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John G. ...

Iran: Bani-Sadr's Foreign Policy Views

An Intelligence Memorandum

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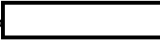

Summary

President Bani-Sadr appears determined to play a major role in shaping Iranian foreign policy. Although he is generally believed to favor a settlement of the hostage crisis without the return of the Shah to Iran, his views on other issues important to the United States are less accommodating. Anti-Americanism is likely to remain a fundamental aspect of Iranian internal politics for some time and a major constraint on any Iranian leader. 

Bani-Sadr is a long-time advocate of a nonaligned foreign policy and is not likely to revive close ties with the United States. He opposes any increase in the US military presence in the Persian Gulf region, rejects mutual security arrangements with US allies in the area, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and favors exporting Iran's revolution to the countries in the region. 

At the same time, Bani-Sadr has been a frequent critic of the Soviet Union, especially since its invasion of Afghanistan. He appears genuinely committed to supporting the Afghan insurgent movement. 

In any case, Bani-Sadr's role in determining Iranian policy will be circumscribed by strong opposition from his domestic enemies, by Ayatollah Khomeini's prominent position in the country, and by political and economic chaos in Iran. Nonetheless, if he can consolidate his hold on the country, there is a good chance that his foreign policy views will increasingly prevail. 

This memorandum was prepared by  Iran Task Force, Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer for Near East-South Asia. Research was completed on 6 February 1980. Comments and queries may be addressed to Chief, Iran Task Force  25X1A

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*Iranian President
Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr
at his home in Tehran*



Source: Sygma.



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Iran: Bani-Sadr's
Foreign Policy Views

The 46-year-old Bani-Sadr has spent virtually his entire adult life in opposition to the Shah, and his views on foreign policy have been heavily influenced by his resistance to the Shah's pro-US policies. Bani-Sadr considers himself one of the leading ideologists of the Iranian revolution and is likely to apply his ideological views to Tehran's relations with the United States and the rest of the world

Bani-Sadr has little practical experience in diplomacy. He served as Foreign Minister for two weeks in mid-November 1979 before resigning because of differences with Ayatollah Khomeini over the hostage crisis. The young, Western-educated technocrats who advise Bani-Sadr share his lack of diplomatic experience.

A Radical Environment

Born into an affluent, landowning, religious family in 1933, Bani-Sadr first became involved in the anti-Shah movement in the 1950s when he was a militant follower of Prime Minister Mossadegh. The early association with the virulently anti-British Mossadegh probably encouraged Bani-Sadr's conversion to a nonaligned foreign policy. In 1963, he was arrested for antigovernment activities, spent four months in jail, and was exiled to Paris. During the next 15 years in France he came into contact with a broad range of Middle Eastern radicals including Palestinian activists and the Lebanese Shia leader Musa Sadr. He first contacted Ayatollah Khomeini in 1966, visited Khomeini in Iraq during the Ayatollah's 14-year exile in the holy city of Najaf, and became one of his most active advisers during Khomeini's short exile in Paris in 1978-79

While in France, Bani-Sadr wrote over 20 books and articles on Iran and Islam. Most deal with the relationship between Islam and economics, setting forth his contention that Islam offers a viable alternative to both Communism and capitalism. He has argued that rather than developing the nation, the Shah used its oil wealth to make Iran dependent on the West. Bani-Sadr's principal objective as stated in his writings is to make the country economically independent of both East and West by reducing reliance on oil revenues. He also urged self-sufficiency in food production.

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Views on the United States and USSR

There is no reason to doubt that Bani-Sadr shares the deep suspicion and animosity that most Iranian revolutionaries feel toward the United States. Nonetheless, he has criticized the seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran at least since his brief days as Foreign Minister. Bani-Sadr believes that the Embassy occupation damages Iran's international image and diverts the country's attention from pressing internal problems.

In his recent comments on the hostage issue, he has stressed that the United States must take the first step to resolve the problem. He has repeatedly stated that the problem can be solved only when there is a change in the US attitude away from "interference" in Iran's internal affairs and toward a recognition of the independence of the country and the permanency of the Islamic revolution. He has also suggested that the United States help Iran seize the Shah's wealth and allow Iran to initiate legal proceedings against the Shah.

Despite his relatively moderate attitude on the hostage issue, Bani-Sadr has made clear that he has no intention of reviving anything approaching the close ties the Shah had with the United States. He has repeatedly stated that he does not believe Iran needs a close relationship with the United States to deter Soviet aggression against Iran. He has rejected the notion of US military aid to Iran. A frequent Bani-Sadr argument is that "we do not intend to liberate ourselves from the hegemony of one of the two superpowers only to fall under the yoke of the other."

At the same time, Bani-Sadr has been one of the most vocal and persistent Iranian critics of the Soviet Union, especially for its invasion of Afghanistan. His criticism of the Soviets is consistent with both his deeply Islamic view of the world and his pursuit of a genuinely nonaligned foreign policy. Rather than turning to either superpower for outside support, Bani-Sadr has maintained that Iran can get the economic and military aid it requires from Western Europe and Japan.

