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IRAN'S ANTI-WESTERN RHETORIC AS A SIGN OF POTENTIAL THREAT TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY¹

INTRODUCTION

For decades, the ruling regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran has used anti-Western rhetoric as part of its political language in an attempt to define itself vis-à-vis the regime's perceived enemies, led by the United States of America. This effort to portray the West negatively in the eyes of Iranian society is evident in the more than 40 years of rule of the theocratic regime, regardless of whether Iran is under the influence of the ideologically oriented conservative wing or the pragmatically oriented wing of the moderate political parties. With the intention of distinguishing themselves from the previous secular regime of the Pahlavi dynasty, the current leaders are thus attempting to right the wrongs that have been perpetrated on the Iranian people not only by the United States, but also by Tsarist Russia and the United Kingdom. Contemporary Iran is a country of contrasts. On the one hand, it is located in a strategically important region, but at the same time, it is a country that is alienated because of its controversial nuclear programme. Iran is a country rich in natural resources, but at the same time an economy unable to fully exploit its own potential, which is constrained by a series of economic sanctions imposed by Western countries. Iran is a country in which a large part of the population views Western countries with a sense of suspicion and mistrust, but at the same time a part of the political spectrum is trying to forge a path of pragmatism towards potential cooperation with the West leading to the removal of anti-Iranian sanctions. Into this ambivalence enters an antagonistic rhetoric that creates an untrustworthy image in the eyes of the Western democracies, manifested in the temporally contradictory attitude of the countries towards the resolution of the Iranian issue, which is so important for the international community.

OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER AND METHODS USED

The primary objective of the present paper is to bring new implications that can be derived from the current foreign policy rhetoric of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The significance of such research on rhetorical trends is not only important for the academic community, but also provides important and relevant information for the needs of

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institutions responsible for the creation of foreign policies of individual countries. On this basis, it is possible to determine the next steps towards the responsible countries in order to ensure the reciprocity of constructive relations and to achieve a higher level of stability and security within the regional, as well as global, conditions. For the purpose of fulfilling the basic objective, two partial objectives have been set – identification of the basic negative connotations towards the West and their subsequent detailed analysis. A number of research questions can also be defined:

- What are the Iranian regime's main accusations against Western countries?
- To what extent should these statements be taken seriously?
- Does Iran pose a potential threat to the international community on the basis of this hostile rhetoric?

In terms of fulfilling the basic objective, methods were used that can be classified as qualitative methods, which represent an important element in the research of sociological and political science issues. A considerable part of the thesis draws on information obtained on the basis of extensive qualitative content analysis of texts. Specifically, it is a collection of transcripts of speeches made by the spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, between July and December 2022. These speeches were reproduced in the local Farsi language, but a written English translation of the speeches is freely available on Ayatollah Khamenei's official website, bringing the latest news about the leader of the Islamic Republic. A sub-objective within this section of the thesis was to locate key explicit statements made by the spiritual leader to Western countries and their subsequent division into the main themes and areas for which he believes the West is responsible in relation to Iran. In order to ensure the integrity of the information presented, the paper also draws on a number of verified websites of institutions such as the European Commission and other relevant electronic and book sources.

In the following sections of the paper, this information is analyzed through interpretation from renowned experts in the field of Middle Eastern realities. To achieve the second sub-objective, the method of semi-structured interviews consisting of questions immediately following the first part of the paper was used. The first of the four interviewees is Professor Ing. Hussam Musa, PhD., currently working at the Faculty of Economics of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. In the second interview, our questions were answered by Mgr. Josef Kraus, PhD from the Faculty of Social Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, whose activities are mainly focused on security issues in the Middle East region with a focus on the Islamic Republic of Iran and research on state terrorism. Another respondent is a prominent Slovak political scientist and expert in Middle East research PhDr. Jozef Lenč, PhD, mim. Assoc. Prof., who is currently working at the Faculty of Arts at the University of St. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. The last of the four experts is a Czech journalist, university teacher at the Metropolitan University in Prague and head of the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies Ing. Břetislav Tureček.

