

# An Iranian Worldview

## The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic

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**Abstract:** Highlighting the nexus between the Islamic Republic's strategic culture and behavior, this article argues that Iran's clerical leadership is ideological in its orientation but has always demonstrated tactical nous and pragmatism. Domestically, it pursues Islamification in conformity with Khomeinism. Regionally, it fosters conditions that might force the United States and its European allies out of the Middle East and oblige local governments to seek accommodation. Its network of regional affiliates and proxies are primarily tools of deterrence to safeguard the regime. Nevertheless, Tehran has a penchant for opportunistically promoting regional instability and arming substate actors to ensnare adversaries in protracted conflicts. Its interventionist proclivities are also borne out of domestic exigencies. Paradoxically, the regime compensates for its diminishing legitimacy by becoming even more aggressive at home and adventurous abroad. There are growing signs, however, that the Islamic Republic's strategic culture may be its undoing.

**Keywords:** Iran, strategic culture, proxy warfare, Shia Islamism, instability

For the past four decades, the main exponent of the Iranian worldview has been the governing regime of the Islamic Republic. Dominated by a clerical hierarchy that draws on Shia Islamic conventions and Iranian national identity, it is a hybrid subculture with its own distinctive outlook, values, and norms. Built around its founding father's *velayat-e-faghih* doctrine, domestically it espouses conservatism through the Islamification of every facet of life.<sup>1</sup> Internationally, it is fervently revisionist with an ingrained hostility toward the West and the United States in particular. Bent on exporting its revolutionary ideals, it straddles the lines between a modern nation-state and a transnational Islamist

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polity. This duality is reflected in its structures and a fractious body politic that is characterized by intense institutional and factional rivalries.

The regime has sought to capitalize on Iran's Shia identity by presenting itself as its sole custodian and chief proponent. Adopted in the sixteenth century as the state religion of a reconstituted Persian Empire, Shiism has ever since been used by the country's rulers to mold a unified national identity across Iran's vast territory with its ethno-culturally diverse population. Shia identity imbues Iranians with a sense of exceptionalism: after all, it was the influence of Iranian civilization that transformed an Arab tribal creed into a religion that could be endorsed by other nationalities and cultures. Iranians regard Shiism as the embodiment of the Islam intended by the Prophet and regard themselves as the faith's true torchbearers.<sup>2</sup>

Central to Shiism is *mazlumi*—the principle of confronting injustice, even against great odds and at the cost of self-sacrifice. It has strong appeal for a nation whose history is punctuated by invasions that laid waste to its cities and saw its population repeatedly massacred. Subjugated by a succession of Arabs, Turks, and Mongols, Iranians never succumbed to their conquerors by surrendering their language and traditions. National identity is, therefore, another incontrovertible driver that shapes the Iranian worldview. At its core is a dichotomy between perpetual belief in victimization and optimism in inevitable resurgence. Pride in the richness of Iran's ancient civilization encourages long-term thinking but can also infuse Iranians with misplaced overconfidence.

## The Islamic Republic's Strategic Culture

The Iranian worldview is informed by the perceptions, values, and norms that define its strategic culture.<sup>3</sup> Since 1979, the main conduit of this culture has been the regime that was established by Ayatollah Khomeini. His unique interpretation of the *velayat-e-faghih* doctrine envisaged a polity governed by an Islamic jurist or "guardian" with extensive political and theological authority over the state and its people. Khomeini's thesis was controversial, even among Shia clerics, for the powers it granted to the guardian. Equally contentious was its transnational implications for bestowing on the guardian a mandate to intervene in the affairs of the wider Islamic community.<sup>4</sup> Railing against the influence of foreign cultures, Khomeini singled out Western imperialism—and pro-Western governments in Muslim-majority states—as the source of moral corruption and Islamic decline. His *velayat-e-faghih* demanded the total expurgation of non-Islamic influence from Islamic societies, the expulsion of Westerners, and the overthrow of regimes that did their bidding.<sup>5</sup>

The worldview of the Islamic Republic was, therefore, revisionist from its inception. The regime's identity revolves around an in-built hostility toward Western culture, especially its liberal democratic values. It is an antipathy generated partly out of historical grievances—specifically the national and Islamic experience of humiliation by Western imperialists. It is also informed by the Shia principle of *mazlumi*: the imperative that the oppressed must rise up

against oppressors. The regime views the existing international order as intrinsically unjust: a hegemonic construct created and maintained for the benefit of what Khomeini—and his adherents—describe as “world arrogance.”<sup>6</sup> Ideally, the Islamic Republic would like this order to be overturned. For its part, it has adopted a resistance culture domestically and, on the world stage, defiance.

If the regime’s rhetoric is to be believed, its overarching objective is to restore the dignity and status of the Islamic world by bringing about conditions that are conducive to a “Muslim awakening.”<sup>7</sup> To achieve this, it claims the Islamic Republic will free the “oppressed masses” from the shackles of Western hegemonic influence by exposing the corruption and subservience of governments that serve as Western lackeys. In line with this affectation, the Iranian state media routinely describes the country’s supreme leader as *Vali Amr Muslimin*—the “leader of all Muslims.” It is a self-righteous ideology that may have carried some substance when Khomeini was alive, but the rhetoric quickly betrays its hollowness when weighed against the core value most cherished by the regime.

