



Is Iran an Ideological State?

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“All politics are local.”

—Tip O’Neill, *Speaker of the US House of Representatives, 1977 to 1987*

Pillars of Iranian foreign policy

Iran’s foreign policy has generally been characterized by continuity in the postrevolutionary period, yet its motives have transformed over time. This research paper argues that Islamic fundamentalism goaded and motivated foreign policy in the first decade of the Islamic Republic of Iran. After the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the country’s foreign policy maintained a fundamentalist posture, but was forcefully driven by policies to guarantee its political survival. From 1989 to the present, core revolutionary elites have applied ideology and religious symbolism to cloak policies to avoid normalization with the United States, pursue an anti-Israeli struggle to reinvigorate confrontation with Washington, and seek leverage vis-à-vis the United States and Israel by nurturing proxies, an extensive missile industry, and a robust nuclear program. These components of leverage constitute a playbook to practice deterrence, with occasional compromises to circumvent large-scale military confrontation with the United States.

Realpolitik is the underpinning of Iran’s foreign policy. Regime security is the core preoccupation of statecraft in Iran. All other essentials of modern governance—such as economic growth, net-zero policies, infrastructure development, research and development at higher-level institutions, civil society, and entertainment—are either downplayed or considered only insofar as they do not interfere with concerns about survival and security. Below, an analysis of Iran’s foreign policy highlights the dominance of ideology in the first decade following the revolution and its replacement by survival calculations over the past three decades. Moreover, this paper provides explanations about the pivotal role of the nuclear program in Iran’s security doctrine, while also addressing the institutional structure of the foreign policy decision-making process.

Ideology and Iranian foreign policy: 1979–1989

In line with the political tradition of other Middle Eastern countries, political outcomes in Iran since the 1978–1979 revolution involve the temperament, belief structure, and predilections of two men: Ayatollahs Khomeini and Ali Khamenei. The role of Islamic fundamentalism, epitomized by Khomeini’s character and worldview, is easily traceable in the conduct of both domestic and foreign policies, particularly in the first decade following the Iranian

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revolution. Those viewing Islamic fundamentalism as the ideology of the revolution have historically been a minority, yet boisterous, voice within the clerical community. The proponents of this view formed the religious opposition to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime, beginning in the early 1960s. The shah's support of Western urban lifestyle and pre-Islamic interpretation of Persian patriotism sidelined, and at times denigrated, two other prevalent political and social narratives in the country—Marxism among the intelligentsia and Islamism within the clerical community and in the wider public.¹

While Iranian Marxists opposed to the shah settled in Europe, the Islamic fundamentalists ended up in Syria, southern Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, and Iraq. Though Marxism and Islamism represented opposite worldviews, they held a common enemy: the Pahlavi dynasty. As early as 1960, the two opposition networks, with their many splintered groups, began to mobilize forces and launched a widespread campaign against the Pahlavi modernization project—both inside and outside of the country. In Iraq and Western Europe, and about a decade and a half before 1979, the ideological basis of the Iranian revolution was already being developed.

The scattered opposition to the regime of the shah, who ruled the country from 1942 through 1979, was acutely idealistic and anti-imperialist, part of a pervasive trend in the Global South. Predictably, these common strands of the Islamist and Marxist narratives reinvigorated their robust determination to oust the Iranian government. The two camps both concentrated on anti-Americanism and anti-Israeli crusades and, for almost two decades, joined forces to overthrow the monarchy. In the 1960s and the 1970s, Iranian fundamentalists were mostly associated with Palestinian revolutionaries and Arab leftists. During these years, both the cleric and non-cleric members of the shah's religious opposition were acquainted with Egyptian fundamentalist authors such as Sayyid Qutb and Hassan al-Banna. At the same time, interpretations of Iran's revolutionary leaders about the West, the international system, Israel, and Arab governments substantially

converged with those of the fundamentalist discourse in the Arab world during the 1950s and 1960s.²

Though Shia and Sunni clerics can differ on theological matters, it is rather ironic that Shia and Sunni fundamentalists converge in their interpretations of Middle Eastern and global politics. While in exile, beginning in the early 1960s, Iranian fundamentalists were schooled in literature penned by Sunni fundamentalists like Qutb, as well as the plight and the slogans of the Palestinian liberation movement. The Palestinian cause was considered the justice project of political Islam, and liberating Palestine—called *Qalb al Umma al-Nabid*, or the bleeding heart of the Muslim community—emerged as a central piece in the agenda of all militant groups subscribing to political Islam. Moreover, the Nakba (the 1948–1949 “mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians”) became the mother of all injustice symbols, the rallying cry of Islamism, and one of the most emotion-laden issues for Muslims.³ Iranian Islamists who fled the country in the 1960s and 1970s internalized the Palestinian cause as part of their political education in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. Even as early as 1953, Navab Safavi, an Iranian militant Islamist who had earned Khomeini's support, traveled to Egypt at the invitation of the Muslim Brotherhood, presumably to meet with Qutb.⁴

There are profound parallels between the literature produced by Qutb and the worldview of Iranian Islamists, particularly Khomeini. “No Islamic fundamentalist has enjoyed recognition in Iran as much as Sayyid Qutb,” Yusuf Unal points out.⁵

As part of a wider political and ideological movement, the translations of Sayyid Qutb's works in Iran were instrumental in promoting resistance to contemporary Western ideologies and to the secular Pahlavi regime, which strove to implement anti-clerical reforms. Qutb's works functioned in the background of the Iranian Revolution...and served to “construct identities and affiliations” among Iranian Islamists...By

1 Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 76–84, 152–154, 155–156.

