

Imam Khomeini and Ethics in Foreign Policy¹

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Right from the time he launched his struggle and especially after the 15th of Khordad 1342 (June 05 1963) Uprising, Imam Khomeini in his lectures on ethics, also taught how to engage in struggle against despotism and global arrogance. It was for this very reason that the agents of the Shah's regime ordered the suspension of his lectures on ethics. By promoting novel political ideas based on Islamic precepts, Imam Khomeini succeeded in promoting ethics and spirituality as a value in the political definitions contrary to the doctrines of that time which presented politics as a human and intellectual subject and consequently an irreligious affair.

From Imam Khomeini's point of view, ethical and political tenets of Islam were not distinct from one another and the harmony between ethics and politics is a prerequisite for establishing an Islamic rule. For instance the diktat that "the pious believers are brethren" is not only a societal and political decree; rather it is an ethical decree as well. In the book 'Islamic Rule or Rule of the Supreme Jurisprudential Authority (Vilayat-e-Faqih), Imam Khomeini refers notably to the role of the (Islamic) administration in fostering security and preventing moral turpitude. More than laying emphasis on the precedence of ethics over politics, he speaks of the interaction of the two with one another. The climax of this relationship becomes manifest in Imam Khomeini's theory of the rule of the Supreme Jurisprudential Authority or 'Velayat-e-Faqih' which has its basis in rational and religious principles and shows that political and ethical merit are equally effective in the appointment of the supreme jurisprudential authority or 'Vilayat-e-Faqih.'

His eminence Imam Khomeini's view of foreign policy is an ideological one. In fact consideration of ethical principles in politics in various spheres including foreign policy as well became apparent after the victory of Iran's Islamic Revolution and institutions affiliated to the country's diplomatic affairs were required to observe ethical issues and to promote them. In line with ethical principles of Islam, Imam Khomeini's foreign policy was established on the

¹ The article has been summarized and translated by International Affairs Department of the Institute.

basis of preservation of international peace and security, not violating the territorial integrity of countries, peaceful coexistence with neighbors and strengthening cooperation with governments on the basis of mutual respect.

Indeed, in Imam Khomeini's view foreign policy is the arena for dealings and interaction of realism and idealism. On the one hand Iran's Islamic Revolution was an ideological and ethical transformation and brought in its wake its own religious ideals and objectives while on the other hand, Iran's geographical boundaries had its own genuine limitations and opportunities.

Imam Khomeini's foreign policy despite its infancy but because of its ideological principles incorporated massive and lofty objectives in an area the size of the entire world. This system which was based on ideology had no alternative except to blend together realism and idealism so that in addition to ensuring its own preservation and progress, it would endeavor towards the ultimate realization of its ideals as well. In Imam Khomeini's diplomacy, ethics which had its origins in Islamic beliefs played an effective role in shaping foreign policy.

The below instances could be considered as being among the objectives of Iran's foreign policy and Imam Khomeini's doctrines. These objectives also had an ethical approach to them:

- 1- Introducing the Islamic Revolution or its promotion overseas
- 2- alliance and unity of Muslim nations
- 3- role of religion and ethics in war and peace
- 4- rejection and shunning of unethical means for achieving objectives
- 5- reciprocal peaceful relations with world's governments
- 6- integrity and abiding by commitments in foreign policy
- 7- advising the diplomatic apparatus to move in the direction of the journey to God

1- Introducing the Islamic Revolution of Iran: Imam Khomeini reckoned the introduction of Iran's Islamic Revolution or promotion of the Revolution overseas as meaning: "promotion of the Revolution abroad implies that Islamic moral behaviors, Islamic rites, Islamic actions and deeds over there are conducted in such a manner that people take note of them...acquaint people with Islam and with the Islamic Revolution; and the promotion of the Islamic Revolution abroad occurs when Islam, the

realities of Islam, Islamic ethics and human ethics develop.” His eminence Imam Khomeini was of the opinion that the secret to the promotion of the Islamic Revolution overseas and its spirituality lay in adaptation of this religion to human ethical behavior and nature. He believed that the Islamic Revolution’s overseas promotion and support of the weak and downtrodden did not mean warmongering and application of force or in other words, interference in the internal affairs of others; rather, he opined that it is the presentation and promotion of religious and divine values that lead to boosting the spirit of fighting injustice, to the discernment of right from wrong and to strengthening of the right frontline.

