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Isolated: The West or Iran?

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Western policy makers should be better aware of what their actions mean in the context of Iran's political discourse. If they were, they would realise that much of their current policies are counterproductive. Though intended to isolate Iran, their measures contribute to Iran's message of resistance against the West. With their policies on Iran Western governments are not isolating Iran, but themselves.

The revolutionary ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran is intrinsically linked to foreign relations. An inheritance, undoubtedly, of the 1979 Iranian Revolution against the Shah and the foreign powers supporting his rule. The Islamic Republic's identity today is one of continuing resistance against these powers and their supposed unrelenting attempts to dominate others. The statements of Iran's leadership are replete with examples of the efforts of Western countries to meddle in other country's affairs, particularly in the Middle East. At the same time, Iran posits itself as a positive force, both in the region and internationally. The Islamic Republic in this understanding provides the necessary resistance to status quo power relations and stands by other oppressed people, particularly the Palestinians. However, Iran finds itself continuously undermined by the United States and other 'arrogant powers'. The United States is seen as the prime 'bullying power,' undermining Iran's natural role in the region and threatening Iran's security.

Iran's ideological struggle against the 'domineering powers' is supporting Iran's increasingly authoritarian regime. Particularly with the reformist revival in 2009, after which every effort has been made by rightwing hardliners to frame opposition to Ahmadinejad's re-election as a pre-planned 'velvet coup' planned by Western powers. Credibility to this understanding is added by the United States' calls for regime change in the past, by the support it has granted to democratisation initiatives in Iran, and by its presumed support for terrorist organisations such as Jundallah and Mojahedin-e Khalq.

Against this background, Western policies help shape the future of Iran both domestically and internationally. Double standard behaviour by the United States is immediately picked up by Iran's right wing hardliners to support the argument that the United States is disproportionately targeting Iran. Criticism of the Iranian nuclear programme is interpreted as an attempt to undermine Iran's scientific progress. And support for reformism in Iran is evidence of Western interference in Iran's domestic affairs. Western countries' policies towards Iran, in sum, only add to the credibility of the hardline discourse, discredit reformists and strengthen the regime.

Iran's nuclear development meanwhile is progressing despite Western efforts of halting it. Internationally, Iran is finding other partners who allow Iran more negotiating space. These governments may recognise some of their own frustrations in Iran's views on international affairs in which the West is seen as unduly overbearing. Meanwhile, the West's unfriendly attitude towards Iran, particularly calls from U.S. partners in the Middle East to bomb Iran, only increase the likelihood of Iran developing a nuclear weapon. If Western policy makers continue their confrontational course, it is not contributing to Iran's isolation, but to their own.

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Shifting Sands is the blog of the Middle East International Affairs Programme at LSE IDEAS, analysing current events in the Middle East and contributing to the ongoing deliberations over policy prescriptions.

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