2 Mahmood Sariolghalam, “Iran's Playbook in the Arab World: Ideology or Domestic Policy?” *Middle East Monitor*, October 24, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-playbook-arab-world-ideology-or-domestic-politics>.

3 “The Palestinian Question,” United Nations, last visited June 10, 2024, <https://www.un.org/unispal/about-the-nakba/#:~:text=The%20Nakba%2C%20which%20means%20%E2%80%9Ccatastrophe,the%201948%20Arab%20Israeli%20war;Mbaye%20Lo,Political%20Islam,Justice%20and%20Governance> (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 360–361.

4 Ladan Boroumand and Roya Boroumand, “Terror, Islam and Democracy” in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Daniel Brumberg, *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Hopkins Press, 2003), 287–288, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/terror-islam-and-democracy/>.

5 Yusuf Unal, “Sayyid Qutb in Iran: Translating the Islamist Ideologue in the Islamic Republic,” *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 1, 2 (November 2016), 42, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316115723_Sayyid_Qutb_in_Iran_Translating_the_Islamist_Ideologue_in_the_Islamic_Republic.

teaching Islam as a total ideology against other contending systems of thought...Qutb's works were a ready-made source of inspiration and political mobilization.⁶

The Iranian religious revolutionaries regarded the Westerners in general, and Americans in particular, as epitomizing “the other,” and argued they were solely interested in the exploitation of Muslims and the dissemination of secular concepts and customs among Iran's Muslim majority. Islamists viewed governance by the Pahlavi dynasty as following imperialists' interests, carrying no homegrown identity, and plagued by corruption and authoritarianism. They viewed sharia as much closer to home than modernization and democracy.⁷ Moreover, they argued that the Pahlavi dynasty pursued an alien project of de-Islamizing Iranian society and culture. These views were rooted in an ideology that prompted a “return to self,” which meant Islamic identity and, ultimately, Islamic governance.⁸

For those who followed the writings and the political activities of Muslim activists, this Islamic revolution was not a surprise but a natural culmination of almost a century of debates and struggle. The tension between religion and modernity had been alive and well for decades throughout the Muslim world. The historian Bernard Lewis believed that, for almost two centuries, the challenge of Western culture was a major subject of discussion in the Muslim world.⁹ Fundamentalists asked, “Who should Muslims be loyal to?” They explicitly refuted the notion of nationalism and patriotism, which they interpreted as pagan, divisive, and the political impact of Western culture.¹⁰ Khomeini rejected Western thought and capitalist practices. In his book *The Revelation of Secrets*, he condemned co-ed schools, cinema, foreign laws, foreign hats, and the removal of veils, arguing that these things were forbidden in divine law, and referred to “capitalism as the corruptor of the Earth.”¹¹ During his long exile, he

developed his ideas on Islamic governance into his theory of the Mandate of the Jurist (*Velayateh Fagheeh*), which was published in Beirut in 1970.¹² His profound contempt for the West manifested itself when he referred to the Great Wall of China, and how he hoped such a wall would be erected, both on land and in the air, between Muslims and the West. In this lecture, he encouraged the youth to forget the West.¹³

This perception of the West can be juxtaposed with the common perspective of Qutb and Pakistani Islamic fundamentalist Abdul-Ala Mawdudi, who believed that any society that is not Muslim is inflicted with *Jahiliyya* (an age of ignorance) and that any society in which anything other than God is worshipped is ignorant.¹⁴ Khomeini, Qutb, and Mawdudi all held a vision of Islam as a political movement and called for the establishment of an Islamic state.¹⁵ All three spoke in simple vocabulary to their particularly young audiences and attacked both the West and nationalism. They scorned political parties because party quarrels disturbed the unity of the community of the faithful and weakened the strength of Muslims in their struggle against the West. They contended there was no necessity to seek European values as a basis for social order because Islamic principles were universal.

This highly politicized narrative was disseminated at a time when nationalist ideology predominated most Muslim societies. These nationalist movements of the 1950s and 1960s, during the time of decolonization, were led by Western-educated nationalists who embraced modernity and secularism while ostracizing religious advocates and the clerical community. At the height of such nationalist tendencies, Qutb's principal works, *In the Shadow of the Quran and Signposts on the Road* (written in the 1960s), emerged as bestsellers all over the Muslim world.¹⁶ Qutb left behind the greatest ideological imprint on the Islamic movement by far, which began in the Sunni world but ultimately triumphed in a Shia country.¹⁷

6 Ibid., 37.

7 Bernard Lewis, *The End of Modern History in the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2011), 11.

8 Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran: 1953–2000* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 50–55, 66–69.

9 Lewis, *The End of Modern History in the Middle East*, 9.

10 Ibid., 60.

11 Said Amir-Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19; Farhad Rezaei, *Iran's Foreign Policy after the Nuclear Agreement: Politics of Normalizers and Traditionalists* (Cham, Switzerland: Macmillan, 2019), 21.

12 Amir-Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 21.

13 Ibid., 22.

14 Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002), 47.

