

Ayatollah Machiavelli

HOW ALI KHAMENEI BECAME THE MOST POWERFUL MAN IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Introduction

The June 2017 reelection of centrist Iranian president Hassan Rouhani obscured a larger story: Over the last decade Tehran's most powerful man, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has imperceptibly become the most powerful man in the Middle East. The 2003 Iraq war and 2011 Arab uprisings created unprecedented political vacuums, and Khamenei's Machiavellian combination of ruthlessness, radicalism, and realism—underpinned by a 2,500-year tradition of Persian statecraft—has helped Iran fill them.

A careful study of his three-decade reign as Supreme Leader reveals Khamenei's use of diverse and sophisticated means to pursue deeply dogmatic, authoritarian ends. Though his domestic power has expanded markedly over the years, he has proven remarkably adept at deflecting accountability by using Iranian institutions—and carefully controlled elections—to project a façade of electoral democracy. To project power abroad, Khamenei couples Iran's vast petro-funds with potent ideologies—including Shiite sectarianism, Iranian nationalism, and anti-imperialism—depending on the context. He simultaneously employs the sword of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to expand Tehran's regional power and the shield of the Iranian foreign ministry to defend against international pressure.

How did an uncharismatic seventy-seven-year-old cleric become one of the longest-serving autocrats in the world and help make Persian-Shiite Iran the most influential country in the overwhelmingly Sunni-Arab Middle East? What follows is his playbook, and how the United States should best contend with it.

The Character of the Iranian Regime

A wise man ought always to follow the paths beaten by great men, and to imitate those who have been supreme, so that if his ability does not equal theirs, at least it will savor of it.

—Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

"The essence of oligarchical rule," wrote George Orwell in 1984, "is the persistence of a certain world-view and a certain way of life, imposed by the dead upon the living." For Iranians, that world-view and way of life were the brainchild of the late Ayatollah



Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the 1979 revolution. Born in 1902, Khomeini's stubborn temperament, religious dogmatism, and deep contempt for the United States and Israel made him a natural adversary of Iran's US-aligned, modernizing monarch, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

Khomeini's anti-government sermons in Qom earned him a large following among seminary students, including a young man of modest means from the Shiite holy city of Mashhad, Ali Khamenei. While Khomeini was exiled by the shah to Iraq in 1963, his most devoted followers, including Khamenei, would spend the next decade and a half in and out of prison for their political agitation. When the mass protests that began against the shah in early 1978 culminated in his overthrow a year later, Khomeini triumphantly returned from exile to become the revolution's Supreme Leader. Khamenei, after narrowly surviving an assassination attempt that left him permanently disabled, assumed the mostly ceremonial post of president of Iran in 1981.

Two early events—the 1979 seizure of the US embassy in Tehran and Saddam Hussein's 1980 invasion of Iran—quickly shaped the character of the nascent Islamic Republic and helped cement Khomeini's authority. As radical Iranian students held fifty-two American diplomats and citizens hostage for 444 days, Tehran and Washington quickly went from strategic allies to hated enemies. This is what Khomeini intended. "The most important and painful problem confronting the subjugated nations of the world," he said in a 1980 speech, "both Muslim and non-Muslim, is the problem of America . . . America is the number-one enemy of the deprived and oppressed people of the world." Khomeini and his followers brutally crushed any dissent; the Iraqi invasion of Iran diluted internal opposition to Khomeini by fueling revolutionary and nationalist fervor.

When Khomeini died in 1989, shortly after agreeing to a cease-fire to the Iran-Iraq war, he left in his wake more than a million casualties, tens of billions of dollars in economic devastation, and no clear successors. One of Khomeini's trusted confidantes, then speaker of the parliament Hashemi Rafsanjani, claimed, without proof, that the revolutionary leader's dying wish was for Khamenei to succeed him. While Rafsanjani likely believed Khamenei would be his subordinate, the ensuing rivalry between them would endure for three decades. Khamenei buried Rafsanjani both politically and literally, when the latter died in January 2017 at age eighty-two.

Since replacing Khomeini in 1989, Khamenei has shown remarkable fidelity to his predecessor's vision for Iran, particularly four core values: justice, independence, self-sufficiency, and Islamic piety. Formulated as a reaction to political circumstances during the time of the shah in the 1960s and 1970s, these ideals continue to dominate Khamenei's political discourse. He interweaves them seamlessly: Islam embodies

justice, political independence requires economic self-sufficiency, and foreign powers are inherently hostile to an independent, Islamic Iran.

Most Iranians are either too young to remember Khomeini or were born after he died. Yet his image and legacy remain ubiquitous in nearly every Iranian public space. The country's officials continue to quote him like a religious prophet. In many ways Khomeini is reminiscent of Big Brother in Orwell's *1984*: "Big Brother is infallible and all-powerful. Every success, every achievement, every victory, every scientific discovery, all knowledge, all wisdom, all happiness, all virtue, are held to issue directly from his leadership and inspiration. Nobody has ever seen Big Brother. He is a face on the hoardings, a voice on the telescreen."

