

Iran: Society, Polity and Identity

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Some time ago, an American scholar who had spent considerable time in Tehran, revealed an interesting experience relating to Western perceptions of Iran in the daily *International Herald Tribune*. The scholar, on his return to New York, was asked by a young kid as to how he adjusted to 'camels' as a means of transport in Tehran.

Fed on these media images, the general public, particularly the new generation in the West, hold such perceptions not only about Iran but almost over most parts of the so-called Muslim World. That Iran is recognised as one of the great civilizations of the world with its history spanning over 7000 years is generally ignored or overlooked either by design or by ignorance. It was in the middle of 19th Century, that English translation of the poetry of 11th Century Sufi poet, Omar Khayan, *Rubbiyat-I-Omar Khayam* by Edward Fitzgerald, made the West aware of great Iranian civilization and its literary and philosophical traditions. The grave and bloody upheavals and invasions, notably the brutal invasion of Chengaz Khan, in which cities after cities, representing great cultural and literary traditions were wiped out, the unique cultural traditions of Iranian society still survived. In the recent history of Iran, in which Shah of Iran, Reza Shah, took the initiatives to modernise Iranian society on the Western lines, the distinct Iranian cultural traditions and social values remained intact. In fact, in order to legitimise his rule, Reza Shah raised the pitch of cultural nationalism of Iran to a high level. His detractors, however, loathed his efforts of imposing the Western secular ideas on Iranian society at the cost of 'Islamic ideals', apart from sustaining and perpetuating the feudal order of the society. The proper definition of 'Islamic ideals' remains still a contested domain in Iran, as elsewhere in the Muslim World. The renowned Iranian scholar and sociologist, Ali Shariati, led this great discourse and highlighted the so called distortions sought to be imposed by the Shah in the society and polity of Iran. The monarch, at the end of his overthrow, left a section of westernised elite, which in fact, did not represent the overwhelming majority of the people of Iran. However, this overwhelming majority certainly is not a retrograde, fundamentalist lot. This majority of the population has equally not remained immune to the processes of social change during different phases of its history particularly since 1950. It would be a vague generalisation to include Iran in the so-called categories of 'Fundamentalist' Muslim states. Even the appendage of 'Islamic' to the revolution led by Imam Ayatullah Ruhullah Khomeini leading to the overthrow of monarchical rule of Reza Shah may be accepted with skepticism. In fact, multiple political and economic factors which accentuated the process of overthrow of Shah, have not yet been analyzed and debated seriously. The dynamics of international politics has equally contributed to the apathy on the subject.

The Iranian Past : A Brief Sketch

A host of Farsi (Persian) and Arabic literature provides glimpses of the achievements of Iran in Science, Philosophy and Literature. Iran traces its glory in science and technology to 13th Century and blames *Qajar* and *Pehlavi* eras for keeping country backward and describes it as a retrograde period. The Iranians take pride in the achievements and contribution of its scientists and mathematicians. The 13th Century Scientist , Khajey Nasseer Tousi , is frequently mentioned in this regard. The compendium, *Tabaqa't al-Uman*, the first regular history of science written in Arabic by Abu'l Qasim Sa'id b. Abdu'r-Rehman b. Muhammad b. Sa'id al-Andulusi (1029-1070 A.D.) mentions eight nations of antiquity (including India) that contributed to the development of sciences. According to him, the second nation (which cultivated the sciences) were the Persians. He writes:

“Among the special characteristics of the Persians are their zealous interest in the science of medicine and profound knowledge concerning astrology and the influence of the stars on the sub-lunar world. They had old observatories and (had developed) different schools on the movement of Planets...”[1]

Iran, after centuries of troubled history and colonial repression, made great strides in modern science and technology during the later half of 20th Century. The leader of the Islamic Revolution, Seyyed Ali Khamenei maintains that: “after 100 years of stagnation , Iranian engineers were building dams, power plants, manufacturing airplanes, military hardware and developing nuclear technology”[2].

