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Ideology and Iran's Revolution: How 1979 Changed the World

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CO-EXISTENCE

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OVERVIEW

The year 1979, rather than 1989, should be regarded as the pivotal year of our contemporary age, to refocus attention away from only the Cold War as a narrative frame of reference and towards the Islamic Revolution in Iran in addition. To date considered marginal and symptomatic to other, wider developments, the events of 1979 in Iran triggered a process of geopolitical realignment that remains to this day.

Western policymakers should look beyond only the end of the Cold War in 1989 as the pivotal moment of our age. Ten years earlier, Iran's Revolution had already sparked a process of geopolitical realignment that remains central to this day.

This paper looks at the context of this change both materially and ideologically. It then moves to outline the immediate impact and longer-term consequences of Western policy short-sightedness, which has often reinforced the very trends it seeks to undermine. Most importantly, in failing to distinguish between the Islamic *Republic* and the Islamic *Revolution*, Western policy decisions have frequently resulted in the latter being strengthened at the expense of the former. The Iranian state is there to serve the revolution, not the other way around.

This paper is the first in a series by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change looking at how the West has misunderstood the importance of the Iranian Revolution. Western policies on Iran—and on the Muslim world more broadly—have consistently overlooked

the impact of the ideology born of the events of 1979. This means that the West has failed to understand how far Tehran is willing to go to export the revolution and spread the ideology. Without this understanding, Iran policy will remain ineffectual, and Western comprehension of the nature of the threat posed by many Iran-backed or -inspired Shia proxies in the region will remain inadequate.

INTRODUCTION

It is a commonplace that today's world is the product of the Cold War and its generally satisfactory conclusion to the advantage of the Western alliance in 1989. This thoroughly first-world perspective was perhaps best expressed by political scientist Francis Fukuyama's highly Whiggish assessment that liberal democracy had triumphed and the "end of history" had been achieved.¹

Fukuyama's argument has to some extent been caricatured, but his thesis came to characterise the hubris of an age that lapsed into a dangerous complacency born of the apparent inevitability of the West's political and ideological triumph. The arc of history was certainly long, but with perseverance and patience, it seemed to bend towards justice. Sooner or later, the world would wake up to the truth of Western achievement.

This perspective began to shift after the 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks on the United States (US) and the political friction that emerged with a resurgent, much aggrieved Russia (and the advent of a new cold war) and the economic powerhouse that is China. The year 1979 marked a sea change in politics and attitudes with the opening up of the Asian power to market forces, the election of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom (presaging the election of President Ronald Reagan in the United States), the election of a Polish cardinal to the papacy and the fatal Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The latter decision not only helped to bankrupt the Soviet Union (quite apart from the moral crisis it engendered), leading to its collapse a decade later, but also brought political Islam into sharper relief with the emergence of the Afghan mujahideen.

The Soviet invasion was in part based on a far more significant development in its hinterland: the Islamic Revolution in Iran. This was in many ways the real revolutionary change. The events that followed—including the Siege of Mecca by Sunni Islamist insurgents that year and the assassination of Egypt's President Anwar Sadat by Islamist extremists in 1980—showed how the revolution was to impact the region beyond Iran's borders.

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

The revolution's consequences still reverberate, yet most assessments, while accepting its importance, still situate it on a broader Cold War canvas, in which the 'loss of Iran' is viewed principally through an American perspective. As such, the Iranian Revolution remains marginal rather than central to Western focus, incidental rather than truly consequential, and an event to be contained rather than challenged and confronted. This is not a view, unsurprisingly, that the revolutionaries in Iran share. They hold 1979 to be not only significant but epochal: a global revolution with historic consequences, and a cause above all others.

Fast-forward two decades, and the optimism of the 1990s soon gave way to pessimism, cynicism and considerably more self-reflection. The new century seemed to inaugurate an age of doubt, and if the old certainties had not been eradicated altogether, they were certainly contested. The new mood was reflected in a new interpretation of the roots of the present, focusing away from the prism of the Cold War to the rise of China and the emergence of political Islam as a global force.²

From this perspective, 1979, rather than 1989, was the real turning point—the historical pivot to which all contemporary developments could be traced. The Iranian Revolution and ensuing events of that year set up Islamism as an ideology to be reckoned with, sweeping up billions around the world along with capitalism and communism. And just like communism, a state was never the objective of the revolution. The organs of the Iranian state serve the revolution, not the other way around. And the end goal of the revolution was never a state, it was the expansion of the revolution.

² In terms of literature, the key texts are David W. Lesch, *1979: The Year that Shaped the Modern Middle East* (New York: Perseus, 2001), and Christian Caryl, *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). The latter provides a global perspective, although he gives due weight to the Islamic Revolution. In contrast, Niall Ferguson's op-ed in *Newsweek*, "Why 1979 Was the Year That Truly Changed the World", 29 October 2009, while noting the significance of revolution, effectively relegated it to an epilogue.