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A prince should delegate to others the enactment of unpopular measures and keep in their own hands the means of winning favors.

—Machiavelli

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran resembles a Rube Goldberg machine whose byzantine complexity cloaks its authoritarian essence. In contrast to regional monarchs and dictators whose absolute power comes with absolute accountability—as evidenced by their 2011 overthrow in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya—Khamenei has cunningly used Iran's carefully controlled elected institutions to project the popular legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and deflect accountability away from himself. And despite the exalted names of the regime's various oversight institutions—including the Guardian Council, Assembly of Experts, Expediency Council, and Judiciary—they are all led by individuals handpicked by or obsequious to him. Consequently, they have served to buttress, rather than check, Khamenei's authority.

Although the lively June 2017 reelection of President Hassan Rouhani against his hardliner competitor Ebrahim Raisi had the trappings of electoral democracy, like all Iranian elections it lacked several fundamental ingredients. In their book *Competitive Authoritarianism*, Harvard's Steven Levitsky and University of Toronto's Lucan Way write that modern democracies all meet four minimum criteria:

- 1) Executives and legislatures are chosen through elections that are open, free, and fair;
- 2) virtually all adults possess the right to vote;
- 3) political rights and civil liberties, including freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom to criticize the government without reprisal, are broadly protected;
- and 4) elected authorities possess real authority to govern, in that they are not subject to the tutelary control of military or clerical leaders.



Iran egregiously violates these criteria in that its presidential elections are a closed competition between pious Shiite males deemed sufficiently loyal to revolutionary principles. Yet not only do virtually all adult Iranians have the right to vote, they are strongly encouraged to vote to confer legitimacy on the system. “Regardless of who wins the majority of votes,” Khamenei said before Iran’s June 2017 presidential elections, “the main winner is the regime of the Islamic Republic.”

Khamenei’s ability to use the regime’s unelected institutions to expand his power, yet diffuse his accountability, has been one of the keys to his longevity. He takes power *from* them and heaps accountability *upon* them. To vet elected officials and veto legislation he can rely on the Guardian Council. To undermine the president, he can enlist the support of the Revolutionary Guards and hardline parliamentarians. To smother civil society and crush popular uprisings, he can rely on the *bassij* militia. Through it all he can maintain the appearance of a high-minded leader staying above the fray, letting others do his dirty work.

Since becoming Supreme Leader in 1989, Khamenei came to view each of Iran’s presidents—including Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammed Khatami, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—as a threat, and sought to emasculate them. Given Hassan Rouhani’s barely concealed critiques of Khamenei during his 2017 reelection campaign, this tradition will likely continue. “The main task of the leader,” Khamenei once explained, “is to safeguard the Islamic system and revolution. Administering the affairs of the country has been entrusted to government executives, but it is the responsibility of the leader to supervise the performance of different government organs and make sure that they function in line with Islamic tenets and principles of the revolution.” In essence, Khamenei has significant power with little accountability, while Iran’s presidents have accountability with insignificant power.

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When princes have thought more of ease than of arms they have lost their states. And the first cause of your losing it is to neglect this art; and what enables you to acquire a state is to be master of the art.

—Machiavelli

In their work on the “Durability of Revolutionary Regimes”—those which emerge out of “sustained, ideological, and violent struggle from below”—political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way argue that “armed liberation struggle, post-revolutionary state-building, and the violent conflicts triggered by efforts to carry out radical social change leave four legacies that enhance authoritarian durability: 1) the destruction of independent power centers; 2) cohesive ruling parties; 3) tight partisan control over the security forces; and 4) powerful coercive apparatuses.”¹ These legacies help

to “inoculate revolutionary regimes against elite defection, military coups, and mass protest—three major sources of authoritarian breakdown.”

The Islamic Republic’s ability to avoid elite defection, military coups, and mass protest can be attributed in large part to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, known as the IRGC. The IRGC was created shortly after the 1979 revolution to protect the nascent Islamic Republic from internal threats, particularly those emanating from the Iranian military, whose loyalty was in question given that it had been trained by the shah. The IRGC’s ranks soon ballooned after Saddam Hussein’s 1980 invasion of Iran; what was initially a ragtag group of hundreds of volunteers in 1979 grew to a hardened fighting force of over one hundred thousand by the time the war ended in 1989.

Over the last two decades, the IRGC has eclipsed the clergy as Iran’s most powerful political and economic institution. This is due partly to the weak clerical credentials of Khamenei. “I am an individual with many faults and shortcomings,” he said in his 1989 inauguration speech as Supreme Leader, “and truly a minor seminarian.” Given his inferior religious credentials, Khamenei began to assiduously cultivate Iran’s security and intelligence forces. Lacking the legitimacy of the seminary, he sought the legitimacy of the barracks. As commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Guards, Khamenei has carefully selected and cultivated the IRGC’s top cadres, shuffling them every several years to prevent them from establishing their own independent power base.