The Iranian revolution in 1979 brought Iran to the center stage of international politics. However, before the country would settle down and chalk out a new post-revolutionary political, social and economic paradigm, it was over taken by sudden internal and external political developments. The Ayatollah Imam Khomeini had not outlined any particular political framework for Iran to be followed and implemented after monarchy. He talked generally about freedom from the oppression of Shah's monarchial rule and drew parallels with Nelson Mandela's struggle against apartheid in South Africa. He, however, couched his expressions with an Islamic revolutionary rhetoric. He equally outlined a vague global Islamic revolution which in fact was a political strategy to mobilise the opinion public at the domestic levels against Shah rather than bringing about a global Islamic revolution. After the exit of Shah, his first task was to bring peace and stability in Iran as he was quite aware that this was the main requirement to justify and harness the benefits of the revolution. Thus, he assigned the task of dealing with the post revolutionary phase to Prime Minister Mehdi Barzaghani. The latter was conscious of the fact that repressive measures against the groups of population with the dissenting views or those having played a doubtful role during the Shah's regime would generate and aggravate social tensions. Therefore, he decided, with the endorsement of Ayatullah Imam Khomeini, to abolish the Revolutionary Courts and do away with the summary trials. The Mehdi Barzaghani, under the guidance of Ayatullah Imam Khomeini, appears to have preferred to follow the policy of truth and reconciliation of Nelson Mandela in South Africa. Ayatullah also advised the people not to be guided by the feelings of revenge and avoid creating acrimony between the sections of society. However, the later developments reversed this process of rational and positive thinking of Iranian leadership. The sudden take over of US embassy ostensibly by the students in November

1979 created a complex situation leading to the resignation of Mehdi Barzghani. The incident with far reaching foreign policy and strategic consequences for Iran indicated the complexities in which different forces with diverge agenda were at work within the country. The incident was followed by another tragic event of assassination of President Moham-mad Ali Rajaei allegedly by Mujahideen-i-Khalaq. The assass-ination of Mr. Rajaei was a new turning point in the post-revolutionary history of Iran which was followed by Iraq-Iran war which lasted for eight long years. The war greatly contributed to the deterioration of economic and social conditions of Iran. The war drained scarce Iranian resources and the US economic sanctions further compounded the economic situation in the country. In the meantime, the country was facing the rising expectations of the growing young population. It may be recognised that Iran is still recovering from the social and economic costs of Iraq war. The cumulative effect of these internal and external developments impinging on the security of Iran as a state and as a society led to the hold of clergy on Iranian society socially and politically in a big way. That political dissensions and contra-dictions from the within and the penetration of influences and manipulations from without leading to instability, chaos and to a new subjugation dominated the strategic thinking in the country. In the meantime, the growing apprehen-sions of Iran's isolation from the international community, particular-ly in the economic sphere, equally prodded the leadership to book for the new policy measures which would enhance its prospects of global cooperation.

The Reformation Phase

The President Hashimi Rafsajani looked afresh on the internal and external policies of the country and came to realise that in view of the growing internal social and economic pressures, the isolation of Iran from global economic regime would push the country toward chaos and instability. Therefore, he took two major initiatives. Internally, he took the initiatives toward expanding political space and moved toward enhancing the sphere of political liberalisation. Externally, he opened the country to foreign trade and investment and initiated the processes of negotiating international economic regime. Europe emerged as a major partner in this new economic cooperation and Asia is now moving closer toward this direction. In fact, the economic restructuring of Iran started in 1989 and it was described as *Khordad- The Second* [³](Second Revolution). Rafsanjani, who has a support base among educated classes and entrepreneurs, has been advocating a moderate approach to the economic and political issues. He appears to be negotiating a middle ground between clergy and the new middle class in accommodating the aspirations of the both. It is interesting to note that the government is still facing the censure on account of foreign capital investment in Iran from some political parties. Responding to this censure, the government spoke-sman, Abdollah Ramezanzadeh is reported to have criticised those who thought that attraction of foreign capital “is tantamount to succum-bing to the West”[⁴]. He said that “these people should refrain from sloganeering. The financial resources of the government are not sufficient for meeting all the developmental needs of the country and hence the government is trying its best to attract foreign capital”[⁵].