Imam Khomeini believed that dissemination and promotion of Iran’s Islamic Revolution using ethical methods would cause oppressed nations to turn to this humanizing religion and believed that the Islamic Republic of Iran had the potential to be a role model and prototype for other countries. He would say that the authorities ought to work hard to introduce this country (Iran) as a role model for the world and it was in so doing that the world’s nations and the Muslims in particular would endorse this prototype and role model and implement the methods and ways of the Islamic system in their respective countries. Imam Khomeini’s letter to Mikhail Gorbachev (former President of the erstwhile Soviet Union) was a prominent example of His eminence the Imam’s focus on introducing the teachings of Islam.

2- Alliance and unity of Muslim nations: the Islamic states were one of Imam Khomeini’s priorities for establishing and consolidation of foreign relations. In his opinion, unity among Islamic states necessitated having an ethical approach and this unity was possible only under the auspices of establishing and strengthening of relations. In Imam Khomeini’s view, contacts that were based on ethical and ideological principles would be more durable.

Focus on commonalities was one of his ethics-based recommendations for fostering understanding with Islamic states. Imam Khomeini would always advise the diplomatic corps and envoys of the Islamic regime abroad to lay stress on commonalities with Islamic nations because this policy—meaning focus on commonalities—always led to strengthening of friendships and lessening of differences. In his view, the main

objective of strengthening contacts with Muslim countries was to increase understanding between them and to unite them in the face of bullying and arrogant international powers or in other words, it was aimed at strengthening the Islamic awakening movement. He would assert: "From the position of enormous strength, I extend my blessed and powerful hands of friendship and religious fraternity towards all Muslims and in particular, towards the nations and governments of the region and neighbors." Or on another occasion, he mandates the foreign policy authorities to give priority to relations with Islamic states and asserts: "Try to improve relations with Islamic states and endeavor to awaken (their) government officials and summon to unity and solidarity."

3- Role of religion and ethics in war and peace: the world's experts on political thought have time and again discussed the role of ethics in dealing with the occurrence of war and establishment of peace. In Imam Khomeini's political thought it is an accepted principle that religion and ethics can play a role in prevention of war or establishment of peace and even offer strategies for deterrence of wars. In the pure Islam of Prophet Muhammad's mission that Imam Khomeini advocates, the main aim and objective is development of ethical solidarity in international affairs as this helps in the promotion of lasting peace. This principle has an international approach and in a sense, introduces the idea of an ethical world ideology at the international level. In this world ideology, international bodies need to recognize this universal ethical principle and to act ethically. This theory is based on the belief that in the process of resolving disputes in international organizations, we need to arrive at an ethical solidarity and discuss the manner of arriving at this universal ethical principle. It is possible to reach to an ethical coexistence in the international sphere if this principle is taken into consideration and it forms the basis of our actions.

In Imam Khomeini's view, in order to prevent war, it is necessary that the teachings of monotheistic religions be considered as the basis. These teachings can explain those universal ethical principles and be the basis for preservation of friendship among nations. Imam Khomeini associates peace and peaceful coexistence with peoples of the world with living among them and says: "we want peace. We want to live in peace with all the peoples of the world. We want to be at peace with the entire world.

