

IRAN, ARYAN KINGDOM AND UNIVERSAL EMPIRE

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“All the early achievements of Mesopotamia, Syria, even Egypt can be traced to the Achaemenids; in turn their discoveries in medicine, mathematics, astronomy and science were passed on to Europe”.

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The idea of Iran, as a federating civilization, both absorbing and prevailing over the ancient kingdoms of West and South Asia arises with the conquests and universal claims of Cyrus (Kurosh) the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid Empire in 549 B.C. but the great Median Kings, before him, had already laboured to unite the tribes of the Iranian plateau while throwing covetous glances at Assyria and Babylonia. Indeed the Mitannians, the Hittites and the Kassites, to mention three illustrious predecessors, had built mighty “Indo-Iranian” states (for want of a better cultural definition) in the Near East, several centuries before Cyrus. Indeed the Kassites ruled Babylonia during the second half of the second millennium BC.

Further back in history, it is now possible to trace the roots of Iranian civilization at least to the fourth millennium BC, and not, as was held so far in Mesopotamia, the supposed cradle of humanity hailed in the Bible, but much farther to the East, in what is today Kerman province, on the site of Jiroft which was only discovered in 2001, not far from the shores of the Persian Gulf, on the Halil river.

The Jiroft archeological remains are spread over a vast area of 400 kms by 300 kms and they do indeed pose a direct challenge to the theory of Sumer’s primacy as the motherlode of civilization since Jiroft’s society was well established, prosperous and sophisticated some 3000 BC and appears to have succeeded an even earlier culture dating back to the 6th millennium BC. As such it constitutes the “missing link” between the Indus Valley and Beluchistan sites such as Mehrangarh to the East and the Zagros and Mesopotamian ones in the West, supporting the thesis that an ancient sea and land-based network of exchanges existed between South Asia and the Fertile Crescent, probably extending all the way to Egypt and Asia Minor since there is evidence of trade relations between these respective areas. There are many features of the Jiroft Civilisation that put it above Sumer in terms of both artistic refinement and social organisation. Significantly the Ziggurat discovered in Jiroft is the largest ever found and is at least a century older than its Mesopotamian parallels.

Objects found at the site have revealed a rich iconography of symbols such as the tree of life and the two-headed eagle, some of which are characteristic of later Iranian art while others later became familiar Biblical themes.

An even more striking feature of the Jiroft is the existence of a writing system as far back as the third millennium BC, more precisely around 2800 BC, which is earlier than the oldest tablets left by Sumerian civilization. The implications of those finds, taken together with other discoveries about the Indus and Sarasvati river cultures, spread out as far North as the Kashmir valley and modern day Afghanistan, are that “Civilization” may have traveled from East to West along the Sun’s path rather than blossoming first in the land of the Two Rivers of Genesis.

It has indeed been proposed that Jiroft is Aratta, the seven-gated city, the mythical land of origins of the Sumerians which they situated past many mountains to the Orient. The only name of a king of Aratta recorded in Sumerian literature, Ensukeshdanna or Ensukushsiranna, bears some analogy to the Inshusinak who was the chief god of the Elamites of Khuzestan, on the ancient site of Susa which later became the meridional capital of the Achaemenid Kings of Kings as Cyrus himself was originally the ruler of Anzan, part of old Elam. Some six centuries before Cyrus became lord over Babylon, the Elamite monarchs of Susa had plundered the city and taken away some of its fabled landmarks, including the famous Stela (kudurru) of Hammurabi, thereby laying claim to the succession of the Sumero-Chaldean paramount kings.

THE SEVEN CLIMES AND THE TWO HEADS

One of the most constant references found in Iranian royal lore alludes to the seven climes of the world which are regions of both space and time and over which the universal monarch rules. The Iranian emperor is the “Lord of the Seven Regions” (keshvars) and he dwells in the central one, in the heart of the universal six-pointed star (which became known later as the Star of David) or Sun-shaped flower. For many centuries the central region of that heptarchy was seen as being located in today’s Iraq as the holy city of Babylon, with its major sanctuary of Baal Marduk, the Esagil –for more than a millennium a fount of sacred learning and initiation - regarded as the world’s navel since the days of Nabuchednazzar II at least, was adopted as capital by Cyrus and his successors.

Earlier heartland cities had been Ekbatan (Hamadan), Pasargadae and Persepolis (Takht I Jamshid), the sacred acropolises of the Median and Persian rulers. The later Arsacids and Sassanids made Ctesiphon (Madain), very near the future Baghdad their royal see, thus laying the ground for Baghdad to become the universal metropolis of the Abbasid Khalifs who claimed the cultural and geopolitical legacy of the Iranian Emperors.