IRAN'S ANCIEN RÉGIME AND THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

The Western reaction to the Islamic Revolution has been a curious admixture of hysteria and complacency.³ Yet analysts have tended to dismiss one crucial element in the importance of the revolution: its context. The ideology that the revolution promoted was consequential, but that Tehran could operationalise the revolution so effectively was a direct consequence of the political and historical frame of reference from which the revolution emerged. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 took place in a non-Arab country with a rich historical heritage, universalist pretensions and a political economy that both empowered and enabled it. In short, the revolution married sacred fury with the political economy of the state of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

AN EMERGING POWER UNDER THE SHAH

To better appreciate the impact of the Islamic Revolution, we need to reacquaint ourselves with late-Pahlavi Iran and the impression it created around the world. It is all too easy to forget that in the 1960s and 1970s, Iran was the emerging power, the new tiger economy to rival Japan's economic achievements, with natural resources that Japan could only envy. The Great Game was receding into history, and while critics of the shah might accuse him of being a lackey of the West, the reality by the end of the 1960s was a good deal more complex. Iran was rich in hydrocarbon resources—the fourth-largest oil reserves and the second-largest gas reserves in the world—as well as other mineral and human resources, and the shah's determination to reach the 'great civilisation' by the turn of the millennium seemed within reach.⁴

Indeed, the oil boom, largely orchestrated by the shah at the end of 1973, appeared to catapult Iran into the premier league of nations, with a growing industrial base, a generous welfare system,

³ On this tendency, see Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime & the French Revolution* (Manchester: Fontana, 1966), 34.

⁴ "Country Analysis Brief: Iran", U.S. Energy Information Administration, 9 April 2018, http://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2018/EIA_Iran_9abr2018.pdf.

highly developed armed forces and a nuclear programme that was the envy of many.

While the reality was never as sublime as the image pretended, in the words of British Ambassador to Iran Sir Anthony Parsons, Iran's Arab neighbours would envy the shah's problems. In the public perception at least, the general attitude and expectations of Iran were very similar to those harboured towards China today. There were undoubted political flaws, and the shah appeared reluctant to pursue sincere political reform towards a form of democratisation, but Iran was emblematic of the modernisation thesis at work. As such, political change would follow the economic transformation of the country, much as night follows day.

As with all models, reality and the idiosyncrasies of agency—human emotion, for want of a better word—got in the way, and the shah's confidence, complacency and ultimate hubris were to prove his undoing. The revolution that resulted in his overthrow began, unedifyingly enough, with a routine article in a government newspaper on 8 January 1978 attacking the morals and integrity of one Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the erstwhile leader of the religious opposition to the shah's rule. Much as with the Arab Spring some 30 years later, this incongruous event sparked a cycle of protests that would unnerve and ultimately unseat the shah. But like all seminal events, it was appreciated for its significance only some time later, not registering in contemporary diplomatic reports until the summer.

Indeed, for much of the first half of 1978, European diplomats argued that the periodic disturbances were a consequence of the shah's programme of liberalisation. Few were prepared for the realisation that what they were facing was not so much a crisis of the state as a profound crisis of confidence by a monarch who simply could not reconcile the protests with his self-proclaimed image of a shah loved by his people. By the autumn it was apparent to the more astute that Iran was facing a fully fledged revolutionary upheaval.

POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION ON THE CHEAP

This political transformation, and the shock it induced among victors and victims alike, helps explain why such a detailed narrative framework was embellished over time to make sense of it all. For all the hyperbole, this dramatic political transformation had been achieved on the cheap. Over the year of revolution to January 1979, when the shah finally left the country, the total number of deaths amounted to 2,781, with the vast majority of casualties occurring in the capital, Tehran.⁵ By global and historical standards this was not a bloody revolution.

The blood would really begin to flow once the shah had left, and the revolutionaries would start to fight over the spoils of a revolution that had left them in charge of one of the most powerful and important states in the Middle East. This mass movement of the Iranian people, which began as something meant to end repression, wound up entrenching it instead.

Today it is often forgotten that the revolution was not originally aimed at producing an Islamic theocracy. What became the Islamic Revolution in Iran was initiated not solely by an Islamist movement but by a coalition of interest groups united against the shah. The Islamists loyal to Khomeini were a part of a wider coalition, which included secular liberals, nationalists, communists and Islamist-Marxists. Shared antipathy towards the shah was the glue that held these competing ideologies together. That said, signs of how far the pro-Khomeinists were prepared to go to achieve their ideological ambitions could be seen as early as August 1978, when they set fire to the cinema Rex in southwestern city of Abadan to protest against the Westernisation of Iran, killing 480 people.⁶

NETWORKS AND NOTORIETY

What gave the Islamists the upper hand over the secular opposition was their access to a vast network of mosques and

⁵ Cyrus Kadivar, "A Question of Numbers", Rouzegar-e Now, 8 August 2003

⁶ Ali Ansari, *Modern Iran: Reform and Revolution: The Pahlavis and After* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 259–260.

religious institutions across the country. Unlike the secular groups forced underground by the shah, the organised structures of the clergy enabled Khomeini and his followers to control the revolutionary narrative. Khomeini's departure from exile in Iraq to a Paris suburb in October 1978 further consolidated the ayatollah's leadership of the revolution. It gave him an international platform to foment discord against the shah and established him as a liberator of the Iranian people in the eyes of many Western liberal observers.

