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IRANIAN POLITICAL CULTURE SOURCES, CHARACTERISTICS AND DIMENSIONS OF INFLUENCE

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The concept of political culture represents one of the most important approaches to study the political process in Iran, as values, perceptions and beliefs exert a clear influence on the political medium and its interactions. It can be said that the vision of Iran's leaders and the nature of their strategies and objectives, in one way or another reflects Iran's cultural values which are deeply rooted in the past. They have withstood countless attempts to change despite the radical changes that have affected the foundations of the Iranian political system after the 1979 revolution. The political system saw a shift from a secular monarchy to a Republican Islamic system coated with Shiism.

This study seeks to explore the dimensions of Iran's political culture and its impact on Iran's policies based on three hypotheses:

» The contemporary Iranian political culture is the product of a continuous interactive process between Iran's ancient cultural heritage, Western values during the monarchical period, as well as, Shiite Islamic values. Also, political experiences gained by, political transformations have contributed to Iran's political culture and its development.

» Iranian political culture is marked with special features such as authoritarianism, skepticism, pastism, pragmatism and an inclination towards conflict. These features have been reproduced throughout historical stages, prolonging their impression on Iranian politics.

» Iranian political culture has a significant influence on Iran's policies, practices and roles. The influence of this culture is very strong and clear in Iranian policies at the internal and external levels, leading to extremism, tension and instability.

Considering the aforementioned hypotheses, this study deals with Iran's political culture and its sources, particularly its characteristics, and its impact on Iranian politics. This will be done by investigating the conceptual approach to Iran's political culture; its main tributaries; its most prominent features and finally, its impact on Iran's policies at the internal and external levels.

First: A conceptual approach to Iran's political culture

Political culture is part of the general culture of any society, it influences and gets influenced. Political culture is concerned with beliefs, values, symbols, attitudes, standards and behavioral norms that influence political activity. The concept of political culture combines psychological, cognitive, historical and anthropological perspectives when it comes to interpreting political phenomena. Thus, it attempts to reconcile individual political behavior with general political behavior based on common determinants and values in society.

Political culture is defined as habits, impressions and attitudes that affect political life.[1] Also, it can be defined as the political psychology of a state or a subgroup. They relate to long-standing and deep-rooted values, which differ from transient or changing attitudes.[2] Therefore, political culture represents the intellectual and psychological framework of political systems, and it determines the alignments and choices of policymakers.

Political culture represents the collective history of a political system.[3] Therefore, it is closely related to the national identity and historical memory of a state, where national traditions and historical experiences play an essential role in political culture and its evolution, especially in countries with a long-standing cultural heritage, as in Iran, where political culture reflects its historical experiences and national traditions.

It should be noted that the political culture of any society is not homogenous; it often involves a degree of heterogeneity due to the diversity of ethnic, class and generational affiliations. For instance, the difference between the political culture of a country's dominant ethnic group and the political culture of other ethnic minorities in the same country is often noted, as is the difference between the culture of younger generations and the culture of older generations. This is evident in Iran. There are clear differences between the political culture of the dominant Persian ethnicity and the culture of other ethnic minorities, such as the Azeri's, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchs and others, as well as differences between the culture of the young and old.

Political culture in any political entity is divided into two main types 1- the political culture of the elite; their attitudes and behavioral patterns in the political process, as well as, their influence on the results of this process 2- the political culture of the masses; the alignment of the public towards politics and governance. This culture does not have a significant influence as the masses are marginal, especially in most third world countries. This is the same in Iran, where the ruling elite dominates the political sphere almost exclusively and has an exclusive influence on decision-making at the internal and external levels.