RHETORIC CHALLENGING WESTERN VALUES

The ongoing debate among Western academic and policy circles over the Iranian issue is conditioned by the strategic importance of the Islamic Republic of Iran not

only in the geopolitical but above all in the international economic sphere. In the company of China and the United Arab Emirates, the European Union represents Iran's most important trading partner. Imports from European Union countries accounted for up to 16% of total imports into the Islamic Republic in the calendar year 2021 (European Commission, 2022). Professor Musa of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica sees Iran's importance in two basic dimensions. The first is its significant geographic and related geopolitical position. Iran is a country that connects strategically important regions, as it lies in close proximity to the Russian Federation to the north, Central Asia and India to the east and the Arab world to the west. The second level is the economic aspect linked to the country's great mineral resources wealth. Iran represents an outlet for the West with more than 80 million people. At the same time, any potential conflict involving Iran itself could lead to major changes in the prices of strategically important natural resources on world markets, which would also have a major impact on the economies of Western countries. All of these factors supporting the claims of Iran's importance to the Western world are undoubtedly being transferred to Iran's foreign policy and are shaping its relationship with the West, which has been more than a little complicated of late. The vocabulary used by Iranian diplomatic circles to refer to the West is also a major factor in shaping this relationship.

It is Iran's foreign policy rhetoric that has become the focal point of the research, the results of which are presented in the following section. Written transcripts of speeches by the country's supreme cleric and political leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, were chosen as the subject of analysis. The speeches were reproduced on various occasions within the period under review. They differed not only in the places at which they were delivered, but above all in the composition of the audiences to which they were addressed. The addressees of these words included not only representatives of Iran's political and governmental elites, but also ordinary citizens of selected regions and employees of certain sectors. Despite the aforementioned strategic importance of Western countries for the performance of the Iranian economy, the West is mentioned in these speeches almost exclusively in negative connotations. The countries most frequently mentioned by the leader include the United States of America, together with the United Kingdom, but also European states as a whole. Special space is devoted to the State of Israel, which is mentioned in the speeches in various variations, but most often under the term 'Zionist regime.' The main accusations against the West can be formulated in the following terms:

- The West is responsible for spreading anti-Iran propaganda;
- The West exploits the entire Muslim world through global imperialism;
- Western countries deliberately spread instability in the region and support terrorist organisations operating in the Middle East;
- The Western concept of liberal democracy is characterized by moral decay (Imam Chamenei, 2022).

In a speech dated September 3, 2022, Ali Khamenei mentions:

“When you speak of spirituality, the world of materialism, where everything is based on materiality and all of the concepts in the world are related to money, they [Western countries] oppose you. This is natural. Therefore, the opposition and confrontation shown by the Arrogant Powers and the Domineering Powers to the movement of the

Islamic Republic is something natural and inevitable. Today, America [United States of America] is at the head of global imperialism.” (khamenei.ir, September 3, 2022).

Dr. Jozef Lenč from the University of St. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava sees these motives primarily in the context of the historical negative experience of Iran and Persia with Western powers. The constant feeling of exploitation of Iran’s natural and human resources has persisted from around the 19th century to the present day and is constantly prevalent among society. Replication of this negative narrative against the West within political discourse is thus a common practice in Iranian conditions. He also sees the recent experience of Western involvement in the Middle East region as being behind the claims that attribute to the West the deliberate spread of instability in the region. He believes that Western interventions, such as those in Syria or Iraq, have been poorly thought through politically, creating a perception among the local population that the West is deliberately trying to destabilise the entire region. At the same time, however, he adds that a large degree of conspiracy is part of the Iranian propaganda against the West. Josef Kraus of Masaryk University in Brno sees in the regime’s arguments a desire to identify an external enemy that is to blame for Iran’s poor economic performance, international isolation and unclear future prospects.

Iran has for decades been among the narrow group of the most sanctioned countries. Sanctions are a central problem for the Iranian economy, which is increasingly being felt among the general population in the form of rising commodity prices and high unemployment rates. In spite of these problems, economic issues are absent from the spiritual leader’s speeches. Only a passing reference is made to the rising rate of inflation, which in 2022 reached a record high of 52.2% (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2022). According to Musa, behind this can be identified the regime’s attempt to cover up possible failures of the government, which is largely responsible for the situation in which the current Iran finds itself. Thus, the possible mention of economic problems could represent criticism in part to its own ranks, as the current cabinet, headed by President Ebrahim Raisi, is politically sympathetic to the country’s supreme spiritual leader. Dr. Josef Kraus of Masaryk University in Brno has the same view. At the same time, he argues that the current political leaders do not know how to stop this downward trend in Iran’s economy, so they are trying to limit mention of these problems.