A combination of insurgency and bloodshed would enable Khomeini to co-opt the revolution. Some rivals for power would be easier to oust than others. The siege of the US Embassy in Tehran in November 1979 would drive the liberals away, but the left, which was instrumental in toppling the shah, would not be so easily deterred. In his brutal treatment of leftist rivals, the ayatollah would show that he was prepared to use violence in service of his mission. In the fractious infighting that followed the departure of the shah, it is estimated that at least 12,000 opponents were executed.⁷

This uncompromising ruthlessness was later symbolised by the convening of the notorious 'Death Committee', made up of figures including Mostafa Pourmohammadi, minister of justice under President Hassan Rouhani, and former presidential contender Ebrahim Raisi.⁸ The creation of the committee resulted in the peremptory mass execution of leftist figures in 1988.⁹

7 Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 129–138.

8 Raisi ran for the presidency in 2017 and is considered one of the contenders to replace Khamenei.

9 "Judgment time", *Economist*, 30 October 2012, <https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2012/10/30/judgment-time>; Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 209–228; Golnaz Esfandiari, "Montazeri Comes Back to Haunt Tehran Over Mass Killings", *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*, 8 September 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-montazeri-comes-back-to-haunt-1988-mass-killings/27975961.html>.

IDEOLOGIES: AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE

To appreciate the ideology that has shaped and driven the Islamic Revolution since its inception, it is necessary to understand not only the context of the ideology's emergence but also the ideas that informed it and the experience that crystallised it. The ideology works first and foremost as an explanatory tool that provides adherents with a narrative of descent as well as a direction of travel—a utopian vision to be achieved. The more ambitious the vision, the grander the narrative and the greater the justification for excesses that may have been committed or may yet have to be committed.

A world-historical event whose ends are both material and spiritual can justify all sorts of means in the pursuit of those ends. It is important to bear in mind, therefore, that while the Islamic Revolution may have been distinctly Shia in its apparent origins, its ambitions were global, drawing on Islamic history as well as a rich heritage of Iranian universalism (one might even describe it as an imperial mentality). These concepts were married to a Marxist inheritance that sought to appeal to the oppressed of the world. Indeed, Khomeini's division of the world into the oppressed and the oppressors arguably owed as much to Marx as to Islam, while his description of the United States as the "Great Satan"—that great tempter of material indulgence—was an astute rendition of anti-capitalist rhetoric in sacral terms.

KHOMEINI'S ISLAMIST POPULISM

A key intellectual figure in defining revolutionary ideology was Ali Shariati, a Western-educated intellectual. Inspired by the works of Marxist, anti-colonialist scholars like Franz Fanon, Shariati set out to converge Marxism with Islamism. The aim was a revolutionary ideology that could oust the Pahlavi monarchy and liberate Iranians from the evils of Western imperialism. Shariati's death before the revolution enabled Khomeini to capitalise on the popularity of his ideas and formulate what can be best described as an Islamist populism.

Any understanding of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution must acknowledge the marriage of ideas between the secular left and the religious right, what the shah liked to call the unholy alliance between “the black and the red”. The alliance is important for understanding the potential reach of the ideology espoused by the revolutionaries, its universalist pretensions (especially when situated within broader Iranian worldviews), and its appeal far beyond Iran’s borders, even among some ideologues of the left in the West. There, the Islamic Revolution was simply another manifestation of ‘third-worldism’ battling against the pernicious effects of colonialism and capitalism.

A *New York Times* piece entitled “Trusting Khomeini”, published two days after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, perhaps best captures the left’s celebration of the collapse of the shah. The author, Richard Falk, who later became United Nations special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territories occupied since 1967, wrote of how the ayatollah could provide “a desperately-needed model of humane governance for a third-world country”.¹⁰ Indeed, at the time there were American officials who argued that Khomeini was the “Gandhi” of Iran.¹¹

Like all good revolutionary ideologies, therefore, the ideology of the Islamic revolution could claim to be for the oppressed around the world. It should come as no surprise that the current supreme leader, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, claimed the authorship of the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 and argued that the Arab Spring that began in 2010 was simply the belated echo of the Islamic Revolution in the Arab world.¹²

Perhaps more surprising for observers in the West was the belief among the revolutionaries that their revolution was the third in a line of great revolutions stretching back to the Russian and French

10 Richard Falk, “Trusting Khomeini”, *New York Times*, 16 February 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/02/16/archives/trusting-khomeini.html>.