Successive Persian dynasties which could generally not maintain their hold on Iraq tended to look to the province of Fars, the heartland of the first kingdoms of their forbears, as the centre of their world but they never seemed to be sure whether their remote ancestors had come from the Caucasus (Azerbaijan) or from the East of the Caspian Sea, beyond the Oxus and Iaxartes (Syr and Amu Darya). This ambiguity about the geographic cradle of the Iranian people and of the Zoroastrian religion has influenced

national history in various ways and it accounts for Iran's past and continuing attempts to define its identity in relation to North Western neighbours, such as Russia and Europe as a whole, with which it often claims a shared 'Indo-Aryan' heritage, and also to the Eastern Turkic and Chinese peoples with which it has many centuries of tormented but fruitful relations.

THE CRUCIBLE AND THE SHINING SUN: FROM GREECE TO CHINA

The Iranian empire was built over the centuries by a succession of horse riding, warrior clans ("Jowanmard": knight on horseback, in Farsi), many of which came from the high plateaux spread between the Caspian and Aral seas. That appetite for far-flung conquests remained strong until the nineteenth century, amongst the descendents of the Sarmatians, Medians, Persians, Parthians, Alani and Scythians that combined to form the Iranian nation. From Greece in the West to South Asia whose Indus region was annexed by Darius the First, the Iranian culture continued to have an influence even when there was no powerful national state to assert its political presence. It has become more difficult, in the light of recent discoveries, to draw the line between the so-called semitic and indo-european languages and civilizations. Akkadian which was a "lingua franca" for the East and became one of the official languages of the Achaemenid empire seems to be related to most later Indo-European languages and, on the other hand, the southern areas of Iran, along the Persian Gulf and upto the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates were inhabited in the middle of the second millennium BC by people that spoke proto-dravidian tongues such as the Elamite of Khuzestan, possibly related to the Brahui which has survived to this day in Beluchistan.

The many commonalities between the Vedic scriptures of India and the Avestan sacred texts of Iran need no repeating as they have been extensively documented. The Vedic kings of India conquered new dominions by following a stallion in its wanderings and staking their claim to any land where the charger ventured, a practice very similar to the Persian custom. In the great Indian epic Ramayana, the hero's father King Dasaratha has as his second wife a princess Kaikeyi whose name suggests an Iranian origin as Persians were usually designated as "Kaikeyas" in ancient India, probably as an allusion to the legendary Kaikus dynasty. The lord of death and king of paradise (the other world: Paeri Daeza, Paradesa, Pardesh) is Yama in India and Yima (Jamshed) in Iran where he is also the father of mankind and the first winemaker, the alter ego of the Biblical Noah.

On the Persian side, Cyrus's name "Kurus" is shared by one of the royal clans of India, the Kauravas, descended from King Kuru. Cambyses (Kambuja) is called like one of the Vedic and Puranic peoples of India, generally located by the ancient texts in the North and North West of the subcontinent (the Kingdom of Cambodia-Kamboja – in Indochina was said to have been founded by them). So many other analogies attest to a very ancient and long-standing kinship between the cultures that flourished between the Caucasus and the Ganges of which many modern Iranians and Indians remain keenly aware.

Persian influence many have been projected by the military equestrian aristocracy but it was in fact carried by its merchants and its famed scribes and scholars, an intellectual caste that excelled in administration, literature and also medicine. These were the men who made the name, the language, the literature, the music and the painting of Iran prevalent in Asia. The later Arab and Turkic overlords of Iran and its erstwhile domains had to rely on Persian intellectual power and knowledge to manage their states and often borrowed the language and the lifestyle of their subjects, as the ultimate symbol of learning and refinement.

Persian-speaking courts, versed in the fine points of poetry, horsemanship, calligraphy, gastronomy, wine drinking, astrology, alchemy and games such as chess flourished from Asia minor to Eastern Turkestan and from Northern Arabia to the Indian Deccan. Some of the greatest dynasties of the East, including the Seljukids and Ottomans of Turkey, the Ghaznavids of Afghanistan, the Khiljis, Tughlaqs, Suris, Lodhis and Mughals of Northern India, the Bahmanids, Adil, Barid and Qutub Shahis of South India, the Sultans of Bengal and the Timurids of Central Asia may not have been Iranian by blood but they adopted the Persian way of life and so did, after them, many of the Hindu royal houses of India, some of which were believed to descend from Persianized Scythian Ephtalite invaders and even (in the case of certain princes of Gujarat) from the Sassanid Imperial line itself. The fascination remained intact well into the XIXth century, when the native elite of British India and Osmanli Turkey still wrote and composed in Persian, on old Iranian themes, even though both Russia and Britain had by then turned the declining Qajar realm into an impoverished protectorate. Furthermore, seafarers and traders from India and Eastern Arabia carried the Persian influence as far as Malaysia and the Indonesian archipelago in the Middle Age.

