; Parsons 72-73.

[55] See the extensive analysis of the subject of conspiracy theories in Yarshater 138-147.

dissimulation). All these are fertile ground for an exaggerated belief in premeditation in human affairs and the assumption that appearances, by definition, hide ulterior and dark motives. It should be noted, though, that the widespread tendency to blame the machinations of foreign powers for everything that went wrong with Iran only developed to its present scope since the middle of the nineteenth century. It would seem, therefore, that the history of foreign machinations and intervention in modern Iran, and the sense that the Iranian nation has been cheated out of its proper place among the nations, have provided the "factual" material for many of the extant conspiracy theories.

The Iranian proclivity towards acceptance of conspiracy theories provides ready explanations for a reality that is perceived as unjust, and a collective defense mechanism in times of national weakness and humiliation. At the same time, it engenders a fatalistic and defeatist mentality, a deep suspicion towards any gesture, and an unwillingness to believe in simplicity of motives and statements. The belief in conspiracies also renders Iranians receptive to implicit threats even over and above the actual credibility of the threat. This is especially true when the source of the threat is the U.S. or Israel. The popular image of these two archenemies of the regime as countries having no constraints in military action feeds the fires of rumor and mass hysteria whenever such a threat is on the table.

Pragmatism

Heroic suicidal dogmatism is not a characteristic of Iranian political culture. On the contrary, pragmatism and Realpolitik have been hallmarks of the Iranian worldview and traditional Shiite doctrine. Iranians are acutely aware of the consequence of force ratios, be they political, economic, or military. One sociological-anthropological study prepared in the 1950s asserted "[the Iranian] must preserve a front for outsiders to see. He will fight for his honor… but only according to his assessment of the probability of winning,"[56] and "a Persian admires dead heroes, but he ordinarily has no desire to become one immediately."[57] Therefore, Iran, as a nation, has responded to threats in a pragmatic way, railing against the lack of justice in the way that stronger powers take advantage of their superior strength, but reacting according to a sober reading of the situation.[58]

This conspicuous characteristic is linked to the Shiite historic narrative. The Imam 'Ali, according to the Shiite narrative, conceded his right to the Caliphate in order to preserve the unity of the Muslims, and when he became the fourth Caliph, went in to negotiations with Mu'awiya in order to avoid further bloodshed. Similarly, his son Hassan, who succeeded him for half a year, in the end ceded to Mu'awiya. The fact that both these cases ended in disaster has not de-legitimized the principle of pragmatic negotiation of conflicts. 'Ali's second son, Hussein, however, symbolizes heroic self-sacrifice; he led an insurrection and was killed at Karbala. Khomeini himself referred to this duality in declaring himself "a Husseini, not a Hassani." In practice, however, Khomeini let the die fall on the side of a Hassan-like pragmatism

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[56] Herbert H. Vreeland, ed. Iran (New Haven, CN: Human Relations Area Files, 1957): 7.

[57] Vreeland 8

[58] One of the best instances is the Iranian reaction to the American deterrence during the "tanker war" during the Iraq-Iran War. Iran realized that attacking American ships would be a political and military mistake, no matter how just it seemed, and refrained from further attacks.

when he announced that he had agreed to drink a "cup of poison" and agreed to a cease-fire with Iraq.[59] In doing so Khomeini opted for the dominant tradition of pragmatism over the idealization of self-sacrifice.

The historic narrative and the state of the Shiites as an oppressed minority during most of their history gave rise to religious justification for pragmatism through defense mechanisms that Shiite Islam developed for survival: passive acceptance of political situations, dissimulation (*ketman*, *taqiya*) regarding their religious identity in order to stave off oppression, religious and cultural syncretism, and allowing for the absorption of non-indigenous practice. The most important of these defense mechanisms is *ijtihad*,[60] the right of senior scholars (*mujtahid* who are also *marja' taqlid*) to make innovative strategic religious decisions based on their own interpretation of the Koran, and not on legal precedent alone (as in Sunnite Islam). The practice of *ijtihad* is in essence the mechanism by which leading Shiite religious leaders may implement a cost-benefit calculus in situations considered as posing a grave danger to the community, in order not to be hamstrung by fossilized legal rulings. In Shiite legalistic thought, the basis for such a calculus is the acceptance of *maslahat* (public interest) or *darurat* (necessity) as one of the sources of law (along with the traditional sources of Koran, Sunnah, analogy, consensus, etc). The use of *maslahat* allows for decision-making based on assessment of the severe damage that would otherwise be incurred by the community[61].

The Iranian inclination towards keeping options open seems to be born of a basic pragmatism and a love of sophistication.[62] The ability to juggle options and keep them all in the air is highly esteemed in Iranian society. This is often linked to a major characteristic attributed to the bazaar operational code – the tendency to play it by ear and a pragmatic attitude towards developments. This inclination, however, extends even to the attitude towards religious injunctions; the ability to find ways around unambiguous prohibitions is highly appreciated both in high-ranking clerics and in the common Iranian.[63] Therefore, the clerics have been careful not to reach an

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[59] Contrary to the theory that Khomeini's advisors convinced him that the situation warranted a cease fire, according to Giandomenico Picco, who negotiated the cease fire between Iraq and Iran for the UN Secretary General, those very advisors came to him and made it clear that they had orders from Khomeini to return with a cease fire (personal interview with Picco).

[60] *Ijtihad* is not a purely Shiite concept, but in Sunni Islam it has been unacceptable since the tenth century.

[61] *Maslahat* literally means utility or welfare. The jurists use it to denote public interest or general human good. The medieval jurist Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505 A.H./1111 A.D.) developed it by ruling that the ultimate purpose of the *Shari'ah* is to further the *maslahah* of the Ummah. The *masalih* (plural of *maslahah*) are divided into the following three categories: **daruriyah** (essential), which protect **din** (religion), **nafs** (life), **nasl** (offspring), **'aql** (reason), and **mal** (property); **hajiyah** (complementary); and **tahsiniyah** (desirable). The government's primary duty is to safeguard these at any cost. The complementary and desirable *masalih* tend to vary according to social and economic conditions. The government protects them only when it has fulfilled its primary duty of protecting the essential interests.

[62] The Shiite concept of *ijtihad* (making legal decisions based on direct exegesis from the sacred books of the Koran and the Hadith) and *maslahat* (making decisions based on a concept of public interest) gave rise to complicated legalistic reasoning.

[63] Iranians like to tell the story about the execution of the last Abbasid Caliph, Ma'asoum. Since the executors were afraid that he was really the "shadow of the prophet" and they therefore may be punished for harming him, they decided to wrap him in velvet and roll him down the palace floor. If the skies did not thunder, they would roll him more and cause more harm, and in this way they would ensure themselves (with an escape possible) that they were not doing something irreversible.

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irreversible impasse with the reformists, and they seem to be wary of taking actions that may close the door to future compromise.

Obstinacy (*sar-sakhtii* or *khod-sari,* literally hard-headedness or own headedness, loner or non-consulter) is perceived in Iranian political culture as a negative trait, insofar as it signifies irrational or non-pragmatic refusal to adapt to changing circumstances or input of information. Such obstinacy or uncompromising behavior is also a result of lack of forethought, and might even be regarded as irrational.[64] This concept differs from the milder form of insistence (*paafeshaari*).[65] Thus, one who is *paaáfeshaar* (insistent) is not being so without reason, and is aware of the ramifications of his insistence. This insistence is intended to achieve part, if not all, of one's goals and intentions.

Aestheticism

Pride in Iran's achievements in the realms of art and poetry are a central element of the Iranian national consciousness. Persian arts – whether Islamic or pre-Islamic – are a treasured national heritage. This is an element that few observers would dispute, since Iran is arguably the most **aesthetic** civilization in the Middle East. Iranian arts and poetry enjoy a high level of social approval. This is highlighted by the general adulation of the great Persian poets (Ferdowsi, Mowlana Jalal-ed-din Roumi, Omar Khayyam, Hafez) and artists, which has overcome even religious reservations (particularly in the present regime) regarding the seemingly heretic content of their art.[66]

Persian artistic talent has been attributed to various anthropological or socio-psychological etiologies. Some have seen individualism as the fount of achievements of Persian arts and sciences by virtue of the fact that individual creative personalities were encouraged by a cultural acceptance of individual idiosyncrasy.[67] Others have claimed that the Persians, having lived in their land from the dawn of history and never having been nomads, appreciate the beauty of their land. The temperate climate and the soft landscapes engendered poetic souls. Unlike the Arabs who had to create a paradise that would serve as an escape from the unfriendly desert, the Persian could imagine paradise in terms of his homeland.

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[64] *Sar-sakht* literally means headstrong, willful. *Sar-sakhti* has rather critical and negative connotations, suggesting disrespect. One who is *sarsakht* does not really think much and is rather indifferent to his own safety. It could also refer to someone who is brave, but whose courage is not combined with contemplation. *Sar-sakhti* refers to conduct based upon deep conviction, whether religious belief or ideology.

[65] From two words: *paa*, or foot, and *feshaar*, pressure. *Paafeshaar* implies that some thought has been given to the matter in question. When *paafeshaari* is used to signify insistence, this insistence does not emanate from religious or deep ideological convictions.

[66] It is enough to observe the modern Iranian adoration of epicurean (or even hedonistic) poets such as Hafez, Roumi, and Omar Khayyam. The attempt to interpret their writings as reflections of Suffi analogies on divine themes is reminiscent of the Judeo-Christian attempt to give a religious hue to the biblical "Song of Songs."

[67] Haas 118, 120.

Chivalry and Spirituality

Iranians today tend to characterize themselves as highly spiritual (*rohani*), in contrast to the materialistic West and Arab world.[68] Iranians see themselves as kind (*mehraban*), modest (*foroutan*), sensitive (*motavaze'*), empathic and warm-blooded (*hassas*, *del-suz*, *khun-garm*), [69] socially committed, open-handed (*dast-o del-baaz*), and loyal and constant (*vafadaar*). [70] These qualities are intimately linked with the pre-Islamic ethos of chivalry (*javanmardi*), which incorporates such qualities as trustworthiness, truthfulness, and honesty in business, integrity, a clear sense of purpose and identity, perseverance, personal courage, and purity. The *javanmardam* (chivalrous individual) is portrayed as an individualist *par excellence*, insofar as he obeys his inner compass and has no fear of standing alone against what he sees as wrong. He acts on his principles even at the peril of loosing his own property, and defends the weak without regard for the risk to his self.[71] This ethos is held in such high regard that the Imam 'Ali himself is seen as the model of *javanmardi*.[72] An interesting anecdote which emphasizes this ideal is that of Mossadeq, who, defeated and dying, heard a colleague say "how terrible it all turned out," and answered him, "Yes, but at the same time, how marvelous it all turned out." It is said that Mossadeq saw himself playing out the roles of the Iranian paradigms of *javanmardi*: the battling hero Rostam, the son of Zaal, the noble general Ali, the Lion of Allah and, at the same time, the Imam Hussein, Prince of Martyrs.[73]

This model gave birth in Iran to two parallel paradigms. The most evident is that of Iranian mysticism as expressed in the Sufi movements and the *dervish* personality. The Iranian concept of spirituality is not of asceticism; Shiite Sufism is not ascetic or monastic and, as pointed out above, the great Persian poets promoted enjoyment of life coupled with awareness of its vicissitudes and the need not to fall captive to the vanities of this world. The *dervish* (darvish) in modern Iranian social typology is a spiritual man who realizes the vanities of material life, enjoys them, but does not allow his self to become enslaved to them. He allows himself to ignore social and hierarchical conventions (such as *tæ'arof*) and makes his spiritual well-being contingent on his material success. He is not a hermit or an ascetic in the Western or East Asian sense. He may be completely involved in business or politics but perceived by his colleagues as a dervish type.[74] In many movies as well as in best-selling novels and magazines, there is an expressed aversion to anything ideological, and an

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[68] Bateson 262.