11 For further details see George L. Simpson, “Seeking Gandhi, finding Khomeini: How America failed to understand the nature of the religious opposition of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the Iranian Revolution”, *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 8, no. 3 (2017), 233–255.

12 “Khamenei: Arab Revolts Sign Of ‘Islamic Awakening’”, *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*, 4 February 2011, https://www.rferl.org/a/iran_khamenei_islamic_awakening/2297319.html.

Revolutions. Iran's revolutionaries saw their historical pedigree in thoroughly European terms as the product of the unfolding of history. Other third-world revolutions were simply not in their field of vision and were largely irrelevant to the grand narrative of revolutionary emancipation that they sought to promote.

REVOLUTION VS. REPUBLIC

Another important distinction, which is often missed by more sympathetic observers in the West, is between the Islamic *Revolution* and the Islamic *Republic*. The revolution does not exist to perfect the state; the state—the republic—is simply a means to support and perfect the revolution. Where the two conflict, the revolution is prioritised. This distinction has also been missed by Iranian political actors, anxious as they have been—often with sincerity—to promote the institutions of the republic and the idea of Islamic democracy.

These ideas reached their apogee under Mohammad Khatami, Iranian president from 1997 to 2005, but have since been systematically dismantled in favour of the purity of the revolution as defined by its most hard-line adherents: a process of spiritual salvation. According to some, that process is far from fruition and requires a state of permanent revolution and confrontation with the West until the ultimate victory is achieved.

It should never be forgotten that the supreme leader is the leader of the revolution, not of the republic, and that the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is sworn to defend the purity of the revolution from enemies both within and without. Both these institutions grew in prominence and power under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad when this hard-line core ideology finally came into prominent relief. Indeed, the Green Movement protests against the 2009 Iranian presidential election results were a rude awakening to many Iranians who had believed the revolution was about political emancipation, when it was abruptly announced that obedience to the supreme leader and his appointees was the equivalent of obedience to God. No modern Iranian monarch could have made such a claim.

WESTERN TUNNEL VISION

These extraordinary ideological positions are largely ignored in the West by those who are determined to see the good in Iranian political life or, in the worst case, fantasise about Iran as the post-colonial (or postmodern) revolutionary state par excellence, whose consistent opposition to the United States excuses a variety of incongruous behaviour. Indeed, Iran's ability to position itself as a victim of Western perfidy has allowed it considerable political latitude, as witnessed during the negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme. The failure of the administration of former US President Barack Obama and the new European External Action Service (EEAS) to properly read Iranian intentions, and their persistence in viewing Iranian political developments through the prism of Iran's relations with the West, severely constrained the Western negotiating position.

What is more, the desire for negotiations to work has muddied the sight and thinking of Western policymakers. In the case of the nuclear negotiations, the well-intentioned but misled European Union (EU) became the convenor, and the EEAS was forged in the heat of those talks. The negotiations became part of the foundation myth of the service, and their successful conclusion in July 2015 were an act of validation that ensured that the EEAS would protect the agreement at all costs. That induced a tunnel vision, which quite deliberately ignored wider political problems.

Paradoxically, therefore, the nuclear agreement, far from binding the hands of the Iranians, bound those of the EU, so determined did the Europeans become not to jeopardise the agreement. The difference in positions between the West and Iran over the accord became most obvious when the Iranians moved quickly to shore up their Syrian ally after the agreement was signed in July 2015. That ran contrary to expectations in the US, where some had anticipated that the nuclear agreement would open the door to further dialogue.¹³

¹³ For details of this misreading, see Ali Ansari, *The US, Iran and the Politics of the JCPOA* (forthcoming).

Put simply, while Khamenei might have agreed that the arc of history bent towards justice, the destination he had in mind was not shared by the US. With the nuclear deal, the West had not moved much farther than Fukuyama's thesis, convinced that the world would ultimately move in its direction and that all yearned for a liberal democratic settlement. There are many in Iran who seek this goal—but not, alas, the ones who currently hold the reins of power.

Just as in 1979 some Western observers thought Khomeini would liberate the Iranian people, many today persist in the belief that Iran and its revolution are simply misunderstood, and that the confrontation with the West is simply the result of a misunderstanding. Although there is a perception that such a view is confined to the far left, its proponents can be found across the political spectrum.