The other fundamental but less known aspect of Iran's farflung sway through the ages is its religious influence. The spiritual messages that spring from the ancient land of the Magi are wrapped in mystical secrecy ("Kitman" or 'Sirr" in Arabic, covered by the famed "Taqiyya" or dissembling) and their followers have often been seen as sectarians who abide supra-rational calls but there is no denying the power and resilience of those creeds. Apart from Zoroastrianism, which is now as a very ancient reform of an even older Mazdean Indo-Iranian theology, based on the duality of "Ahuras" and "Daevas" ("Devas" and "Asuras" in Samskrt), we must recall that Zurvanism, Manicheism, the cult of the Yazidees of Sinjar, Mithraism (which literally invaded the latter Roman empire), the defunct schism of the Mazdakians, the Ismailian Shi'ism with its long-vanished militant "Assassin" version, the Qarmatian and Alevi denominations, "Twelver" Shi'ism which is Iran's official religion since the XVIIth century, the Druz faith of Lebanon, the Mzab sect of North Africa, Babism and Baha'ism were all born in Iran or had Iranian sources.

The land that provided a hospitable refuge to the last Neoplatonists expelled from the Athens academy by the Byzantine emperors in the VIth century, has inherited many strands of NeoPlatonic and Neo-Aristotelian thought (both schools were generally not seen as distinct in the East) which became an integral part of its philosophical tradition and pervaded many of the Sufi tariqas (traditions) that arose in Persia between the IXth

and XIXth centuries, including the Karramiya, Malamatiyya, Hakimiya, Melewi, Chishti, Naqshbandi, Bektashi, Alevi and the “Ishraqi” illuminationist followers of Suhrawardi. This illustrious native of Suhraward in Iran, like several other revered figures of Islamic mysticism, such as Beyazid Bistami, Hallaj, Jalal ul Din Rumi and Jami or “Gnostic” poets as Firdowsi, Saadi, Jami, Hafiz and Ruzbehan Baqli could lay claim to an ethnic filiation with Salman Pak, the Persian friend and confidant of Prophet Muhammad who is regarded as the founder of Sufism according to many esoteric traditions.

The desire to build an ideal Platonic state has remained surprisingly vivid among Iranian religious scholars, usually by combining the Shi’ite gnostic revelation with Hellenic metaphysics. The contemporary Iranian constitution reflects in some of its provisions the lingering influence of Plato’s political thought.

As a footnote to this review, the enduring legacy of the Mazdean-Manichean doctrine of duality between light and darkness can be detected in the Iranian game of chess which symbolically illustrates the eternal struggle between the white and black forces in the universe. The game also carries traces of the Indo-European reverence for female power as the active energy (the queen of Chess) which dynamises the otherwise static but all-conscious male pole of creation (the Ishvara-Shakti pair). The struggle of dualistic opposites is very present in the theology and eschatology of Shi’ism.

Thus, in its strong tradition of statecraft and in its intellectual religious speculations and yearnings we find Iran’s twin guidelines for exercising its influence and defining its role in the world. The country has remained an Indo-European society in an Islamic garb, marked by the division between scholars, warriors and merchants-artisans, a triad resting on a vast peasant foundation. The nation is striving with its strategic assets to assert its regional preponderance and fight off encirclement from old and new rivals and foes such as Turkey, the Arab states, Israel and the US-British axis.

Those assets are the Shi’ite minorities in Lebanon, Syria, the Gulf nations and Central Asia, the Hazara of Afghanistan (which, with few interruptions has been under the Persian aegis, at least around Heart, known by both the Mughals and British rulers of India as the “gateway of Iran”), the Sarts of “ethnically” Persian Tajikistan and the “sevensers” and “twelvers” of Pakistan. In India, where the Persian legacy remains strong and which is home to the world’s second largest Shi’ite community, the Kashmir valley calls itself “Iran Sagheer” (Little Iran) and on the side of the state occupied by Pakistan, Ismaili communities have also kept strong cultural ties to Persia.

Indeed, on all sides, Iran is hedged in by Sunni Turkish and Arab powers, which accounts for the siege mentality that the country tends to develop when a powerful enemy tries to reduce its might or break it up. From the Renaissance to the Industrial age, the Shahs, while keeping generally friendly relations with the Mughal Emperors of Hindustan tried to win western backers in order to hold the Ottoman Sultans at bay and sent several diplomatic missions to Europe to that effect, in keeping with the diplomatic axiom that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. Later they tried to fight off Russian encroachment with the help of Britain while staving off the imperial appetites of Britain

by seeking the alliance of France. The enduring feeling of relative religious and political isolation in the Iranian ruling classes does indeed rest on an objective reality and plausibly justifies the alleged desire to acquire a nuclear deterrent.