We want to live among the peoples of the world.”¹ On another occasion, he states: “We conduct our affairs with all governments in a tolerant manner and we never desire to act in an aggressive manner.”²

On yet another occasion, by rejecting the aspect of distance in communication between nations, Imam Khomeini states: “relations between nations should be based on spiritual issues and in this regard, the question of distance has no impact; and how often there are countries that are neighbors but there is no spiritual relations among them. Therefore, other relations too cannot be fruitful. Our relations with other countries shall be based on principles of Islam.”³

In sum, this ethical approach shows that the main priority in Imam Khomeini’s diplomacy was negotiations at settling differences with enemies prior to use of force. In this approach, factors responsible for engaging in diplomacy and envoys were charged with presenting solutions aimed at preventing the occurrence of conflict. Call to peace especially before initiating war; engaging in negotiations aimed at bringing peace and shunning conflict; negotiations on exchange of prisoners of war and acceptance of UN Resolution 598—all speak of Imam Khomeini’s belief in avoiding war, establishing peaceful relations, undertaking steps at making peace aimed at resolving differences with enemies and giving priority to negotiations before going to war. In fact, in his view the chief duty of diplomacy and diplomatic envoys was to adopt necessary measures and offer advice and practical solutions aimed at preventing conflict. In this process, recourse to peaceful measures was given priority over resorting to war and holy struggle (Jihad) against the aggressors.

4- Rejection and shunning use of unethical means for achieving objectives: In relations with countries too, Imam Khomeini had in mind objectives and policies that were compatible with the ethics and teachings of Islam and he did not consider any and every means for attaining objectives to be legitimate and permissible. In this ethical standpoint, committing injustice and aggression, killing and looting, breaching

¹ Imam Khomeini’s statements at a gathering, year 1985

² Imam Khomeini’s statements at a gathering of employees of the Ministry of Road and Transportation, year 1983

³ Imam Khomeini’s statements at a gathering of employees and staff of Ahwaz Municipality dated November 08, 1979

covenant and pact and so forth were forbidden. Imam Khomeini would assert that the people of Iran were followers of a doctrine whose objectives were summarized in two phrases as: "لا تُظلمون و لا تُظلمون" meaning "neither commit injustice nor tolerate injustice." Desisting from reciprocal action during the aerial bombing of non-military targets and cities by Saddam's (former Iraqi dictator) army during the Sacred Defense (war with Iraq) shows Imam Khomeini's adherence to his ethical principles even during the time of the (Iran-Iraq) war.

5- Peaceful reciprocal relations with other world governments: In today's world, no country can secure its needs by living in isolation and without establishing relations with other countries. Political astuteness demands that global communications are increased, regional relations are developed and bilateral exchanges reinforced. At the same time as safeguarding the independence of the system and recommending ethical and sincere approaches, Imam Khomeini encouraged communications with the outside world and establishing relations with other countries of the world. He considered communications with the outside world as leading to the country's political development and strengthening of its economic constitution while in his view cultural and ideological communications with other countries and Islamic states in particular would lead to greater understanding, convergence of views and interaction among nations.

On the basis of this ethical standpoint, in his recommendations to officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, His Holiness Imam Khomeini always emphasized on the necessity to observe mutual respect, pay attention to the independence of countries and observe humanitarian criteria as well as on the policy of non-interference in internal affairs of countries. Indeed, he regarded interaction and exchanges with the world to be a matter that was based on intelligence and Islamic law and to be in agreement with the principle of statesmanship. In a section of his speech, he states:

"Islam wants to have friendly relations with all countries in the world; and the Islamic government wishes to have understanding and good relations with all nations and all governments provided that they (other countries) mutually respect the Islamic government." While emphasizing on mutual respect and rejection of expansionism, Imam Khomeini

recommends establishing relations with other nations and countries. Based on this advice, the Islamic government's strategy was to have good relations combined with understanding with all nations and governments. His Eminence the Imam considered strengthening of relations to lead to better understanding of Islam by the world's nations and to the dissemination of the cultural, spiritual and humanizing Divine message to distant lands. While declaring that the Islamic government did not seek hegemony in the world, the Imam stressed on the necessity to promote religious values and attract the hearts of nations. In this regard, he deemed the role of diplomacy and the diplomatic representatives in achieving the objectives of foreign policy to be both critical and valuable.