### **Core Value(s) of the Regime**

Regime security outweighs all other considerations for the Islamic Republic’s leadership. Under its *maslahat-e-nezaam* or expediency diktat, electoral outcomes, the Iranian constitution, Shia traditions, and even Islamic law may be set aside should they contravene the regime’s interests.<sup>8</sup> When expedient, the regime has been willing to discard ideology and suspend its antipathy toward even the bitterest of foes. A history of secret negotiations and cooperation with the United States, provision of safe passage for al-Qaeda fighters to enter Iraq, and the arming of Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan are examples of singular pragmatism when the regime has felt imperiled.<sup>9</sup> Even as it vehemently condemns the suffering of Muslims elsewhere, in the name of expediency the self-professed “leader of the Islamic world” can turn a blind eye to the internment of Uighur Muslims in China and oversee its proxies engage in sectarian cleansing in the urban battlefields of Syria.

The nexus between self-preservation and expediency are apparent in the regime’s external and internal behavior. Ideologically, the Islamic Republic remains committed to exporting its revolution. But some three decades after the death of Khomeini, the security of the regime is the key variable in all its strategic calculations. Convinced that Washington—and the Saudis and Israelis—are intent on engineering regime change, Tehran is determined to take the war to its enemies in the place and time of its choosing. It is a strategy designed to keep opponents off-balance and provide the regime with leverage in negotiations. Surrounded by hostile states and the might of the U.S. military, Tehran has been using instability as a tactical tool. Knowing that stability is a core U.S. objective in the Middle East—and vital to the security of Israel and the conservative Arab states—the Islamic Republic promotes and aids perpetual radicalization at a substate level.

In creating a network of transnational proxies, Tehran has compensated for its conventional military weakness by enhancing its asymmetrical capabilities. Its substate affiliates—comprised of ideological surrogates, groups with overlapping interests, and mercenaries—are an instrument of deterrence that can be deployed to coerce opponents and project Iranian influence. With thousands of armed militias scattered across the region, Tehran aims to reduce the risk of a direct confrontation with its enemies by making war with Iran a high-cost enterprise.<sup>10</sup> The regime is naturally opportunistic: whenever an opening has presented itself, it has exacerbated and deepened its opponents' difficulties, as with the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. In other instances, it has ensnared adversaries into protracted conflicts, such as the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen.

By aiding so-called revolutionary forces, Tehran hopes to further inflame anti-Western sentiment. In the short term, growing hostility may distract and preoccupy the U.S. and regional opponents, reducing their currency and influence. In the intermediate to long term, Tehran hopes to wear down the United States and its European allies by facilitating their voluntary extrication from the Middle East. Left on their own, Washington's regional partners may either be soft targets or are likely to seek terms and accommodations. In reality, although the Islamic Republic has been a consequential player in major regional events, especially in terms of influencing conflicts, this has entailed considerable political and economic costs without producing the geopolitical outcomes Tehran desires. Its steadfast persistence with a costly policy of limited gains suggests that the expulsion of the West, and the geopolitical reconfiguration of the Middle East, are strategic ideals but regime security remains the core objective.

Regional interventionism is an imperative that is also influenced by domestic developments. With a faltering economy, a rise in sociopolitical discontent, and declining popular legitimacy, the regime has been seeking validation and supporters outside its borders. By pouring money and amenities into mainly Shia Arab communities, the clerical hierarchy has always sought a constituency outside Iran. This goes beyond a desire to project influence: an overseas constituency yields some legitimacy to the regime's pretension that it is a transnational polity dedicated to all Muslims. The resettlement of some of this constituency within Iran also embeds a loyal power base that, if and when necessary, can be deployed against the Iranian population.<sup>11</sup> For these reasons, as its domestic troubles mount, the Islamic Republic is likely to entrench itself further across the Middle East.

An extraterritorial constituency is not without challenges and risks. The majority of Shia communities in the Arab world view Iranian intervention with disdain. Angry protesters—from the shores of Lebanon to Iraqi cities and towns—have been taking to the streets to condemn this interference and what they call "Iranian Islam."<sup>12</sup> Ironically, rather than be embraced as the savior it claims to be, the Islamic Republic is often viewed as an imperialist power by the very communities it regards as its natural overseas constituency. Ethnocultural

differences notwithstanding, Iranian machinations in the Arab world have a history of raising the suspicions of Arab governments, leading to an intensification of sectarian violence and the persecution of Shia Arabs.