[69] This is especially true about the younger generation. Dr. E. Pardo points out that in many movies, in magazines, as well as in at least one best-selling novel , there is an expressed disgust of anything ideological, and a great interest in dealing with local problems and societal ills. There is a search for pacifism and a kind of existentialism – they want to live in the "here and now" with love, compassion, good food and music, and heal their wounds from an overly ideological period. The demand by the government to sacrifice youth for nothing in the minefields of the war, and executions by the revolutionaries are open wounds. This fact, which is evident to the ruling clerics, stands in direct contradiction to the image of Iran which serves as the basis for their political strategies.

[70] Bateson 262.

[71] For a definition of *javanmardam* seeArasteh 26. For the Suffi link to the ancient Iranian concept, see the site of the Nimutallahi Suffi order: <http://www.nimatullahi.org/us/DJN.html>.

[72] Bateson 263. The identification of the Imam 'Ali as the "King of Javanmardi" appears frequently in discussions of Iranian culture on the Usenet.

[73] Mottahadi 133.

[74] See Bateson 264–265.

admiration of dervishism. This is not seen as contradictory to Iranian character but rooted in the true character of the nation.[75]

The second offshoot of the *javanmardi* ethos is *luti-gari*.[76] The *lutis* were the Iranian Robin Hood; and belonged to distinct orders (not unlike those of the Sufi) that developed in the nineteenth century. They wore emblems of membership, behaved in a distinct fashion, and were expected to be true to the principles of *javanmardi* and to strive for excellence in areas of physical training and sports in the Iranian gymnasium (*zur-khanah*). The *luti* did not seek leadership or ask for rewards for their good deeds. Since they were known as both honest and physically fit, they frequently became the community civil guard, patrolling the streets and extending support to the needy.[77] Today the *luti*-type is the neighborhood tough-guy who becomes a local champion and enforces a sort of local justice. His responsibility derives from his physical prowess. Like the dervish, the *luti*-type is a popular hero in modern Iranian cinema.[78]

Religiosity and Superstition

Despite a pervasive and deep mistrust of the clerical establishment (see below – the *Mullah*), Iranian society is highly religious. The Reformists are not secular, and most of them do not call for a total separation of religion and State. Even the Shah – despite the present regime's propaganda – was a believing Shiite Muslim. His aversion to the 'Ulama did not detract from this fact, as it does not prevent many other Iranians from expressing mistrust towards the *mullahs* and a deep belief in the Prophet and the Imam 'Ali.

Alongside official orthodox Shiite Islam, popular heterodox beliefs and superstitions enjoy wide currency in Iran. Many of the customs and beliefs unique to Iranian Shiite Islam have their origins in ancient Iranian Zoroastrianism. This is especially true about the Iranian concept of leadership. Popular Iranian Shiite Islam inherited from Zoroastrianism the belief in reincarnation. Thus, much as King Darius proclaimed himself the reincarnation of the mythical hero Fereyidoun (who saved Iran from the tyrant Zahaak and the devil Ahriman), Khomeini's claim that he guides Iran on behalf of the hidden Imam was popularly interpreted as his being the reincarnation of the hidden Imam.

Another ancient Iranian belief is that all events on earth are a reflection of celestial events. Astrology and other esoteric forms of foretelling and explaining events are widely accepted in Iran. Some expressions of political manipulation of this factor were the rumor spread after the Revolution that the face of Ayatollah Khomeini would appear on the full moon – traditional proof of his having been anointed as leader. As a result, Iran was witness to a mass sighting of Khomeini's face.[79] Another instance was the story spread that anyone who opens the Koran to the sura of *al-*

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[75] See Bateson 264–270.

[76] It is of interest that the word *Luti* is borrowed from Arabic, where it connotes a passive homosexual man; in Persian it came to mean a machoistic character.

[77] Arasteh 26–29.

[78] Bateson267.

[79] Fereydoun Hoveyda, <u>The Shah and the Ayatollah – Iranian Mythology and Islamic Revolution</u>. (London: Praeger, 2003) 35. In interviews, a number of Iranians, including anti-Regime exiles have repeated the story of this "sighting."

Baqara would find there a hair from Khomeini's beard. Even declared secular Iranians are said to have feared to open the Koran.

It is said that the Iranian, even if he is a proclaimed atheist, believes in the hand of God in human affairs. Therefore, events that are not part of a conspiracy of human – but almost omnipotent – Great Powers or international organizations, are frequently attributed to divine retribution, trial, or reward. The vicissitudes of the Iraq-Iran war were so presented to the public; and the accident that caused the abortion of the American hostage rescue mission in the Tabass desert was the hand of Allah.

Social Mobility and Hierarchy

Be the historic cause of this Persian individualism as it may, it is itself seen as a cause of certain important political features widely considered to be characteristic of Iranian society. It is linked to the absence of a caste system and the existence of a potential for socio-economic mobility, unusual in Middle East traditional societies. Indeed, Iranian mythology[80] treats with honor figures of the lower class who have performed great deeds. Recorded Iranian history also provides examples of individuals from the lowest strata of society who rose by way of exceptional talents to the top of the pinnacle.[81] This acceptance of social mobility is also at the root of the willingness of Iranians to accept leaders without respect to their social origins.[82] The success of the Communist Tudeh party in Iran during the twentieth century also can be attributed, at least partially, to the receptiveness of Iranian culture to egalitarian ideas.

In a seeming contradiction to individualism and revolutionarism (see below), acceptance of authority (as long as it lasts) and subservience have also been seen as characteristics of Iranian society. This has been attributed to the history of despotic rulers in Iran and to the Iranians' inherent pragmatism regarding force superiority. Iranian society is at any given moment highly **hierarchical**. Even the uninitiated can easily tell, watching two Iranians meet, which of them is the senior.[83] Iranian social stereotypes differentiate between the elite (*khawaas*) and the common folk (*awaam*). The former are the traditional leaders; the latter are the traditional followers. Iranian concepts of social and political mobilization are intimately linked to this differentiation; the *khawaas* are the people who are capable of dealing with the real story, those who are "in the know", while the common people are not expected to make their own decisions and therefore do not have the "need to know." Much of the criticism conservatives level on the Reformists relates to their presumption to apply

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[80] The classic example is that of Kawah, the legendary blacksmith who led a rebellion against the oppressive ruler, Zuhuq.It is of interest, however that while Kawah became a revered legendary figure (his blacksmith's apron was for ages said to be the royal standard of Persia), he is honored, inter alia, due to the fact that he refused to take the throne for himself and placed Faridun, a member of the Pishdadian Royal House, on the throne.

[81] Even some of the Shahs of Iran began their rise to power from lowly stations: Yaqub bin Lais, *Suffari* (the Pewtersmith), came to power in the ninth century; Sabugtagin came up the ranks of the army to the throne in the tenth century as did Nadir Quli in the eighteenth, and Riza Khan in the twentieth. Similarly, Mirza Taqi Khan (Amir Kabir), Chief Minister in the nineteenth century under Nasir al–Din Shah was born the son of a cook.

[82] Wilson 306–307.

[83] This is an observation as good today as it was when Herodotus noted it in his Histories.

Western concepts of wholesale political transparency in contradiction with Iranian political-social mores.[84]

Hierarchy in Iranian society is based on the utter subservience of the subordinate to his higher-ups. The strongest and most pervasive hierarchy is within the family: the father and the eldest brother remain the patriarchal sources of authority even in relatively modern Iranian families. On the political level, the relationship between the ruler and his people (even in the revolutionary regime) is often defined by the Islamic concept of *ra'yat* – a word with connotations of both flock and serfs.

The attitude towards total compliance with superiors is frequently linked to ideas of divine determinism – if God had wanted the superior to take the right position, he would have inspired him accordingly. If he did not do so, to contradict the superior would be tantamount to acting against the will of God. The Persian moralist Sa'di quotes the Vizier on his "yes-man" attitude towards the King: "Only God knows the outcome of all matters and only he determines whether a man's view is right or wrong," and he adds "To urge a view against the Sultan's view/ Is to surrender hope of living too/ If he should say the very day is night/ Say, 'Lo the Moon, and there is Pleiades bright."[85] This poetic portrayal of the need to accept political realities is also expressed in the Persian maxim: "If you can not cut off the hand of the King – kiss it". In modern relationships between the former Shah and his entourage, there had been not a few cases documented in which the latter have called in foreigners to portray a reality to the Shah that they themselves feared to tell.[86]

A boss or person superior in rank will not greet his subordinates first; he will not fraternize with his subordinates or socialize with them except in the framework of a special visit for an occasion. At the same time, however, a superior is expected to cultivate his subordinates in order to maximize the benefit he gets out of them. He is expected to protect them from others of his rank and to behave according to an agreed code (*ra'yet- parvar* – kindness to or care for one's serfs, a sort of *noblesse oblige*). The duties that derive from this principle are similar to those of a father towards his children: to cultivate the subjects and to care for their needs, but at the same time to educate them to discipline and obedience. The paradigm of hierarchal relations also draws, on one hand, from the political-religious status of the Imam in Shiite theology, and on the other from the Shah in Persian civilization. In both cases, authority is total (*motlagh*) and unquestioned. The subject or subordinate has no need to know the reasons behind the leader's decisions. The last Shah was centralist to an extreme degree, and tended to go into details of political and economic affairs that many of his ministers were not aware of.

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[84] Khatami, for example, was criticized personally as one who speaks to the *awa*m as if they were learned and responsible people. Ayatollah Misbah-Yazdi went on record in a Friday sermon that the *awam* are like a flock of sheep and must be led as such.

[85] Quoted in Arasteh. 44, from Sa'di, Gulistan, in A.J. Arberry, <u>Kings and Beggars</u> (London: Luzac & Co., 1945).

[86] Y. met with a senior Iranian leader. Before the meeting the Iranian leader's most senior aide asked Y. to convince the leader of a certain point and to bring to his attention certain facts, otherwise the leader would make decisions that stood in contradiction to the facts. Y. asked the aide why he did not simply point out to the leader at the beginning of the meeting that these were the facts. The aid replied that this could not be done and only an "outsider" could bring in the "corrective" facts.

The Shah paradigm of authority, however, is not the only one that derives from traditional Persian character. Another is that of the relationship between the Caliph and his Grand Vizier. The epitome of the Grand Vizier was that of a shrewd *bazaari*-type individual who succeeded in ingratiating himself to the Caliph (or, to that extent, with the pre-Islamic King such as in the Biblical story of Esther), and manipulating him. The dominant trait in this type of a relationship is, therefore, not obsequiousness, but shrewdness and court intrigue.