While some scholars have questioned whether the IRGC serves at the behest of Khamenei or vice-versa, there is not a single example of an acting Revolutionary Guard commander who has even mildly criticized Khamenei. The relationship between them has been mutually beneficial and symbiotic: politically expedient for Khamenei and economically expedient for the Revolutionary Guards.

In contrast to the Tunisian and Egyptian militaries, who in 2011 abandoned their beleaguered commanders in chief—Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, respectively—during Iran’s large-scale anti-government protests in 2009, the Revolutionary Guards stood firmly by Khamenei. Both politically and economically, the IRGC saw its fortunes intertwined with his. As a former Revolutionary Guard commander cum parliamentarian once put it—in the form of a macabre Persian proverb—“If [Khamenei] asks us to bring him a hat, we know what to bring him,” i.e., the head of the person wearing the hat.

Over the years, prominent Iranian clerics such as the late Grand Ayatollah Montazeri have strongly criticized Khamenei’s rule. While dissent among senior Revolutionary Guard commanders could be fatal to him, dissent among Qom’s senior ayatollahs is



manageable. As Joseph Stalin famously quipped when told the Pope had criticized his repression of Russian Catholics, “The Pope? How many divisions has he got?”

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There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things, because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new.

—Machiavelli

Iranian politics are authoritarian but not monolithic, and major differences exist among competing politicians about how to best sustain the Islamic Republic. One of the core dividing lines is between self-proclaimed “principlists,” led by Khamenei, who believe in strict adherence to the ideals of the 1979 revolution, and “pragmatists,” now led by President Rouhani, who favor economic interests before revolutionary ideology. Khamenei and the hard-liners want to maintain the original principles of the Islamic Republic, meaning strict adherence to Islamic mores at home and a “resistance” foreign policy abroad. Pragmatists, in contrast, believe that the policies Iran adopted in 1979—such as “Death to America”—do not necessarily serve the country’s interests four decades later.

The distinction between them has parallels with the debate among American Supreme Court justices who believe in an originalist interpretation of the Constitution (like the late Justice Antonin Scalia), and more liberal scholars (like Justice Stephen Breyer) who believe the Constitution should be a “living document” that must evolve with the times.

To the extent that pragmatists have a coherent vision for Iran, it is akin to the “China model,” i.e., authoritarian politics coupled with economic liberalization and decreased social restrictions. Khamenei, in contrast, has long warned that compromising on revolutionary principles could weaken the pillars of the Islamic Republic, just as Mikhail Gorbachev’s attempts at perestroika hastened the demise of the Soviet Union.²

Principlists and pragmatists also have meaningful foreign policy differences, most notably with regard to relations with the United States. For Iran’s pragmatists, détente with the United States is a critical prerequisite for sustained economic growth, as was the case in China. For Iran’s hard-liners, like Khamenei, enmity toward the United States is a fundamental pillar of the revolution and central to the very identity of the Islamic Republic. While Iran’s pragmatists have shown a willingness to cooperate with the United States against Sunni radicals, including the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Iran’s hard-liners have shown a willingness to cooperate with Sunni radicals against the United States.

Indeed, like most revolutionary regimes, Iran has sought and nourished external enemies for domestic expediency. Though Khamenei's hostility is cloaked in ideology, it remains driven by self-preservation. As the powerful Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati once noted, "If pro-American tendencies come to power in Iran, we have to say goodbye to everything. After all, anti-Americanism is among the main features of our Islamic state." Khamenei has been similarly blunt, saying in July 2014, "Reconciliation between Iran and America is possible, but it is not possible between the Islamic Republic and America."

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Men ought either to be well treated or crushed, because they can avenge themselves of lighter injuries, of more serious ones they cannot; therefore the injury that is to be done to a man ought to be of such a kind that one does not stand in fear of revenge.

— Machiavelli

Amid Iran's large-scale antigovernment protests in the summer of 2009, contesting the tainted reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, I asked the son of a former Iranian president to assess the stability of the Islamic Republic. "What matters in Iran," he said, "is not the breadth of the regime's support, but the depth of it. Two hundred thousand people who are willing to kill and die for you is more valuable than 10 million people who say nice things about you on Facebook."

As has commonly been observed about dictatorships, while they rule their collapse appears inconceivable; after they've fallen their collapse appeared inevitable. The above dynamic—a unified regime willing to kill to keep power presiding over a disaffected but atomized society that isn't willing to die to seize power—means that the pace of political change in Iran will be far slower than the popular demand for it.