Political culture is of several types, most notably, the culture of dependence that is linked to systems with centralized authoritarian structures. Within this culture, citizens are aware of the political system, its institutions and its actors, but they participate in a limited and seasonal manner in the political process without having the ability to influence decisions. Also, there is a culture of participation, it is linked to democratic systems in which citizens participate in the political process and have the potential to influence decisions by various means. The political culture of Iran falls within the framework of cultural dependency, where the powers of decision-making are concentrated at the top of the political system, especially in the hands of the Guardian Jurist. Mass participation in the political process is marginal. But to say that Iranian political culture falls only within the framework of cultural dependency - like the political culture in most third world countries - is an oversimplification. This would overlook many of the distinctive features of Iranian political culture, that will be dealt with in the third part of this study in detail.

Second: Sources of Iranian political culture

1 - Persian historical tradition

The Persian tradition associated with the pre-Islamic period is one of the most important sources of Iranian culture in general and of Iranian political culture. In this respect, the Persian civilization and its empire, characterized by power, expansion and hegemony, plays a prominent role in shaping the collective consciousness of most Iranians and their national identity, as well as their convictions and attitudes. The Iranians, whether they are rulers or ruled, realize that they belong to a great civilization and that they are the heirs of a powerful empire that spread far and wide. This instills in their mentality a sense of cultural superiority and a sense of excessive autonomy.

Moreover, the Persian tradition - associated with strict hierarchical social structures, absolutist rule, patriarchy, and excessive reverence for leaders, resulting in divine attributes to kings and emperors -[4] is ingrained in Iran's political culture and its nature.

On the other hand, there is a clear influence of ancient Persian religious doctrines on Iranian political culture. The Iranian collective mind is rooted in the dual vision of the world derived from the Zoroastrian and Manichean beliefs, that there is a constant struggle between the forces of good and evil. As a result of this dualism, Iran embodies goodness and virtue, as opposed to the other (the enemy), that embodies evil and sin. This dualism has contributed to Iran's political culture being characterized with mistrust towards the other.[5]

2. Western cultural traditions

In the past, Western cultural traditions and values were one of the tributaries of Iranian political culture. Since the second half of the 19th century, the Western nation model has had a strong influence on Qajari intellectuals and rulers, many lived abroad, and spoke

European languages. They played a critical role in bridging the gap between Western culture and Iranian heritage to find an "authentic identity" and to "return to the self." They adopted Aryanism, believing that Iran belongs to the same race as the Europeans.

During the Pahlavi rule from 1925 to 1979, the secular elites - driven by national pride - rejected Islamic values, claiming the superiority of the Persian civilization. They accused Islam and the Arabs of destroying the Persian civilization and advocated the revival of Persian tradition and Aryan glory.[6] This engendered deep chauvinism among Persian elites and contributed to the revival of many ancient Persian values and their integration into Iranian political culture in the quest to build a national identity more aligned to Western secularism than to Iran's Islamic heritage. This led to a strong counter-reaction by clerics and intellectuals, who sought actively to revive Shiite Islamic traditions and to assert their status in Iran's identity and culture.

Western cultural values contributed to discourse on political freedom and constitutional rule in Iran's political culture. This was demonstrated by the 1905 constitutional revolution, that resulted in the promulgation of the 1906 constitution, leading to the integration of some core modern political values – such as equality, participation and the rule of law - into Iranian political culture.[7]

3 - Shiite Islamic traditions

With the Safavid state at the beginning of the 16th century declaring Shi'ism as an official state doctrine and imposing it by force on most Iranians, Shiite traditions and values became a major component of Iran's cultural and social identity. The Safavid rulers sought to achieve some sort of political unity for their empire. The Shiite doctrine was adopted and institutionalized. It was used as a powerful tool to legitimize the central government and was exploited in building a different identity and opposing the identity of the neighboring people, particularly the Ottoman Turks and the Arabs.[8] As a result, the Shiite doctrine - with a strong narrative on martyrdom, hope in the Mahdi and a claim to political authority - became integrated into Iranian identity.[9]

In the subsequent period, during the Qajari and the Pahlavi rule, the polarization between the secular nationalist and the Shiite Islamic trends continued until the 1979 Iranian revolution, that led to the clerics coming to power. This led to Shiism having state patronage, leading to indoctrination, as well as, sectarian mobilization, that is deeply rooted in Shiite values and traditions. The cultural revolution was launched (1980-1983), that Islamized education and culture by displacing Western and non-Islamic influences in Iran. At the same time, those who resisted clerical rule, were excluded from universities, as well as, from other state-supervised institutions.