<u>Revolutionarism</u>

The other side of the coin of Iranian acceptance of authority is a predilection in Iranian society towards revolutionarism. The wide range of words in Persian to describe states of civil unrest is indicative of the prevalence of such a state. They include the Arabic *fitnah* (civil strife), *fassad* (corruption, sedition), *inqilab* (revolt) and *harj-o-marj* (anarchy). The first two hold clearly negative Islamic overtones,while the third is used to refer to the Islamic revolution. Other terms are the Persian *ashub* (disturbance, turmoil), *naa–arami* (unrest), *shouresh* (rebellion), *eghteshash* (rioting) – all having negative connotations. Modern Iranian Persian, however, does not see all civil disobedience as negative: the concepts of *ghiyam* (rebellion, used to refer to the Shiites in Iraq), *khizesh* (jump), *enghelaab* (revolution), *nehzat* (movement) and *jombesh* (movement) all are seen as positive phenomena of rebellion. This tendency towards civil disobedience and rebellion, apparent in Iran and unparalleled in the Arab Middle East, has been attributed to a wide gamut of causes.

Many Iranians and sympathetic scholars ascribe it to Iranian individualism and social mobility. According to this school of thought, Iranian society is populist or revolution-prone in various ways: intellectual rebellion against the Arab domination has persisted from the beginning of the Muslim conquest of Iran through literature and poetry. According to this view, it was expressed in the armed rebellions of Abu Muslim (747) and Babak and Mazyar (816-838), and later movements of the Assassins. This populism is attributed to motifs in Iranian political culture rooted in the activism of Persian Zoroastrianism and concepts of justice inherent in the ancient concept of Kingship in Iran. These motifs were fertile ground for adoption of the egalitarian ideas of the teachings of the Prophet Mohammad. They found their expression in a series of political and intellectual movements: the social thought of the Khoramdin in the eighth and ninth centuries, the utopianism of the Isma'ilis and Qarmatians in the tenth through the thirteenth centuries, the populism of the Sarbedaaraan and Hurufiyya movements in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the political rebellion against colonial domination in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[87]

A parallel interpretation leans on a mixture of religious and sociological etiologies. A major tenet of Iranian Shiite Islam is the Messianic expectation for the return of the "hidden Imam," as the *Mahdi* who would deliver the world from tyranny and impose the true mandate of Heaven. This heavenly order is supposed to redeem the oppressed upon the earth and create a new and egalitarian social structure in the spirit of the teachings of the Prophet and the Imam 'Ali. This fundamental belief is widely

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[87] Manochehr Dorraj, <u>From Zarathustra to Khomeini – Populism and Dissent in Iran</u>(London: Lynne Rienner Publishers 1990): 165.

accepted among the religiously conservative Iranian peasantry. The internal migration of peasants to the large cities created an urban peasant class with peasant-style social ideology in an urban setting.[88] This utopian messianic belief has its transient add-on, as expressed by the famous vizier, Nezam al-Mulk: it is the sins of the people which causes God to corrupt the ruler, thus encouraging "drawing of many swords" and chaos, which purges the land of sinners (and innocents) and then brings forward by God's Grace (*farr-e izadi*) a new just ruler (*padeshah-e dad-gostar*), who "puts an end to chaos and anarchy, **spreads his fear**… so that people will **feel safe**" (my emphasis. SB).[89] The *farr-e Izadi* is a manifest phenomenon; it is discernable on the ruler who has it. While it is a necessary condition for legitimacy as a ruler, it is not a sufficient condition for continued acceptance of his sway; this is contingent on his being a "just ruler", and, since Iranian traditions of royalty put little emphasis – if any – on primogeniture as a source of legitimacy, this condition is even more demanding for the next in line after the founder of a dynasty.[90]

These religious and psycho-sociological etiologies, however, do not explain the manifest willingness of Iranians to accept despotic regimes as the result of revolutions against such regimes. According to another interpretation, the phenomenon is only ostensibly popular, but is actually elitist. It takes place only at the top of a traditional Iranian tri-functional pyramid (composed of a temporal and religious leadership, the coercive forces of the military, and the economic forces of the nation), with the acquiescence of the other levels of the pyramid. According to this viewpoint, the 1905 constitutional revolution, the coronation of Reza Shah in 1925 and his abdication and replacement by his son in 1941, the overthrow of the Mossadegh government and the return of the Shah in 1953, and finally the Islamic revolution, are all "palace revolutions", the results of which are accepted by the masses.[91] The legitimacy for these frequent revolutions is provided, according to this theory, by Iranian national mythology, which recounts the heroism of popular saviors, who dethrone oppressive rulers only to become despots themselves. This mythology, it is claimed, serves as the "fabric of Iranians' collective unconscious" and the source of a collective "repetition compulsion" which forces Iran to repeat the cycles of the nation's mythical and historic past.[92] Attribution of modern political ideas to ancient myths should, however, be tempered by a caveat as the same myth can be interpreted with different and even diametrically opposed implications for modern times. During most of the history of Shiite Islam the occultation of the Imam was perceived as a convincing argument for political quietism; the 20th century Ayatollahs 'Ali Shari'ati and Rohallah Khomeini interpreted the very same tenet of faith as obliging political activism, each of them reaching different conclusions regarding the form and goals of this activism.[93]

The common denominator of all the above attempts to decipher the code of revolutionarism in Iranian society is that Iran has through the ages been a "short term society" caught in a cyclical pattern of arbitrary and despotic rule: social uncertainty→growing discontent→chaos→willingness to accept any new regime in

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[88] Dorraj 168-170.
[89] Katouzian 22–26.
[90] Homa Katouzian. "Legitimacy and Succession in Iranian History," <u>Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East</u> 23.18 2003: 236–240.
[91] Hoveyda 54–55.
[92] Fereydoun Hoveyda, Iranian Mythology and Islamic Revolution, Praeger, London, pp. 60–64.
[93] Dorraj. 5.

order to put an end to the chaos→new despotic and arbitrary rule.[94] It was this cycle that engendered the tendency towards subservience to the incumbent ruler, the ease with which the opportunity to overthrow him was seized, and the willingness to accept a new despot as long as he provides respite from the period of anarchy. From this point of view revolution can be seen, in Iranian cultural eyes, not as a sin against heavenly ordained rulers, nor as an intrinsically good expression of the will of the people, but rather as a necessary evil, *in extremis*.

Nomenklatura

The Iranian *nomenklatura* is composed of close knit "old boys clubs" made up of pre-Revolution comrades in arms, extended families with extensive access to the leadership, and the *Bazaar*, the traditional marketplace merchant class that has played a pivotal anti-modernization role in Iranian politics for generations. Many of the leading 'Ulama are from prominent *bazaari* families,[95] as are many of the most influential non-clerical leaders of the regime. Lineage and social circle divide people into categories of *khodi* (insider, "one of us") and *gheir-e-khodi*(outsider).

The 'Ulama

Traditionally, the clergy drew power from the *bazaar* and requited their benefactors with religious legitimacy. Throughout the years, "*Ulama* and *bazaaris* often belonged to the same families; much *'ulama* income came from levies paid mainly by *bazaaris*; the guilds often celebrated religious or partly religious ceremonies for which the services of *'ulama* were needed; and piety and religious observance were among the signs of *bazaar* standing or leadership. Entry into the *'ulama* through study was an avenue of upward social mobility and entailed more respect than entry into the service of the Shah's government. Mosques and shrines (located close to the *bazaar)* were a major area of *bast* (refuge) for individuals and groups that feared governmental arrest or harassment."[96]

Bazaaris

The ubiquitous presence of scions of the old *bazaari* families in prominent (and lucrative) public posts in the Islamic Republic, the fact that the organizational power of the *bazaar* remains behind the Islamic regime, and the takeover of non-*bazaar* sectors of the Iranian economy by old *bazaari* families reinforce the old stereotype of the corrupt and exploiting *bazaari*. Iranians frequently will refer to an additional merchant stereotype: the *meydani*. The *meydani* is a member of the lower merchant

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[94] Katouzian 22–23. Katouzian refers to the term "pickaxe society," derived from the way buildings in Iran no more than thirty years old are considered worthy of removal, as "pickaxe buildings" (*sakhteman-e kolangi*).

[95] Many *bazaari* families give their patronage to important Shiite schools and religious centers and wield, through that support, their influence over graduates of those centers. It is also very common for bazaari families to send some of their sons for a religious career, thus cementing their links with the 'Ulama (much the way that families in medieval Europe would "allocate" one son to the sevice of the throne, one to the church and one for the family estate).

[96] Nikki Keddie, quoted in Robert Kaplan, "A Bazaari's World," <u>The Atlantic</u>, March 1996.

class, one which lacks the traditional political clout of the *bazaar*; he is seen as less sophisticated than the *bazaari* and less well connected.[97]

Trust is essential to the *bazaar* culture, an economic structure which was not originally based on written contracts, and in which large sums of money pass hands without formal assurances. Personal security is preferred to collateral security. Oral commitments made in the *bazaar* before witnesses are usually kept, as breaking such commitments would have a crippling effect on the system and on the personal reputation of the merchant who reneges. In the *bazaar* a person's previous history, behavior in public, manner of speaking, and religious convictions are all criteria used to judge his trustworthiness. This is reflected in the fact that Persian has a wide range of words to signify various levels of trust between people.[98]

Families

Regional origins, family economic status, and family lineage play an important role in the determination of an individual's social identity. The extended family with a network of personal ties provides the mechanism for social mobility, business success, political acceptance, and protection from the arbitrariness of the regime. Official biographies of prominent Iranians will frequently go into detail about the person's genealogy and his ancestor's achievements. Implicitly, a person is assumed to continue the tradition of his forefathers and remain true to them. Favors are not on a person-to-person basis but on a "(family or friend)-circle-to-(family or friend)-circle" basis.[99]

An extension of a person's family identity is his family's geographic origin. This is expressed in the custom, grown more prevalent since the revolution, of taking an additional surname indicating the city or region of origin (for example, Isfahani, Mashhadi, Khouzestani, or Rafsanjani).[100] This custom is maintained even among Iranians who were born abroad (for example, expatriate Iranians born in Najaf, Iraq), who add the city of their forefathers to their name.

Social circles

Iranian social-political circles external to the family are embodied in the institution of *dovreh* (circle), the practice of *party-baazi* (protectionism), and *ravaabet*

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[97] It is of interest that since the Revolution a number of *meydanis* have achieved high social rank through their service in the IRGC and other arms of the regime. One of the most prominent examples is of the former head of the IRGC and of the Bonyad Mostazifan, Mohsen Rezai.

[98] These words include: *e'temaad*, *etminaan*, and *e'teqaad*. *E'temaad* has wider use in business transactions than the other two. When someone has *e'temaad* in someone else, he can trust him with his money and family, and he is sure that his friend will not leave him alone in a moment of need. *Etminaan* serves in phrases such as "peace of mind" and "to rest assured," or in cases in which one government has requested assurances from another. *E'teqaad* means profound trust or belief, with religious connotations. Conviction in God, for example is affirmed using *e'teqaad*.