A characteristic recurring rhetorical feature of the Iranian leader is his questioning of the very principle values of Western liberal democracy. These claims are based on the essence of Islamic fundamentalism, which is also used by the Shi’ite regime in Iran. Liberal democracy, according to the fundamentalists, is contrary to the values of Islam. This phenomenon is primarily related to the issue of sovereignty, which, according to the Islamic religion, is exclusively in the hands of God, whereas in democracy it is in the hands of society and citizens (Potměšil, 2012: 190). On the occasion of a meeting with the people of Isfahan Province on November 19, 2022, the spiritual leader made the following remarks:

“For 300 years, first the Europeans and then the Americans took actions using the logic of liberal democracy. Now, if a government or a system is established in the world that rejects the logic of liberal democracy and it uses real logic to give people an identity, to give the people of its country an identity, to revive them, to awaken them, and to strengthen them while standing up to liberal democracy, this will in-

validate the logic of liberal democracy. This is how the Islamic Republic is. Liberal democracy was founded on the negation of religion, while the Islamic Republic was founded on religion. They claimed to be democratic, while the Islamic Republic is a democratic system in the true sense of the word.” (khamenei.ir, November 19, 2022).

According to Professor Musa, the claims about the moral decay of Western countries are largely based on truth. At the same time, he argues that defining oneself against the values of Western liberal democracy is a sign that Iranian society is not ready and willing to embrace a number of values that contradict the spiritual principles of the Islamic faith and the way of life of the ordinary Muslim. The promotion of same-sex marriage or the legalisation of certain drugs is completely at odds with the values and religious essence of the Islamic religion. Břetislav Tureček points to the ambivalence in the Iranian perception of the West. This is based on the stereotype of the moral decadence of Western countries on the one hand. On the other hand, however, many Iranians admire the education system, the health care system, the system of organising public transport or the functioning of the state administration in Western democracies. At the same time, he points out that the way in which the United States and other Western countries are turning away from Iran creates room for the country to seek new political economic partners, whether among Latin American countries or in the form of increasingly significant Iran-China cooperation.

Lenč points out that the way a supreme leader tries to speak to the public must be seen in the context of the composition of the audience to which the speech is addressed. Since most of the speeches are addressed to domestic audiences, he argues that this is the way in which the regime is trying to score political points and gain support among the local population. Therefore, anti-Western rhetoric cannot be seen as an immediate problem for the development of future relations between the Muslim country and the West. At the same time, Kraus points out that this official rhetoric is not believed by a large part of the population, which has lost all illusions about the capabilities of the state leadership. The dream of ordinary Iranians today, he says, is to leave their own country and start a new life in Western countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavian countries or Canada.

IRAN AS A POTENTIAL SECURITY THREAT

In the case of Iran, the confrontational style of political leadership must also be seen in the context of the potential security threat that the current Iran may pose to the international community due to its controversial nuclear programme, but also its multiple activities aimed at supporting radical regional groupings. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) plays an important role in this regard as an autonomous military force responsible for protecting the ideology of Shi'ite values not only at the internal level, but also beyond the borders of Iran itself through the support of other groups. In 2022, the Iranian government's support for this military organization more than doubled from 2021 to a level of \$22 billion (Helou, 2021). Meanwhile, Iran's strategic interests in the region are secured by these militias through the aforementioned cooperation with various factions in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, and

neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq (Kamrava, 2021). Jozef Lenč sees Iran's activities as a potential security threat, especially at the regional level. He emphasises Iran's involvement in neighbouring states such as Syria and Yemen. In particular, he sees a clear intention to weaken the position of major regional players such as Sunni Saudi Arabia. In doing so, it argues that Iran has already been able to benefit from a number of Saudi failures in the past, such as its dispute with neighbouring Qatar. At the same time, however, he does not believe that the current Islamic regime poses an imminent danger in terms of a possible open military confrontation with the West. Nevertheless, it sees scope for economic activities that could harm Western interests. The Strait of Hormuz in the south of the country, as an important regional economic artery, could be a potential tool in Iran's hands in this respect. At the same time, however, Iran must also be cautious in this respect, as any hostile activity carried out in this area would also be likely to damage its own economic interests. Josef Kraus has a similar view on the matter. Iranian interests in the region often clash with those of major Western allies such as the State of Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. However, from the official Iranian perspective, interference in the affairs of countries such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen is a legitimate means of defending not only its own national interests, but also the defence of the minorities there (Shi'ites) against aggression by the majority, which, moreover, is supported by the aforementioned states.

An important issue from a security point of view is the controversial nuclear programme. With the ascension of Democratic candidate Joe Biden to the presidency of the United States, Iran has a new opportunity for a reset in relations after the Iranian economy experienced a series of new sanctions following the United States' withdrawal from the original nuclear deal in 2018 (Pop, 2020: 105). Work began on a new nuclear deal, the signing of which was to be preceded by several rounds of negotiations between Iran and its Western partners. Negotiations have not been helped by the recent crackdown on protesting Iranians or indications that the regime is continuing to enrich uranium beyond a critical threshold (Davenport, 2023). Meanwhile, antagonistic rhetoric can also send at least some kind of signals towards Western partners. On the nuclear deal, Tureček makes a point of promoting pragmatism in relations between Iran and the United States. Historically, these countries have been able to come to an agreement even in worse times, and to prioritise strategic interests over an often restrictive ideological conception of reality. He points to the period of the Iraq-Iran conflict in the 1980s, when information about alleged secret military cooperation between the United States and Iran, known as the Iran-Contras affair, became public, despite the fact that US-Iranian diplomatic and political relations were at their worst in history. Yet, according to Musa, the nuclear program is not the only critical point in building security guarantees between the West and Iran at the moment. Increasing attention is being paid to the alliance between Iran and the Russian Federation at a time when Ukrainian territory is facing military aggression on a scale not seen in Europe since the Second World War. At a time when a large part of the international community is condemning Russian aggression on the territory of another state and is imposing a number of sanctions measures against the Russian Federation, it is clear that Iran-Russia military-logistics cooperation in the form of drone supplies is making it an unreliable partner.

Jozef Lenč sees another dimension in the importance of Iran's position, which is the question of Israel's regional security. The current events in Iran are thus also important for the West in terms of security guarantees and the protection of Israel as a key ally of Western countries in the Middle East. In the speeches of the spiritual leader, the State of Israel, referred to as the 'Zionist regime' or by the generic term 'the Jews,' is mentioned above all as a tool in the hands of the Western powers serving to carry out malicious activities against the Islamic State. From a speech by Ali Khamenei on October 14, 2022:

"They [Western countries] planted the rotten seed, this cancerous cell in this region called the Zionist regime, to serve as a base for Western enmity against Islam."
(khamenei.ir, October 14, 2022).

According to Kraus, it is the issue of Iran-Israel relations that is key to resolving relations between Iran and the United States. As he notes, a settlement between the Jewish and Islamic states would solve many of the problems in the Middle East, but by no means all of them. However, in his view, an improvement in the security situation in the region cannot be expected in the near future, as there are multiple lines of conflict and sources of conflict, such as the relationship between Israel and Palestine itself. Professor Musa takes the opposite view in this regard and does not foresee that there can be any improvement in relations between Israel and Iran. In the context of the Iran-Israel issue, Tureček points out that a potential attack on Israel is not in Iran's strategic interest and that such an action would probably represent a military defeat for the Islamic country. Although this rhetoric is often pointed to by the Israeli military and security forces, and especially by Israeli political leaders, as a sign of a potential Iranian threat, the reality is that Israelis are fully aware that anti-Israeli and anti-Western rhetoric in this case serves more as a deterrent than as a precursor to an actual attack on the Jewish state. It also points out that in order to establish constructive relations with a number of countries, Iran will be forced to curtail its support for a number of contentious regional organisations. For example, the cooperation between Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, or its support for groups operating against Israeli interests such as Hamas or the anti-Israeli organization Palestinian Islamic Jihad, is currently being demonstrated (Dančo, 2021: 8).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