How Iran Wields Power Abroad

He will be successful who directs his actions according to the spirit of the times, and [. . .] he whose actions do not accord with the times will not be successful. Because men are seen, in affairs that lead to the end which every man has before him, namely, glory and riches, to get there by various methods; one with caution, another with haste; one by force, another by skill; one by patience, another by its opposite; and each one succeeds in reaching the goal by a different method.

—Machiavelli

Since the inception of the 1979 revolution, there have been two consistent pillars of Iranian foreign policy: opposition to US influence and to Israel's existence. Virtually every Iranian foreign policy gambit—from Syria to Venezuela—is framed as an effort to counter these twin evils and nearly every domestic agitation is attributed



to American and Zionist plots. In the last several years, a third pillar has emerged: rivalry with Saudi Arabia. While the animosity between them is often framed in ethnic and sectarian terms—Shia/Persian Iran versus Sunni/Arab Saudi Arabia—it is driven by geopolitical differences.

Iran is unique among Middle Eastern nations in that it has three distinct yet potent means to project power: anti-imperialism, sectarianism, and nationalism. Though these ideologies can often be in competition or even conflict with one another, Iran employs them in different contexts to try to appeal to diverse constituents around the world.

The late Egyptian diplomat Tahseen Bashir famously said there were only two real nation-states in the Middle East—Egypt and Iran—while the rest were simply “tribes with flags.” Given Iran’s history, size, resources, and culture, nearly all Iranians, regardless of their political views, share this perception. A 2003 poll conducted by the University of Michigan, known as the World Values Survey, asked people about their national pride. Iran finished toward the very top, with 91 percent of Iranians surveyed claiming they are “very proud” of their nationality (for comparison, 72 percent in the United States and only 40 percent in France claimed to be “very proud”). Iran’s national pride is augmented by the youth of its neighbors, many of whom, like Saudi Arabia, have existed as nation-states for less than a century. “Of all the countries in the [Middle East],” said Henry Kissinger, “Iran has perhaps the most coherent sense of nationhood and the most elaborated tradition of national-interest-based statecraft.”

As the captains of Iran’s regional policy, Khamenei and the IRGC have capitalized on the mistakes of the United States in Iraq as well as the power vacuums created by the Arab uprisings (which Iran referred to as the “Islamic awakening”). “I have said many times that Revolutionary and Islamic concepts are like fragrance of spring flowers,” Khamenei said. “No one can avoid it: it spreads and goes everywhere. A breath increases one’s spirit and it is life-giving and is accepted everywhere it goes . . . It has gone, it has spread, and now you observe it in different countries. This thinking is working in Lebanon, it is working in Iraq; Iraqi youth are moving with their armies and are able to win this victory. It is like this in Syria, in Gaza, in Palestine, in Yemen, and God willing in Jerusalem.”

He adeptly employs both the sword—Revolutionary Guard Commander Qassem Soleimani—to spread Iranian hard power and also the shield—Foreign Minister Javad Zarif—to spread Iranian soft power and deflect foreign pressure. But while in years past Iran relied on its ideology to spread its power, today it increasingly relies on its power to spread its ideology.

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Along with opposition to the United States, the active rejection of Israel's existence has been one of the Islamic Republic's chief ideological principles. Many of Iran's revolutionary leaders—such as the father of the 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini—became politicized after the loss of Palestinian/Muslim lands to the newly founded state of Israel in 1948. Today, they continue to see Zionism and Western imperialism as two sides of the same coin. To counter Israel, Iran has generously funded and armed groups like the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah (“Party of God”), which it helped create after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Tehran has also provided extensive financial and military support to Palestinian Sunni militant groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).

Iran's opposition to Israel is not only a source of internal legitimacy for the Islamic Republic, but also a means for Shiite Persian Iran to try to transcend ethnic and sectarian divides in the predominantly Sunni Arab Middle East. For years, Tehran managed to surmount these divides with its defiance of the United States and fierce opposition to Israel, including support for Sunni Palestinian militant groups. Polls of Sunni Arab populations consistently showed Iran was among the countries they most admired.

While this narrative was effective for many years, it was punctured in 2011 when the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and the government of Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq—both close Iranian allies—crushed their predominantly Sunni Arab dissenters. Iran's complicity in these events—the Syrian slaughter in particular—has undermined its popularity and leadership in the Sunni Arab world and degraded its relationship with its key Arab rival, Saudi Arabia.

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In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, one of the hotly contested debates that took place in Washington was whether the road to peace in the Middle East went through Jerusalem or Baghdad. Advocates of the former argued that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the single most important task to bring stability and reduce radicalism in the region, while advocates of the latter argued those goals would be best achieved by removing Saddam Hussein from power and creating democracy in Iraq. Today, both in Washington and elsewhere, there is a growing consensus that the Iran-Saudi rivalry constitutes the region's greatest source of unrest and radicalism.