The parting of ways between the increasingly secular and cosmopolitan but autocratic monarchy and the nationalist religious caste, largely supported by the middle class and the urban proletariat, led to the 1979 revolution and the subsequent overthrow of the Shah. The anti-British, pro-German policies followed by Reza Pahlevi the First, when Hitler ruled in Berlin reflected a desire to chart a modernist, secular path as the only genuinely “Aryan” nation, distinct from both the Communist ideology forced upon the Soviet Republics of Central Asia and the largely pro-British, pro-American conservatism of most Arab rulers at the time.

Unsurprisingly, London, Moscow and Washington all found the “rebellious” Iranian proclivities unacceptable and the Shah was sent in exile in 1947 after being forced to abdicate in favour of his eldest son. The Republican nationalist regime proclaimed by Muhammed Mossadegh in 1951 was also quickly overthrown with the support of the CIA which helped restore the young Reza Shah. The latter was generally content to act as a staunch ally of the Americans within CENTO of which Iran became the central pillar in 1955. Together with Turkey and Pakistan, Iran was part of that Asian extension of NATO, designed mostly to contain the USSR and prevent its feared march towards the warm waters of the Persian Gulf.

The USA and Israel helped build up and train the State secret’s police, the feared Savak which carried out rampant espionage and repression against both religious and leftist opponents of the monarchy. Apparently the CIA and the MOSSAD taught their Iranian students sophisticated techniques of interrogation, torture and murder though it is hard to believe that there was a dearth of local knowledge in those fields.

Nevertheless the policies followed by the Shah between the sixties and 1979, the year of his downfall should not be seen as uniformly and slavishly aligned with US interests. In keeping with Iran’s age-old tradition and sense of its destiny, Reza Pahlevi pursued a policy of regional leadership which caused misgivings to his neighbours as well as to his American “protectors”. His increasingly independent diplomacy, his rapprochement with the USSR, his assertive oil strategy within OPEC which led to the oil shock of 1974-75 caused dismay in western capitals and his endeavour to acquire nuclear power for both civilian and military uses aroused some suspicion though nobody at the time predicted that he might fall and be replaced by a fundamentalist anti-western, anti-Israeli regime.

Many in the White House and the State department concluded, when the throne began to shake, that it might be better to let the Iranian “dictator” go and try to build a satisfying equation with a successor republican regime more or less allied with the Shi’ite clergy.

The Khomeini-led revolution put paid to those misguided calculations when it turned out that the victorious religious leadership, buttressed by the relatively novel doctrine of “Velayat e Faghih” (rule of the theological scholars) was unwilling to share power with

any of the more or less pro-American politicians or officers supported by Washington. Dogmatic authoritarianism which at least since the days of the Sassanid state, has been efficient in uprooting or marginalizing schismatic sects and heretical factions served the new Khomeini orthodoxy as it acted to sideline the ayatollahs and lesser clerics who disagreed with his interpretation of the role of the Howzah (the seminary) in the state. As a result the Qom school of political theology became supreme, despite the seniority of the Najaf and Karbala howzahs – more quietist by tradition - which were at the time severely restricted by Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in Iraq.

GREKS, JEWS, ARABS AND TURKS: Neighbours, Foes and Partners.

Iran defines itself in also through its turbulent , multifaceted and millenary interaction with four “nations” or ethnic groups. Greeks brought about in 490 BC at Marathon and ten years later at Salamis the first large-scale defeat for the Achaemenid armies, thereby blocking the expansion of the Persian Empire into Europe before taking over the throne of their remote Indo-European cousins through a series of expeditions, from Xenophon's 10,000's odyssey to Alexander's campaign in the IVth century. Subsequently for centuries the Iranian realm was ruled by Hellenized monarchs until the Parthian Arsacids reclaimed the throne of Cyrus in 256 BC but the Greek cultural and political legacy thrived under them and successor dynasties as was shown by several scholars such as F. Cumont and J. Bidez in their study of “Hellenized Magi” such as Zoroaster, Ostanes and Hystaspes.

Hebrews spread through the Middle East under Assyrian and Babylonian primacy but became allies of Cyrus and his descendents, establishing prosperous trade colonies in many of the cities of the Persian empire. They generally enjoyed the favour and protection of the Achaemenids whose Mazdean religion decisively influence “Post-Exilic” Judaism that took shape – as a clearly monotheistic unified faith that it had never been hitherto – when a colony led by Esdras and Zurobabelel moved back to Palestine to rebuild Solomon's temple, with the blessings of the “Great King”, in the Vth century BC.

Zoroastrian theology, angelology, cosmology and eschatology can be detected in later Judaism, particularly in the Babylonian Talmud, together with common Sumero-Chaldean borrowings. For instance the six “Ameshaspenta” of the Avesta turned into the seven archangels of the later books of the Old Testament, which name only four however. On the Iranian side, the traditional identification of many landmarks with sacred Biblical sites is a legacy of Islam but it echoes Iran's self image as the second holy land which well before Messianic Judaism believed in the birth of the God sent Savior (the Saoshyant) in a cave under a holy mountain where the magi would come to worship him, under the guidance of a miraculous star, and proclaim him king of the three worlds.