15 Ibid., 23.

16 Ibid., 24–28.

17 Amir-Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 29.

Moreover, Qutb branded jihad as a mechanism for opposing oppressive rulers and global powers. He rejected reason and promoted submission to God's will. According to the twenty letters of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, in 1928, "Islam is a religion and a state, a sword and a Quran. The concept of the nation-state and *wataniyya* (patriotism) are subsumed in the notion of the umma: its border is Islam and its nationalism is defined by what they term *al-nizam al-Islami*—the system of Islam."¹⁸ These assertions and interpretations of Islam flawlessly align with the pronouncements of Iranian postrevolutionary foreign policy. In response to US military threats during the hostage crisis, Khomeini defied the United States, claiming that "[President Jimmy] Carter must know an attack on Iran is an attack on all Islamic countries. The Muslims around the world are not indifferent in this matter...it has left so deep an effect in America."¹⁹ Unlike Western notions of the citizen and the nation-state, fundamentalism (as outlined by al-Banna) tends to divide societies into Muslim and non-Muslim—with Muslims called upon to distance themselves from non-Islamic contexts.²⁰ Their dignity will be safeguarded only when they refuse to follow those who do not represent divine law, whether an internal secular despot or foreign government. Because sovereignty belongs to God in this view, parliaments and other consultative bodies exist exclusively to enforce the laws of the divine legislator.²¹

Attaching this level of essentialism to Islam was espoused earlier by Qutb, an Egyptian whose ideas overlapped with those of Khomeini. In his book *World Peace and Islam*, Qutb argued that Islam is the only valid and original guarantor of world peace. He furthermore noted that Islam has its own relationship with the universe, its own law of life, and its own understanding of the origins of mankind. He described this as the foundation of "the nature of peace in Islam, it hedges on deep roots; making peace the constant norm, and war then becomes the exception."²²

Iran's rhetoric and its conduct of foreign policy, particularly toward the Muslim and the Western worlds, can be traced to Qutb's ideas as early as the 1960s. Qutb observed that,

"Jihad imposes upon Muslims the responsibility to defend all Muslims, to protect their rights to propagate the faith, and to promote the divine authority on Earth." Muslims, he argues, should establish the great, overarching rule of justice on Earth. Qutb belonged to the literal school of justice, which equates justice with the right and the right only with Islam. This formulation dismisses all human agency in negotiating with a perceived unjust situation beyond making it just. Qutb was the forerunner of using jihad to enforce the right, which is one of the characteristics of militant Islam.²³ It seems logical to trace the idea of exporting the revolution to these propositions. The ideological principles of Iran's foreign policy lie with how Islamic sharia defines the concept of sovereignty. Qutb vehemently objected to the idea of popular sovereignty. Mawdudi's conceptualization is even more transparent.

God only is the real sovereign; all others are merely his subjects. All legislative power too vests in God. The believers cannot frame any law for themselves nor can they modify any law which God has laid down even if the desire for such legislation or for a change in it is unanimous... Islam is not democracy; for democracy is the name given to that particular form of government in which sovereignty ultimately rests with the people, in which legislation depends both in its form and content on force and direction of public opinion, and laws are modified and altered to correspond to changes on that opinion.²⁴

This conceptualization of state and governance cannot conceive of separation of powers; leadership is unitary and all branches of the state follow centralized instructions. During Khomeini's leadership in the first decade of the revolution, ideological principles of governance were implemented both at home and abroad. Political institutions were launched to run the affairs of the state, mostly managed by senior clerics who were well-versed in religion. The educational system, entertainment industry, and social interactions were profoundly influenced by ideological persuasions. In foreign affairs,

18 Lo, *Political Islam, Justice and Governance*, 97.

19 Amin Saikal, *Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 81.

20 Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran*, 33.

21 Ibid., 132–133.

22 Lo, *Political Islam, Justice and Governance*, 16, 23.

23 Ibid., 152, 207.

24 Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran*, 45–46.

institutional linkages were established with all liberation movements, particularly with those in the Middle East and of Palestinian and Shia streaks. Iran emerged as an anti-Western country that also defied the communist world, introducing an alternative to both Western capitalism and atheistic communism. Under Khomeini's politically determined and ideologically focused leadership, ideology pervaded all walks of life.

Ideology and Iranian foreign policy after 1989

Following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini on June 3, 1989, power structures and decision-making procedures in Iran were transformed. Unlike during the first decade of the revolution, there was no centralized charismatic leadership. New power centers emerged and jockeying for influence became rampant. The 1960s postcolonial autarchic sentiments of self-sufficiency and absolute sovereignty permeated state agencies and bureaucrats' mental constructions. One president after another rose to power fanaticizing about new models of development and philosophies of international behavior, commonly in defiance of global norms and common practices. Through four presidencies spanning more than thirty-two years (1989–2021), Iran's economic standing steadily declined, leading to the emigration of roughly 5.2 million people.

The ambitions and pragmatism of Hashemi Rafsanjani, whose presidency began in 1989 and ended in 1997, posed the most formidable challenge to the political and institutional positions of the ruling revolutionary class. The battle did not appear to involve ideas and worldviews, but persons and groups seeking statesmanship and political consolidation. In other words, once the leader of the revolution was deceased, the children of the revolution, like those of all revolutions before, confronted one another. Unlike what Henry Kissinger noted in a 2006 piece in the *Washington Post*, *the contradiction did not involve those who sought to represent a state and others seeking to defend a cause*.²⁵ Rather, it was a zero-sum game for leadership and influence. For centuries, politics in Iran meant clientelism, and postrevolutionary Iran epitomized another era of this long-held tradition. Survival, continuity of rule, and secure successions have historically

been the main preoccupations of Iranian leaders. In the absence of established rules, political parties, and a social contract, how to survive in power and how the succession should be organized are, and have been, the most controversial issues in Iran's political history. Khomeini's charisma and unquestionable revolutionary authenticity brushed aside these dilemmas from 1979 to 1989, but the old predicament reappeared after his death.