AMERICAN VACILLATION, IRANIAN CONVICTION

Indeed, successive US administrations since 1979, be they Republican or Democrat, have failed to grasp the realities of the revolution and the ideology it seeks to promote, alternating between exaggeration and neglect—and frequently being burned by the experience. If US President Jimmy Carter had his US embassy hostage crisis, then Reagan was confronted by the realities of the Iran-Contra Affair, in which senior US officials secretly enabled the sale of arms to Iran, which was under an arms embargo. Since then, US administrations have tended to prevaricate and vacillate between blunt hostility and occasional, if mistimed, attempts at détente. In both cases their approach has generally weakened moderating influences and consolidated those of the revolutionary purists.¹⁴

Iranian hardliners have been all too clear on their mission statement. Only the firmest of convictions in the truth of their mission can explain the sacrifice they are willing to endure and, in many cases, impose on their fellow Iranians. For revolutionary romantics, generally those gazing from afar, such 'sacrifices' enhance the appeal and the allure of the Islamic Revolution, but the

¹⁴ Ali Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Conflict in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

consequences for the region and the world have been profound.

ANGST IN THE REGION

Unsurprisingly such calls did not sit well with the region's rulers, whose already unsettled populations were inspired and further radicalised by events in Iran. But it would be a mistake to assert that the revolution was a singular event that transformed the situation. Better to see it as the start of a process that through experience, reaction and miscalculation reinforced a revolutionary conviction. That conviction remains to this day and, if anything, is more determined in its goals.

Regional dynamics are indicative of this process. With the Gulf monarchies, Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan as Iran's main targets, the leaders of these lands trembled in angst as they searched for ways to mitigate the threat from Iran's Islamic Revolution. The collapse of the crown at the behest of the turban revealed the potency of Khomeini's brand of revolutionary Islamism, which must have been deeply unnerving for the leaders of neighbouring states.

And while regional governments had dealt with the forces of Arab nationalism and Arab socialism throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the nature of this challenge was greater than anything they had encountered in the past. After all, Khomeini claimed that his mandate derived from God and the religion of Islam, the greatest source of legitimacy in the Muslim world. With no effective tools to counter this ideology, the governments of the region came to believe that the pace of the shah's secular modernisation strategy, coupled with his regime's neglect for Islam, had enabled the Islamist rise. This correlation informed their mitigation strategy: embrace Islam more visibly and abandon secular modernisation, which the Islamists claimed to be Westernisation.

SAUDI REACTION AND THE RISE OF SUNNI FUNDAMENTALISM

As the shock of the revolution reverberated throughout the region, among the most affected countries was Saudi Arabia, which found that its former ally had turned to a revolutionary radicalism that was by definition destabilising. This did not, at least on the surface, stop the kingdom from congratulating Khomeini on

establishing a state based on the “principles of Islam”, expressing hope that “Islamic solidarity” would bring the two countries closer together.¹⁶ In truth, however, the Saudis feared Iran’s revolutionary message would arouse an Islamic uprising across the Arabian Peninsula. As Khomeini’s call for the downfall of the ruling House of Saud grew louder, the Saudi leadership began to fear it would suffer the same fate as the shah.

The siege at the Grand Mosque can only have reinforced fears among the Saudi elite about the challenges they now faced. On 20 November 1979, only ten months after the revolution, Sunni Islamist insurgents led by Juhaiman al-Utaibi seized the Grand Mosque of Mecca in a direct challenge to the House of Saud’s leadership of the Holy Land. The seizure was motivated by a desire to depose the Saudi monarchs and restore Islamic rule over the birthplace of the Prophet. Utaibi and his men berated the Saud family for being corrupt and influenced by the West. The group simultaneously denounced the Saudi clergy’s quietism, which was in their view a betrayal of Islam.

Faced with the prospect of further radicalisation at home, the Saud family fell on the solution to export their radicals abroad and mollify others through the expansion of religious schools—both at home and abroad. The oil boom of the early 1970s had provided Saudi Arabia with billions of dollars, giving it funds to invest across Muslim countries to position itself as a leading power in the Muslim world and propagate a very particular derivation of Islam.

In practical terms, this meant that while charities such as the Islamic World League poured money into promoting a certain kind of Islam, Saudi-funded educational institutions and mosques connected Riyadh to religious scholars across the world, from Nigeria to Indonesia. Therefore, when Khomeini’s Islamist challenge came knocking on the kingdom’s door, the Saudis were, through the global infrastructure they had built, well positioned to take the battle to the ayatollah. Rather than countering the extremism disseminating from Iran’s Islamic Revolution through a moderate

16 Florence Gaub, “War of words: Saudi Arabia v Iran”, European Union Institute for Security Studies, February 2016, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_2_Saudi_Arabia__Iran_01.pdf; Lawrence Rubin, *Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2014), 52.

brand of Islam, the House of Saud decided to beat Khomeini at his own game—a decision the current Saudi leadership has said was a mistake.¹⁷

Consequently, the 1979 Islamic Revolution led the Saudis not only to accelerate their efforts to spread Wahhabism through their global infrastructure but also to debunk Khomeini's vision of Islam by underscoring its Shia identity. The impact of this strategy had consequences far beyond the kingdom's borders and nurtured the rise of Sunni fundamentalism from Africa to the Far East, especially in Indonesia.¹⁸

Such Saudi efforts were assisted in this expansion by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, prompted in part by fears of an Islamic resurgence inspired by neighbouring Iran. While the Soviets sought to contain Islamism on their doorstep—and prevent any contagion to Central Asia—the Americans saw the utility of Saudi religious policy in containing the Soviet Union and delimiting the potential for Iran's Shia expansion eastwards. This strategy was far from perfect, but it squared a circle at the time.