Contrary to media perceptions, the Saudi-Iran rivalry is less an ancient religious conflict and more a modern geopolitical proxy war cloaked in ethnic (Arab vs. Persian) and sectarian (Sunni vs. Shia) garb. The two countries are on opposing sides of the region's bloodiest conflicts, including in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, which in turn exacerbates



their mutual mistrust and animosity. Clashing regional ambitions ignite jingoism and identity politics in both nations, which further aggravates their geopolitical differences.

Saudi Arabia has spent tens of billions of dollars trying to counter Iranian influence in the region, with mixed results. Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq remain in Iran's sphere of influence, and Riyadh's military campaign against the Iranian-allied Houthi movement in Yemen has caused mass civilian casualties and fueled radical groups like al-Qaeda. Only in Bahrain has Saudi Arabia maintained a clear upper hand, though at great reputational cost.

Though Tehran and Riyadh ostensibly share a common interest in countering the Islamic State (ISIS), they blame each other for fueling it. For Tehran, ISIS is the offspring of Wahhabi ideology (the version of Islam native to Saudi Arabia) and Saudi financing, while Riyadh sees the group's emergence as a by-product of Iranian-backed repression of Sunni Arabs in Syria and Iraq. Iran blamed Saudi Arabia for a June 2017 ISIS attack in Tehran on Iran's parliament and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini which killed 17 civilians and injured dozens.

Until now, various international efforts to facilitate a Saudi-Iranian détente have been unsuccessful. A confident Tehran has not shown a strong willingness to compromise, while Riyadh seemingly believes it needs to regain regional leverage to strengthen its negotiating position. What's more, chauvinism toward the other side appears to be politically popular in both countries. "How do you have a dialogue with a regime built on an extremist ideology," Saudi Depute Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in May 2017, mirroring Iranian language about Saudi Arabia, "which says they must control the land of Muslims and spread their sect in the Muslim world?"

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Iran has been more effective than any Middle Eastern nation in filling regional power vacuums. The four Arab countries in which Tehran currently wields most influence—Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen—are engulfed in civil strife and ruled by weak, embattled central governments. In each of these contexts and elsewhere in the region, Tehran spreads its influence by 1) creating and cultivating non-state actors and militant groups; 2) exploiting the fears and grievances of religious minorities, namely Shiite Arabs; 3) fanning anger against America and Israel; and 4) influencing popular elections to ensure the victory of its allies.

Nowhere are these dynamics more evident than in Lebanon, where Iran's longtime Shiite proxy, Hezbollah, resembles a "state within a non-state," wielding outsize power (but not accountability) over Lebanese politics while continuing to be the country's most potent military power. Over the last four decades, Iran has used Hezbollah as

both a threat and a deterrent against the United States and Israel. More recently, Hezbollah has fought to ensure the survival of the Alawite-ruled al-Assad regime in Syria. The increased vulnerability of al-Assad and Hezbollah has made them more reliant on Tehran for financial support and protection, giving Iran unprecedented influence in the Levant.

Syria has been Iran's only consistent ally since the 1979 revolution. Mutual contempt for Saddam Hussein's Iraq brought them together in 1980 and mutual "resistance" against the United States and Israel have helped sustain them. Damascus provides Tehran a critical geographic link to finance and arm Hezbollah, which Iran considers one of the crowning achievements of the 1979 revolution. Since the start of the Syrian unrest in 2011, Tehran has stood by al-Assad despite numerous atrocities—including the repeated use of chemical weapons—that have led to over five hundred thousand Syrian deaths and the internal or external displacement of more than twelve million people (more than half its population). Former Syrian prime minister Riad Hijab, who defected in August 2012, went so far as to say, "Syria is occupied by the Iranian regime. The person who runs the country is not Bashar al-Assad but [IRGC commander] Qassem Suleimani."

Syria and Hezbollah are crucial elements of Iran's so-called axis of resistance against the United States and Israel. Indeed, for the Islamic Republic, the fight to save al-Assad is the fight to save Hezbollah. Former president Rafsanjani alluded to this in 2013, proclaiming, "We must possess Syria. If the chain from Lebanon to [Iran] is cut, bad things will happen." Mehdi Taeb, head of IRGC intelligence and a close adviser to Khamenei, went even further: "Syria is Iran's '35th province' . . . if we lose Syria we won't be able to hold Tehran."³

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Although one may be very strong in armed forces, yet in entering a province one has always need of the goodwill of the natives.

—Machiavelli

Given that Shiites constitute a small percentage of the largely Sunni Middle East, the region's growing sectarian tension is inimical to Iranian interests. Yet this has not stopped Tehran from seizing opportunities to exploit Arab Shiite grievances to undermine its regional nemesis, Saudi Arabia. In Yemen, Tehran has attempted to co-opt an indigenous Zaydi Shiite movement called Ansar-Allah (popularly known as the Houthis) with financial and military aid. In September 2014, Ansar-Allah took the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, and has recently been fighting back a coalition of ten countries led by Saudi Arabia. While Yemen was already often referred to as a failed state, the ceaseless violence has only worsened the country's humanitarian crisis.