As part of our research, we have attempted to identify Iran's position and relationship with Western countries by researching the statements of the country's supreme spiritual leader – Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The results show that a significant part of the pro-Western statements are based on a well-founded basis and are mainly related to Iran's negative experience with Western countries over the last two centuries. At the same time, it is worth mentioning the role of propaganda, which dominates many of the speeches and pursues one main objective – scoring political points with the local population precisely by using populist vocabulary. Based on the interpretation of the results by several experts in the field of Middle Eastern realities, it is clear that the current regime in Iran, despite its clear anti-Western rhetoric, does not pose an im-

mediate threat to the international community. It may, however, be creating the space for a potential threat at the regional level. By supporting a number of controversial organisations, it poses a danger to important regional actors such as Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia, and thus indirectly threatens the West's strategic interests in the region. The issue of Israel and the relationship with the Jewish state seems to be a key issue for resolving a number of problems between Iran and the West. It can be assumed that the anti-Western rhetoric that has persisted within Iranian political discourse for more than forty years since the revolution will continue to dominate the vocabulary of Iranian leaders. This can be argued for three basic reasons:

- 1) identification of an external enemy responsible for the bad situation in the country – such statements conceal the possible shortcomings of the government regime itself by putting in the spotlight the foreign actors who are supposed to be responsible for the situation in the country;
- 2) increasing popularity among the local population;
- 3) a deterrent to possible efforts by Western countries or other regional players to interfere in the internal affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Finding commonalities on which to base a constructive relationship between Iran and the West will be a challenge for the next generation of political leaders who will lead their respective countries. Building a strong but secure Middle East will require multiple concessions from both sides. We anticipate that the success of efforts to establish a new phase in relations will be based primarily on Iran's willingness to curb its activities related to its support for a number of regional groups operating in neighbouring states and to come to terms with its disputed nuclear programme.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to shed light on some of the views of Iran's supreme political and spiritual leader on Western countries. The paper is based on information obtained through quantitative content analysis of texts and the method of semi-structured interviews with leading Czech and Slovak experts in the field of the Middle East. A number of research questions can also be defined: What are the Iranian regime's main accusations against Western countries? To what extent should these statements be taken seriously? Does Iran pose a potential threat to the international community on the basis of this hostile rhetoric? As the analysis shows, although some of these statements are based on a realistic basis, the rest constitute a well thought-out propaganda concept with which the local regime is trying to cover its own shortcomings or to win the favour of the local population.

Keywords: Islamic Republic of Iran, Ali Khamenei, Western countries, foreign affairs

ANTYZACHODNIA RETORYKA IRANU JAKO PRZEJAW POTENCJALNEGO ZAGROŻENIA DLA SPOŁECZNOŚCI MIĘDZYNARODOWEJ

STRESZCZENIE

Celem niniejszego opracowania jest rzucenie światła na niektóre poglądy najwyższego politycznego i duchowego przywódcy Iranu dotyczące państw zachodnich. Artykuł opiera się na informacjach uzyskanych dzięki ilościowej analizie treści tekstów oraz metodzie wywiadów półstrukturalnych z czołowymi czeskimi i słowackimi ekspertami w dziedzinie Bliskiego Wschodu. Zdefiniowano następujące pytania badawcze: Jakie są główne zarzuty reżimu irańskiego wobec państw zachodnich?, Na ile należy traktować te wypowiedzi poważnie?, Czy na podstawie tej wrogiej retoryki Iran stanowi potencjalne zagrożenie dla społeczności międzynarodowej? Jak wynika z przeprowadzonej analizy, choć część z tych wypowiedzi oparta jest na realistycznych podstawach, to pozostałe stanowią przemyślaną koncepcję propagandową, za pomocą której tamtejszy reżim stara się przykryć własne niedociągnięcia lub zdobyć przychyłność miejscowej ludności.

Słowa kluczowe: Islamska Republika Iranu, Ali Chamenei, państwa zachodnie, sprawy zagraniczne

