

# COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

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### **The Sources of Iranian Conduct**

More than any other nation, Iran has always perceived itself as the natural hegemon of its neighborhood. Iranians across generations are infused with a unique sense of their history, the splendor of their civilization, and the power of their celebrated empires. A sense of superiority over one's neighbors, the benighted Arabs and the unsophisticated Turks, has defined the core of Persian cosmology. The Persian Empire has shrunk over the centuries, and the embrace of Persian culture faded with the arrival of the more alluring Western mores, but a sense of self-perception and an exaggerated view of Iran have remained largely intact. By dint of its history and the power of its civilization, Iranians believe that their nation should establish its regional preeminence.

Yet, Iran's nationalistic hubris is married to a sense of insecurity derived from persistent invasion by hostile forces. The humiliating conquests by the Mongol hordes and Arabs have left Iran profoundly suspicious of its neighbors' intentions and motives. Few nations have managed to sustain their cultural distinction and even absorb their conquerors as effectively as the Persians. In due course, Persian scholars, scribes and bureaucrats would dominate the courts of Arab empires and define their cultural landscape. Nonetheless, such unrelenting incursions with their prolonged periods of occupation have had a traumatic impact, leading Iranians to simultaneously feel superior and suspicious of their neighbors.

However, to ascribe Iran's foreign policy strictly to its sense of nationalism and historical grievances is to ignore the doctrinal foundations of the theocratic regime. Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the state, bequeathed to his successors an ideology whose most salient division was between the oppressors and the oppressed. Such a view stemmed from the Shiite political traditions as a minority sect struggling under Sunni Arab rulers who were often repressive and harsh. Thus, the notion of tyranny and suffering has a powerful symbolic aspect as well as practical importance. Iran was not merely a nation seeking independence and autonomy within

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the existing international system. The Islamic revolution was a struggle between good and evil, a battle waged moral redemption and general emancipation from the cultural and political tentacles of the profane and iniquitous West. Khomeini's ideology and Iran's nationalist aspirations proved reinforcing, creating a revolutionary, populist approach to regional realities.

The Islamic Republic's internationalist vision has to have an antagonist, a foil to define itself against. A caricatured concept of the West has become the central pillar of the clerical rulers' Islamist imagination. The Western powers are rapacious imperialists determined to exploit Iran's wealth for their self-aggrandizement. The Islamic themes are never far behind, as the West is also seeking to subjugate Muslims and impose its cultural template in the name of modernity. In a sense, for Iran's rulers the Shah was a mere tool of a larger Western conspiracy to plunder and abuse the Muslim world. One of the principal purposes of the Islamic Revolution was to expose the manner in which the West sustained its exploitive presence through local proxies. Disunity among Muslims, the failure of clerical class to assume the mantle of opposition, and the young people's attraction to alien ideologies are all somehow byproducts of a Western plot to sustain its dominance over Islam's realm.

### **Back to the future: Revival of the Revolution**

The 2005 Iranian presidential election constitutes a watershed event in history of Iran. The elders of the revolution now receded from the scene, and a new international orientation gradually surfaced. The 1990s are often seen as a decade when clerical reformers were seeking to reconcile democracy with religion, while the younger generation was moving away from a political culture that celebrated martyrdom and spiritual devotion. However, beneath the surface of innovation and reform there evolved a war generation—pious young men who had served on the front lines of Iran-Iraq war. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is emblematic of this new generation of leaders. A combustible mixture of Islamist ideology, strident nationalism and a deep suspicion of the West composed the global perspective of the younger conservatives—the New Right. As uncompromising nationalists, they are unusually sensitive to Iran's prerogatives and sovereign rights. As committed Islamists, they continue to see the Middle East as a battle ground between forces of secularism and Islamic authenticity. As suspicious rulers, they perceive Western conspiracies where none in fact exist.

The rise of the New Right in Iran coincided with important changes in the Middle East. As the Iraq and Afghan wars drain America's confidence and power, and as Islamist parties in Lebanon and Palestinian territories claim the mantle of leadership, Iran has emerged as an important regional player. The Arab Awakenings that have led to surge of Islamist parties will not produce clients for Iran, but perhaps interlocutors with a greater sympathy than say Hosni Mubarak. Tehran's determination to sustain its nuclear program, its quest to emerge as a powerbroker in Syria, and its holding aloft the banner of resistance against Israel are all means of asserting its regional influence. The old balance between ideology and pragmatism is yielding to one defined by power politics and religious fervor. In the early twenty-first century, Iran finally has a government that looks more to Khomeini for guidance than before.

Although many of Iran's younger generation of conservatives may have been in their twenties when Khomeini passed, his shadow looms large over their deliberations. They often

romanticize the 1980s as a pristine decade of ideological solidarity and national cohesion. They see it as an era when the entire nation was united behind the cause of the Islamic Republic and was determined to assert its independence in face of Western hostility. Khomeini and his

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disciples were dedicated public servants free of corruption and crass competition for power, traits that would characterize their successors. Self-reliance and self-sufficiency were the cherished values of a nation that sought to mold a new Middle East. Back to the future in essence is their common refrain.

In 2009 election, Iran had a stark choice. It could have opted for a return to reformist policies whereby it would seek to become part of the community of nations by conceding to the mandates of the international community or embark on its path of self-assertion and defiance. The public chose a certain path, and the governing elite another. The gap between state and society has never been wider. Today's the ruling elite's ideological preferences are not shared by a wide mass of Iranian public.