In the majority-Shiite island of Bahrain, which is ruled by the US-aligned and Saudi-supported al-Khalifa monarchy, Iran also attempted to co-opt large-scale protests in 2011 spurred by the Arab spring. Bahrain has long been the subject of Iranian irredentist rhetoric, and Iranian elites openly tout their disdain of the Sunni al-Khalifas. Despite Tehran's attestations of not meddling in the island's civil unrest, Bahraini security forces have intercepted Iranian arms shipments allegedly destined for anti-government forces.

Tehran's foremost criterion in strategic allies, however, is not sectarian affiliation but ideological affinity. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, both Sunni, have been generously supported by Iran in their fight against Israel. In its efforts to counter the United States, Tehran has shown a willingness to offer discreet tactical support for ideological adversaries such as the Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan or to allow al-Qaeda finance networks and personnel in Iranian territory. Tehran has also demonstrated this same ideological flexibility on a global scale.

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In international affairs, bonds are often forged between nations who have little in common apart from a shared enemy. Iran's hostility toward the United States has won it plaudits, if not reliable alliances, with nonaligned countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, including Cuba, North Korea, Venezuela, and Belarus. In this context, Russian President Vladimir Putin has increasingly seen Iran as a "reliable and stable partner," particularly in countering the United States.⁴

Throughout history, Iran has viewed Russia as a deeply untrustworthy, predatory neighbor. Even after Iran's 1979 revolution and its divorce from the United States, Khomeini's slogan "neither East nor West" reflected his opposition to the Soviet Union and Marxist ideology. In 1988, he sent a letter to then Soviet president Gorbachev, imploring him to abandon communism and embrace Islam. "It is clear to everybody," Khomeini wrote, "that from now on communism will only have to be found in the museums of world political history, for Marxism cannot meet any of the real needs of mankind . . . I declare outright that the Islamic Republic of Iran as the greatest and most powerful base of the Islamic world can easily fill the vacuum of religious faith in your society."⁵

Over the last decade, however, growing antagonism between Washington and Moscow, coupled with Tehran's growing isolation, has created fertile ground for a Russian-Iranian partnership. Tehran has relied heavily on Russian technology and expertise for its nuclear program (although both parties frequently complain about the other). Moscow has also been willing to sell Tehran important military hardware, such as the S-300 surface-to-air missile system that Iran could ostensibly use to defend against an attack

on its nuclear facilities. During Russian President Putin's 2015 visit to Tehran, Khamenei called him an "outstanding figure on the global stage" and thanked Putin for Russia's support concerning nuclear issues. "America's long-term policies in the region are a threat to all countries," Khamenei said, "especially Iran and Russia, and we must increase our strategic and wise cooperation to counteract the US."

Most recently, Iran and Russia have combined their efforts to prevent the collapse of the al-Assad regime in Syria. Despite Iran's obsession with sovereignty, it has allowed the Russian Air Force to use its military bases to bomb the Syrian opposition.

Given the historic mistrust between Moscow and Tehran, and their natural geopolitical and geo-economic competition in Central Asia, the Middle East, and energy markets, it is a historic anomaly that today Russia is Iran's strategic ally and America its strategic adversary. But so long as opposing the United States and the Western liberal order remains a top priority for both Tehran and Moscow, their relationship will endure.

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Wise princes should take care not to drive the nobles to desperation, and to keep the people satisfied and contented, for this is one of the most important objects a prince can have.

—Machiavelli

"In no other country," wrote former secretary of state Henry Kissinger, "is it conceivable that a modern leader would initiate a major national undertaking by invoking strategic principles from a millennium-old event—nor that he could confidently expect his colleagues to understand the significance of his allusions." While Kissinger was talking about the lessons Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung drew from his country's seventh-century battle with India, invoking a millennium-old event is precisely what Khamenei did in 2013 to signal his willingness to reach a nuclear compromise.

For decades, Iran's leadership had used the example of Shia Islam's third Imam, Hussein, whose principled resistance against unjust rule led to the massacre of him and his supporters in 680. Iran's clerics had long used the story of Hussein's bravery to inspire Iranians to revolt against the shah, join the war effort against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and defy the "injustices" of the United States and Israel. The site of Hussein's martyrdom, Karbala (in present-day Iraq), remains one of Shia Islam's holiest shrines.

But in September 2013, speaking before the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Khamenei introduced a concept previously absent from his political lexicon: "heroic flexibility." It comes from the story of Hussein's older brother, Hassan, Shia Islam's second Imam, who in 661 avoided a sectarian conflict by negotiating a compromise with a rival



Sunni Muslim leader. Khamenei carefully telegraphed in his remarks that heroic flexibility did not portend a grand bargain with the United States, but merely a temporary, tactical compromise to reduce sanctions and stave off economic pressure. “A wrestler sometimes shows flexibility for technical reasons,” he said. “But he should not forget who his opponent and enemy is.”