During his leadership, Khamenei, the second supreme leader of the Islamic Republic, consistently referred to the "internal enemies of Islam." The revolutionary class argued that preserving revolutionary values was vital and should never lose priority to freedom and development. Its leaders further contended that democracy is just another form of dictatorship built on capital, consumerism, and selfishness. They argued that democracy is simply reactionary—a return to an age of ignorance, paganism, and disbelief. The ruling revolutionary class in Iran maintained that political and economic openness in Iran are antithetical to the revolution.²⁶ It has consistently tapped into and recruited youth from provinces to reinforce its ranks, and integrated ideology with employment. Deeply worried about velvet revolutions, Khamenei once declared, "In the present postmodern colonial era, the arrogant powers are trying to influence other nations with the help of their agents, by spending money and through propaganda tactics and colorful enticements."²⁷ He also said, "any relations would provide the possibility to the Americans to infiltrate Iran and...relations with America have no benefit for the Iranian nation now...Undoubtedly, the day relations with America prove to be beneficial for the Iranian people I will be the first one to approve of it."²⁸ He also issued a fatwa on December 28, 2008, declaring anyone who died defending the Palestinians a martyr in jihad.²⁹

While the United States during the Bill Clinton administration adopted a dual-containment policy, then in the George W. Bush years included Iran in the "axis of evil" and sanctioned Iran's economy heavily, Tehran developed its own containment policy. The Khatami presidency (1997–2005) and its overtures to the West were perceived by the revolutionary class as endangering the foundation of the polity. Therefore, the revolutionary

25 Henry A. Kissinger, "The Next Steps with Iran," *Washington Post*, July 31, 2006, <https://www.henryakissinger.com/articles/the-next-steps-with-iran>.

26 Amir-Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 66–67, 107.

27 Ibid., 178.

28 Karim Sadjadpour, "Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 10, 2008, 17, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2008/04/reading-khamenei-the-world-view-of-irans-most-powerful-leader?lang=en>.

29 Amir-Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 185.

class pursued a hedging strategy with both internal and external components, including ideological indoctrination of a select young group, revival of the nuclear program, launch of a robust missile-development program, and vast regional proxy consolidation.

Notably, during the Iran-Iraq War the revolutionary leadership was convinced of the utility of returning to the nuclear program due to Iran's vast logistical shortcomings and lack of sufficient deterrent force.³⁰ If this doctrine had not already been put in place, the Khatami presidency, US adventurism in the Middle East after 9/11, and the Iranian presidential election of 2009 would have likely tipped the balance in favor of the reformist camp in Iran. Iran's vast regional involvement and retaliation capabilities delayed potential US military attacks on Iran and seemed to encourage Washington to follow a path of diplomacy with Tehran when the Islamic Republic demonstrated occasional conciliation. While the strategy was to keep the United States at bay, tactics used confusion and procrastination to lessen the odds of US aggression. The Islamic Republic has engaged in incessant nuclear negotiations with the United States, Europeans, China, and Russia for more than two decades and through four diverse governments. It appears that the revolutionary class utilizes these negotiations to preserve areas of contention with Washington.

The governments of Mohammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani, who took office in 2013, eased tensions with the Arab world but failed to transform relations with the West. At times, such as right after 9/11 and in 2011 at the height of US economic sanctions, Iran made concessions to the United States that fell short of normalization. From the perspective of a national security doctrine, both Khatami's dialogue of civilizations and Rouhani's later détente and moderation were neatly packaged psychological tools of appeasement. The contentious Iranian presidential election of 2009 was the culmination of the standoff between the revolutionary and nonrevolutionary factions that existed for the entire history of the Islamic Republic. Had presidential candidate (and former prime minister) Mir-Hossein Mousavi become president, the entire polity would have likely experienced a total transformation given his powerful alliance with Khatami and Rafsanjani. Instead, the revolutionary class was hardened after 2009 and far

more convinced of its invincibility. The anti-US policy, missile program, and regional presence were further reinvigorated after this period. As Georgetown University Associate Professor Daniel Brumberg states:

Liberalized autocracy has proven far more durable than once imagined. The trademark mixture of guided pluralism, controlled elections and selective repression...is not just a survival strategy adopted by authoritarian regimes but rather a type of political system whose institutions, rules and logic defy any linear model of democratization.³¹

After 2009, the revolutionary class focused on a two-tiered strategy of containing and de-energizing both pro-US and pro-Western forces at home and raising the costs of a potential US military intervention in Iran through Tehran's extensive regional involvement and a robust nuclear program. Thanks to this policy, Iran's influence now extends from Afghanistan to Lebanon. Syria emerged as the epicenter of Iran's regional strategy because it allowed Tehran's easy access to Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. It also equipped Iran with territorial proximity to Israel for purposes of intimidation and measured confrontation. Any US and/or Israeli military designs on Iran would be then met with Iran's proxy arm in the region. As a pillar of Iran's regional strategy, the supreme leader has openly called on the United States to leave Syria and Iraq. In line with revolutionary credentials, Islamic fundamentalism is utilized as the organizing principle in the delineation of this strategy. The anti-West campaign is also justified on religious grounds. Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, a senior authority on Islamic fundamentalism, once professed that Islam and democracy are incompatible—and he proclaimed that relations with the United State could be blasphemous.³² Additionally, as one revolutionary politician and former minister asserted, "Any political concession will lead to total loss. Our continued power dictates that we avoid negotiations with the United States."³³

30 Rezaei, *Iran's Foreign Policy after the Nuclear Agreement*, 5.

31 Daniel Brumberg, "The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy" in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Daniel Brumberg, *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Hopkins Press, 200), 35.