He further said that:

“The government cannot accept that after the lapse of twenty six years since the victory of Islamic Revolution, scientific and managerial concepts are challenged under the pretext of advocating Islamic Revolution”.^[6]

In case, Hashmi Rafsanjani is credited with the leadership of *Khordad-The Second*, Mohammad Khatami, who was elected as President with an overwhelming majority in the year 1997, and was again re-elected for the second term, should be credited with the leadership of *Khordad-The Third*. Mohammad Khatami has been pushing for aggressive reforms in the political, economic and administrative fields of the country. However, his basic political thrust has been on greater political freedoms, human rights, pluralism and dialogue with the West. His thesis ‘Dialogue of Civilizations’ has earned him an international acclaim. Although he has been articulating his ideas within the framework of Islam, Khatami is trying to change the political discourse in the country while laying emphasis on strengthening and expanding the democratic frame and underlining the larger role of civil society in the governance. This formulation logically restricts the role of clergy and theologians in the affairs of the state and society. The political parties which support and articulate this line include *Mejme-e-Ruhantyon Mobarez*, *Sazman-e-Mojahedtn Englebal Eslami Iran*, *Khizb Khermbestegi -e- Iran-e-Islami*, *Jebhe-e-Moshareket-Iran-e Eslami* and *Khizb e Kare Eslami Iran*.^[7]

The new generation of reformists inspired by well known Iranian intellectual Abdul Karim Sarosh who advocates separation of religion from politics, advocate a very restricted role of clergy on the grounds of its non-accountability and non-transparency. This aggressive reformist politics has polarised Iranian society among reformists, conservatives and moderates. It is ironical that in this contest for space and supremacy, the pro-reformist activists, academics and journalists owing allegiance to Mohammad Khatami, have suffered worst human rights violations at the hands of the Iranian state.

Ideological underpinnings

Iran offers a unique model of an Islamic state and society for analysis. And from a cultural viewpoint, it is an unparalleled model of inquiry in the entire Muslim World. The three elements would help unraveling the nature of Iranian society. The first element is constituted by its rich civilization and cultural heritage and recognition of this heritage at the societal levels. The restoration and preservation of cultural sites and heritage has been the preoccupation of most of the regimes in Iran particularly in the later half of 20th Century. It is unlike Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Taliban experiment in Afghanistan in which historical and cultural sites and heritage are being targeted by certain elements in society on the pretext of their being un-Islamic.

It is also a fact that in view of the vastness of Sasanian Empire, Islamic influence in general and Arab influence in particular, did not touch every part of Iran. Therefore, the attitudes, behaviour patterns and traditions remained mostly untouched. Second, the incorporation of Islamic values within the structures of society and polity in Iran may be viewed in an entirely different context in comparison with the other Muslim states of Asia. The basis, rationale and the objectives of Islamism in Iran are entirely different from the other Muslim states. Therefore, the term *fundamentalism* which has been in vogue especially post 9/11 in relation to most of the Muslim

states would have a doubtful application in case of Iran. The Sunni variety of Islam constituting the majority of Muslim states forms a barrier between these states and Iran which follows a *Shiite* form of Islam.

The third element is constituted by the role of clergy in governance and politics in Iran, which has been a perennial debate from the within and without Iran. It needs to be recognised that unlike *Sunni* tradition, the role of clergy is well defined in *Shiite* tradition of Islam. The concept of *Vilayat-i-Faqih* (the mandate of the Jurist) is ingrained in *Shiite* Jurisprudence and theological thought. In the same manner the status and role of *Imam* (leader) is well defined in *Shiite* tradition. In the due course of time, both these concepts emerged as institutions in the *Shiite* tradition seeking incorporation in state systems wherever it had territorial and sovereign existence. The capacity and level of the status of these institutions has been negotiable, depending upon exigencies-social as well as political. In Iran, this issue has remained a constant theme in both, pre-revolution as well as in the post-revolution phases of its history. King Reza Shah viewed these traditions of *Shiite* Islam as signs of backwardness and he restricted the role of *Mullahs* (religious preachers) consigning them mostly to lead the prayers in mosques. He rejected the demands of clergy and *Ulema* (Islamic scholars) to control the education system and *Waqfs* (trusts) and their interference in the legal and justice system of the country. The rejection of these demands led the clergy and *Ulema* to throw their weight with the political groups opposing the Shah which expedited the process of the overthrow of the latter.