For two decades, Khamenei had consistently argued that compromising due to external pressure projects weakness and invites even greater pressure. Mounting economic burdens and isolation, however, forced him to sign the July 2015 nuclear agreement with the United States, Russia, China, France, Germany, and the UK (known as the P5+1). The agreement, known as the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), significantly curtailed Iran’s nuclear program and subjected it to greater transparency in exchange for sanctions relief.

Though the nuclear deal was very popular with the Iranian public, Khamenei distanced himself from the decision and said it would not change Iran’s mistrust of the United States. In speeches since the nuclear deal was signed, he simultaneously warns that foreign investment in Iran is a Trojan horse for regime change and attacks the United States for policies that deter foreign countries and companies from investing in Iran. In truth, state-owned Iranian enterprises, particularly those controlled by the Supreme Leader, benefited handsomely after the nuclear deal, signing nearly 90 percent of the major contracts.⁶

While the full impact of the nuclear deal—and its sustainability—will take years to assess, it has so far been a nonproliferation success, a regional disappointment, and a domestic letdown for Iranians. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has consistently said Iran is in compliance with the agreement. Though the Obama administration argued the deal should only be judged in a nonproliferation context, it hoped that it might also serve to encourage more moderate Iranian policies both at home and in the region. So far, however, this has not been the case. Tehran’s hardliners remain firmly entrenched, and Iran’s longtime regional activities have expanded, not contracted.

Nor is the agreement on firm ground, as regional disputes between Tehran and Washington could jeopardize it. Given that Khamenei’s main motivation in signing the nuclear deal was economic duress, it remains to be seen whether Tehran will continue to feel the need to adhere to it if that duress has been significantly alleviated. Yet as China, Russia, and the European Union commonly point out, the nuclear deal is not merely a communiqué between Iran and the United States, but also Russia, China, and Europe. Given the turbulent state of the world, there is little global appetite to reopen another potential source of conflict.

US Policy Options: Cooperate, Contain, or Confront?

He who believes that new benefits will cause great personages to forget old injuries is deceived.

—Machiavelli

Since September 11, 2001, Iran's size, geostrategic location, natural resources, ideology, and ambitions have made it central to at least eight major US foreign policy challenges, including Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, terrorism, energy security, nuclear proliferation, and cyber-security. On these issues and others, Tehran has often defined its interests in direct opposition to Washington. This creates a quandary for any US administration: while shunning Iran will not ameliorate these issues, the Obama administration's eight-year efforts to engage Tehran on these issues also produced few successes. The Islamic Republic of Iran is too big to isolate, too rigid to bend, and too pragmatic to break.

Since 1979, nearly every US administration, apart from George W. Bush's, saw it in America's national interests to try to mend ties with Tehran. Despite numerous common foes—including the USSR, Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and now ISIS—these attempts have proven unsuccessful. Ronald Reagan wrote three letters to Iran's leaders, urging them to improve ties with the United States. The Iranian government never responded. George H. W. Bush once spent twenty-nine minutes talking on the phone with Hashemi Rafsanjani, his Iranian counterpart, only to find out that it was a prank call from an Iranian seeking to embarrass Rafsanjani. Bill Clinton loitered in the basement of the United Nations during the 1999 General Assembly hoping for an encounter with the reformist Iranian president Mohammad Khatami, who demurred.

The last two decades of US policy toward Iran shows Washington's limited ability—using either coercion or engagement—to change the nature or behavior of the Iranian regime. Between 2000 and 2008 the George W. Bush administration made more efforts than any previous administration to intimidate Tehran militarily (“All options are on the table”) and support Iranian democracy activists. Yet during this period, Iran relentlessly attacked US forces in Iraq—reportedly causing more than a thousand US casualties—and the country's reform movement withered. Between 2009 and 2016, Barack Obama's White House, in contrast, tried harder than any previous administration to improve relations with Tehran, including numerous letters Obama wrote to Khamenei. Yet Iran's hostility toward the United States and its longtime regional policies remained unchanged.

Among the important lessons of the 2015 nuclear deal is that the policies of coercion and engagement are often complementary, not contradictory. Obama's unprecedented but unreciprocated efforts to engage Iran helped convince Brussels, Beijing, and



Moscow that the obstacle to a nuclear deal lies in Tehran, not Washington. From the outset of his presidency, Obama was keen to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran, but Tehran did not begin to seriously engage until several years later, when it faced a global economic embargo. In the aftermath of the nuclear deal, the Obama administration only employed one aspect of this formula—engagement—to try to compel Iran to reconsider its longtime regional policies. In contrast to the enormous costs Tehran endured for its nuclear intransigence, it has paid little penalty for its regional policies.