The ancient connection with Jews was revived by Mohammed Reza Shah who established strong bonds with Israel, winning applause in the USA and Europe but putting another nail in his coffin by doing so as his Zionist leanings attracted upon him

the hatred of the national religious leadership and of many Muslims at home and throughout the world.

The reaction that took place under Khomeini put Iran and Israel at loggerheads even though it is now well known that covert diplomacy and substantial trading in arms took place during the Iran-Iraq war when Tel Aviv saw an advantage in helping Tehran against a zealously Pro-Palestinian Baathist Iraq.

Now that Iraq has collapsed and that Iran is stronger than it has even been since the downfall of the monarchy, Israel is clearly interested in crushing the Islamic regime by overt or covert means and seeks to enlist the support of the West to reach that end, even hoping to garner Arab Sunni support behind the apparently uphill task to bring about a new dispensation in Iran, perhaps in the form of a restoration of the empire.

It is significant that one of the major Israelite religious holidays is Purim which commemorates the massacre of 75,000 Persians carried out in 356 BC B.C. at the behest of Queen Esther-favourite wife of Ahasuerus or Arthakshatra -and her uncle or cousin, the king's Jewish adviser Mardocai in Susa, in retaliation for the policies of the disgraced anti-Hebrew Prime Minister Haman who is believed to have ordered the extermination of all Jews for treason, according to the Old Testament. Despite the generally symbiotic relationship between the ancient Iranians and the people of Israel there were times of conflict which modern Jews, as usual, remember much better than Iranians who have no particular tradition of anti-Judaism though they ancestrally tend to hold Semitic peoples in disdain. Let us not miss however the syncretistic and even symbolic significance of the Book of Esther who bears the name of the great Middle Eastern mother-goddess (Ishtar), represented as the planet Venus and whose relative is Mardoki (Marduk) the father god of Babylon. Even the name of the Persian King, Ahasuerus could be seen as a Hebraized form of the universal Indic deity Ishvara, a noun related to the Egyptian god Oser (Osiris for the Greeks). It is quite possible that the original story of Esther may have developed as a cosmological myth that was "evhemerized" by monotheistic IIVth century Jews into a historical event in order to reinforce the cohesion of their community by recalling the trials and threats that they had surmounted.

Arabs, who occupy the southern fringe of the Iranian homeland are, as is well known, descended from the Semitic tribes of Antiquity that partook in the early Middle Eastern religions and in its cultural melting pot. They were often satellites or subjects of the more powerful Persians who, under the greatest Sassanid Shahs even extended their direct rule to the Eastern Arabia and to the Southern shores of the Gulf until the rise of Islam sent waves of conqueror out of the peninsula. The defeat of the last Zoroastrian King of Kings in 642 AD was followed within a few years by the fall of his state to the Khalifs. Less than three centuries later though, the Iranian Buyyids had victoriously entered Baghdad and become protectors of the enfeebled and heavily persianized Abbasid emperors whose power had been steadily undermined by internecine struggles between Sunni and Shi'ite factions and by the subversive campaign -which we would today qualify as "terrorist" -waged by the Assassin community.

The rise of Ismaili Assassin power demonstrated once more the uncanny Iranian ability to build well organized clandestine movements dedicated to utopian messianic goals and hardened by fanatical zeal and ruthless military discipline, whereas the critical influence of ethnic Persians, such as the mighty Barmekid viziers, in the Abbasid court evinced the superiority of Iranian statecraft and administrative experience. Indeed it appears that at various times in history, leaders of Persian origin sought under the cover of schismatic Muslim doctrines to overthrow Arab rule and even orthodox Islam altogether. Prominent examples that come to mind include the Assassins themselves, the Qarmatians of Northern Arabia and Bahrein in the Xth century, the Druzes of Syria and the Alevi Qizylbash of Anatolia and Persia.

Insofar as that designation has any meaning in the Eastern context, Shi'ites have tended to place themselves on the left of the political spectrum vis-a-vis the Sunni conservative majority and in that sense, they have been a constantly revolutionary element which appealed to the poor and downtrodden sections of society, from Lebanon to India.