[99] This characteristic of Iranian society has been extensively treated by sociologists and lay observers. See Benham 101-103; Zonis 154; Millspaugh, etc.

[100] This is a relatively new custom. Khomeini gave it impetus when he himself added the name Khomeini to his original name – Rouhallah Moussavi. This custom is not to be confuses with the tradition of one's adding the name of a holy city (Karbalah, Najaf, Mashhad) at the beginning of one's name as a religious title, similar to the title "Haji" (one who made the Haj to Mecca) to indicate that the person had made a pilgrimage (ziyarah) to that city.

(connections). The first, literally a circle, serves as social "glue" and a point of reference for the relationships between its members, all of whom consider themselves equal. The basis for a formation of a *dovreh* may be likened to the Chinese *guangxi* – people who studied together at an educational institution, hold similar professional interests, political or social beliefs, or have some other common basis such as having lived or studied in some foreign country. The *dovreh* meets on a regular basis, ostensibly to read poetry or discuss current events. Each meeting takes place at the house and under the auspices of different member. The importance of the *dovreh*, however, is not in the content of the meetings, but in the relationships between the members. The members feel an obligation to further each other's interests, to arrange public positions for each other, and to lobby for each other wherever necessary. The *dovreh* also serves as a potent instrument of spreading information or disinformation.[101]

The practice of lobbying is *party-baazi*. Adopting an attitude towards an individual on the basis of *party-baazi* is common, and is seen by young Reformists as one of the social evilsthat must be eradicated.[102] An Iranian's personal status is frequently measured in terms of his *nofouz* (influence). *Nofouz* is especially used of someone who has friends or knows people in powerful circles. This could include high government and local officials who can help the individual with *nofouz* to circumvent the bureaucracy. Having such influence can be a source of respect, fear, and intimidation, thus giving it a sinister meaning.[103]

Women

The chador or the less conservative maghna'the poosh or "reformist" manteauy, which hides the faces of Iranian women, also hides the fact that the Iranian woman enjoys substantially more intellectual independence than most of her sisters in the Muslim world. The Iranian woman's influence within her family has always been substantially greater than that of her Arab sisters. All parties in Iran court the women's vote out of an understanding that, unlike women in the Arab world, Iranian women have their own voting patterns. Notwithstanding, in the present regime, there are no women to be found in the decision-making elite or, even in the Reformist leadership.

Humor

Humor and satire in Iran are sophisticated and cutting, and highly appreciated. Traditional Iranian humor usually focuses on the traits attributed to the above-mentioned stereotypes: sharp wit, ability to contend with extremely adverse circumstances, and moral victories of the powerless over the powerful by virtue of cunning and verbal skill. On a lower level, Iranian jokes tend to focus on social prejudices towards certain ethnic groups, usually with a stress on sexual customs attributed to those groups, and their stupidity or lack of sophistication.

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[101] William O. Beeman, Language, Status and Power in Iran (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986): 45-48; Zonis. 239-240.
[102] Under the slogan "*zavaabet* (criteria) and not *ravaabet* (connections)".
[103] The word is also used in the context of infiltrating enemy lines, or in matters relating to an espionage mission.

Political satire is also prevalent in modern Iranian humor. The daily Iranian (Reformist) press articulates its skepticism of the regime's version of reality on a regular basis through cartoons and oblique circuitous tongue-in-cheek headlines. The ongoing duel between the Conservative and Reformist press is frequently expressed by humoristic retorts of the latter on the attacks of the former.[104]

A favorite character in Iranian humor is the popular hero Mullah Nasseradin,. He is a lover of the good life who grapples with hopeless situations, and trumps blind fate and human contumely with an ostensible naiveté that conceals a superior intellect and shrewd insight. The classic ills of Iranian society are also widely treated in popular humor: arbitrariness and caprice of the rulers, oppression of the poor and the disadvantaged, and the moral hypocrisy of the clerics. In much popular humor the oppressed succeed in averting danger through shrewdness, but the rulers-oppressors, being no less Iranian, appreciate the skill of their subjects and reward them.

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[104] For example, on the day of the fall of Baghdad to American troops, the Reformist newspaper <u>Iran</u> reported the event (16 April 2003) with a headline "American Tanks in Baghdad." In the wake of conservative criticism (Kayhan, 17 April) that the newspaper was supportive of the American enemy, the paper published a "correction" (18 April): instead of "American tanks in Baghdad, the headline should have read "Iraqi Tanks in Los Angeles."

Communication and Negotiation

Overview

Cultures are frequently categorized as "high-context" or "low-context."[105] This paradigm was developed mainly out of observation of the differences between high context East Asian (particularly Chinese and Japanese) culture and low context Western culture (particularly American, being the epitome of that type). In terms of communication, the East Asian cultures are said to be highly language-oriented, but marked by linguistic ambiguity and therefore dependent on extra-linguistic devices to transmit the true meaning of messages. The Western cultures, on the other hand, are said to use more explicit "WYSIWYG" ("**W**hat **Y**ou **S**ee **I**s **W**hat **Y**ou **G**et") language as the main carrier of messages, avoiding ambiguous extra-linguistic devices. East Asian cultures are also often identified as "shame cultures" in which outward appearances, personal standing, reputation, and honor are paramount.

This model is useful in understanding certain elements of the predominant Iranian communication paradigm. Ostensibly, Iran is an example of a high context communication culture. Iranian use of flowery language and linguistic ambiguity places Iranian culture in this category. Moreover, Iranians accord great import to the context of communication. This is not only true in communication with each other, but in communicating with foreigners who arguably may not be sensitive to many of the contextual implications that are being communicated. Furthermore, in their interaction with foreign low context interlocutors, Iranians frequently tend to read contextual non-verbal connotations that their interlocutors had no intention of transmitting .

From many other aspects, however, Iranian culture is closer to the low context West than to the cultures of East Asia, or even its neighboring Arab cultures. It is pragmatic and considerate of "force ratios," honor plays a role but not one that supersedes rational considerations and considerations of confidence building and future credibility rarely bow to the practical and "here and now" goal.

Iranian negotiating techniques are best understood in contrast with those of East Asian and Western societies. Classic Western negotiation techniques are based on dynamics in which anything can happen. The underlying premise is that as long as there is a common denominator (both sides want the interaction to succeed), incremental give and take will produce the inherent compromise and a mutually acceptable solution. Western negotiation techniques are, therefore, not averse to creating crises as part of the negotiation process. Such a crisis is not seen as impairing the confidence between the two sides, but a device in the interactive process. Bluffing and disinformation are legitimate tools, though they should be used with caution,

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[105] This paradigm was first proposed by Edward Hall, in 1976. Since then, it has (usually) served as a tool to analyze differences between Western and Eastern societies, while also defining a challenge and possible solutions for those involved in various intercultural connections, especially business. Edward T. Hall. Beyond Cultures (New York: Anchor Press-Doubleday, 1976).

integrated in the spirit of sportive behavior,[106] and not used in a manner that could break long-term trust and endanger the post-negotiation relationship. Studies of East Asian cultures have shown that the permissible scope of such tactics is much less than in Western society, and tactics that are acceptable in the West may be counter-productive in the long run. For this reason, East Asian societies place great importance on the phase of pre-negotiation in order to test the waters and preclude crises during the negotiation process.

From this point of view, Iranian negotiation tactics go even further than the Western model in acceptance of ostensibly trust-damaging tactics, and from this point of view Iran is very far from the Asian paradigm. Many observers have attributed this to the influence of the business culture of the *bazaar*. The Iranian admiration of *zaroengi* (cleverness) accords wide legitimacy to dramatic departures from the course of the talks, insinuated threats, bluffing, and disinformation. Accordingly, the Iranian may not only be not offended by the use of these techniques by his foreign interlocutor, but may even hold a grudging admiration for the cleverness of his protagonist.

Collective and Individual Communication

Linguistic conventions

Iranian culture places the Persian language on a pedestal; it is perceived as the soul of Iranian national identity, more than land or religion. The Iranian who is skilled in the art of communication in Persian is highly esteemed, as is the foreigner who has mastered the linguistic and social complexities of the language. Normative Persian usage employs circuitous and flowery language, which lends itself easily to obliqueness. It is rich in allusions, metaphors, and pithy folk sayings, which must be decoded in order to achieve a full comprehension of the true intent of the speaker. This nature of the Persian language is frequently carried over into discourse in foreign tongues with non-Persian speakers.

Ambiguity in discourse is not only acceptable, but even admired, if it is performed in a manner which successfully confounds the interlocutor. This is in sharp contrast to American style communication (Get to the point/Where's the beef?/ Stop beating around the bush) which places a high value on using lowest common denominator language in order to ensure maximum mutual understanding of the respective intents of both sides. The assumption of uncertainty and the constant flux of the true position of one's interlocutor is said to create a "communication system" based on the following two principles: (a) messages cannot be interpreted according to any single set of criteria; (b) an adroit operator never settles on a final interpretation of any message.[107]

Clever discourse (the epitome of cleverness) is highly admired by Iranians. *Zeroengi* has been defined, in socio–linguistic terms, as "an operation on the part of an adroit operator which involves thwarting direct interpretation of one's own actions

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[106] Influential Western sport images all create a strong expectation of fairness and obeying rules: "level field playing" and "cricket" in British terms. Games are expected to be played by "the rules," breaking them being a costly tactic, especially regarding long-term relations in the West.
[107] Beeman, "What is (Iranian) National Character?" 32.

or deliberately leading others to an erroneous interpretation of those actions while being able to successfully interpret the actions of others."[108] In essence, *zerængi* is an ability to manipulate relations and communications with others. In Iranian literature and cinema, a person who fails in such manipulation is a tragic figure, whereas one who succeeds – even if the manipulation involves extreme deception and blackmail – is perceived as a positive figure.[109] In manipulating the interpretation of a message, Iranians put equal emphasis on maintaining correctness in speech (not diverging from proper protocol) and effectiveness (creating strategic departures from correctness in such a way as to unbalance the interlocutor). A person who is adept at discourse manipulation is highly esteemed in Iran. Conversely, the expectation that the other party will attempt to be clever as well contributes to the general sense of mistrust and unwillingness to accept things at face value.

An individual's use of the Persian language is frequently an indication of his politics. A comparison of interviews and speeches of Conservative and Reformist politicians clearly shows a predilection of the former to Arabized Persian, i.e., vocabulary and a convoluted rhetorical style typical of religious sermons and of clerics for whom Arabic is almost a second mother tongue.[110] The latter, on the other hand, clearly favor a more colloquial, straightforward style with a preference for Persian words over Arabic imports. This distinction comes through even in translation.

The very terminology of diplomatic interaction concerning conflicts is indicative of the cultural baggage attached to possibilities of compromise or concession. Much can be read into the etymologies of the words that Iranian diplomats choose to describe the interactions and agreements in which they are involved. An attempt to map the Iranian terminology,[111] however, produced an ambiguous picture, with little practical application. It seems that, in contrast with Arab obsession with well-crafted linguistic ambiguity, the Iranian is less perturbed by the exact content of the words he uses; in any case, it is future circumstances and not connotations that existed in the past that will determine whether or not a statement will be politically relevant when the time comes.