32 Amir-Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 22, 44.

33 Mohsen Rafikdoost, Asr Iran website, December 20, 2020.

law. Not long after, on January 7, 1989, Khomeini issued a public letter in which he affirmed the preeminence of the revolutionary logic of the Islamic state over sharia.³⁸ In this context, one author said, “Ayatollah Khomeini enunciated in 1988 that the survival of the Islamic state is the supreme value to which all other religious obligations must be subordinated.”³⁹ One can perhaps interpret Khomeini’s statement as indicating that the practitioners of the Islamic Republic of Iran can, and should, operate with a logic of preserving the system under any circumstances and challenges. The ayatollah’s decision to accept the United Nations-managed ceasefire and end the war with Iraq in 1987 could be a prime example of this pronouncement during his own lifetime. Nonetheless, after his passing, instances abound that reflect this practical worldview.

The nuclear program places the Iranian state at odds with both the United States and Israel, let alone other countries in the region and the European Union. It also is evident that neither China nor Russia is interested in Iran having nuclear weapons.⁴⁰ The dilemma is that as long as Iran does not change its attitude toward Israel, no US administration will be politically able to normalize relations with the Islamic Republic. On the surface, the Israeli issue appears to be an element of Islamic fundamentalism, but from another angle, perpetuating the conflict with Israel is a reliable policy that preserves enmity with the United States and obstructs its entanglements with Iran. Nuclear negotiations have consistently been fraught because they do not address the foundation of Iranian-American confrontation—Iran’s denial of Israel. Iran has spent some \$50 billion on the nuclear program, which appears to have far-reaching deterrence capacity.⁴¹

Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Iran was further emboldened to maintain the essentials of its nuclear program. Tehran appears to have concluded that the nuclear program is a quintessential element of its national security doctrine and regime survival. Therefore, ideology is insignificant in the revolutionary class’s political calculations to preserve the nuclear program.

Obviously, if at some point Iran decides to normalize relations with the United States, total transparency—enforced by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)—would be at the top of the agenda in negotiations.

Ideology and foreign policy decision-making structure

The power structure experienced a major transformation after 1989. Since then, domestic political rivalries have become far less ideological and more about survival, relevance, status, prestige, and power. Iranian politics rarely focused on constitutionalism, institutionalism, and bureaucratization; politics primarily meant rivalry between men and tribes.⁴² Against this backdrop, no president in the history of the Islamic Republic has attempted to reach rapprochement with the United States as much as President Rafsanjani. His repeated and consistent posturing and overtures to Washington alarmed the revolutionary class. While Rafsanjani sought rapprochement with the United States, the supreme leader—as early as 1990, only one year into his leadership—called on Muslims and the revolutionary class to wage jihad against the United States—condemning Israel, Zionism, and US imperialism.⁴³ In all domains of national politics, national security, and foreign policy, the key question in the post-1989 period involved attitudes and policies toward the United States. During Friday prayer sermons, Rafsanjani argued the revolution was a step to accomplish national economic development, enforce justice, and improve the conditions of life, implying revolution belonged to history.⁴⁴

The supreme leader, however, opposed him implicitly by promoting the belief that the revolution was well and alive, and would never vanish.⁴⁵ If Rafsanjani had succeeded, he would have been able to construct a large coalition of the educated, professional groups, entrepreneurs, the middle classes, and the enlightened, thereby outmaneuvering members of the revolutionary class who despised these anti-revolutionary forces. The supreme leader

38 Oliver Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1994) 177.

39 Abdelwahab el-Affendi, “The Elusive Reformation” in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Daniel Brumberg, *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Hopkins Press, 2003), 254–255.

40 Mahmood Sariolghalam, “Diagnosing Iran’s Emerging Pivot toward Russia and China,” Middle East Institute, June 1, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/diagnosing-irans-emerging-pivot-toward-russia-and-china>.

41 Reza Mansoori, January 26, 2022, <https://www.ensafnews.com/326145/توانستی%۸۰%۸۰ای-شد-می%۸۰%۸۰با-پولی-که-خرج-هسته>.

42 Mahmood Sariolghalam, *The Evolution of State in Iran: A Political Culture Perspective* (Kuwait: Strategic Studies Center of Kuwait University, 2010), 5–10.

43 Amir-Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 139–140.

44 Akbar Rafsanjani, May 16, 1997, <https://rafsanjani.ir/search?from=618149904&to=872335104&cat=30&sort=exact-phrase>.

45 Amir-Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 144–146.

consolidated the revolutionary and military clusters to ostracize Rafsanjani. By doing so, he effectively disgraced the idea of normalization with the United States. In other words, a group's position on the United States determined whether it would remain in power and sit on the bench. Normalization with Washington would have gradually shifted the balance of domestic politics in favor of the modernizers, while distance from Washington kept US hard and soft power outside of the body politic of Iran. Liberal, reformist, and developmentalist factions among the elites kept returning to politics through presidential elections, but none could upset the foreign policy pillars of the revolutionary class.

