



“IRANOPHOBIA IS A KIND OF COMMODITY” –
INTERVIEW WITH DR. SEYED MOHAMMAD
KAZEM SAJJADPOUR,
IRAN’S DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER,
PROFESSOR AT THE SCHOOL OF
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN TEHRAN
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Dr Seyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour, Iran’s Deputy Foreign Minister, heads the Centre for International Research and Education, professor at School of International Relations in Tehran. Former Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative for the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations. Dr Sajjadpour received his PhD in political science from George Washington University and was a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard.

The interview took place during the visit of dr. S.M. Kaem Sajjadpour in Poland culminated in his lecture in National School of Public Administration: “Iranian Diplomacy Experiences”.

Interviewers: Agnieszka Piwar, Magdalena Ziętek-Wielomska

[A. Piwar, M. Ziętek-Wielomska:] Does Iran accept the unilateral world with the unquestionable leadership of the United States that emerged after the Cold War?

[Dr. S.M. Kazem Sajjadpour:] Simply put: No.

How do you see the role of Iran in an alternative multilateral world? Are China, Russia, and India Iran's strategic partners to build an alternative world security order?

I think, the international system is in an era of transition. We still do not have a new fixed international system, and anything which can help diversify and democratize power internationally, multi-polar, multi-institutional does good for the world and for Iran. But we shouldn't forget that this world is still in the process of becoming.

The American offensive against Iran is held under the banner of democracy and human rights protection. How do the main Islamic allies of the USA: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates comply with democracy and human rights?

I think it's a question that you have to ask Americans. The double standard in this policy is clear, not just the USA's, but also the European countries' and all the USA's allies'. Human rights is an issue that is used for political purposes, as you know. I think that rational human rights is something else and the politicization of human rights is something else, but US and US allies including Europe are in a difficult position to explain why their allies are not democratic and why some of them even don't have constitutions.

Some days ago, the France24 TV station announced that this year Iranian pilgrims won't go to Mecca because Saudi Arabia cannot guarantee any security for Shia followers. What is the essence of the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran? Is it of a religious nature or is it a political dispute about the primacy of one of the states in the Middle East?

First of all, Iran is certainly not for conflict. We are not for the escalation of the conflict, we are for freezing this conflict, for its de-escalation. There are some elements in the Saudi system that cause, that want a more aggressive and more confrontational stance. I think the issue for Iran is the security of the pilgrims and that security was not guaranteed. Furthermore, if God forbids something happened and if Iranian pilgrims were there it would add to the conflict, to the escalation. I think Iran has made a very wise decision

not to give any pretext for the conflict, as well as choosing for the safety of its pilgrims.

Saudi Arabia presents itself as a country expressing all Islamic followers' interests. Does Iran perceive itself as a rival country for this hegemony or rather does it not focus on the protection of all Islamic followers, but just on Shia believers?

No, actually I think first of all, Saudi Arabia, if you read even the American press and European press, the type of Islam Saudi Arabia has been promoting is the radical Islam of the Wahhabi version, which is the source of today's global terrorism and radicalism. So it is not the Shia or Sunni version, it is how Islam is interpreted for radical and terrorist activities. The Islam that Iran supports or Iran believes in is not that of terrorism and radicalism. I think that this is the major point. Now Saudi Arabia is supporting terrorist groups in Syria, Iraq, and around the region and I think it hasn't got any relationship with real Islam.

Are Kurds a nation and on the grounds of UN Charter, do they have the right to self-rule, self-determination, and should they have their own state? If so, in what boundaries?

I would say that this question should be looked at with other, let's say, issues. We cannot just talk generally about this issue. Kurds are an integral part of different countries in the region and boundaries of the countries in the Middle East are to be respected, so if you look at it this way, the borders cannot be changed. Furthermore, the rights of Kurds should be observed. This is my understanding: that Kurds in Iran are an integral part of the social and political process in Iran. They have a province under their name, called Kurdistan, one of the best developing areas, so they enjoy a better situation in Iran compared to some of the countries in the region.

What are the Turkish goals in the Middle East? Permanent destabilization of the region or upholding a permanent supremacy with the help of religious minorities and ethnic Turkic peoples? Is Turkey a Trojan Horse of the USA and Israel?

I think Turkey is a very important player in that region, but it poses a lot of challenges, and the challenges are very immense and big, so it depends on the quality of the challenges and different issues. There is a Syrian issue, there is a Kurdish issue; there are other issues. For Iran, Turkey is a neighbor, and we have good, neighborly relations, and we have some differences on different issues, but we have decided that our differences should not prevent more cooperation between us.

Is Iran a theocratic state, like Israel for example, where there is no institution of civil marriage and where people not being Judaism followers have to go abroad, for example to Cyprus, to get married? What are the rights of atheists, Christians and other religion's followers in Iran?