Iranian interpreters have frequently been known to manipulate their translations and even to translate dialogues in a manner that makes it more palatable to the Iranian side. When the interpreter is himself a member of the team and not a professional interpreter he may have more of a tendency to use his own political knowledge to create constructive misunderstandings.[112] A few observers have noted that the choice of interpreter for sensitive meetings was not necessarily based on his proficiency in the foreign language, but on his loyalty and security rating.

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[108] Beeman, "What is (Iranian) National Character?" 34; Beeman, Language, Status and Power 26.
[109] Beeman, Language, Status and Power 31; Beeman, "What is (Iranian) National Character?" 34.
[110] Many of these clerics studied in the seminaries of Najaf and lived in Arabic-speaking countries. The very fact that the day-to-day discourse in these circles deals with the Koran and Hadith also increases the use of Arabic.
[111] Raymond Cohen, Farsi Negotiating Lexicon, Unpublished digital database, Hebrew University of Jerusalem 2 1998: 130-139.
[112] This custom was observed during Khomeini's period in Paris. His interpreters were Dr. Ibrahim Yazdi (to English) and Abolhassan Banisadr (to French). Both took care to translate only those questions that would not arouse Khomeini's wrath, and to render his answers in a "politically correct" manner.

Non-verbal Communication

Communication between Iranians is high-context; i.e., communication is allusive and indirect not only in the choice of words utilized, but in the dependence of the interpretation of the message on the context in which it is transmitted: non-verbal clues, staging and setting of the act of communication, and the choice of the bearer of the message. Regarding the latter aspect, one may paraphrase Marshall McLuhan in saying that in Iran frequently "the messenger is the message." While Iranians who interact with the West on a regular basis are aware of the low-context nature of Western (and particularly American) styles of communication, many tend to infer non-verbal clues from the behavior of their Western interlocutors according to Iranian criteria.

The gamut of non-verbal communication in Iranian interaction is extremely wide and complex. It includes aspects of proxemics, hand and body gestures, eye contact, etc. The concatenation of these gestures clearly indicates intimacy between the two persons, or their perception of each one's hierarchal inferiority or superiority.

Iranian social protocol places great importance on seating; placing a guest near a door is indicative of his low rank or a low degree of welcome. Honored guests are usually seated to the right of the host. In ancient Iranian protocol, the seating of a guest on the left side of the primary host (especially in a royal court and the like) is an indication of the guest's predominant status on the one hand, and assumed friendship, on the other hand.[113] In the modern Iranian *Majlis*, members are seated according to their rank, rather than their party affiliation.

Body contact and free posture and behavior are not perceived as ice breakers in Iranian culture, but a custom of *samimiyat* (intimacy) alone. Therefore, demonstrations of conviviality and gregariousness between non-intimates are not generally effective vis-à-vis Iranian interlocutors (especially within groups). Such gestures (pats on the back, frivolous body contact) are perceived as carrying a patronizing message.[114] When employed towards senior officials in the presence of their subordinates, it may have a demeaning effect (presenting the senior Iranian as intimate or inferior to the foreigner).

Head and hand gestures in Iranian culture differ somewhat from most Western models. For example, raising the head (a half nod) has a meaning of disagreement or dissatisfaction, while lowering the head is an expression of affirmation; a Western-style thumbs up is an obscene gesture; holding one's head down and placing the hand on the heart with a slight bow is a sign of acknowledgement of the other party's social pre-eminence. Iranians, however, do not expect foreigners to copy Iranian etiquette.

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[113] It is said that Cyrus first began to place men on his left hand as a sign of respect, because that side is the weaker side, and therefore the most exposed to danger. Sir John Chardin, Travels in Persia, 1673-1677. 2 (London: Argonaut Press, 1927, reprinted 1988, Unabridged Dover republication).

[114] It is interesting to note that even in times of mourning, Iranians do not engage in physical acts of consolation (hugs, etc.), but rather maintain dignified "face."

Speaking up, down and across status lines

The high sensitivity to hierarchy among Iranians is the source of two important ramifications in the relations between Iranians and non-Iranians: when interacting with foreigners, Iranians expect their interlocutors to accept and respect their hierarchies and to deal with them accordingly; in return, Iranians tend to respect foreign hierarchies even when they are much more subtle and less protocol-demanding than the Iranian form. The differentiation between the social statuses of individuals is evident through a variety of verbal and non-verbal communicative devices: language, posture, and eye contact. Many of these indicators of hierarchal relations seem to a foreign eye tantamount to extreme sycophancy and unwillingness of subordinates to contradict their superiors, or even to point out factual mistakes in a superior's statements or decisions.

Iranian hierarchy effectively neutralizes the subordinate in the presence of his superior and he ceases to act as an interlocutor, even if he was an active negotiation partner when the superior was not present. Direct reference to a subordinate over the head of the superior – even in technical matters that he had dealt with previously –is perceived as a severe breach of protocol, and may even bring the loyalty of the subordinate into question. The obligations of the subordinates in all levels are absolute and personal: Iranian bureaucracies have not developed a sophisticated concept of civil service in which the employee owes his loyalty to the system and not to his individual boss. Loyalty to a superior extends frequently even beyond the end of the formal work relationship, and one may frequently see senior Iranians acting with deference to a person who was once their superior or teacher.[115]

Age and Gender

Iranians traditionally respect old age. This is reflected in the hierarchy of the Iranian family and in religious institutions. Respect for age is particularly evident in the time-honored hierarchy of the Ayatollahs. The Islamic revolutions, however, brought to power a generation of relatively young leaders who were then between 30-40 years old and are now in their 50s or early 60s. As a result, many of the revolutionary institutions (Basij, IRGC, and Ansar Hezbollah) are still led by relatively young individuals. The outstanding example of this trend is the position of 64-year-old Khamene'i, who was only 50 years old when elected to the post of *Rahbar*, which elevated him above all the aged and venerable Ayatollahs of Iran.

Notwithstanding, authority, particularly moral authority, is still linked in the Iranian mind with old age. This is also true regarding foreign dignitaries. It has been pointed out that Iranians still perceive the age, personal record, and links to the Head of State (i.e., personal influence) of a foreign emissary to be an indication of the respect that that foreign power accords Iran.

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[115] It is a custom in Iran for a student or subordinate to stand up when his teacher/superior enters the room. One referent sat in a restaurant frequented by military officials. A retired official who no longer held any formal position entered the restaurant. He noticed a wave of people standing up in deference to the retired officer as they noticed him, beginning from the tables close to the entrance and then the further ones. When he asked about the incident, he was told that almost everyone there had at one time or another been under the direct or indirect command of that official.

The Iranian attitude vis-à-vis foreign women interlocutors is again indicative of Iranian pragmatism; the demands on a foreign woman to conform to Iranian religious conventions are a function of the foreign woman's personal status and power, as well as the Iranian assessment of which demands for conformity she would accept.[116]

Ethnic and National Biases

The relationship between Iranians and Western culture has the trappings of a form of national schizophrenia. An intimate relationship with the West since the nineteenth century has produced an ambivalent approach/avoidance relationship with Western culture. The admiration of Western (and particularly American) economic success and values persists in the urban economic and intellectual elite, even two decades after the revolution. It is this very admiration, however, that brought Iranian nationalist intellectuals to liken Iranian civilization to a body that is affected by a poison or virus of the West (*gharb-zadeggi* or "Westoxicated"), a concept coined in the 1960s that signifies a rejection of the imposed Westernization of the Shah's era.[117]

Iranian nationalism is exclusive, and to a large extent xenophobic. [118] Iranians see their national identity as *sui generis*,[119] with no identifiable "cousin" nationality.[120] While they identify *pro forma* with Muslims in general, and Shiites in particular – or even with other Persian speaking peoples – the scope of Iranian national identity remains that of the Persian-speaking Shiites within the borders of Iran, and Iranian expatriates. The other side of this coin is discrimination towards the non-Farsi minorities in Iran. The nationalist Persian policies of the late Shah had as their goal the complete assimilation of the non-Farsi (Arab, Turkmen, Balouchi, Azari and Kurd) minorities. Despite this campaign, a large number of the inhabitants of these areas are not fluent in Persian and are discriminated against in Iranian society.[121] Iranian senior military officers of non-Farsi origin are few and far between (the Minister of Defense, Ali Shamkhani, being a prominent exception that proves the rule). On the political level as well, with the exception of Khamanei (who is of Azeri

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[116] For example, the Iranian-born CNN journalist Christiane Amanpour wears a head cover when broadcasting from Iran, but even in high-level interviews (such as with Khatami) significantly does not cover her hair entirely, as would be required of a woman in Iran. On the other hand, female diplomatic emissaries visiting Iran have met with their Iranian counterparts bareheaded and, of course, Iranians set no conditions regarding the dress code of women when they meet them abroad. This pragmatism stands in sharp contrast with the unbending strictness employed by the Sunnite regime in Saudi Arabia.

[117] The term was invented by the Iranian intellectual Ahmad Fardid and made famous by the author and social critic, Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969). His book of the same name (1962) deals with the social conditions in Iran. The symptoms of westoxication are total national submission to the West and its technology through the Iranian monarchy, which serves as no more than a native brokerage for Western influence, with no aims and identity of its own.

[118] The British Ambassador to Teheran in the 1960s D.A.H. Wright, reported home in his annual report of 1964 "xenophobia is not far from the surface in Iran. The new generation of men in office, though Western educated are, I believe, at heart more nationalistic and neutralist that their fathers." UK Public Record Office

[119] Zonis 211. He notes the reasons that Iranians tend to ascribe to their national uniqueness: the continuity of Iranian history; the greatness of ancient rulers; the uniqueness of being the only Shiite country; and the persistence of the Iranian culture in the face of occupation.

[120] While all national identifications are by definition singular and exclusive, as that is what sets them apart, many see themselves as belonging to a wider family. This "trans—national" milieu is lacking in the Persian context, though the Islamic and the Shiite facets supply it to a degree.

[121] It is enough to see the number of Turk/ Rashti racist jokes on Iranian websites to realize the depth of this phenomenon.

origin), few non-Farsis can be counted among the political elite. This is particularly true in regards to Arab Persians, where the main representatives are Persianized Arabs from Najaf (such as Ayatollah Shahroudi), and not Iranian Arabs.

In the light of the significance of Iranian nationalism in the Iranian mindset, it is not surprising that Iranians have had a certain difficulty in accepting a fellow Iranian as a bone fide counterpart who speaks in the name of the adversary.[122] Similarly, Iranians tend to look askance at other Muslims who represent the West. They also tend to project their own domestic sectoralism on the foreigner; an emissary who comes from a Texan background is perceived as a more authentic representative of a Texan president, and his words are seen as carrying more political weight.

On the other hand, Iranians frequently view emissaries of non-Caucasian origin (blacks, Asians) as less authentic representatives of the West. For many Iranians, Afro-Americans belong to the category of *mostaza'fin* (the oppressed of this world), and therefore should feel empathy towards Iran, which is discriminated against as a nation. This image emerges occasionally when the Iranian press reports on rioting among American blacks or cases of racial bigotry in the United States or Israel.