Ayatullah Imam Khomeini had to face the crucial issue of the future role and status of clergy after he had led the revolution successfully. He had the stature and capacity to opt for a system in which clergy would have a predominant and prominent role. It is reported that in the early years of the Revolution, some conservatives were projecting the idea of a sort of a religious monarchy in Iran. According to an Iranian Analyst:

“ Some people were promoting the idea of an Islamic monarchy in Iran so that they would not have to worry about public consensus and pursue their own agenda. However, the *Ulema*, elite and genuine sympathisers of the Islamic Revolution along with the Imam (Khomeini) were strongly opposed to their call and ensured an end to such dangerous notion”.[⁸] In fact, Imam Khomeini, soon after the Revolution , “insisted on peoples’ power and often declared that the peoples’ vote is above all else”[⁹].

Thus, it is clear that the father of Iranian Revolution had opted for a democratic system and rejected the idea of a theocratic monarchy. Imam Khomeini was perceived as a guide philosopher and father of the revolution. He had the qualifications and status to be recognised as the highest Islamic Jurist (*Faqih*) and it seems that as a recognition to his contribution and stature , the Iranian Constitution recognised that in absence of Prophets and Imams, *Faqih* should be the head of the government. Thus, the Constitution gives wide powers to the Supreme Religious Leader. However, it is debatable, with the demise of Imam Khomeini, whether the mantle would have genuine claimants. There are enough indications that the growing demands for increasing space of democratic rights and the role of civil society would render the role of *Faqih* feeble.

It is important to note that one of the significant contribution of Ayatullah Imam Khomieni is defining and providing the original import of the term *Jihad*. He laid great emphasis on the

measures of uplifting *mostaz'afin* (the downtrodden and depressed sections) which led to the formation of *Jihad-Sazandgi* (Ministry of Reconstruction) which has now been merged with the Ministry of Agriculture. The use of concept of *Jihad* in the processes of social and economic development and reconstruction is quite unique which should be emulated by the other Muslims states as well.

The three leading religious and political figures of Iran, Ayatullah Imam Khomeini, Hashmi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatimi, have underlined the role of religion in the polity and society of Iran. However, all the three concurred on democracy to be the mainstay of political system of the country. Imam Khomeini did not live long to strengthen democracy in the country but he did underline his preference for the system. Hashmi Rafsanjani took the initiatives to broaden the political and economic space indicating that the future would not be a hostage to historical acrimonies and retrograde thinking. He introduced the measures which gradually shaped the concept of a new national strategic interest and linked it up with international cooperation. It is interesting to note that Rafsanjani has been providing fresh and creative parameters for discourses on Islam. In his Friday sermons,^[10] he has been stressing the need to de-codify the processes of *Isti'mar* (colonisation or colonialism) and following the path of *taqwa* (piety).

Rafsanjani draws a larger picture of varied forms of colonialism and exhorts people to understand these vicious processes and rise against these currents politically. In this process, he addresses all the human beings who have suffered colonial exploitation and seeks to make a common cause with them. He does mention the plight of Muslims, their oppression and extermination in different parts of the world in the context of colonialism. He then proceeds to stress the people to adopt *taqwa*, i.e., *piety*, which is a very broad concept. However, his emphasis remains to bring changes from the within rather than adhering to mere rituals. His style and methodology of discourses are philosophical and inspiring rather than fundamentalist.

Mohammad Khatimi, conscious of the changing global realities, is vigorously pushing toward greater international economic and political cooperation. His initiatives toward a dialogue of civilizations, economic cooperation, enlarging the political freedoms within the country outline a new vision for Iran. According to him

“Today, in many Islamic and non-Islamic countries, women still do not have the right to chose, but with the changes in Iran women can choose”.^[11]

He further maintains that “the problem with many societies is that they may remain preoccupied with *outdated* (emphasis added) thoughts despite changes in the real world. The clash between the two is indeed problematic”.^[12]

Mohammad Khatimi's colleagues in the government have been articulating his concerns unambiguously. The Iranian Interior Minister, Abdolvaheed Mousavi Lari, urging Iranian people to vote in the next Presidential elections said that:

“History has shown that foreign domination and domestic despotism have always supplemented each other. What guarantees the Islamic system is peoples’ vote and not military hardware”.^[13]

However, the balance-sheet of these assertions indicate, as supported by statistical data, documented by International monitoring mechanisms and Press reports in Iran, that Mohammad Khatami’s policies and initiatives have brought him in direct confrontation with the orthodox elements in the government which have resulted in grave violations of political and civil rights of his supporters.