In Iran, the constitution guarantees what we call citizens' rights. It is applicable to all Iranians with no exception. So, citizenship is the base, but we also have religiously recognized minorities. There are Jews, Christians, Christians of Armenian and Syrian origin, and some Syrians are even parliamentary members, so it's a very different situation.

In the times of the last shah, the American cultural influence on Iran was very strong. Is it possible to modernize a country, to build a modern economy, to industrialize and at the same time preserve traditional culture, piety and devoutness? Or may the Americans be right thinking that a modern economy needs a superstructure in the form of a secular society with a pluralistic and relativistic world view?

I think the American narrative is not a universal narrative; so you can be modern, but modern doesn't mean secular. And also the matter is how you define secularism and how you define religiosity. We believe you can be economically advanced and in the meantime preserve your culture and tradition. I think the same is in Poland; you are so proud of your culture and inherited identity. You have not been Americanized to have a better economy.

So we have the same problem in every country.

Does Iran perceive the EU as one partner or as a formation which exists today but which may disappear tomorrow, and national states that are real, genuine partners for Iran?

I think, first of all, my personal understanding is that the EU is an institution which exists and functions and coordinates, but the EU is the result and effect of its member states. So the EU is not something different from its member states and I think its member states coordinate; in the meantime they have their own understating of different issues. But today I see that both European countries individually and the EU collectively are interested in expanding the relationships with Iran; that now they have a better understanding of Iran compared to the past and I think they search for a better future.

Poland is a catholic country; our society, as you said, in contrast to the western countries, distinguishes itself by the attachment to the traditional family, objecting to demoralization. As far as I know, in your country there's such an importance placed on religion and traditional values. Can Catholics speak the same language as Shias; and if so, what should we focus on and what should we avoid?

Actually, we have some scholarly works done by some American scholars on the community between Shia and Catholics. Of course, you are different in terms of belonging to a different religion, but we cannot ignore two facts: one that among the big religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – there are many communities. The second point is that there are different sects and denominations of the big religions; there are interesting affinities between Catholics and Shia in the way they care for, for example, some social and collective ceremonies for looking at sacred figures and features, and also what you mentioned on the values related to the family, related to traditions. I think, I'm not a specialist on Christianity, but I think Catholicism is less mundane and less secularized compared to some other creeds. So, there are some similarities in that way if you read and have this narrative that Shia also stands by principles, by some traditions and also, by looking at just the mundane horde, looking for the day after and so on.

There's a theory developed by Polish scientist Feliks Koneczny, who said that civilizations are bigger structures than religions and the religions are part of these structures, and the same religion can function in many civilizations in different ways. So that it's not the religion that is the most important thing but the civilization.

That's an interesting point; however, I think regardless of what some extreme secularists around the world try to do to marginalize religion in social life, that religion is still an important factor everywhere, and Catholicism and Shi'ism take it more seriously.

Poland is a country where most of the Holocaust casualties lost their lives during World War II. That's why we are surprised that there are conferences organized in Iran where the history of the Holocaust is revised. Unfortunately, the Polish media don't give us any details. Does behind these initiatives stand a conviction that there was no Holocaust at all, and its history was falsified, or are you against the political exploitation of history to serve current political goals?

Actually, I also don't have any details of that conference. It was not a governmental conference. I think we have to differentiate between different narratives, interpretations and the politicization of these issues. According to our understanding, even if one person is killed unjustly, we have to condemn it. So we don't ignore the fact that injustice should be condemned.

Could you define the Iranian stance in relation to subjects such as: Assad's Syria?

It is not to anybody, including the regional players, to decide about the destiny of other nations. The fate of Assad is in the hand of Syrians and it is not anybody's business, including the regional players.

And Islamic state?

It is neither Islamic, nor a state. It is un-islamic because you don't have such type of beliefs in Islam and it is not a state because it doesn't act as



a state. It is a bond of groups/people who have some agendas which are very different from those of the civilized world.

Now, finally, a humorous question. In Poland and Romania, a missile defense shield is being installed. Do you believe in the American declarations that the shield is directed against Iran and North Korea? How many hundreds of intercontinental missiles, which might bring New York, Paris, or London into ruin, does Iran have?

I think that the answer is in the question. Iran is no threat to anybody. It's no threat to its immediate neighbors. Let me tell you the very important fact that Iran is under pressure by different offensives, by different players, but has been able to defend itself, and Iran is the only country in that region that is providing its own security, and its security design is very defensive. The military budget of Iran compared to all these US allies is so small that you cannot even compare them, and one of the USA's allies is the third among the world's military spenders with between 82-90 billion dollars a year. So we are not a threat to our neighborhood; you can see how we may be a threat over a long distance. But I have to tell you that they use Iran as an excuse; this is called iranophobia. Iranophobia is a kind of commodity that some people use – it is not as marketable as before. This is why you said you have a joking question, because it is a joke, if somebody says Iran is a threat. Unfortunately, some people believe that.

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