The Iranian attitude towards Israel and the Jews is a mixture of religious and ethnic animosity and of admiration. Here too, however, Iranian pragmatism comes into play. Despite the declared animosity of Iran towards Israel (including openly calling for its destruction), Iranians, unlike Arabs (before the era of Israeli-Arab peace treaties) did not leave the room when Israelis were present, or leave conferences when Israelis spoke. In many cases, Iranians who are most vociferous in their open hatred towards Israel have acquitted themselves with utter civility when meeting individual Israelis. They do not interpret their presence as recognition of Israel.[123]

Honor

Honor or *gheyirat* (manhood) plays an important part in any interaction with Iranians. On the personal level, this means that if a person is wrongly accused or insulted, it is considered an affront to his *gheyirat* and he must express his indignation in a clear and public manner. Otherwise, *silentium videtur confessio*. Frequently, Iranians extend their personal *gheyirat*-sensibility to national affronts as well as personal ones.[124] An affront to Iranian nationalism must be answered emphatically and publicly.

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[122] The idea that once an Iranian, always an Iranian was blatantly clear in the days of the Shah: Israeli Ambassador Meir Ezri (of Iranian origin), rarely met with the Shah. When he did, the officials in the court found a way to legitimize the meeting of an Iranian with the Shah, not as the official representative of a foreign government, but as the editor of a Persian newspaper in Israel.

[123] Recently a senior regime figure who has been instrumental in many of the worst terrorist attacks against Israel met Israelis at an international academic conference. Upon being introduced by his hosts, he politely conversed with the Israelis. The gist of his talk, though, was that the Israelis have no right to exist…

[124] For example, A. spoke with a senior Iranian and made the point that terrorism is not compatible with Iran's ancient civilization. The Iranian felt the need to justify the compliment, agreed with A., and went on to the specific matter on hand. In another case, A. began his meeting with a senior Iranian by stating that Iran is acting like an outlaw and terrorist state. The reply was a long-winded vociferous history lesson on Iranian civilization, which did not allow for dealing with the matter at hand.

The Iranian concept of honor, however, differs from its Japanese or even Arab equivalent. The other side of *gheyirat* is *aaberou* (face saving). The mechanisms for saving face in Iranian inter-personal discourse usually preclude extreme situations.[125] Loss of face due to an affront to an Iranian's *gheyirat* usually does not call for extreme reactions such as suicide or murder. For the most part, it is alleviated verbally and does not preclude continued contact between the affronter and the affronted.

Dissimulation

Frankness and complete candor in discourse between Persian speakers is not politically correct. Brashness and audacity (*por-rou–yi,* roughly translatable as *hutzpah*) are usually frowned upon in Iranian society. Iranian social mores do not see the advantage of putting everything on the table. This has been interpreted as a spin-off of two cultural traits: the Iranian concept of distinction between the inner world of a person and the dangerous outside, according to which externalization of one's real thoughts is risky and one should always be on guard; and basic Iranian politeness, which is not commensurate with brashness.

This is not to say that sincerity is not valued or that an Iranian does not feel the need to convince his counterpart of his genuineness. It is transmitted, however, through extra-linguistic devices and oaths.[126] The projection of sincerity through these artifices is not an act that is performed lightly; it is usually employed when it is clear that the other side doubts the sincerity of his Iranian interlocutor.

In Iranian political culture, dissimulation towards the outside is to the credit of a political leader. Cleverness and manipulative abilities are highly respected in leaders – both Iranian and foreign. This is quite different to the East Asian paradigm in which blatant deception may deliver a fatal blow to the trust necessary for further interaction. Numerous accounts tell of senior Iranian officials who pass on a message through reliable channels (which states are normally careful not to taint with disinformation). The message may be intended to raise hopes for a shift in Iranian policy if external pressure is not put on them, or to tempt someone away from support of opposition activity.[127] After the goal has been achieved, in all these cases the people involved have concluded that the messages were psychological warfare.[128] When such dissimulation is exposed (for example by Voice of America, Voice of Israel, BBC in Persian, or by the Iranian opposition), it does not give rise to questions regarding the politician's domestic credibility or harm his own standing.

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[125] Arasteh 44.

[126] Physical gestures for stressing sincerity include the afore-mentioned touching one's heart with the open hand. Persian is rich in oaths, including "by my family," "by my eldest son," "by the prophet (or Ali)", "by all the prophets," "by my life," "may my hands be cut off." There are also bogus oaths that are especially meant for lying, such as "*hazrat-e Abbas*" (on the name of a non-existent Prophet).

[127] In the mid-1990s Iran arrested an aged and senior member of the Jewish community, charged him with espionage and sentenced him to death. His family began to mobilize international public opinion to save him. At one point, the Iranian MOIS negotiated an elaborate deal with him that was contingent on preventing any public discussion of the issue, ostensibly in order to prevent radical pressures. The convicted man was allowed to speak with his relatives abroad and to inform them of the deal and ask them to refrain from any public activity that could scuttle the deal. They agreed; a few hours later (as it turned out), he was duly executed.

[128] The Persian adage states "a lie which brings benefit is preferable to a truth which causes damage."

Ambiguity

Western diplomats and go-betweens have lamented the fact that Iranian interlocutors were consistent in not maintaining their promises, and that oral statements or promises are often employed by Iranians *pro-forma*, just to get an interlocutor out of their hair, with no intention of carrying out what they have stated. The British Ambassador to Iran in the 1970s, Sir Dennis Wright, summarized his dealings with Iranians as follows: "The Iranians are people who say the opposite of what they think and do the opposite of what they say. That does not necessarily mean that what they do does not conform to what they think."

Some observers claim that the popular image of Iranian non-sincerity in commitments towards foreigners comes of the Iranian reluctance to disappoint.[129] As a result, an Iranian "perhaps" or a courtesy "yes" is frequently overestimated as a definite "yes".[130]

The tendency of Iranians to refrain from categorical refusals has been linked in popular images to various traits: charitable observers attribute it to an ingrained social imperative to please, or at least not to disappoint the person one is speaking with. This is particularly true regarding refusing a request by a guest. Those less sympathetic relate it to a basically utilitarian approach – a commitment is kept according to the scale of the damage incurred if it is broken – or to the concept of *Ketman* or *Taqiya* as religious and social legitimization of deception in the service of necessity or a higher good.

Manners and Etiquette

One of the most obvious aspects of Iranian culture is the high significance accorded to political correctness and proper etiquette. *Mehman navazi* (hospitality) ranks high in the Iranian cultural system. The all-pervasive ritual of ***tæ'arof*** has been defined as the "active, ritualized realization of differential perceptions of superiority and inferiority in interaction."[131] The practical results of this ritual are a clear status ranking of any ad hoc grouping in which one may infer from the acceptance or reluctance to accept favors and proposals an indication of the relative status of all parties. The terminology of the custom is replete with expressions of servitude (such as *bandeh*, *chaaker*, *novkor* – e.g. slave). The ritual of *tæ'arof* is also extremely time-

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[129] Haas, *Iran*, p. 128. According to a 19th Century account "Readiness to please you or to concur with you, is another peculiar trait in the Irani's character. ... The fact is that he generally does not want to deceive you but gives you merely an evasive answer if he thinks that the truth, if told, would be unpalatable to you or savour of incivility. ..If you ask him to do a thing or fetch something for you, he would invariably say *chashm* (with my eyes), but would not often move even his little finger. …You might as well wait till Doomsday". Masani Sir Rustom, "With Dinshah Irani in New Iran", Dinshah Irani Memorial Volume," Bombay, 1948.

[130] One referent pointed out his own bitter experience when he petitioned one of the top-level Iranian leaders regarding a certain matter. The leader answered affirmatively (bālé,yes in Persian) to a question, which was formulated "Would his Excellency agree to…" After a few weeks, when the matter became pressing, the petitioner asked one of the senior officials how he could follow up the subject. The official (who had participated in the meeting) asked in surprise if the leader had given his agreement. When told that he had clearly said yes, the official laughed and said: "there are tens of ways to say bālé. When you learn the intonation of them all and their real meanings, you will have become Iranian…"

[131] Beeman,. Language, Status, and Power in Iran 56.

consuming; the initial refusal to accept a proposal must be repeated enough to underline the fact that the recipient knows that he is unworthy, but accepts out of deference. When an Iranian wishes to stress his sincerity, he will say *tæ'arof nist.* This is not to be confused with *tæ'arof.*

Iranians do not practice *tæ'arof* on foreigners (who do not know the rules), and they do not expect foreigners to practice esoteric Iranian customs. It may even be said that Iranians feel a certain discomfort in the face of attempts by foreigners to obey Iranian etiquette mores. Iranians, however, are extremely and genuinely hospitable to foreigners. Like many other cultural traits, this too seems to contradict the stigma of stinginess or frugality often attached to Iranians.

Iranians have a strong feeling of representing their culture vis-à-vis foreigners. As a rule, they maintain a façade of politeness even under tension. Most accounts of difficult negotiations are in agreement that the Iranian side seemed to pride itself on not "loosing their cool," and on maintaining political correctness and etiquette.

One custom, unique to Shiite Islam, is the belief in ritual unclean-ness (*najjes – nejasat*). According to this tenet of Shiite faith, a believer (i.e., Shiite) who touches a heretic (Christian, Jew, pagan) becomes impure and must purify himself. This precept, if observed conscientiously, precludes physical contact with heretics – an obvious obstacle to normal interaction. The manner in which Iranians, including scrupulously religious ones, circumvent this tenet is indicative of the predominance of pragmatic politics over religious principles.

Emotionalism

Iranian culture allows for expression of extreme emotions – in particular feelings of insult, rage, and personal umbrage. Some observers rightly distinguish between spontaneous and unbridled expression of feelings, and socially appropriate public demonstration of emotion – particularly anger. The former is not a typical Iranian trait (as can be seen at Iranian funerals), whereas the latter is a social device or accounting procedure, which relays to the surroundings a message of emotion.[132] The goal of the latter is pragmatic; it declares to the target audience that the individual is hurt, insulted, and angry, and that he must be appeased. Sophisticated use of emotional outbreaks is highly regarded as cleverness.

In the course of official talks – be they political or business – it is rare that the relationship reaches a level of camaraderie that allows for humoristic exchanges. It is not politically correct for Iranians to malign themselves by telling foreigners jokes about Iranian frailties, and their strong sense of etiquette does not allow for exchanges of jokes.

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[132] See Beeman, "What is (Iranian) National Character?"

Negotiating Behavior

The Role of the Negotiator

An understanding of the modalities of diplomatic interaction with Iranians is contingent on a proper definition of the role and the authority of the emissary or the negotiating team in the framework of the Iranian decision-making paradigm. In day-to-day matters between Iran and her neighbors this differs according to the subject under discussion and the status of the Iranian interlocutor. Insofar as a discussion with the enemy, i.e., the United States, Israel, or any other Western power that negotiates in their name, is concerned, however, no subjects are insignificant. The traditional perception of the cunning of the West puts into effect the traditional skepticism and suspicion generally attributed to Iranians. Obviously, under such circumstances an emissary, no matter how senior he is, cannot decide alone even on those ostensibly trivial matters.