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In his 2001 book *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* Kissinger wrote, “There are few nations in the world with which the United States has less reason to quarrel or more compatible interests than Iran.” Yet, Kissinger added years later, “Iran must decide whether it’s a nation or a cause.”

The reality is that Iran’s top leadership, first Khomeini and now Khamenei, have long been motivated—against the better judgement of many of their compatriots—by revolutionary fervor rather than national interests. While US policy cannot change this reality, it’s important to understand that Iran’s motives are both deeply ideological and politically expedient. As George Kennan once wrote about the Soviet Union, “There is ample evidence that the stress laid in Moscow on the menace confronting Soviet society from the world outside its borders is founded not in the realities of foreign antagonism but in the necessity of explaining away the maintenance of dictatorial authority at home.” The challenge of Iran policy, hence, is not diagnosing the problem, but devising effective prescriptions.

The US policy debate on Iran has commonly vacillated between two opposing views: the hope to change Iranian behavior and the hope to change the Iranian regime. Yet both rapprochement with Iran and regime change in Iran are aspirations, not policies, and beyond the control of the United States. To conceive an effective strategy toward Iran, US policymakers should first try to address the following questions:

- Where can the United States cooperate with Iran; how and where should it counter Iran; and what is the most effective method of containing Iran?
- How important is it to the United States to preserve the nuclear deal with Iran?
- What coercive measures against Iran would risk jeopardizing the nuclear agreement?
- What additional policies—such as naval interdiction—can effectively counter and deter malign Iranian activities, such as arming regional militant groups?

- Should the United States use military force to counter Iran’s regional proxies, including al-Assad?
- How are US interests impacted by the Iran-Saudi rivalry? What is the most effective way to quell tension between the two countries?
- How can the United States work with European and Asian partners who have commercial relations with Iran to ensure their commercial activities with Tehran do not simply enhance the wealth, power, and repressive apparatus of Iranian government monopolies, cronies, and Revolutionary Guard entities?
- Is Iran an ally or adversary of the United States in the fight against Sunni radical groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda? Does enlisting the support of Shia radicals—including Hezbollah, Iraq’s “Popular Mobilization Forces,” and the Revolutionary Guards—to counter Sunni radicals decrease or increase Sunni radicalism?
- What is the most effective and responsible way for the United States to support civil society and human rights in Iran?

While these questions have no easy answers or solutions, they are essential to probe in order to formulate the right policy balance. In lieu of a grand strategy, our Iran policy must be sophisticated and nimble enough to cooperate when possible, counter when necessary, and contain intelligently, until the Islamic Republic’s internal contradictions force a course correction. “For no mystical, Messianic movement,” wrote Kennan, “can face frustration indefinitely without eventually adjusting itself in one way or another to the logic of that state of affairs.”

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Given the opaque and paranoid nature of the Iranian system and its inaccessibility to independent journalists, scholars, and analysts, we must be humble about our understanding of Iranian political, social, and economic trends. While Khamenei and his IRGC backers appear firmly entrenched now, we know from history that authoritarian stability can be a chimera. In a visit to Tehran one year before the Iranian revolution, Jimmy Carter famously declared it to be an “island of stability” in a turbulent sea. More recently, shortly after the fall of Tunisian autocrat Ben-Ali in 2011, longtime Egyptian Minister of Intelligence Omar Suleiman calmly dismissed any prospects for contagion. Weeks later the three-decade reign of Egyptian autocrat Hosni Mubarak was over.

This domestic uncertainty is coupled with a global economy undergoing profound technological transformation. For decades, the Islamic Republic’s domestic



mismanagement and foreign policy radicalism have been subsidized by the country's enormous oil and gas wealth. As machines increasingly replace laborers, and alternative energies increasingly replace fossil fuels, Iran's longtime practices will prove more costly to sustain.

The paradox of Iran is that of a society which aspires to be like South Korea—proud, prosperous, and globally integrated—but which is hindered by hard-line revolutionary elites whose ideological rigidity and militarism more closely resemble isolated North Korea. Unless and until the economic interests of the Iranian nation take precedence over the ideological prerogatives of the Islamic Republic, Iran will remain what it has been over the last four decades: a country with enormous but unfulfilled potential.

Ibn Khaldun, the fourteenth-century North African philosopher, believed that empires were built and destroyed over three generations. The first-generation founders are hungry, determined, and vigilant. The second generation manages to preserve what it witnessed the first generation build. By the third generation, the ruling elite is composed of palace-reared princelings who lack the grit necessary to maintain what their grandparents' generation built. The Islamic Republic of Iran is currently transitioning from its first-generation founders to its second-generation managers. While there are no guarantees that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei will one day be succeeded by a more enlightened, tolerant leader, what's clear is that so long as he remains at the helm, Iran's most valuable export will continue to be not its oil, but its people.

NOTES

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The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world. Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.

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