Shifting Social Structures

Traditionally, like many other societies in South Asia, Iran has been a feudal-autocratic society. It is through feudal structures that kings, foreign rulers and monarchs kept the society under their respective subjugation. At the top were the big agricultural land holders, the *maliks*, who not only owned the lands but the cultivators as well who tilled the lands for them. These absentee landlords resided in cities while holding lands in the villages. They were followed by the officials employed by the rulers, small time traders and merchants, and the last rung was constituted by the tenants on the agricultural lands, laborours and small shopkeepers. There was a small population of nomads also which is dwindling now. The first structural changes were sought to be introduced by Mossadigh but his rule was a short lived one. Mohammad Reza Shah restored the status quo. However, in view of the growing social unrest, he introduced land reforms by laying a ceiling on the land holdings in 1963. In response to this initiative, which Shah described as *White Revolution*, feudal classes started selling their lands and shifted their investments from agriculture to urban real estates, commerce, industry and overseas investment.

The process of urbanisation had started growing pace a few years well before the Revolution. However, this process was accelerated in post-Revolution period turning villages into small cities. The transition of traditional villages into small rural cities, which have been described by Hitoshi Suzuki, as *Rusta-Shahr* (village- cities), are bringing about major structural changes and shifting the occupation patterns. Histoshi Suzuki^[14] categorises *Rusta-Shahar* (the population of *Rusta-Shahar* had grown to millions, and formed 15.6% in 1996, hence they deserve special attention) into four categories:

a) Agricultural *Rusta-Shahar*: This *Rusta-Shahar* has an agricultural base due to superior facilities for this activity, for instance, irrigation system etc.

b) Commercial *Rusta-Shahar*: It is rife with commercial activities due to better quality of roads which facilitate export of goods and make trade and commerce a viable activity.

c) Industrial *Rusta-Shahar*: This *Rusta-Shahar* has developed due to the industrial set-up in which investments have been made by the government or semi-governmental institutions.

d) Governmental *Rusta-Shahar*: It has developed due to the location of regional governmental offices like municipal offices, post offices or telephone departments etc.

The process of urbanisation and semi-urbanisation is changing the social and economic structures of Iran very fast. Moreover, the emphasis on empowering the lower rungs of society, particularly at the village level, and implementing social welfare programs and raising the facilities of infrastructure in rural areas is bringing socio-economic changes at a fast pace. According to Suzuki:

“Generally speaking, after the revolution, Iranian policy toward rural society raised the bottom level of the most remote villages; especially the improvements in the fields of education, health, medical conditions, birth control (since the last years of war with Iraq) pavement of roads, expansion of electricity, water supply etc.”^[15]

The Iranian government, since 1999, has been taking measures toward the devolution of political power at the grass-roots level. Although hampered by the “screening” of the candidates, the elections at the level of villages and cities, analogous to the Indian Panchayati Raj and Municipal Boards, *Shouria-ye-eslami*, (Islamic Consultative Councils) have been taking place. The two elections have so far been held, one in the year 1999 and the second in 2003.

It may be noted that during the monarchical rule of Reza Shah in general and during the post-Revolution period in particular, the middle class, comprising municipal and government officials, managers and professionals, employees of the oil companies and industries, teachers and merchants engaged in imports and exports has been growing. This middle class is also emerging as a vocal and assertive section of civil society. The loyalties of this assertive section of society are divided between Hashmi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami.

The Controlled Democracy

The post-Revolutionary nationalization processes which brought about major structural changes have created new social and political tensions in Iran. In the process of nationalisation of major sectors of economy, significant portions were placed under the control of *bunyads* (foundations). These *bunyads*¹⁶ are reportedly controlled by clergy who use them for patronage in which a new class of economic oligarchs owing allegiance to clergy is emerging and they are consolidating their position in society and polity. There is a contest between orthodox clergy and liberals referred as Reformists on the democratic freedoms in the country. Since the country has opted for a democratic model, the orthodox forces cannot reverse this process. However, the supreme position given to the Guardian Council by the Constitution, the orthodox elements retain the veto to circumvent the processes or block the measures of enlarging democratic space in the country. They can even restrain the individuals and parties from contesting elections.