4. Political experiences

The political experiences and interactions resulting from some of Iran's significant political transformations in the 20th century have had a significant impact on its political culture. These experiences and interactions have contributed to re-producing certain values and trends and consolidating them in the Iranian collective consciousness. There are three significant incidents that could be pointed to. First, there is the coup against the government of Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953, particularly the role played by some Western intelligence agencies and the complex circumstances surrounding this coup.[10] This led to the consolidation of conspiracy theories and deepening suspicion and mistrust towards outsiders in Iranian consciousness. Second, the bloody conflict that followed the Iranian revolution in 1979 between the different wings of this revolution (Islamists, leftists and

liberals), that lasted until 1982, led to the killing of many leaders of the revolution, prompting the ruling regime to step up its repressive measures against opposition movements. This conflict fed skepticism at the national level.[11] The third was the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the isolation that Iran suffered because of this war. This heightened the Iranian sense of oppression and victimization.

Third: Characteristics of Iran's political culture

1 - Authoritarianism

The roots of this is in the imperial heritage of Iran's state and its domination, leading to an imbalance between state and society.

Throughout history, a strong focus on power has been one of Iran's fundamental l characteristics. There are many indications that "eastern despotism" - most notably absolutism and a monopoly of power - has characterised different periods of Iranian political history. The distinctive feature of the Iranian state was that it monopolized power and used , arbitrary authoritarian power to spread chaos. During the Middle Ages, the Iranian state played a vital role, extending its economic and administrative functions, leading to absolute rule. . The state administration system followed a strict hierarchy, with the civilian and military rulers of the provinces being appointed by the king or the emperor. These rulers were directly responsible before the king and were usually monitored by secret agents from within or outside their administrations. These authoritarian structures have persisted as time has passed and any unions or independent organizations beyond the traditional establishment have not had the breathing space to arise. Thus, cooperation and collective action in Iranian culture has deteriorated significantly.[12]

This authoritarian characteristic was visible in the Qajari and the Pahlavi era by the state monopolizing power and wealth in society, limiting political participation, and spreading fear by unleashing security agencies to spy and oppress opponents.

Despite the revolution in 1979 and the consequent expansion of political participation, especially for the middle classes, authoritarianism has remained unchangeable in Iranian political culture. Especially in the culture of the ruling elite, where power is concentrated at the top of the political system, particularly in the hands of the Supreme Leader, who has absolute powers that supersede political institutions.

2- Pastism

Pastism is a prominent feature of Iranian political culture, which seems to be more connected to the past than the present and the future. Many of the values, attitudes and convictions included in this culture seem to be from the past. This is evident in the alignments of the ruling elites who are strongly attracted to the past and are looking to safeguard their interests.

In this setting, concepts such as the superiority of the ancient Iranian civilization and the greatness of Iran's imperial and cultural heritage have a large presence in Iran's collective consciousness, especially in the consciousness of the ruling elite. These concepts are the main stimuli of Iran's role beyond its borders.

This is evidenced by the statements of some Iranian officials, such as the statements of Ali Yunisi, Advisor to President Hassan Rouhani, made in March 2015, in which he noted that, "Iran was an empire since the creation of the world and its cultural and civilizational influence includes the regional neighboring areas. Iran's influence

extended from the north of the Indian subcontinent to the Caucasus, the Gulf and Oman"[13]. He added, "To preserve our interests, national security and historical identity, the Iranian clout and vital sphere can not be ignored[14]." He noted that Iran will defend all the people of the region because it considers them to be part of Iran. "Iraq, for the time being, is not only within our sphere of cultural influence, it is our capital and the center of our identity and culture, because the geography of Iran and Iraq is indivisible and their culture unbreakable".[15]

The historical feature of Iran's political culture is highlighted by the continuous tendency to reinterpret some of the tragic historical events that took place some fourteen centuries ago. Particularly what is known in Islamic history as the "great sedition" which began with the martyrdom of Caliph Uthman ibn Affan, leading to the martyrdom of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib and then to the martyrdom of His son, Imam Hussein. The Iranian mindset refuses to let go of the past but rather uses it explain the current political conflicts between Iran and its adversaries.