As a result, it has been said that any group of Iranians who meet with Western negotiators are first and foremost information collectors. The absence of a clear delegation of authority regarding most any issue connected to the archenemies of the regime divests even the most senior level emissary – let alone junior officials – of any decision-making powers.

A distinction should be made between collective trust (i.e., of the administration or the country represented by the emissary) and personal trust in the mediator. A mediator who has been known by the Iranians to deal fairly with their demands and to remain relatively impartial is thus regarded as able to present harsh realities with less risk of breaking the relationship.[133]

The Negotiating Team

Iranian interaction with foreigners in business matters differs from that in the political realm. Whereas in business contacts, the *bazaar* paradigm of one-on-one negotiations has been preserved, the ideological constraints of the present regime tend to create a preference for negotiation in teams. The Iranian need for collective decision-making is especially evident in the treatment of back channels. Even in high-level meetings, Iranian negotiators will hold talks in the presence of an official interpreter or a clerical "commissar" as a silent witness. Furthermore, written messages to senior figures have frequently been opened and read in the presence of others as a means of allaying any suspicions of hidden deals.

Various accounts of interactions with official Iranians have noted the high level of politicization and domestic push-and-pull within the Iranian team. Almost every team holding high-level talks includes representation of the *Rahbar,* usually from the MOIS and the IRGC. This person usually sets himself apart from the rest of the delegation or

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[133] This is a central claim of Giandomenico Picco, who negotiated the cease-fire between Iraq and Iran and thus gained the Iranian confidence in further negotiations on hostage and MIA issues.

group;[134] he does not have to obey the instructions of high-ranking officials who lead the team of which he is a part.[135]

Iranian politics has traditionally taken advantage of the purported or real links of high-level Iranian officials with foreign powers. This has been especially relevant regarding people with links to the UK. Many Ulama have a public image of British proxies. This identification is not limited to reformist or moderate Ulama; it is based on the public's perception regarding visits of the cleric to the UK and his relations with people in that country. The regime then uses these individuals as channels for transmitting information and disinformation to the West. Frequently, a person who is considered close to the side the Iranians are negotiating with is placed on the team in order to coax the other side to make concessions that would serve to maintain the credibility of their proxy.[136]

In addition to the Mullahs and the *bazaaris* who may take part in an Iranian team, there is an additional team member type: the Western-educated expert. They are usually much more receptive to the Western mode of negotiation. They serve as a bridge between the Mullahs cum *bazaaris* and the Westerners, though their affiliation with the West makes them suspect and reduces their influence on the real decision-makers. The Iranian side has impressed most observers with the level of preparations for meetings or negotiations, and the precision of the choreography of their teams. Important exceptions may be those Western-educated individuals who come from well placed clerical or *bazaari* families, or whose families are closely related to the leadership.[137]

Personal Motivation

The prevalence of corruption and bribery in Iran has been noted above. It is almost inconceivable that an official would hold negotiations on a business deal without providing for his own personal *renta* or *pour cent*. The reformist outcry notwithstanding, there is no social or political stain as a result of disclosure of such deals.

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[134] In 1993 an Iranian airliner was forced to land at the Uvdah airstrip in Israel. The passengers were interviewed before they were allowed to continue. People involved in the interviews recounted that from the first, one could tell the difference between regular passengers and representatives of the clerical side of the regime. The latter remained silent during the long wait, they did not inquire about their fate (some of the passengers inquired if Israel intended to hold them in return for Ron Arad), or ask for favors (many of the Iranians initiated contact to ask if they could be taken to visit Eilat or Jerusalem).

[135] On one occasion when the Iranian opposition planned to hijack military vessels that France was about to send to Iran, the Iranian Captain of one of the vessels (who was a member of the opposition) ordered all crewmembers below deck for a professional lecture. The only crewmember who remained on deck was the *Rahbar's* representative…

[136] One source pointed out a case of a senior Iranian official who was well known as a Russian agent of influence. Nevertheless, he remained in influential positions. At one point he was arrested (ostensibly for espionage) and then released and sent on sensitive diplomatic missions to Moscow. The Iranian assumption, according to the source, was that the Russians would want to bolster the status of their proxy.

[137] This is a point that Picco made, based to a great extent on his experience with specific individuals such as Javad Zarif who served as Iran's ambassador to the UN and ex-deputy FM. His influence derived from his personal rapport with Khomeini and Rafsanjani.

Pre-Negotiations and Operational Intelligence

Iranian negotiators have been known to make extensive use of back channels and pre-negotiations. Obviously such behavior has a mundane domestic reason: to free the regime of the need to explain its behavior to the Iranian public. In many cases, however, these channels seem to have been no more than a mechanism for gathering operational intelligence prior to the actual negotiations, for sounding out the rival's weaknesses and positions, and to identify disagreements within the rival's teams. In a few cases it was revealed that the Iranian side made extensive simulations, including allocating tasks to the more responsive or conciliatory team member as opposed to the hard-liner.

Here, the Iranian pre-conceptions of the West frequently come into play. The more the West is perceived as a "high BATNA" rival (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement - like the Iranians themselves), and willing to walk away (to the military option if need be), the greater will be the Iranian tendency to expedite the negotiations.

What's on the Table?

True to the code of the *bazaar*, the prices of merchandise proposed at the outset of negotiations has very little to do with the real price that the Iranian believes he can get. The difference is usually expressed in terms of hundreds of percents (when the price is in money), and in unacceptable political demands when the price is diplomatic.

A more interesting phenomenon is the willingness to enter into detailed negotiations over issues that the Iranian side knows it could not deliver even if its demands were to be met.[138] Some sources claim that this is a negotiating ploy, meant to wear out the adversary with "virtual" negotiations and to learn his weaknesses before raising real issues. Others claim that this is just a reflection of the "bazaar instinct" and the "love of the game," a demonstration of rhetorical, emotional, and intellectual virtuosity in negotiation that raises the status of the Iranian in the eyes of his colleagues and subordinates, and hence serves a social end, separate from the real goal of the negotiations.

According to one source, the virtual negotiations often spring from other issues with no apparent reason, with the Iranian side going off on a tangent. The new and unexpected issue comes as a *non sequitur*, but becomes the focal point of the talks. The non-Iranian side finds itself compelled to negotiate back to the original issue, and then finds that it has paid for the return to *status quo ante*. A former Western official pointed out that at the start of negotiations he was "led to believe that [the Iranian negotiators] are rational, reasonable, understanding, and able to adjust on the basis of facts that are revealed to them in the course of the give and take." He claims, however, that this turned out to be no more than verbal dexterity serving as a mask to hide a reluctance to change positions. He discovered that at the end of the negotiations

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[138] Sources who were privy to sensitive negotiations over hostages/POWs testified that even when there was reliable information that the Iranian team did not have the authority to make decisions, or they could not deliver, they held talks as if they could.

there was a tendency to revisit issues that were thought to have been decided already, and to unravel the whole package.[139]

Principle vs. Particulars

The Iranian attitude towards dealing with principles or details of implementation is not monolithic. Many Western negotiators claim that Iranian bargaining modus operandi is focused *ad nauseum* on irrelevant details, and shies away from catchall statements of principles. In a way, this runs contradictory to the Iranian custom of flaunting principles (regarding naval rights, the basis for the Iranian nuclear program, etc.). Indeed other observers, with no less experience, have related long-winded sessions with senior Iranian officials in which the latter dragged the meetings into discussions on matters of principle that were ultimately abandoned.[140]

Short Term vs. Long Term

Iranian negotiation techniques are notoriously short-term focused. Very rarely will Iranians offer a deal in which the *quid pro quo* from the other side will only emerge years later. In this respect, Iranians are very different to East Asian cultures; they do not seem to see the trust that the deal builds as an asset that may be worth making concessions for. The assumption is that the opposite number is as opportunistic and cunning as oneself, and therefore will not provide the merchandise only because of trust. U.S. diplomats who dealt with the U.S. embassy crisis of 1979-1980 described the Iranian attitude towards long-term confidence-building as follows: "Favors are only grudgingly bestowed, and then just to the extent that a tangible *quid pro quo* is immediately perceptible. Forget about assistance proffered last year or even last week. What can be offered today?"[141]

Length of negotiations

Iranians are known for long, drawn out negotiations. One interpretation of this characteristic is that the underdog psychology brings the Iranian to assume that the longer the negotiations last, the greater a chance that things can change in his favor. The intrinsic Shiite belief in the virtue of patience also contributes to this tendency.

The American adage that time is money is foreign to Iranian discourse, at least as a general principle. It is said that Iranians have, in practice, turned procrastination into a virtue. In personal hierarchical relations, delay is a tactic used by subordinates to avoid implementing decisions they believe to be problematic; in negotiations with non-Iranians, it has frequently been interpreted as deriving from the assumption that delaying decisions may be advantageous.[142] This is not to say that Iranian leaders and diplomats have no sense of urgency. During the Iraq-Iran War, when Iran was in dire need of military materiel and held negotiations for purchase of spare parts, Iranian negotiators pressed their interlocutors to continue talks and reach a quick conclusion.

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[139] Giandomenico Picco, former U.N. emissary, personal interview.

[140] For example the Iranian insistence on a declaration of the responsibility of Iraq for the Iraqi-Iranian war as a precondition for a cease-fire agreement.

[141] See cable sent to Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance written by the American charge d'affaires, Bruce Laingen on 13th August 1979.

[142] Arasteh 45–46.

It was clear then that delaying answers put pressure on the Iranian side. On the other hand, Iranian predilection to slow and drawn out deliberations was at its best in negotiations for hostages, and particularly in extended and unsuccessful negotiations for the Israeli navigator, Ron Arad. Testimonies about both business and diplomatic negotiations with Iranians are replete with stories of talks reaching the final stage and then the Iranian side asking for a deferral of the final agreement for a day, which is then extended to a few days. This pattern is interpreted as deriving from a basic assumption that the opposite number is usually stronger, and therefore a delay can benefit the weak by producing new opportunities.[143] In terms of negotiation techniques, Iranians tend to set a relatively high BATNA,[144] thus demonstrating willingness to walk away from the table at an early stage of negotiations. Since the BATNA is time-dependent (a better alternative may not exist presently, but it may arise in the future, hence there is no reason to concede now), the Iranian tendency to draw out negotiations is compatible with this pattern.

Punctuality is not central in Iranian etiquette – either from the point of view of the host or the guest.[145] Arriving late for a meeting does not necessarily project lack of respect and it is not politically correct to comment on a visitor's lack of punctuality.[146]

Ambiguity vs. Clarity

There seems to be a contradiction between the proclivity of Iranians to legalistic detail and their use of ambiguity. Iranian interlocutors have received high marks from their Western counterparts on the level of their preparations and the detailed and legalistic attitude they demonstrate. On the other hand, most accounts of ongoing talks with Iranians – both business and diplomatic –stress the extreme ambiguity that the Iranian side preserved throughout the negotiations. This tendency has been explained by a variety of cultural traits: an aversion to spelling things out on one hand, or a delight in confusing the counterpart. The rules of the game preclude allowing the other side to know what you know or do not know, but require projecting a sophisticated façade.