The orthodox clergy represented by Political Parties like *Jame-e-Ruhanteyete Mobraz*, *Jamtyete Motelefe-e-Eslami* and *Peyraven-e-Khatte Emam ve Rehbret* ^[17] have been advocating for an exclusive role to the *Velayat-i-Faqih*. The events in Iran reveal that the orthodox elements have a strong hold on the structures of power of the country. The Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression appears to be an area of ‘special concern’ for these elements. Ironically, pro-Reformist media and political activists have suffered most due to this ‘special concern’ of the orthodox clergy. The death of Zahra Kazmi, an Iranian journalist based in Canada, in a Tehran jail in July 2003 due to the alleged torture raised an international outcry.

The latest report [18] of the *Special Rapporteur on Civil and Political Rights including questions of Freedom of Expression, UN Commission of Human Rights*, has documented the cases of violation of right to freedom of opinion and expression in Iran. The majority of cases relate to pro-Reformist media. The detentions are made by the Revolutionary courts and the arrested or harassed persons are journalists of repute, eminent writers and poets “who are fighting the political corruption in the country”[19]. They receive the ire of the government, apart from their writings, for addressing the students of the universities. The courts have found it convenient to haul them up on the ground of *inciting students to revolt*.

The rising population of youth and students, eager to look for their job prospects and livelihood deserve to be engaged in a dialogue rather than shunned as anti-nationals. Thus, *Anjoma-e-Daneshjuyan va Daneshamuktegan-e-Melli* (National Association of Students and Graduates) should be prodded to work for national reconstruction rather seen as enemy of the state. In the same fashion, the activism of women particularly through print media needs to be encouraged. The harassment to Ferzaneh[20], a magazine dealing with women’s issues and the harassment to Fershteh Ghazi who works for *Etemad* and writes on women’s issues (brought to the notice of UN Commission on Human Rights) indicates the strength of conservative and orthodox elements in controlling the levers of power in Iran.

Social Tensions

The educated young unemployed population remains a serious concern for Iran. The experts and analysts are of the opinion that this problem, in case remains unattended, could pose political and national security challenges to the state in future. According to media reports, the number of young people holding graduate degree was 29.2% of the population ending March, 2005 [21]. Although official unemployment rate is 10.4%, the media places the unemployment rate at 24.5% (urban) and 18.5% (rural) respectively²². However, the 4th Economic Development Plan (2005-2010) of Iran has envisaged the creation of job opportunities on a war footing and decided to offer 50% employment opportunities in the age group of 15-29 years.

The growing phenomenon of urbanisation is not corresponding well with the rising expectations at the social, economic and political levels of society. This has resulted in creating a simmering discontent and in absence of effective mechanisms of expression of public grievances, it has the potential to render the social situation explosive in future.[23] The Iranian state should identify and define these mechanisms and bridge the gaps between the promise and practice. It is equally important to note that growing urbanisation should not create an imbalance in urban and rural settings leaving the rural settings to background from the developmental strategies and programs.

The drug addiction and narcotic trafficking continues to pose a serious problem in Iran. According to Provincial Police Chief, Ahmad Ali Reza, some 1.2 million people were addicted to narcotics in Iran while about 800,000 people used drugs occasionally[24]. According to him, 3,350 police officers had lost their lives in the past 25 years in the country’s relentless anti-drug campaign. It is further reported that during the first 11 months of current Iranian year (which started from March 20, 2004) 13.392 tons of various narcotics which include Heroin, Morphine,

Opium and Hashish were seized. According to another news report the mortality rate due to drug addiction grew by 38% during March 2004-February, 2005 compared to the same period in the preceding year.[25] The Iranian government is reported to have earmarked a budget of 300 billion riyals this year to fund prevention measures, treatment, research and promotion of NGO's active in the campaign against illicit drugs[26].

Conclusion

Iran is coming out of the shadows of pre-revolution and post-revolution phases of its history. The government has announced the establishment of Supreme National Space Council with the aim of "making peaceful use of outer space and space technology, protecting national interests and achieving economic, cultural and scientific development through this technology"[27].