Meanwhile, when tensions between Iraq and Iran escalated into war in 1980, the Saudis and their Gulf allies (which soon became the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC) moved to support and shore up the Iraqi position. From an Iranian perspective, the 1980s and the onset of war were pivotal in operationalising an ideology that had so far been abstract. For Iran's revolutionaries, Iraq was merely a proxy for the wider struggle against the 'Great Satan' and its allies, Saudi Arabia and that 'cancerous tumour', Israel. Indeed, the latter came to occupy a unique position in the ideology of the Islamic Revolution; successive Iranian leaders have rhetorically pledged to eradicate the 'Zionist regime' and diverted some of the country's resources to proxy militias opposed to Israel in the region.

17 Martin Chulov, "This is a revolution': Saudis absorb crown prince's rush to reform", *Guardian*, 7 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/07/this-is-a-revolution-saudis-absorb-crown-princes-rush-to-reform>.

18 Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 155–156.

QUDS FORCE AND THE CREATION OF HIZBULLAH

The 1980s forged the revolutionary elite and convinced many of the veracity of their increasingly hard-line ideology. Iraq's invasion of Iran not only failed to deter the Iranians from pursuing their revolutionary vision but also led them to double down on these efforts. In fact, in the midst of the war the Iranian revolutionaries came up with the idea of putting together the IRGC Quds Force—the 'Jerusalem army' that would be tasked with 'liberating' Palestine and exporting the revolution beyond Iran's borders.

During the next three decades, the IRGC Quds Force operated covertly in virtually every country in the Middle East. But it was Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which followed escalating aggression between the PLO and the Israeli military in southern Lebanon, that would provide the grounds for one of the Iranian regime's most significant foreign policy achievements: the creation of Hizbullah.¹⁹ For Iran, the invasion of a Muslim-majority country by the 'Zionist entity', a usurper created in the heartland of the Muslim world to enable the West, in particular the US, to achieve its 'colonial goals', was a clear priority. The fact that Iran committed resources to southern Lebanon amid the Iran-Iraq War indicates how far Iran's leaders were prepared to go to pursue their ideological interests.

Founded by Iranian revolutionaries of the IRGC, Hizbullah effectively changed the nature of Islamic insurgency through its ideological culture of martyrdom. Hizbullah's role in conducting the 1983 Beirut bombings, which it has always denied, gave a flavour of the group's tactics. Some 241 US Marines and 58 French military personnel were killed in the two suicide attacks.²⁰ Suicide bombings, hostage taking and targeting civilians would become the tools employed by the Shia fundamentalist group to achieve its objectives, which were primarily driven by Tehran. The perceived

¹⁹ See Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁰ For further details and the debate around these attacks, see Ali Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Roots of Mistrust* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2006), 102–103. See also interview with Caspar Weinberger, PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/interviews/weinberger.html>.

success of Hizbullah's tactics against Israel would later be emulated by groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Perhaps more importantly, through its support for Hizbullah and Palestinian Islamists, the Iranian regime gained a direct stake in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Since attaining this stake, Tehran has focused on calling for Israel's destruction, while simultaneously arming Palestinian Islamists and Hizbullah. The successful 'Hizbullah archetype' served as the model Iran later sought to implement throughout the region, not least in Syria and Iraq. The precedence of ideology over state interest continues to shape the Islamic Republic's actions: the billions Iran reportedly spends in Syria despite domestic suffering are an example par excellence.²¹

21 Kasra Aarabi, "US-Iran Stand-Off Should Not Detract From Iranian Domestic Problems", Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 27 July 2018, <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/us-iran-stand-should-not-detract-iranian-domestic-problems>.

WAITING FOR DÉTENTE

Many Iranians emerged from the eight-year war with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein exhausted and in search of a *détente*. But others, gathered around the new supreme leader, were wedded to an uncompromising revolutionary ideology that effectively pitted Iran against the world—the Americans to the west and the Soviets to the east—in which regional players were proxies and pawns in the wider struggle. The tentative thaw of the 1990s, as the GCC realigned itself away from Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait, was shattered by the failure of the reform movement in Iran, and the triumph of the revolution over the republic, as well as the fateful consequences of 9/11.