Even if Bani-Sadr should become more concerned about the Soviet threat to Iran in the future, it is unlikely that he could openly align Iran with the United States without facing major domestic criticism. Anti-Americanism is likely to remain a fundamental aspect of Iranian internal politics for some time and one that can easily be manipulated by Bani-Sadr's rivals against him. Moreover, Khomeini seems certain to continue to view the United States as the greatest enemy of his vision of an Islamic republic. The Ayatollah can remove Bani-Sadr from power at any time.

Afghanistan

Both during his election campaign and since his landslide victory, Bani-Sadr has been an outspoken supporter of the Afghan insurgent movement against the Soviets. In several statements he has promised to give the Afghans

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political and financial support and has also stated that Iran will provide military training and weapons to the rebels. In one statement he also indicated that Iranian volunteers—but not the regular military—will be allowed to fight with the rebels. []

Reliable evidence suggests that at least some Iranian leaders, especially religious figures and tribal groups along the Afghan border, are already giving aid to the insurgents. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, thousands of Afghan refugees have crossed the border—one estimate runs as high as 100,000—and these refugees are a fertile recruiting ground for the Afghan resistance. []

Bani-Sadr does not appear to be concerned that Iranian support for the rebels may invite Soviet moves against Tehran, possibly in the form of cross-border incursions. He has argued that any Soviet military move against Iran can be deterred by the threat of guerrilla warfare—“a people fighting for its survival” will cause “the Russians to dare not attack us.” According to one observer, this perception is widely held among Iranian revolutionary leaders, who believe that invading Soviet forces would face heavy casualties from Iran’s numerous paramilitary groups and massive civil unrest from a population versed in the tactics of mass protest. []

Exporting the Revolution

Since the revolution, Iran has become a focal point for Middle Eastern radicals eager to secure backing for their own revolutionary objectives. Tehran has provided some limited support for various dissident groups, usually without the direct involvement of the Iranian Government. Tehran radio has been a vocal proponent of revolutionary change throughout the Islamic world and especially among Iran’s Persian Gulf neighbors including Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The Shia committees in those countries have been able to get aid from Iran for their dissident movements. Some of these groups—including Iraqi and Saudi dissidents—have openly welcomed Bani-Sadr’s election. []

In his inaugural address on 4 February, Bani-Sadr made clear his support for other revolutionary movements in the Islamic world. According to press reports, he said that:

Our revolution will not win unless it is exported. We are going to create a new order in which deprived people will not always be deprived. We Iranians, as long as our brothers in Palestine, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and all over the world have not been liberated, will not put down our arms. We give our hand to deprived people all over the world.

Khomeini’s son, Ahmad, made a statement along similar lines during the inaugural ceremonies. []

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Bani-Sadr is probably sincere in his commitment to support other "liberation" movements. While he doubtless recognizes that revolutionary rhetoric is useful domestically, his years of contact with other radical groups in Paris have conditioned him to support their causes, and he probably feels some obligation to repay past debts to them. []

**Regional Security
Issues**

Given his outspoken support for revolutionary change along Islamic lines in the region, there is almost no chance that Bani-Sadr would favor cooperative regional security measures in the Persian Gulf with US allies in the Middle East. In one recent interview, Bani-Sadr ruled out a mutual security arrangement with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, arguing that both regimes "are not representative" of their people []

On the other hand, Bani-Sadr has offered to improve relations with Turkey to form a "joint front" against the United States and the Soviets. He has also suggested that Pakistan reject US military aid offers and instead rely on support from other Muslim countries including Iran. Bani-Sadr seems likely to try to develop a regional non-aligned bloc in order to minimize both US and Soviet influence in the area. []

Bani-Sadr is also unlikely to view favorably US diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the Arab-Israeli issue. In the past, he has been a consistent supporter of the Palestine Liberation Organization and its Lebanese allies. He is likely to continue Khomeini's policy of expanding ties with the PLO and giving it diplomatic support. Bani-Sadr probably also shares Khomeini's unwillingness to give the PLO any major role inside Iran. []

Outlook

How much of a role in determining Iranian foreign policy Bani-Sadr will actually play is uncertain. He faces strong opposition from several groups including the clerical supporters of Ayatollah Beheshti and Iran's leftist parties. His relationship with Khomeini is ambivalent and subject to sudden change. In any case, as long as Khomeini is alive and fit, he will almost certainly continue to interfere in the government's actions and be the most influential figure in the country. []

Bani-Sadr also faces enormous domestic problems and will have only limited means to secure foreign policy objectives. The Iranian military is much weaker than it was under the Shah, and some time will be necessary to develop it into a meaningful instrument of diplomacy. The foreign policy bureaucracy is in chaos, and the diplomatic corps suffers from serious morale problems. Iran's reduced oil production also weakens the effectiveness of its oil weapon. []

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Nonetheless, Bani-Sadr has demonstrated a strong national following and seems determined to reorganize Iran's bureaucracy along revolutionary lines. If he can consolidate his hold on the country, there is a good chance that his foreign policy views will become increasingly influential. Under Iran's new constitution the president must approve all treaties and agreements with foreign powers.

We cannot determine at this point how much influence Bani-Sadr's revolutionary past and rhetoric will have on his future policies. He may become more pragmatic once he is confronted with the reality of wielding power. Nonetheless, his past experiences are certain to play some role in determining his future decisions.

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