The *qal'e* (walls surrounding villages making them look like forts) have been dismantled and small urbanised cities are emerging out of these enclaves. Art and music enriching the cultural life of the country is thriving. Mohsen Makhmalbaf's and Marziyeh Meshkini's films are winning laurels in the international fora. The fact of the deficit on the political freedoms and democratic rights aside, Iran is emerging as an active partner in global economic and technological cooperation. It has forged strong economic ties with most of the European and Asian countries. Iran is now proposing to constitute a regional economic block. The Iranian Foreign Minister, Seyyed Kamal Kharrazi, speaking at the 14th Iran-India Joint Business Council in New Delhi in February, 2005 stressed the urgency of establishing a Joint East Asian Market comprising India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, the Central Asian and Caucasian republics "leading to regional peace, stability and development, as well as regional nations' well being"[28]. He said that: "These countries can rely on their broad capabilities, economic and trade potentials and turn into a strong regional economic block". He further mentioned that the volume of Iran-India trade and business transactions would "increase from 3 billion US dollars to 5 billion dollars in the next few years"[29].

The foreign minister emphasised on an increase in the incentives for private sector which indicates the positive and active responses of Iran to the processes of globalisation and open markets. It was during this visit that Mr. Kharrazi announced that Iran was planning to join SAARC and proposed a West Asia Cooperation block to ensure stability in the Persian Gulf Region. In view of the galloping processes of globalisation, open markets, partnership in trade and commerce and ever increasing energy requirements and demands it would be naive to assume that international community would support the initiatives to exclude Iran.

It is amazing that despite the US sanctions against Iran, as pointed out by Stanley A Weiss, the exemptions to the U.S. embargo have already made Iran a major customer for American wheat and corn[30]. Americans already buy more than \$150 million worth of Iranian dried fruits, pistachios and caviar every year. Stanely and other US experts rightly argue that US foreign policy towards Iran had yielded low returns. Therefore, it would be in the interest of US to negotiate and engage with Iran directly rather than seeking mediation through Europe. It may be mentioned that during the heat of the debate on Iran's nuclear program, Iran's chief nuclear

negotiator, Hassan Rohani, said that Iran had no problem in engaging with the US on Iran's nuclear program. The US should draw upon these positive overtures from Iran.

It may be noted that Iran extended its cooperation to the US post 9/11 in dealing with the Al-Qaeda and Taliban. Iran had to suffer great human losses including its diplomats during the Taliban sweep in North of Afghanistan. It could still provide, as pointed out by Stanley Weiss, great services in fighting Al-Qaeda and stabilising Iraq.

Iran should be encouraged to play a constructive role at the international level particularly in the so-called Muslim World. It has normative and philosophical wherewithal in dealing with the extremist Islamism. In the words of Mahmood Sariolgham:

“Even in the post-revolutionary period, Iran is by far an innovative source of ideas from Islamism to Muslim integration to civil society and dialogue of civilizations. This is of course no surprise in a land that has a long tradition of poetry, philosophy, political thought and civilization-building. Today, Iranians are in search of a viable formula that can project a meaningful matrix of Islam, *Iranianness* and modernity”^[31].

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17. Aras Bluent, op.cit, p. 15.

18. Document E/CN.4/2005/64/Add1, Commission on Human Rights, Geneva (March-April, 2005).
19. Document E/CN.4/2005 documents the cases of the violations of Human Rights of prominent intellectuals of Iran in detail. For instance, The paranoia of the government can be gauged from the fact that the pro-Reformist newspapers, *Yes-e-no*, *Sharq*, *Nassim-e-Sabah*, *Tosseh*, *Aftab-e-Yazd*, *E'temaad*, *Hambastagi* and *Mardomsalari* were reportedly threatened by the legal authorities for their coverage of a sit-in by reformist members of Parliament. It is amusing to note that IRNA, the official news agency had to face the summons of prosecutor's office. Pro-Reformist website *Emrooz* (www.emrooz.ws) and news website *Rouydad* (www.rouydad.ws) are being blocked.
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23. The UN Commission Report mentions the case of Mostafa Sabti, Editor of the Weekly *Gorgan-e-emronz* who had published a letter regarding a public park in gorgan. The authorities filed a defamation case and arrested him.
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