There was a certain ambivalence in US approaches to Iran: haughty confrontation was periodically matched by studious disdain and even neglect. The effect of this was to embolden hardliners and give little encouragement to moderating forces.²² Thus, in the Global War on Terror there was a renewed American determination to confront Iran in theory, while in practice, Iran took advantage of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan to enter both countries and lay down networks of influence, further destabilising them. Revolutionary purists benefited from both the rhetoric of confrontation and the practical reality of ambivalence, which allowed them to expand their power by effectively confronting the Western coalition in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Ironically, some in the West appeared to believe that they were dealing with and empowering the government of Iran, seemingly unaware that it was the revolutionary institutions that were benefiting, and that political power in Iran was shifting emphatically away from the moderate forces towards the revolutionary purists. This shift became brutally apparent with the arrival of Ahmadinejad.²³ With him, ‘what you saw was what you got’, and what the Saudis saw they did not like. Indeed, the contradictions of US policy in the region did little to assuage Saudi fears that a resurgent Iran was making regional gains at Riyadh’s expense.²⁴

²² A good example of this was the reckless shooting down of Iran Air Flight 655 by the USS Vincennes in 1988.

²³ For details of this transition, see Ali Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change* (Washington, DC: Brookings University Press, 2006), 218–285.

American incoherence, as well as fatigue with the Middle East, exemplified in the Obama presidency, convinced the Saudis that they could no longer rely on the US to maintain the balance of power in the region. The sense of urgency became even more acute with onset of the Arab Spring, and Iranian expansion into Syria and Yemen.

24 On the paradox of the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, see, for example, Thomas Joscelyn, "About that 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on Iran . . .", Weekly Standard, 25 September 2009, <https://www.weeklystandard.com/thomas-joscelyn/about-that-2007-national-intelligence-estimate-on-iran>.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE WEST'S FAILURE TO UNDERSTAND IRAN

The intention of this paper is not to overdetermine the West's current predicament to the onset of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, but rather to see 1979 as the start of a process of change itself based on specific policies, actions and reactions to events. The emphasis has been on refocusing the Western lens on the Islamic Revolution as a turning point, drawing it in from the margins and seeing it as more consequential on other events than many histories have granted it. In this respect, the revolution is less a consequence of the wider Cold War than a catalytic agent of change in itself.

Whether by deliberate policy or the ineptitude and incoherence of its opponents, the Islamic Revolution in Iran continues to play a significant role in both the politics of its region and, for particular historical reasons, the politics of the United States. The triumph of revolutionary ideology over that of the republic has resulted in the consolidation of an ideology with ambitions that are as historic (and global) as they are uncompromising. That ideology seeks nothing less than the reordering of the world order in its own image.²⁵

The West's failure to understand this development—and, perhaps most damningly, to pursue policies that have enhanced rather than diminished this trend over more moderate forces in the country, in a paradoxical effort to strengthen those forces—remains one of the West's great policy failures since 1979.

FROM THE GREEN MOVEMENT TO THE ARAB SPRING

The key moment in that consolidation was the 2009 presidential election, the last time the Iranian people mobilised against what they perceived with justification to be the institutionalisation of revolutionary ideology around Khamenei, as the expression of divine will on earth. It was at this moment of crisis that the clergy in Qom fractured between two camps. In one were those who pursued

²⁵ Ahmadinejad frequently made references to overturning the post-Second World War settlement, an ambition that was tied to his notorious views on the Holocaust. See Ali Ansari, *Iran under Ahmadinejad: The politics of confrontation*, Adelphi series (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 51–53.

an interpretation of Muslim doctrine that others openly considered blasphemous: the idea that the doctrine of the government of the supreme jurist (*velayat-e faqih*) should become one of the central pillars of Muslim belief. In the other camp were those who accepted the supreme jurist was the infallible interpreter of God's will.²⁶

But despite the enormity of the protests, which were larger in many ways than those in 1979, the international community, and the United States in particular, remained remarkably ambivalent, anxious not to jeopardise the potential for further negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme. The Green Movement was ultimately crushed—though not until after six months of turmoil.

The movement was followed in 2011 by the abrupt cascade of the Arab Spring. The US response to the latter was a good deal more proactive and, in the eyes of regional allies, a good deal more problematic. Faced with the possibility of democratic movements sweeping the Arab world, the United States sought to situate itself in the vanguard of this movement, making clear to (former) allies that their time was up. The spectre of the overthrow of the shah loomed large in the minds of many regional rulers, and when the US made clear to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak that he could no longer count on its support, the anxiety became all too real.

This was 1979 all over again, made worse by the realisation that the US administration's approach to the Middle East was much more revolutionary than many appreciated or cared for. Not only was the United States suffering from Middle East fatigue, it also sought to reorder its own policy on a rapprochement with Iran—a resuscitation of its twin pillar strategy in the Persian Gulf.

Nothing better exemplified this shift than Obama's assertion that the Saudis would have to learn to "share" the Middle East with Iran.²⁷ But this was based on a misreading of the revolutionary ideology that now dominated in Iran—in part as a consequence of Obama's own ambivalence. The key to this strategy was a resolution to the Iranian nuclear crisis, a resolution that the Americans felt

26 For details, see Ali Ansari, *Crisis of Authority: Iran's 2009 Presidential Election* (London: Chatham House, 2010), 60–61.