In a manner that is destabilizing and dangerous, all of Iran's relationships are being defined and distorted by the nuclear issue. Iran is at odds with its Gulf neighbors not so much because of its nuclear aspirations. For the first time in three-decades of animosity and antagonism, there is a real possibility of a military clash between Iran and Israel. Washington and Tehran seemed locked in a confrontational posture that they cannot escape given their disagreements on the nuclear issue. The European states have moved from their policies of constructive dialogue to one of sanctions and hostility due to the nuclear dispute. Even, the Russian Federation seems to be moving away from Iran as its conflict with the international community deepens. The next several years will answer the question of how this conflict can be sort out: one side backing down or a clash that would unsettle the volatile politics of the region.

In end, it is too facile to suggest that Iran has gone the way of a typical revolutionary state, namely, relinquishing its ideological patrimony for more mundane considerations. Khomeini was too much of an innovator in terms of institutions he created and the elite that he molded to see the passing of his vision. On a range of issues from its antagonism to the United States and Israel, Iran has sustained its animus long after such hostilities proved self-defeating. The theocratic regime would remain a state divided against itself, struggling to define coherent objectives; with revolutionary pretensions pitted against national interests. The Islamic Republic would alter its course, limit its horizons, and make unsavory compromises but would not completely temper its raging fires. In the end, Khomeini may not have been able to impose the totality of his vision on Iran, much less the Islamic world, but neither would he become another faded revolutionary commemorated on occasion and disregarded most of the time.

In many ways, China's experience encapsulates the paradigm of the life cycle of a non-Western revolutionary state. Initially, the new regime rejects the existing state system and norms of international behavior, especially respect for sovereignty. Foreign policy decision-making dominated by ideological considerations, even if there are concessions made to pragmatic concerns. But, over time, a clear trajectory is observed. As the next generation of leaders comes to power, the ideology is modified and later abandoned outright in favor of becoming a "normal" country, usually to promote the economic development and modernization of the country.

This continues to puzzle Western policymakers—why Iran has not yet become a post-revolutionary country. What makes this case more peculiar is that by the late 1990s, Iran did

appear to be following the footsteps of states like China and Vietnam, at least in terms of its foreign policy. Yet this evolution was deliberately halted and then more fundamentally reversed by the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Paradoxically today, it is the younger

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generation of Iranian leaders who have rejected the more pragmatic, non-revolutionary approach of their elders—such as Rafsanjani and Khatami—in favor of reclaiming the legacy of Khomeini in foreign affairs; a commitment, rooted in austere Islamist vision, to overturning the regional order and to find ways to challenge the existing international system.

In the end, the Islamic Republic has managed to maintain its revolutionary identity in face of counter-veiling pressures, elite defection, and mass disaffection. The institutional juggernaut of the revolution, an elite molded in Khomeini's image or mere domestic politics that press factions in a manner that ill-serves a country's interests are all valid. However, Iran's foreign policy has also played a crucial role in sustaining its domestic ideological identity. A narrow segment of conservative clerical elite, in command of key institutions of the state, have sought to fashion a foreign policy that would maintain the ideological character of the regime. As such, preoccupation with external determinants—changing balance of power in the region, the rise and fall of superpowers—misses a key ingredient about how the Islamic Republic thinks of itself and its role in the Middle East.

#### **Iran and the Levant**

One of the more enduring ideological aspects of the Islamic Republic's international relations has been its policy toward the Arab East. The defining pillar of Iran's approach to this region has been its intense opposition to the state of Israel and the diplomatic efforts to normalize relations between the Jewish state and its neighbors. Iran's strident ideological policy has been buttressed by strategic incentives, as its support for militant groups such as Hezbollah gives it a power to influence the direction of politics in the Levant and inject its voice in deliberations that would otherwise be beyond its control. Along this path, Iran has long made common cause with the radical Syrian regime that shares its antipathy to Israel. So long as Iran's policy toward the Arab East remains immured in its conflict with Israel, Tehran is unlikely to edge toward pragmatism and moderation in its embrace of the Assad regime.

On the surface, the high-prolife visits and the wide variety of compacts and accords can only give the impression that Iran and Syria are intimate allies sharing the same vision and embracing the same priorities. However, prior to outbreak of the popular revolt in Syria, the ties between the two states were at best an alliance of convenience based on shared fears and apprehensions. For the past three decades, Iran's persistent animosity toward Israel has coincided with Syria's quest to exert pressure on Israel as a means of recovering land lost during the 1967 war. While Iran's policy was driven by Islamist determinations, Syria's was propelled forward by cold, strategic calculations. Tehran may view Hezbollah as a vanguard Islamist force struggling against the "Zionist entity," but always harbored a degree of unease about Damascus' resolution.

All this has now altered. The Syrian civil war has made Bashar Assad far more dependent on Iran. As the Assad dynasty veers ever closer to collapse, the Islamic Republic will do all it can to sustain its ally-turned-client. The preservation of a Syrian regime, isolated from the councils of Arab states, has emerged as a critical aspect of Iran's international relations. Through dispatch of

arms, assistance and advisors, Tehran has made a commitment to sustaining the Assad war-machine. For the rulers of the Islamic Republic, Assad's Syria is the front-line of resistance toward the United States as well as forces of democratic change.

In sum, today we face in Iran a determined and disciplined adversary. The Islamic Republic is committed to advancing its nuclear program and maintaining its radical allies. To address the

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threat posed by Iran, we must appreciate that this is a multi-front struggle. The Western powers have to resist not just Iran's surging nuclear ambitions but also its attempt to subvert moderate Arab states. In many ways, Syria has emerged as the lynchpin of the new struggle for the Arab world. The collapse of the Assad regime can go far to undermine the forces of radicalism led by the clerical rulers in Tehran. It is important to note that the tide of history is working against the Islamic Republic. A regime distrusted by its neighbors and disdained by its citizens, is a challenge that a robust Western effort can surely overcome.