The formal reassertion of Iranian power over the Mesopotamian heartland of the Khalifal state turned out to be shortlived as the Turkic Seljukid invaders seized Baghdad in 1055 and took over the role of puppet masters for the figurehead khalifs. Henceforth Turco-Mongol tribes, bolstered by the successive invasions of Gingham Khan's and Timur's hordes, played a major role on the Persian plateau and in Anatolia for more than eight centuries. Even the great Kurdish-Iranian dynasty of the Savafids, the often successful rivals of the Ottomans, had to compose with the military might of the Turkmen (Oghuz) tribes that made up an important part of the army and feudal nobility, many rising from the lowly condition of "gholams" (slaves) or freebooters. One of them ended up dethroning the decadent Savafids to claim their place. The three following dynasties were hence ethnically Turkic. The country's most populous and most developed province is Azerbaijan, inhabited by a Turkish-speaking majority and naturally still close to its former northern half which is now an independent nation after being conquered by the Czars and turned into a Soviet Republic by Lenin.

After his coup d'etat in 1925, General Reza Khan acted to eradicate Turkic influence on Iran, though he was paradoxically most influenced by Kemal Ataturk, the revolutionary modernizer of Turkey whom he regarded as a role-model. As part of his "Iranizing" policy, Reza Khan forbade by constitutional law ethnic Turks from occupying the Peacock Throne and tried to sift Turkic and Arabic words out of the national language, just as Ataturk was "de-arabizing" and "de-persianizing" the Turkish tongue by reviving archaic central Asian roots.

The nationalistic but westernizing revolution championed by the Pahlavis sought to revive many features of the ancient Persian civilisational and religious heritage and to weaken the hold of clerical Islam on society but its secular and elitist tendencies were seen as alien and decadent (Taghuti) by the devout middle classes and conservative rural masses on which the clergy's influence was deep-rooted.

Iranian modern nationalism was partly shaped by the great Savafid kings but the Shi'ite religious hierarchy traditionally had been a bulwark for the poor against the

highhandedness and corruption of the royal court and when Persian rulers fell under mounting foreign military and financial influence, the clergy was perceived by the masses as the champion of the country's integrity and independence. Khomeini's revolution hence appeared, even to the eyes of the irreligious or Leftist Iranian intellectuals, as an essentially patriotic popular reaction against the materialistic, hedonistic culture imported by the Shah's police state, on behalf of the old British-American Imperialist "betes noires".

Even though the monarchy was abolished by the bloody "reactionary" revolution of the Mullahs and with it, the Shah's policy of global prestige, the pursuit of regional hegemony remains a constant for the Islamic Republic, deeply aware of the country's historic preeminence and demographic preponderance in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Iranians are proud of the nation's intellectual and scientific capital which remains impressive despite the massive brain drain from Iran that flooded some Arab states, Europe and North America in the wake of the Revolution and even much before that dramatic event. The modern Iranian emigrants and refugees who excel in many diverse fields bring to mind the Persian scholars, mystics, physicians, chemists, astronomers, travelers, businessmen, artists and poets who enriched the societies of Turkestan, China, India, Turkey, the Levant, Egypt, Arabia and even South East Asia since Antiquity. Some of the most famous rank among the great minds who paved the way of mankind's intellectual progress. They include Al Biruni, Al Farabi, Rhazes (Ar Razi) and Avicenna.

IRAN'S FUTURE

Iran today stands at a crossroad of its history between two US or NATO occupied states (Iraq and Afghanistan) and other Western-dominated nations, including Pakistan, Azerbaijan and the Arab Gulf states, with its Israeli Nemesis ominously looming in the background and looking for every way possible to destabilize the Islamic Republic and bring the country down.

Tehran's only friends of the moment, even if they are self-serving, lie to the North and North East across the Caspian since Turkey is not to be trusted in the light of history and geography. Indeed Russia and China have provided key support and will predictably continue to do so as they have major interests at stake in the country's oil and gas reserves.

India, as a neighbour which shares with Iran an enduring antipathy to Pakistan, has traditionally had friendly ties with Iran which Tehran has cultivated, seeking in particular to revive the connection with the wealthy and prestigious Parsee community that has remained aware and proud of its original identity. However New Delhi's current diplomatic involvement with the US has cast a shadow over that old and prized relationship and India cannot be depended upon by the IRI in the current tug of war between Iran and the West. Iran's likely admission to the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization on the other hand will strengthen its coordination with the two major powers in Asia, China and Russia and may be the only recourse against a threatened US-Israeli attack on its territory.

By applying unrelenting pressure on Tehran, the Americans and their Jewish allies and surrogates may be unwittingly precipitating the birth of the Asian collective defence mechanism which they have dreaded ever since Russia began to recover from its socio-economic collapse and formed an alliance with China at the turn of the century.

The reaction to this geopolitical realignment from Washington has grown increasingly shrill recently and the leitmotiv was voiced once again by US Vice-President Cheney during his visit to Saudi Arabia in March 2008 when he said that "Iran was the main threat to the region". The statement showed once more how the Vice-President is as lacking in humour as in the knowledge of geography since Iran is definitely the major country in the region and can hardly be regarded as an outsider while the US is an alien occupying and bullying intruder making no effort to disguise its colonial policies.