The surprise victory of reformist Khatami in 1997 was a daunting event for the revolutionary class, but it consolidated and institutionalized its grip on power during his presidency. Beginning in the latter part of the 1999 and two years into Khatami's presidency, Iran began to put in place a national security doctrine that subordinated economic growth and development. In an era of economic globalization, Iran's prioritization of national security to sideline pro-Western camps led to Iran's deglobalization. The bifurcated nature of Iran's domestic politics led to the prioritization of national security with strong ideological window dressing. While almost all countries rushed to a foreign policy based on their national economic development, Iran's domestic and foreign endeavors concentrated on security concerns. Thereafter, Iran began to pursue a policy of "no normalization, no confrontation" with the United States, a policy that has survived five successive Iranian presidents.⁴⁶

Though five presidents have been elected since 1989, the country's core leadership has remained unchanged. By constitutional decree and personal style, the supreme leader is the principal strategist concerning policies toward the United States, the Middle East region, Russia, China, the nuclear program, and all transactional matters dealing with national security. Over time, this leadership has sustained the essential policies of the state in both the domestic and foreign policy realms, and the levels of state centralization since 1989 have consistently expanded. Presidents have been impotent at initiating any meaningful change in foreign affairs, national security, economic privatization, or cultural pluralism.

When Khomeini led the country, his charisma, religious authority, and political acumen subordinated all factional politics. However, in the post-1989 period, a wide range of political narratives about the nature of the state, the future direction of the country, foreign challenges, and the role of religion in politics gained public attention and, given the circumstances, were able to impact public discourse and electoral processes. Gradually, ideas and ideology became pretentious. Jockeying for position, solidifying existing positions, and defying any structural and constitutional change branded Iranian politics during this period. Understandably, all factions spoke in a religious and ideological lexicon while acting according to *realpolitik*. There was never a scarcity of politicians who sacrificed principles for a taste of power and its emoluments. Fundamentalism, too, mostly posed as a façade and a means of justification. In the end, despite policy pronouncements by numerous factions, core policies have remained remarkably consistent. The supreme leader has benefited from a large number of devotees and operators in all realms of statecraft to maintain his grip on a wide range of policies. Nonetheless, a close reading of the country's constitution provides the office of the supreme leader with vast levers of power.

Contentious relations between the president and the revolutionary class over the last three decades represent frictions over the scope of power and influence, rather than their contrasting ideas or interpretations of realities. All presidents either believed from the outset of their tenure or learned by experience that economic development and foreign policy cannot be delinked. Yet their attempts to make a public case or to persuade the core leadership privately faced the stumbling block of the revolutionary class. This is expected, as the revolutionary class believes prioritizing economic development will gradually marginalize their political base at home, raise questions about their revolutionary credentials, and jeopardize their military and political operations in the Middle East region. From their perspective, Iran would no longer maintain its regional influence and deterrent capability if it were to concentrate on trade, industrialize, and become a member of the World Trade Organization. The supreme leader has summed up his view of the international system by announcing succinctly that the Islamic Republic does not wish to be a "normal country."⁴⁷

46 Mahmood Sariolghalam, "The Role of Algorithms in the Persistent US-Iranian Impasse," Middle East Institute, April 16, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/role-algorithms-persistent-us-iranian-impasse>

47 Ayatollah Khamenei, October 2, 2019, <https://www.leader.ir/fa/speech/23599/اسلامی-انقلاب-پاسداران-سپاه-پاسداران-انقلاب-اسلامی>

The revolutionary class maintains that by normalizing relations with the United States, Iran would abandon its inspirational vitality in the eyes of the Muslim revolutionaries.⁴⁸ On its face, this is an ideological statement and displays Islamic convictions. Iran's devastated economy and political solitude present no model to emulate for the vast Muslim masses who are overwhelmingly interested in economic growth and global alliances.

From the perspective of polarized domestic politics, these statements are also about survival and continuity. Far more consequentially, normalizing relations with the United States would practically facilitate a context where Iran can be handed over to the reformist and liberal camps within the country. Following the nuclear agreement with the United States, three European countries, China, and Russia—dubbed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—Rouhani hoped that JCPOA 2 (a potential agreement on regional issues) or even JCPOA 3 (a potential agreement on Iran's missile program) could be signed. He advocated opening Iran's economy internationally, which he said “doesn't mean letting go of the nation's ideals and principles.”⁴⁹ He also reminded the revolutionaries of past mistakes, which he believed had led to a situation whereby the economy “pays for the politics...It would be good for once to act in reverse and have internal politics and foreign policy pay for the economy.”⁵⁰

As noted earlier, from a historical perspective, politics in Iran are not a reflection of consensus building, coalitions, or a manifestation of a social contract. In the absence of political parties, politics consistently played out as a bitter competition and rivalry among personalities. Also, for centuries, politics in the country have been an endeavor of single individuals in the pursuit of their predilections, interests, and glamour. Even the shah clashed with Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in the 1952–1953 period, primarily because he did not wish to share power, and not so much due to the latter's nationalist tendencies or confrontation with the British oil companies—the shah himself challenged oil companies in the early 1970s for a higher share of revenues. Monopolizing the political stage is almost instinctual in the country's history; sharing power is not a Persian tradition.