3- Tendency towards suspicion

Iran's political culture is characterized by a clear tendency towards skepticism and mistrust towards the other, suspicion strongly overshadows Iranian political interactions at all levels.

On the one hand, major foreign invasions against Iran, most of which led to great destruction and chaos in the medieval eras, and foreign domination during the 19th and 20th centuries by major powers such as Russia, Britain and America contributed to the shaping of a collective memory skeptical of the other. Suspicion has become a collective psychological defense mechanism that helps Iranians adapt themselves to external threats.[16] As mentioned previously, the dualist Manichean worldview is rooted in Iranian culture and tends to divide society into two conflicting categories, one is virtuous and the other is evil . This has led to suspicion and distrust of the "other" as a potential conspirator or enemy. [17]

Iran has witnessed hostility between its political system and society, particularly between its bureaucratic apparatus and its security establishment on the one hand and society on the other. This has led to growing suspicion and mistrust between society and the political system.[18]

Following the 1979 revolution, suspicion and mistrust of Iran's political culture was strengthened. The post-revolutionary system contributed to the perpetuation of suspicion and mistrust at the level of foreign and internal relations. At the external relations level there were growing doubts about the two superpowers, reflected in the slogan "No East or West." The United States of America was classified as a major threat to the revolution and was dubbed the "Great Satan". At the internal level the ruling Islamists divided society into two denominations- Islamic / non-Islamic; religious / secular; pro-revolutionary/ anti-revolutionary; anti-Western / pro-Western; and oppressed / arrogant. An apartheid regime was created, consisting of those who were outside the system and deprived of the opportunities, rights and resources available to those within the system. Although this dual division may apply to any revolutionary transformation, in Iran it was saturated with a stronger dose of mistrust against the "others". In the post-revolutionary years, for example, people were encouraged by the ruling clergy to report their neighbors and anti-revolutionary relatives. This practice was applied in educational institutions, where pro-government students were spying on their colleagues. To root out non-loyalists from institutions of higher education,

a system of selection was designed after the cultural revolution in the early 1980s. According to this system, after passing entrance examinations, students had to undergo a religious "ideological test". Thousands of students, hundreds of university professors and staff were excluded for their political or religious incapacity. Similar tests were done on public sector applicants. [19]

In general, the first decade of the revolution was founded on what could be called "Islamists and others." The "others" included secularists, liberals, marxists, nationalists, monarchists, non-Shiites, ethnic minorities, feminists, intellectuals and army officers. As a sign of the suspicion and mistrust that prevailed during this stage, they were characterized as enemies of the revolution, mercenaries, traitors, hypocrites, fifth columnists, enemies of Islam and surrogates of the West.[20] Thus, the atmosphere of suspicion and distrust dominated internal political interactions, and it became a prominent feature of Iranian political culture.

4- Mystical inclination

Iranian political culture is characterized by a clear sense of mysticism or what can be called as political mysticism. The Iranian mentality tends to be obscure and tends to hide its true orientation, ideas and intentions in the depths of the soul. It is a mentality that hides and conceals more than what it reveals and declares.