The Neoconservative advisers to the Bush administration made no mystery of their design to trigger a war between the Arab Gulf states backed by the USA and Iran which has added insult to injury to US interests by launching this year a non-dollar denominated Energy Bourse on the island of Qishm in the Persian Gulf after renouncing the Dollar as a currency to sell its oil and gas. However so far, the Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia have rejected the Zionist-inspired suggestion, realizing how dangerous it would be for them, and how devastating for the region, to attack a much more populous and far more battle-hardened and martial Iran.

Iran's response has been to promote a joint regional security arrangement that would exclude foreign powers (read: the USA). Given the strategic reality, that proposal is a non-starter for now but it is hard to believe that the Muslim neighbours of the Islamic Republic do not see some merit to that plan, however suspicious they may be of the Tehran regime and of Iranians as a people.

It is irrefutable that one of the largest if not the largest investor in the economy of the booming United Arab Emirates is Iran and the financial clout of the Persian state and of its private businessmen in these days of high oil prices remains formidable, despite the sanctions and other penalties enforced by the Western powers. Tehran is thus not so short on options to plan the national future in its best interest. Here we will consider a few of them in the light of historical constants and contemporary developments.

IRAN AND TURKEY

The Turkish Republic remains what the Ottoman Khalifate was: the main rival of Iran for supremacy in West Asia and a contender for influence in mainly Turkic Central Asia. The rise of the Islamic Party (AKP) of Prime Minister R. Tayyep Erdogan has not changed that geopolitical reality, made sharper by the Sunni-Shi'ah divide and the

competing ambitions of Turkey and Iran on the border areas and States of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Kirghizia. Iraq is also a bone of contention between the two neighbours, particularly the Northern Kurdish zone which is ethnically and linguistically close to Iran but extends to the entire South-East of Turkey. Both Ankara and Tehran have fought long and bloody Kurdish insurrections.

If Iran has uncontested advantage in the Southern Iraqi mostly Shi'ite area, Turkey is much more acceptable to its former Sunni subjects in the central region of Iraq which were during three and a half centuries vilayets of its empire. Though the two governments have held talks in 2006 and 2007 in order to address reciprocal misgivings, Turkey remains an ally of the West and maintains cordial relations with Israel but has now established a flourishing

economic partnership with Russia and China which is of ill omen for the future of its equation with the USA and its traditional NATO allies. The AKP's concept of Islam as a moderate factor in public life and national culture under a civilian government is quite different from the Iranian theocratic dispensation in which clerics stand above lay politicians and military officers.

Therefore there is no likelihood that the connection between the two republics will improve and it is more probable that future conflicts might erupt because of their rival claims in the region. One of the major incentives for building better relations though, is the great need of Turkey for oil and gas for which Iran is an obvious source that could reduce Ankara's vulnerability to the endemic conflicts in Iraq and particularly in the Kurdish region through which the Iraqi pipelines enter its territory. Ankara cannot afford either to let Iran support its own Kurdish rebels in their war for secession and should hence try to cultivate Tehran's friendship.

IRAN AND THE ARAB WORLD

Much has been written about the ancestral hostility which lingers on between Persians and Arabs. However that general observation must be nuanced with the proviso that Arab Shi'ites tend to be politically as well as religiously close to Iranians, who claim the role of protectors for that minority community. Politically radical but religiously conservative Sunni movements such as the Palestinian Hamas or the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood are also in good terms with the Iranian theocracy, openly sympathetic to their struggle against "moderate" pro-Western Arab regimes. There is hence a foundation for Iran to exercise leadership in at least certain parts of the Arab world and to thereby stretch its influence from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. The kingdoms and sheikhdoms of the region are currently seeking to improve their relations with the Islamic Republic, with the hope of lessening the risk for unrest or insurrections from their domestic Shi'ite minorities. In the event of a catastrophic defeat and exit of the US armed forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, -an increasingly plausible outcome - a realignment of all those traditionally US-dependent states towards Iran would be expected, whether or not they undergo "regime change" as a result of the American debacle.

Few predict a multi-national Islamic federation or Khalifate led by Tehran to emerge in the coming years but Iran will most likely become the centre of an energy-rich regional alliance in the wake of its gradual annexation of Southern Iraq and of its strong relations with Russia. The pillar of such a league would probably be the “gas cartel” that Tehran, Moscow and a few other major producers are presently building.