Given that Iran has not experienced late capitalism, Iranians have not experienced the political spillover effects of sharing wealth in a typical capitalist state. In its modern history, Iran has persistently experienced state domination of the economy, leading to the centralization of its politics as well. In a sense, politics in Iran is a zero-sum game. According to Article 110 of the Iranian constitution, the supreme leader has the responsibility to delineate all blueprints for the country's national and international policies. In contrast, Articles 122–126 stipulate that the president must execute these same blueprints.⁵¹ This constitutional division of labor has steadily been the main area of conflict between the leader and the president, confining the latter to an exclusively operational status. Because presidents are elected and are in charge of executive decisions, they naturally strive to deliver results to their constituency. But they are also faced with the fixed predilections of the core leadership in the country, comprising the revolutionary class, military-industrial complex, and supreme leader. This polarized division of labor in statecraft has caused economic mismanagement, dysfunctional bureaucracy, and the gradual divergence of the nation from the international community, leading to an inefficient polity. In the theater of Iranian politics, strategies of survival and continuity championed by the supreme leader ultimately set the tone and the substance of all policies. Under the presidency of Ibrahim Raeesi (who won a June 2021 election void of moderate and pro-reform candidates), there has been far less disagreement and a unique consensus on almost all matters of state. His style of seeming acquiescence has led to an atmosphere of uniformity in the running of state affairs. Furthermore, his presidency is conceived to facilitate a smooth transition of power in the years to come because he poses no major challenges to the status quo.

Conclusion

This paper scrutinizes the proposition that while Islamic fundamentalism espoused by Ayatollah Khomeini undeniably calcified Iran's foreign policy choices during the time he led the country, Iran's foreign policy calculus and decision-making structure after 1989 and during the leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei reflect domestic politics and far less framed by values of Islamic fundamentalism. During the latter period, foreign policy

48 Yadollah Javani, Mashreghnews, March 1, 2021, <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/1187657/فضلا-و-متفکران-به-پاییزند>.

49 Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit, eds., *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3.

50 Ibid., 5.

51 Mahmood Sariolghalam, “Prospects for Change in Iranian Foreign Policy,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 20, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/20/prospects-for-change-in-iranian-foreign-policy-pub-75569>.

options have been based on the bifurcated nature of Iran's domestic politics and a reaction against existential threats to the revolutionary class, which is commonly dubbed the "principalists." Moreover, since 1989, Islamic fundamentalism has been utilized as both posturing and a political instrument to deny developmentalist, liberal, and reformist factions from exerting substantive influence in the decision-making apparatus of the state, particularly in the domains of foreign affairs and national security.

This paper argues that the current narrative and inertia in Iranian politics are in line with the country's historical traditions. Iranian politics are typically dominated by favoritism and rent-seeking elites for a given period of time, only for them to be replaced by another group of elites with a rosy and promising narrative. Generally, over the span of long centuries, conquerors have risen to power seeking a better living and access to resources. Rational statecraft and problem-solving elites have historically been scarce. Given the vast levels of state wealth in fossil fuels and minerals, political playbooks in Iran have centered on securing processes to exploit national resources. Ideology has consistently been employed not as a set of solid belief systems and organizing principles, but as a mobilizing political force to outmaneuver the competition. If the ruling elites in Iran today choose to concentrate on national economic development, a conciliatory foreign policy with neighbors, and normal relations with the West, they would gradually lose their grip on power in the domestic standoff for political influence. The internal standoff is not about belief systems; it is about competing clusters of power seeking to exploit a richly endowed country. As a result, the current elites in power are not intrinsically anti-Western; they hold a certain narrative because it can preserve their power and alienate their competitors. Iran's history exhibits that reasoning, and dialogue does not usually settle differences. To the contrary, patterns demonstrate that the rise of simultaneous crises, populism, and the death of leaders signify major transformations. Nationhood, imperial statecraft, and authoritarian rule are what define Iranian history over several millennia. However, incessant personal and cult politics have long stunted the ancient country's transition to a socially and politically modern nation-state. As a consequence, political loyalty is the main market for national resources.

Moreover, and toward this end, Iran's revolutionary class is uniquely gifted at operating in chaotic circumstances, asymmetric contexts, convoluted atmospheres, and contradictory surroundings—in short, with non-state actors. Within this context, Tehran has no reliable strategic partners. Also, Iran's regional presence provides its leadership with hedging capability. Iran's U-turn on Saudi Arabia—from describing it on March 14, 2022, as a country having Zionist roots to establishing a relationship characterized as a strategic partnership by Iran's new ambassador on September 11, 2023—is vivid evidence that the Islamic Republic's stance on Saudi Arabia was not based on ideology in the first place, but rather on political competition.⁵² If Islamic ideology shaped Iran's foreign policy, Tehran would have viewed the plight of the Uyghurs differently. Iran's ambassador to China stated on April 4, 2021, that "the reason why some propagate there is ethnic cleansing in China is because they do not want to witness China's progress."⁵³

Realpolitik dictates Iran's choices. "While addressing members of the Experts' Council (a body that chooses the supreme leader) on March 10, 2022, Iran's supreme leader established a correlation between regional presence on the one hand, and the power and solidity of the polity (*nezaam*) on the other."⁵⁴

Religion in the Middle East holds penetrating, persuasive powers. Religious concepts can sway societies toward piercing political objectives. Within Islamic sharia, for example, the concepts of *tavali* and *tabari* are passionately observed. These concepts instruct a Muslim to interact with those who are observant of the divine law (*tavali*) and distance oneself from those who are not (*tabari*). These religious traditions intensely contrast with the concepts of connectivity, economic interdependence, joint ventures, global supply chains, and reciprocity in the modern world. Such religious behavioral guidelines border on isolation and calcify beliefs of group and national sovereignty. Additionally, given the fact that the contemporary international system was constructed by Western powers—and particularly by the United States—merging with such a system, the argument maintains, would only result in foreign domineering and capitulation. In a sense, these religious traits, politically encapsulated in Islamic fundamentalism, may lead to the conclusion that the establishment of strategic relations and economic interdependence with the Western world would require

52 Kayhan, March 14, 2022, <https://kayhan.ir/fa/news/238571/ريشه%۰۸%۸Cآل-نام-هيولايي-به-صهيوني-هيولايي-%E۰۲%۸0%۸Cسعود%۸C۰۲%A۰>.