6- Ethical approach to foreign policy: In the present-day world's diplomacy, governments—and in particular when faced with crises—inevitably adopt unethical approaches; however, even in the most difficult of circumstances, Imam Khomeini maintained his principled and value-based style. By adopting this ethical approach, Imam Khomeini believed that Islam was for all and had compassion for mankind and that we all obey Islam and are very concerned for mankind in the sense that “we are not on bad terms with any nation; Islam arrived on the scene for all of mankind; for human beings...we declare that we have no intent to commit aggression against any of the Islamic and non-Islamic states...”¹ On the other hand, the modern world's style of diplomacy is usually based on misinterpretation of the opposite party's words, creating a hostile atmosphere and driving the other party into a corner. However, in this interaction and approach Imam Khomeini does not abstain from fair dealing and thus in order to achieve the objective, he avoids intimidating the opposite party. Indeed, Imam Khomeini's style of dealing with other nations is based on integrity, ethics and respect.

In response to the journalist of the American magazine ‘Time’ who queries him that in the Islamic Republic in what manner would the foreign policy be conducted in general, Imam Khomeini responds:

¹ Charter of the Islamic Revolution; *Excerpts from Ideas and Opinions of Imam Khomeini*, Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, year 1995, pages 407-09.

“Our Islamic Republic has good relations with all countries and believes in mutual respect provided that they too believe in mutual respect.”¹

In reply to a question posed by a journalist who asked him concerning the Islamic Republic’s (of Iran) foreign policy especially with the superpowers, Imam Khomeini asserts:

“The policy of the Islamic government (of Iran) shall be to safeguard the independence and freedom of the nation, government and the state; and mutual respect after total independence has been achieved; and there is no distinction between superpowers and others.”²

By relying on this ethical principle, on another occasion Imam Khomeini observes:

“Relations between nations must be based on spiritual issues. Our relations with other countries will be on the basis of Islamic principles.”³

Imam Khomeini’s response even concerning relations with the United States is associated with an ethical approach. In reply to a question as to how long relations between the two countries would remain frozen, the Imam responds: “Till the time that America mends its ways” meaning that until America rights its erroneous ways in dealing with others and with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

7- Advice to the diplomatic apparatus to move on the path of the

‘Journey to God’: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs which is the custodian of the country’s foreign policy occupies a special position in the administration and in the words of the Supreme Leader this ministry is one-half of the government. In view of this importance, his Eminence Imam Khomeini too paid particular attention to this ministry and at least once every year, he would grant audience to the cadre of this ministry and offer ethical guidelines to them. At first the Imam would usually call upon all of them to piety, self-development, spiritual purification and ethics. He would say:

“The Foreign Ministry is the only ministry which with its Islamification can demonstrate our Islamic existence to foreign lands; and conversely, the damage that could possibly be inflicted on this country—and in the

¹ Imam Khomeini’s interview with American ‘Time’ magazine journalist.

² Imam Khomeini’s interview with journalists from Brazil, Britain, Thailand, etc.

³ Imam Khomeini’s statements to a delegation from New Zealand—June 21, 1979

past was inflicted by foreign embassies here (in Iran) and our embassies abroad to the country—was greater than by others.”

The Imam always encouraged the country’s diplomatic apparatus to move on the path of the journey to God and had stated: “When you are placed on the straight (right) path, you reach to the destination.” Imam Khomeini did not consider departing on the journey to God as implying isolation and living in solitude; rather, he regarded political and social movements based on Islamic principles as moving on the Divine route. For this same reason he also believed in safeguarding the independence of the Islamic system with this spiritual point of view.

It is hoped that executives of foreign policy always bear in mind the ethical doctrines advocated by Imam Khomeini especially in the diplomatic arena and God willing put them into practice