This inner tendency is rooted in the principle of *Taqiyya,* that allows a person to show something other than what is necessary when he is in danger of being exposed or attacked. This principle was one of the methods used by Shiite clerics in the past to protect their followers from persecution. The Shiites expanded their use of *Taqiyya* as a core belief in the Twelver Shiite (the dominant doctrine in Iran). [21]

If, in time, the Shiites resorted to the practice of *Taqiyya* in the past to hide their religious beliefs when they were a small minority threatened and oppressed, over time this practice transcended their religious context and became an integral part of the socialization process in Iran. It contributed to a contradictory relationship between Iranians and their political authority. They criticized their authority or mocked it in secret, while praising it in public.[22] It is a clear indication of the extent of the influence of mysticism on Iranian political culture.

5- Carefulness and gradualism

The roots of this is Iran's exposure to many waves of invasion and conquest and its submission to various forms of authoritarian rule for hundreds of years. This has contributed to making patience and deliberation a psychological defense mechanism to adapt to dangers and difficulties, as well as, enduring suffering to sustain the survival of the state.

The *Mahdism* [occultation] of the Twelver Shi'ism has contributed towards these hallmarks. It states that people must be patient and wait for the emergence of Imam al-Mahdi, who will bring justice to the whole world and establish the global Islamic state of justice. It has had an impact on the Shiite mentality in general and particularly the Iranian Shiite mentality, entrenched a longitudinal consciousness, and imposed a long-standing juridical and political stalemate. [23]

In this setting, it is often referred that the Iranian political mentality resembles the mentality of a chess player, who is a model of patience and deep and long thinking. Likewise, like the mentality of a patient Iranian carpet maker, who is a model of silent introspection and full dedication to his work, and perseverance to accomplish this work

without considering the factor of time.

6- Propensity towards strife

The political culture of Iran is characterised by a clear propensity towards strife. This tendency to fight has a strong existence in Iranian culture, as opposed to a weak tendency towards tolerance and peace. This is rooted in Iran's imperial history, which is full of war and military adventures, mainly a series of violent conflicts, victories, defeats and expansion. This has contributed to Iranian personalities being combative in nature.

This propensity is associated with some of the statements by Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib, such as, "The survivors of the sword (from getting killed) have more progeny"; "The best way for a person to die is to be killed"; and "It is better to be stabbed one thousand times with the sword than to die on the deathbed".[24]There are similar statements by other Shiite figures. They said, "Whoever hates the heat of swords when they are struck into the enemy, they will be humiliated". Also, there are Shiite mottos such as, "Yal Tharat al-Hussein", lets get revenge for Hussein.

7- Pragmatism

The Iranian mentality tends to adopt trends and options that serve Iran's interests, leaving what does not. When opportunism becomes a virtue, interest is a supreme goal in accordance with Iran's political mentality. Whereas principles, values and ideals become constraints that one should be freed from.

This existed due to deep commercial pragmatic ideas in the Iranian mindset. This came about because of Iran having close ties with the Chinese, Indians, Arabs and Europeans. Its cities had sustainable trade with its neighbors due to its geographical location between Asia, Africa and Europe. This permitted Iranians to gain skills of negotiation and bargaining. They learned how to be pragmatic, which is one of the breakthroughs of the Bazaar mindset.

Fourth: The impact of Iranian political culture on Iran's policies after the 1979 revolution

Iranian political culture has had a great influence on Iran's policies, roles and activities. The characteristics of this culture are very strong and clear on Iranian policies at the internal and external levels, and define their nature, orientations and strategies.

1. At the internal level

The authoritarianism which characterizes Iran's political culture is visible in Iran's political system, making it a closed hierarchical system characterized by the concentration of power, especially in the hands of the Supreme Leader. Authoritarianism was integral in the process of building the legitimacy of the regime, which adopted modern constitutional structures. Authoritarianism impacted political participation levels and he role of elections was limited to democratizing the system. The regime manipulated the electoral process by excluding opposition figures and leveraging favourable candidates .