53 Mohammad Keshavarzadeh, IRNA, April 4, 2021, <https://www.irna.ir/news/84283669/بازتاب-سفر-سفیر-ایران-به-سین-کیانگ-در-رسانه-های-چینی>.

54 Ayatollah Khamenei, March 10, 2022, Khamenei.ir, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=49769>.

that Muslims relinquish their own authenticity. The revolutionary leadership has skillfully drawn on these religious concepts to both maintain distance from the Western world and discredit the modernist camp at home.

Furthermore, while elected governments in Iran usually leave office after eight years of dismay and unfinished projects, the revolutionary class is a permanent stakeholder of power and influence. This frame of political construction is more Hobbesian than inspired by Qutb. Consistent policies over the last three decades can be explained by this division of labor in the country. One prodigious fear of the revolutionary class is the dissolution of the revolution in what it sees as the corrupt mechanics of global capitalism. If Iran focuses on its national economic development, the revolutionary class argues, it will be swept away by the forces of globalization in banking, trade, services, education, entertainment, and other sources of soft power. The survival of the revolutionary class then relies on hard power, whereas the modernist camp relies more on soft power. The former has tendencies toward Russia and China because neither Moscow nor Beijing possess any political interest in modifying Iran's domestic politics. In contrast, the modernists/reformists find the West more attractive both culturally and economically. Therefore, the revolutionary class has successfully inhibited the "other" from gaining institutional and lasting influence in national politics. In this context, the limbo status of the nuclear negotiations serves the interests of the revolutionary class by postponing potential rapprochement with the West. If Iran were to emerge as a normal country like Turkey, Indonesia, South Korea, or Brazil, then the technocrats, industrialists, middle classes, educated people, information technology specialists, and scientists would occupy positions of policy and professional decision-making. To what would the revolutionary class then be entitled?

Iran cannot possibly reap benefits from its membership in the BRICS grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, which it joined this year, or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, without having normal relations with the Western world. With the exception of Russia, all BRICS members have strategic relations with the Western world in general, and the United States in particular. Both the United States and the European Union countries have extensive sanctions against Iran, and BRICS cannot jeopardize its economic interests with the West while maintaining normal financial and commercial relations with Tehran. Its current "understanding" with the West has more of a transactional nature than a strategic one.

The worldview, skills, and social and economic classes of contending groups in the Iranian polity are so diverse that they cannot possibly engage in a process of consensus building over the purpose, substance, and direction of national interests. One intervening variable that energizes the revolutionary class to fight tooth and nail for power is the fact that Iran's electorate has consistently voted for candidates who promote economic development and openness to the world. With the exception of Raeesi, every president—from Rafsanjani to Khatami to Rouhani, and even Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—has questioned the confrontational pillars of Iran's foreign policy, yet none have been able to deviate from the overall parameters set by the revolutionary class. Against this background, the concept of regime security provides precise explanatory power to scrutinize the instrumentality of applying ideology in Iran's politics.

At the root of Iran's contemporary economic malaise and foreign policy confrontations lie three political culture tendencies of the current elites: scapegoating, political tribalism, and an obsolete interpretation of national sovereignty, all intentionally cloaked to harvest confusion. From a historical perspective, Iranian politics have been stamped by revolutions instead of reform, sinuous changes instead of evolutionary and cascading developments, and violent transitions instead of peaceful ones. Change in Iran generally emanates from crises rather than dialogue. In the absence of economic privatization and political transparency, rent seeking in a large, populous state rich in energy and minerals affords a handsome opportunity for personal affluence.

Ironically, modernizers from all walks of life in Iran's history—including constitutionalists, liberals, nationalists, Marxists, and even reformed Islamists—have emphasized democracy over economic development. Interestingly, over the last century and a half, one democratic attempt in Iran after another has failed in the context of an ancient state with a tribal political tradition, ubiquitous state economic supremacy, and patrimonial culture. This is in contrast to the contemporary history of Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, and China, which have pursued modernization in the reverse order, underscoring rapid economic development.

From historical linear and cyclical perspectives, Iranian society is proceeding in the right direction. It is the equivalent of about 1850 in Iran. If Iran were to emerge as a nation-state, its identity dilemma would need to be settled. In Iran, fundamentalism, religion, and ideology are undergoing galactic transformations in the long

sweep of history. Economic inefficiency and limited social liberties in the country are major sources of questioning that challenge tradition and long-held ideas. Thanks to social media, narratives increasingly reflect global trends. Human civilization dictates that a country's *raison d'être* will indisputably need to include global beliefs and conventions. For an ancient country like Iran, change will certainly take time.

About the author

Mahmood Sariolghalam has a PhD in international relations from the University of Southern California. For more than three decades, he has taught in a number of countries, including the United States and Iran. His publications and research focus on Iran's foreign policy and political culture. He is currently conducting research on the psychological roots of Iranian authoritarianism.

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