27 See Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine", *Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

would unlock the door to a host of other possibilities. That the US had convinced itself of the probability of this outcome reflected its adherence to a Whig narrative, reinforced by ‘confirmation bias’: seeking reassurance from pundits and analysts anxious to lay the ghosts of the past with Iran to rest. As with previous US administrations, the approach to Tehran was once again flawed.

Yet, the Iranian response to the Arab Spring should have offered clear clues that not all was well with this approach. Khamenei publicly proclaimed the popular uprising, which he referred to as the “Islamic Awakening”, to be somewhat belated copycat Islamic revolutions fulfilling the promise of 1979.²⁸ At the same time he sought to square the contradiction of Syria by proclaiming the uprising there to be a product of Western perfidy. Many in the Iranian political elite objected to a close association with and support for Syria, regarding it as a contradiction of the revolution’s values. But these were the values of the republic that had already been crushed. Support for Syria could be easily justified on the alternative revolutionary ideology of global confrontation with the West. In an acutely practical sense, both Russia and Iran could use their resolute support to show others in the region that they were not fickle allies like the West.

The decision of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to sit tight and fight it out was in large part determined by the spectre of 1979: there were practical as well as ideological advantages to be gained. If the Americans hoped that an agreement on Iran’s nuclear programme would usher in a period of pragmatism and a wider Middle East settlement, then developments in the immediate aftermath of the agreement were a profound disappointment. This strategic miscalculation not only emboldened Iran in the region but also contributed to the West’s failure over Syria.

AN INCREASINGLY FALSE HARDLINER-REFORMIST DICHOTOMY

There were technical flaws in the nuclear agreement reached in July 2015, but these might have reasonably been resolved in subsequent negotiations. That these follow-up discussions never

²⁸ “Khamenei”, RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty.

took place reflected a wider failure of strategic vision and understanding: a belief that Iran and the West shared the same destination in mind when it came to the arc of history, and that the current impasse was fundamentally down to a colonial legacy reinforced by a series of misunderstandings. The truth was somewhat more serious and reflected a widening chasm in worldviews.

This clash of minds was blurred by the increasingly unhelpful hardliner-reformist dichotomy, which has meant the West has been unable to distinguish between Iranian hardliners and true moderates. The West has been so keen to find interlocutors in Iran to work towards change it has engaged with dialogue partners who, with a brief look beneath the surface, oppose the West's aims and interests, as well as those of the Iranian people.

This is certainly true in relation to Iran's current crop of 'reformists': the Rouhani administration. Western policymakers engaged with the Rouhani government believe that strengthening his hand would lead to moderation in Tehran's behaviour, both at home and abroad. Working with Rouhani to seek nuclear rapprochement was not, on the face of it, a mistake. But to conclude, by virtue of his engagement, that he supports long-term change in the Iranian system is not supported by the evidence on the ground.

MAJOR POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This failure to understand the changes in Iranian domestic political dynamics has had, and continues to have, major policy implications, including for European security. The EU recently restrained from sanctioning Iran over terrorist plots in Europe for fear that doing so would weaken Rouhani and lead to him pulling the plug on the nuclear accord.²⁹

In 2003, Iran's Reformists had understood the deeper political differences with the West and sought a wider settlement of

²⁹ Borzou Daragahi, "Europe refrains from harsh response against Iran over terror plots for fear of emboldening Trump", Independent, 21 November 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/donald-trump-administration-europe-iran-nuclear-deal-denmark-response-a8644796.html>.

disagreements, including Iran's emerging nuclear programme, in what became known as a grand bargain. In this tentative proposal, the nuclear impasse was understood as part of a wider political problem, a symptom and not a cause of the malaise. Included in this solution was a modus vivendi on Israel and Palestine. But by 2015, the changed political landscape in Iran ensured that even broaching such a wide-ranging détente was beyond the realms of political possibility. Wider disputes—including, most pertinently, the position of Israel—were not even considered as part of the agreement, since by now the Iranian position was that even a change in behaviour, or policy, constituted regime change.

Consequently, when the nuclear agreement was reached in 2015, broader areas of contention were deliberately set aside and deferred. Nothing has better exemplified the centrality of ideological conviction to the current Iranian political elite—or the West's ability to misread the challenge posed by the Islamic Revolution and its ideology of transformation.

For this worldview and these principles are the point of Iran's Islamic Revolution, not the state per se. The state—the Islamic Republic—serves the revolution, and the revolution has ambitions far beyond the boundaries of the state. It is an ideological challenge that needs to be understood, absorbed and fully appreciated. How to engage, contain or confront it is a matter for policymakers to choose. But what should not be in doubt is the nature of the revolution itself.

Western policymakers should look beyond only the end of the Cold War in 1989 as the pivotal moment of our age. Ten years earlier, Iran's Revolution had already sparked a process of geopolitical realignment that remains central to this day.

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