The pragmatism embodied in Iran's political culture has clearly contributed to defining the nature of the political system by adopting the Wilayat al-Faqih ideology, which is essentially pragmatic. It provided a practical solution to the dilemma of state and governance in the time of the Imam's absence. But this ideology does not agree with the spirit of the sect and its true doctrine, which dictates the necessity of not declaring a state until the emergence of the Imam who is exclusively assigned to govern. Wilayat

al-Faqih is more like a practical trick than a scholarly religious interpretation. It gives pragmatism precedence over dogmatism.

Skepticism, which characterizes Iran's political culture, has reinforced the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories, and the tendency of the ruling elite to hold external factors responsible for internal problems and to demonize and betray opponents and dissidents. This is evident from the Green Movement in 2009, when the regime launched a fierce media campaign against it, accusing protesters of treason and supporting the American-Zionist plot to overthrow it.[25] Also, it is was evident from the regime's position towards popular protests that broke out in December 2017. They were portrayed as an attempt by "outside stooges" to stir unrest in Iran.[26]

In addition, skepticism led to confining recruitment in the Iranian political system to those close to the ruling elite. They relied on subjective considerations such as kinship and personal loyalty, which led to the spread of patronage and the dominance of a limited number of families. This contributed to the weakening of the political system and led to the exclusion of large segments of the population from participation in the decision-making process.[27]

As to mysticism, which is related to duplicity, as it requires two faces for each matter, revealed and hidden, it impacted the nature and structure of the political system in Iran. The system includes institutions, regulatory frameworks, and centers of power not visible to the public. But they have great influence, such as some of the figures of the Revolutionary Guard, and other personalities close to the Supreme Leader and they have no official status, nor do they occupy senior positions in state institutions. But they exert great influence on Iranian political interactions.

It is noteworthy, for example, that although the Leader of the Revolution (Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini) was Iran's only leader, the country was run by his son Ahmed, who played a key role in ousting Hussein Montazeri from his position as Deputy to Ayatollah Khomeini. The same applies to Mojtaba Khamenei, the son of the current Supreme Leader - who is widely believed to have a huge influence on state affairs - and is rumored to have played a key role in the crackdown on Green Movement activists after the 2009 presidential election.[28]

Gradualism that characterizes Iran's political culture slowed down the reaction of the ruling elite to social demands whether they were economic, social or political in nature. For many years, there have been many demands to improve economic and social conditions, reform the political system by reviewing the Wilayat- Al Faqih theory, balance the centers of power and limit the absolute powers of the clerics, but these demands have not received any real response.

2. At the external level

The characteristics of Iran's political culture are strongly influenced by the nature of Iran's role and behavior at the external level, where skepticism and distrust of the other, pastism and armistice have led Iran to adopt a radical foreign policy which provokes tensions and violent conflicts.

This skepticism and mistrust has made security the focus of Iran's foreign activities. This has created a permanent sense of insecurity in Iran and has led to the perception of the outside world being a permanent source of danger and conspiracy. It prompted Tehran to portray its roles and interventionist activities in the region, especially in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain, as a kind of self-protection effort. This has led to

Iran adopting a foreign policy which is of an offensive nature and stimulating tensions and divisions in the region.

Pastism has contributed to making Iran's expansionism linked to its imperial past as one of the focal variables when it comes to Iranian behavior beyond its borders. Expansion and hegemony have become the main drivers of this behavior, with the regime, following in the steps of the Achaemenid and Sasanian empires. Iran's efforts to dominate and extend influence follows the expansionist campaigns of Persian emperors in the distant past.

Pastism has impacted the methods followed by Iran in mobilizing its supporters and catapulting them into regional conflicts. It depends on evoking tragic historical events that promote sectarian divisions, claiming that its foreign military activities, for example in Syria, are to defend the Ahlul-Bayt and their shrines such as the Sayeda Zaynab shrine. It also promotes slogans such as "Labayk Ya Hussein", "We came for your cause Hussein", "Labayk Ya, we came here to defend you Zaynab", and "Zaynab won't be captured twice, while she is alive and now while she is dead". It was as if the Syrian revolution was not against an oppressive and brutal political regime but against Imam Hussein, as if the Syrians - who rose up for freedom, dignity, equality and justice - were the army of Yazid bin Muawiyah.