IRAN AND EUROPE

The relations between the Islamic Republic and of a European Union closely aligned with the US, whether by wish or under duress, are bound to be frigid but, despite the American caveat, some EU members have quietly moved to re-establish pragmatic business relations with Iran, mostly in the energy sphere. Austria which has maintained rather cordial ties with the Islamic Republic has signed an agreement to build a pipeline that will reach its territory after crossing Greece and the Balkans, before branching off to feed Western and Northern Europe. With Russia becoming the major energy-supplier to the EU and acting as an indispensable intermediary between Iran and the West, an economic and strategic rapprochement between the Union and the Russian Federation will certainly result from the rapid decline of the United States and facilitate the normalization of ties between the continent and the Islamic Republic that is much desired by the business leaders of the major EU states such as Germany, Poland, France and Italy.

IRAN AND THE USA

The great enigma for “Iranologists” and for many Iranians at home and abroad is the future evolution of the almost thirty year-old conflict between the Islamic Republic and the American Government. Various periods of relative if more or less surreptitious improvement in their relations (at times mediated by Israel), especially during the Iran-Iraq war and during the First Gulf War of 1991 have led many to expect that a time would come when Tehran and Washington would find themselves again on the same side of the fence in their conflict with Sunni extremists or even with a resurgent and expansionistic Russian Federation.

The age-old connection between Jews and Persians has been invoked as a possible precedent for what now would appear to be an almost unnatural alliance, in the light of current geopolitics. Would, for instance, a fundamentalist anti-American revolution in an Arabia that might no longer be Saudi not prompt the Iranians and the Americans to come together against the common Sunni foes? Would not a like-minded Islamic mass uprising in politically fragile Turkey also lead to a convergence between Washington and Tehran?

Those are not implausible scenarii but so far Iran has every reason to edge out the US from its area of influence and gain pan-Islamic recognition as the leader in the fight against the Western colonizing crusaders, the champion of the Palestinians and the Nemesis of their Zionist US-backed oppressors. Furthermore a weakened, discredited and demoralized US is not an attractive ally for a rising challenger of the “status quo” like Iran and any tactical agreement between those rival claimants to regional hegemony is

likely to be opportunistic and short-lived. In the long run anyway, the ancient paramount nation has a much stronger position in the Middle East than the over-extended and increasingly despised USA. On the other hand, without unflinching American military backing, Israel would quickly lose its status as a regional superpower and become highly vulnerable to coordinated attacks by non-state actors such as Hamas, Hezbollah and other battle-hardened guerilla forces supported by oil-rich states and individuals. If American and NATO forces cannot prevail in Iraq or Afghanistan, the Israeli Tsahal can hardly be expected to prevail indefinitely against effective multi-pronged bombing campaigns and commando operations.

CONCLUSION

Iran is both outwardly a fairly homogenous state, ethnically, culturally and religiously and internally a very diverse mosaic of peoples at the crossroads of the silk roads, with a civilization originally enriched by the great Elamite, Hittite, Sumero-Babylonian, Assyrian, Lydian and Egyptian states and later fertilised by Greek, Indian, Chinese, Jewish, Arabic and Turkish inputs. As a provider and a recipient of culture through the ages the nation is a crucible of influences that can present a puzzling and paradoxical face to strangers. The fabled Persian subtlety in diplomacy and inscrutability is proving to be a major challenge to those who would like to submit it to their power.

With its ability to play East against West, Islam against Judeo-Christianity, Turkey against the Arabs, Russia against the EU or China against the USA, the Islamic Republic has taken the historical succession of the Arsacid, Sassanid and Safavid dynasties as a pivot between West and South Asia. On the North are energy-rich states and sprawling nuclear Russia with which Iran is forming a mutually beneficial economic and strategic compact. To the South are Arab petro-monarchies on which Tehran has an age-old influence that can only rise against waning US might. In the East, India and the other SAARC members are traditional trading and cultural partners with which its interaction is bound to increase. Iran's expatriate and domestic intellectual and financial elite is highly westernized and provides a powerful bond between the nation and the Euro-American world. Some Iranian scholars, such as Rasool Nafisi and Ramin Jahanbegloo (in *World Affairs*, vol. 11, number 1, Spring 2007) believe that in the medium-term future the influence of fundamentalist religion in Iranian society is bound to recede to the background as the middle-class youth is increasingly secular and free-thinking or even agnostic in its outlook. These academics are convinced that the day of the theocratic regime are numbered and that the country will naturally on its own evolve into a "modern", more open society, provided a US or NATO-led attack does not throw it into turmoil and trigger an inward-looking, nationalistic reaction, thus boosting extremist apocalyptic militancy.

Let us hope that for once the voices of wisdom will be heard in Washington and Tel Aviv. For better or for worse, Iran will continue to remain a keystone state in the global architecture and could unleash waves of violence throughout the world in self-defence but it can also, out of its treasure trove of esoteric gnosis, provide unique insights into

religion, spirituality and science, on the basis of its complex and fascinating heritage. Magics is after all a semantic contribution of the Empire of the Rising Sun.

Come Carpentier de Gourdon
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