Iranian negotiators have a reputation of being protocol-shy, preferring not to put the trend of the discussions on paper or to draw up protocols or interim MOUs. This has been attributed to a variety of causes: *bazaar* traditions of doing business on the basis of oral agreements; Shiite customs of *taqiyya*; the structure of the Iranian regime, which compartmentalizes the non-clerical bureaucracy from the real

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[143] Meir Ezri, <u>Mi bahem Mikol Amo</u> (Hebrew) (Or Yehuda, Israel: Hed Artzi, 2001) 15.
Meir Ezri notes that this is a permanent characteristic of negotiations with Iran.
[144] See. Leigh Thompson, *The Mind and Heart of the Negotiator* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001): 11–12.
[145] Masani Sir Rustom, described the Persian attitude to punctuality as follows: "[The Persian] is certainly no slave of the clock and in no hurry to start. A meeting may be fixed for five o'clock; business may not begin till six o'clock. You may be invited to dinner at eight o'clock. It may not be served till ten o'clock. You wonder if there would ever be an end to the stream of salutations, shafts of witticisms and the rounds of tea without milk offered to you. Tortured by hunger, you may sip the tea or chew the dry fruit or shirini (pastry) laid in front of you…" Masani Sir Rustom, "With Dinshah Irani in New Iran," <u>Dinshah Irani Memorial Volume</u> (Bombay, 1948).
[146] Y. was scheduled to meet the Shah in Europe in the late 1970's due to traffic, he arrived an hour late. The Shah did not even ask about the delay. Y explains that raising the question of the delay would seem as if the host is questioning the respect in which the guest holds him. That in itself would be an insult to the guest.

considerations and plans of the leadership; or the underlying Iranian view of the world as a concatenation of transient and ephemeral conditions, which may, upon their change, render any written agreement irrelevant.[147]

Risk Propensity

The Iranian tendency towards pessimism and conspiracy and the ingrained mistrust of the "other," create an exaggerated view of the significance of any concessions. Seeing themselves as under attack, Iranian negotiators tend to be in a defensive mode of minimizing losses and not necessarily maximizing gains: negotiations are not born of opportunity, but of necessity, since one would not normally negotiate from an inferior position (as the Iranian normally sees himself). As a result, Iranian risk propensity – willingness to hold out for better terms – tends to be higher than Western negotiators, who are frequently focused on maximizing gains.[148]

The Bargaining Zone

The permanent Iranian sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the West tends to cause Iranian negotiators to resist Western attempts to bring in extraneous issues. At the same time, however, it is the cause of the Iranian tendency to look for additional areas and issues of potential Western risk, in order to widen the scope of issues that they can use against the West. This is different than the traditional concept of expanding the pie in order to reach a more equitable deal.[149]

An example of this strategy can be seen in the Iranian signals during 2003 of a willingness to restrain the Lebanese Hezbollah and support the Western war against terrorism (including arrests of Al Qaeda activists who crossed into Iran from Afghanistan). The Iranian side perceived these issues are central to U.S. interests and proposed "tension reduction steps."[150] In practice, Iran is expanding the pie of critical negotiations over its nuclear program to include other urgent issues, hoping to implement a trade-off between the two areas.

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[147] Picco related a meeting with the Iranian negotiator Ali Larijani, at the end of which Picco drew up a protocol and asked the Iranian to sign it. Larijani refused, though he did not claim that what was described in the document was incorrect. When he finally agreed, under pressure, to sign, he made it clear that the document "only describes a situation which existed at a certain moment in the talks. The moment it is signed, conditions have changed and it may be worthless." In other cases, Iranians have refused to sign documents, claiming that "the only written document which is binding is the Koran." Rafsanjani himself referred to the international conventions on WMD as "pieces of paper" which may be torn up when the situation dictates.

[148] This seems to fit the Tversky-Kahnemann paradigm of people being risk-averse for gains and risk seeking for losses. In the Iranian case, since political negotiations with the West are almost always defensive, (i.e., about potential losses) the Iranian side will tend to be risk seeking, and averse to concessions.

[149] See Thompson 61–83. Two folk stories exemplify this principle of a negative expansion of the pie: Mullah Nasserudin agreed to sell a house, but insisted on remaining the owner of a nail on the wall of the house with rights to hang anything he wanted on the wall. Eventually, he began hanging all sorts of items and finally an animal carcass. This caused the new owners to flee the house and Nasserudin came back without having to buy it back. The second story recounts how a farmer complained of his cramped house. The Mullah ordered him to bring into the house all his farm animals. When he later ordered him to take them out, the farmer felt that his house was a palace.

[150] What is classically known as GRIT (Gradual and Reciprocal Initiatives in Tension Reduction). See Thompson 217.

Implausible Deniability

A ubiquitous characteristic in contacts with Iranians is their readiness to deny facts, even when they have been clearly presented with irrefutable proofs. The willingness to do so derives of a situation assessment regarding what the traffic will bear. The fact that both sides know that the denial is false is less important than the assessment whether the other side will make an issue of it.[151]

Multi-Tracking

An important characteristic of indirect interaction with high-level Iranian figures is their tendency to maintain a number of active channels of communication. These are frequently misinterpreted as "back channels" for support of the mainstream of communication; very often, however, these channels seem to be in competition with each other or to represent different interest groups within the Iranian leadership, or different people in the close vicinity of the highest leadership who want to be the ones to bring a "prize" to the leadership. Another possibility, one that has been raised by those who have encountered this phenomenon, is that the authority inside Iran responsible for the issue under discussion, intentionally allows a number of channels as a means for collecting intelligence on the other side and for sensing possible concessions. This phenomenon has been a source of frustration, especially in the area of hostage negotiations; in Israel, the tendency has been to preclude contemporaneous multi-tracking in order not to loose control. [152]

The phenomenon of multi-channeling has a number of conspicuous traits:

- Channels frequently are born out of Western initiatives meant to uncover short cuts to the decision-making level in Iran, or ways to clinch a deal. A number of individuals who have dealt with the hostage issue agree that no Iranian anywhere near the leadership has ever turned down an offer to mediate on the basis of lack of access, or has confessed that he has no clout.
- Frequently representatives of one channel will malign the other and create an impression that concessions submitted to the other channel are lost as bargaining chips.

During some business negotiations some Iranians have used the possibility that they can provide help in hostage negotiations to make themselves more attractive in the eyes of their Western (Israeli) counterparts, and to ensure the continuation of business contacts even when the pragmatic business motif cannot be met. Conversely, during some hostage negotiations, Iranian negotiators may introduce business and economic issues in order to take advantage of the Western sense of urgency regarding hostages.

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[151] In the days of the Shah, the Israeli airline El Al flew daily flights to Teheran. One referent told the story that the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Mahmoud Riyadh, came to visit (before the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt) and while he walked down the red carpet, an El Al plane landed. He asked his hosts if that was an El Al plane. The Iranian Foreign Minister immediately denied and a day later even reiterated the denial after he "checked" the matter…

[152] became a major issue for decision-makers dealing in the Ron Arad affair.

Iranian negotiators have also used the course of negotiation on one issue to promote a completely separate political agenda – domestic or foreign – without giving any clue to what lies behind the linkage. The convoluted nature of Iranian domestic politics lends itself to such mixing of domestic issues with external ones. In many cases Western negotiators realized *post factum* that they had read too much into an Iranian insistence on an issue that seemed to be irrelevant, when they tried to discover the hidden relevance. The truth finally lay in personal political or even business interest of some Iranian within the loop.[153]

Post-Negotiations

The *bazaar* does not close its doors after a deal has been made.[154] One of the characteristic traits of Iranian negotiation techniques is that the haggling goes on even after an agreement is struck. This stage of the "post-negotiations" may have to do with implementation of the agreement or even with a re-opening of issues previously agreed upon due to "changes in circumstances." A senior Western negotiator defined this attitude as classic carpet dealing, and true to that metaphor related that at the end of each negotiation he always made sure he had five dollars left in his pocket for the surprise.[155]

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[153] For example, Picco negotiated with the Iranian Ambassador in Damascus, Akhtari, on the hostage issue. At one point, Akhtari insisted that Picco visit Libya to talk with Qaddafi. He could not offer any reasoning (a specific Libyan link with certain hostage holders) but continued to insist on the meeting. After an attempt to meet the Libyans, it became clear to the UN envoy that the trip had no relevance whatsoever; it probably was a favor that Iran or Akhtari himself wanted to provide to the Libyans who were then under UN sanctions.

[154] When negotiating over a rug in the *bazaar*, one may finally reach a price after much haggling. The carpet merchant will then offer more coffee and then, while preparing to pay, the customer will (if he knows how to behave in the bazaar) say "But the prayer rug (or something similar) goes with the carpet for this price." This story has been proposed by a few observers as the basic pattern of the Iranian "post-negotiations syndrome."

[155] Giandomenico Picco, former U.N. emissary, personal interview.

Summary

Iranian negotiating culture is deeply rooted in the Iranian national psyche, linguistic conventions, cultural mores and habits, and religious conventions. The high value that Iranians place on cleverness and on their ability to outwit their counterparts, and the social and religious legitimacy of dissimulation guarantee that almost any exchange with Iranians will be extremely opaque. Equally, the Iranian negotiator will rarely accept a Westerner at face value; culturally ingrained mistrust, a general belief in conspiracies, and the specific suspicion towards the West will most likely make him believe that what seems like frankness and a candid approach on the part of his interlocutor is but clever deception. The hostility of the present regime in Iran to the West accentuates this tendency.

Iranians negotiators have frequently used blatant threats – many of them empty – as staple instruments in the course of negotiations, though they have also proven to be susceptible to use of threats by others. Cases of effective negotiations with Iranians have shown that more has been achieved by taking advantage of inherent Iranian fears and weaknesses and wielding a credible "big stick," thus bringing into play Iranian pragmatism and the Shiite principle of the predominance of public interest. Once it is clear to the Iranians that only compromise can avert a serious threat, the compromise will become a legitimate choice. Ambiguity in threats may not achieve this end since the Iranian side may assume that the other side is using tactics similar to its own.

An analysis of the Iranian tendency towards mistrust and conspiracy theories suggests that arguments in the course of negotiations should be based on clear short-term incentives and threats, and not on incremental long-term confidence building. Progress will not be made through discussions of the rights and wrongs of each side's view of the issues. Iranian political dynamics will not allow a concession on the basis of the justice of a position. Negotiations must achieve an acceptance by the Iranian side of the brute facts, rather than an understanding of the merits of the other side. Only if it is clear beyond any shadow of doubt that the *maslahat* (interest) of the regime is at stake will this mechanism come into play. Despite the Iranian tendency to use back channels to transmit such messages, it seems that Iranians have frequently seen back channels and secret negotiations as giving the other side an advantage.

Western negotiators have an inclination to try to nail down budding understandings in writing in order to preclude retraction of the understandings. Since the Iranian leadership has total authority, a Western negotiator can demand immediate decisions and compliance, taking into account the Iranian disposition towards post-negotiations. Written agreements have more or less the same status as oral ones; they are subject to review when the circumstances that prompted them have changed.

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<u>Interviews and Personal Correspondence</u>

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