Pragmatism as a characteristic of Iran's political culture explains Iran's changing attitudes and alignments according to its compass of national interests. For example, Iran's leaders rely on their interests in their relationship with Russia, despite decades of hostility and mistrust, leading to close relations between the two sides and coordination of their positions on many issues in the region as in the Syrian case. It also coordinated with the United States of America to topple the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, where Iran arrested al-Qaeda leaders on its territory and provided maps to US forces of Taliban positions in Afghanistan, and the Iranian army offered training to 20 thousand Afghan soldiers as part of a US-led program to rebuild the Afghan army.[29] It coordinated with the United States in the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Pragmatism prompted Iran to ignore sectarian ideological considerations and cooperate with its sectarian foes, providing support to al-Qaeda and the Taliban to counter US presence in the region.[30]

Also, mysticism and internalism, which require dual positions and orientations, have impacted Iranian foreign policy and marked it with double-facedness. This is illustrated by the nature of Iran's foreign policy objectives, which include two contradictory aspects. The first is the declared, which is unreal. And the other is concealed, which is the real. For example, Iran declares its aim of interfering in Syria is to support the so-called resistance axis, and its goal in Yemen is to help the oppressed. But the facts indicate that its real undeclared goals are to expand influence and hegemony and pressure neighboring regional countries, as well as to pressure major powers to compromise over Iran's strategic interests, regional influence and its nuclear program. In this context, many official statements of Iranian officials defy Iran's practice. While some Iranian leaders assert that Iran is not a threat to any country and it supports a policy of moderation and openness with the world,[31] the actual practices of Iran and its affiliates show the opposite.

Iran has adopted long-term strategies based on long-term political investment in support of its partners or loyalists in some of its regional neighbors. This has happened by mobilizing groups or factions with better capabilities, and strengthening their

capabilities through long-term infrastructure investment, which often empowers these groups to influential political positions in their own countries. In this context, Iran has been investing in supporting many sectarian factions in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen for more than three decades. Gradualism has also impacted Iran's adoption of a strategy to prolong crises until conditions and balances change in its favor. This has been clear in the issue of the nuclear program where a strategy of giving and taking has continued for years. This aspect is also evident by the Syrian and Yemeni crises, where Iran insists on continuing to support its allies until the international and regional conditions and internal balances change in its favor.

Conclusion: Iranian political culture between stalemate and change

The Iranian regime strives to impose its values, orientations and perceptions, and to disseminate them widely in society by intensive political propaganda and ideological indoctrination. However, this endeavor faces great obstacles. A large segment of society and the ruling regime are distant from one another. Many Iranian factions, especially young people and ethnic minorities do not necessarily share the same value structure or the same attitudes and perceptions with the ruling political elite. Unlike the ruling elite and leaders, these factions are more open and less ideological. The present and the future can not be built based on a political culture that tends to evoke the dark side of the past, indulge in it and project it to the present. Nor are these factions preoccupied with skepticism and fear of the other, and do not tend to blame all Iran's internal problems on foreign conspiracies and adversaries. They rather tend to hold the Iranian regime responsible for most of these problems. Moreover, these factions do not see any benefit from the opportunistic policies of the Iranian regime and its tendency to expand its external influence. They look angrily and unpleasantly at these policies and the consequent suffering on the internal level due to their high cost and the resulting aggravation of tensions, divisions and conflicts at the regional level (as evidenced by the slogans of the popular protests in December 2017). These factions, exert pressure on the regime to change some of the values of Iran's political culture to make it less rigid, and more moderate, positive and realistic. Although this change will not happen quickly and radically of course, changing politic a l culture is not easy and takes place over a long period of time. Until then, Iranian political culture will continue to be a catalyst for tensions and crises at the internal and external environment levels.

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