

# Iran, the Middle East and the West: Implications for Europe

## *A Global Conversation with Professor David Menashri*

On Tuesday, 27th March 2018, Professor Menashri came to the faculty of Economics of the University of Rome Tor Vergata to hold an interesting lecture about developments in the past and in the more recent history, concerning the relationships between Iran, the Middle East, and the West.

Prof. David Menashri from Israel is the Founding Director of the Alliance Centre of Iranian Studies and a Professor at the Tel Aviv University. He is specialized in topics such as Religion, focusing on the Shia Islam, and Iranian History. In the 1970s he took part in field studies in Iran and today he is a member of numerous NGOs in Israel and abroad.



Introducing the question of Iran, Professor Menashri pointed out the complexity of Iranian culture and the difficulty that comes from the simplicity of the ideas that many people have about it. Iran is neither just “wonderful” nor all about “terrorism”, the reality is more complex. In his words, modern Iran is built on two pillar cultures.

The first pillar is Islam as the country’s religion, which cannot be removed from the society. Islam was introduced to Iran in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century and has a majority of Shia since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

The second pillar is the Persian, pre-Islamic, culture. Iran has 25 Centuries of Persian history and culture, lots of which predates Islam for Centuries and is deeply rooted in the memory of the society.

A third pillar, which was introduced in recent history, was the influence of western culture. By saying “The West is already in Iran” Professor Menashri refers to aspects of public Iranian life such as constitutionalism and parliamentarism, which belong to the Western and not the Islamic culture. In addition to that, we have a western-modeled educational system, which teaches, for example, English and French. Moreover, regarding an Iranian nationalism, we can clearly observe a difference to main thoughts in Islam, which sees all Muslims united in the religion and not in state-borders.

This triangular identity led Professor Menashri to ask three questions to understand Iran in the modern Middle East and a global World.

*“We call everything Islamic, but in what sense is the Islamic Revolution Islamic?”* Looking at the Revolution in Iran at the end of the 1970s, ordinary people had no religious motivations to overthrow the Shah regime. Ordinary people wanted to improve the circumstances in which they lived. This is why many secular scholars do not speak about an Islamic Revolution, but about an Iranian Revolution, which led to an Islamic Regime. And in this regime, 40 years after the revolution, the circumstances for many ordinary people have not changed.

*What is Islam?* Islam as a religion goes back to the 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE when the Prophet Mohammed received the word of Allah. However, modern Christianity or modern Judaism is not the same as it was in its beginning or in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. So why should Islam be? Over more than 14 Centuries of human history, the traditions and beliefs that defined the Islamic community have changed and different interpretations and schools of Islam have developed.

The last question *“Is Iranian policy today still conform with the motivations of the Revolution in the 1970s?”*, raises a much bigger question. Revolutionary ideas must be idealistic visions because they are not limited by political means, but once someone has to govern a country pragmatism becomes a more relevant tool in politics than idealism. Iran is moving away from the aims of the revolution 40 years ago, but today’s politics have to actually answer to recent challenges.

These developments in Iran took place in a much bigger context of developments in the entire area of the Middle East. The Middle East has been experiencing one of its most critical phases and the collapse of the nation-state system. Breakdowns in Iraq, Libya and Syria have troubled the entire region. This led to a growing frustration in Middle Eastern countries. Seeing the Islam as the best religion and the countries rich of resources such as oil, it seems to be a cruel paradox for people in the Middle East that the economic and political situation is worse than in the west. Many dreams of the Arab Spring about democracy and freedom seem to be long forgotten and the idea of a pan-Arabia collapsed, bringing to internal wars and different form of governments.

Professor Menashri concluded by referring to the success of Iran in the recent years. Not that long ago Iran was surrounded by its enemies, whereas today it is influencing the entire area. This also refers to the Nuclear Deal, which opens the way for more relations with the West. Taking Europe as the driving force of the Nuclear Deal, it leaves us with the question, how much freedom Europe has under the US-led coalition to decide independently.

By Livia Bonessi and Simon Muehlbauer