Financial investments overseas also stir up domestic resentment. With living standards falling, angry Iranian protesters have periodically taken to the streets to denounce the regime's regional largesse. Chants of "no Gaza, no Lebanon, I give my life for Iran" betray a growing nationalist undertone.<sup>13</sup> In response, the regime has acted quickly and ruthlessly by unleashing violence against unarmed protesters. In the expediency of protecting the regime, the distinction between criminality and the act of sinning has been blurred to dissuade outward expressions of discontent. Even criticism of the clerical leadership can entail prosecution and capital punishment under the crime of "waging war against God."<sup>14</sup>

### **Identity, Inner Dynamics, and Norms**

Even prior to the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran's clerics had their own corporate identity: a distinct ethos and outlook shaped by seminary education and manifested by a distinctive dress code and way of speaking. Before 1979, *Ruhaniyat*, the clerical class, was esteemed in Iranian society. With a few notable exceptions, such as the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) and Iran's short-lived experimentation with popular democracy (1951–53), the *Ulema* (senior clergy) viewed interfering in politics as undignified and beneath them.<sup>15</sup> Instead, the religious establishment gave its full support to the reigning monarch and, in return, received royal patronage and the privilege of consultation in decisions pertaining to social and religious norms.

Khomeini changed this long-standing convention by advocating the politicization of the clergy. In doing so, he contributed to a widening rift between the regime's clerical hierarchy and Shia traditionalists in seminaries. Moreover, political empowerment ensured that his clerical followers would be exposed to the same divisions, temptations, and vested interests that tend to plague most governing classes. In the early postrevolutionary years, internal differences were encapsulated by two factions. Radical ideologues viewed Iran largely as a launching pad for a transnational Islamist struggle. Dismissing Iranian identity, and contemptuous of international protocols and borders, ideologues advocated an all-out regional war against the enemies of Khomeinism. The opposing camp, comprised of pragmatist conservatives, preferred to consolidate the foundations of the regime before embarking on transnational operations. This group was mindful of the sensitivities of the Iranian public for fear that, if their needs were ignored and national interests not upheld, the regime could be imperiled.<sup>16</sup> Both blocs fully subscribed to Khomeini's worldview but differed on strategy and timing.

In the post-Khomeini era, factional differences gradually became subsumed in institutional turf wars and interpersonal enmities.<sup>17</sup> From the 1990s onward, the factions coalesced into two broad camps, representing a conservative coalition and a bloc consisting of technocrats and reformers. The former has broadly

supported the vast powers entrusted in the Office of the Supreme Leader, has close ties with Shia seminaries, religious foundations, the security services, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It encourages securitization and sociocultural Islamification and retains a deep-seated ideological enmity toward the United States and other liberal democracies. The reform movement seeks to divest the supreme leader of some of their powers by granting elected officials the authority to effect real change. To this end, it promotes a culture of accountability, the liberalization of society and the economy, and the easing of tensions with the West.

Splinter groups within each bloc ensure that factional allegiances are fluid: for instance, a party identified as conservative may align on social issues with reformers but support a hard-line position on the United States. Oddly, the reform movement encompasses individuals who in the 1980s would have been recognized as ideologues, while among hard-liners are pragmatists from the same era. In contrast to the 1980s, factional tensions are no longer confined to strategy but now reflect a divergence in ideology and norms, including differences over each bloc's ambitions for the character of the regime. Increasingly, these disagreements are underlined by the desire of hard-liners to make the final transition to a full-blown revolutionary theocracy by abandoning any residue of republicanism. In contrast, their opponents would like to establish a genuine republic that merely has an Islamist orientation.<sup>18</sup>

The factional rift is exacerbated by a system that allows for limited electoral representation to provide a veneer of popular legitimacy. Conflict between the elected and nonelected organs of the state are often played out in public, though it is not always clear to what extent the drama is real or staged for domestic and international consumption. It is a duality that makes it difficult to understand the processes for decision making and the forces that influence policy making. For instance, it is recognized that a number of organizations with ties to the Office of the Supreme Leader operate outside the remit of the elected government.<sup>19</sup> The executive branch—headed by the president—can neither scrutinize their activities nor control their budget.<sup>20</sup> Among them is the IRGC, whose commanders are only answerable to the supreme leader and whose vested interests and priorities, including extraterritorial operations, can contravene the policies of the government of the day.<sup>21</sup>

Further incongruity is caused by parallel institutions—often, though not always, representing the elected and nonelected elements of the regime. The Islamic Republic has numerous departments and agencies with overlapping responsibilities that foster jurisdictional wrangling. This is exemplified by the 2021 struggle between the Ministry of Interior and the Guardian Council over the required criteria for presidential candidates.<sup>22</sup> Rivalries between parallel organizations that undercut one another has reached such dangerous proportions among the intelligence community that a former minister has publicly warned the authorities about its consequences. In a 2021 interview, Ali Younesi, a former intelligence chief (2000–2005), publicly denounced the culture of “in-

fighting” between “parallel organizations” that attack one another and, in so doing, allow “foreign infiltrators” to operate with impunity across the country.<sup>23</sup>

These structural shortcomings are accentuated by the regime’s penchant for inundating the public with contradictory statements on issues ranging from the rate of unemployment, inflation, to who gave the order for the security forces to open fire on unarmed protesters.<sup>24</sup> Secrecy, misdirection, and misrepresentation have become norms for the Islamic Republic’s authorities. *Taqiyya*—the practice of resorting to dissimulation—is a well-known principle in Islamic tradition. If Mohammad Javad Zarif is to be believed, the culture of dissimulation is now embedded within the regime’s inner core. As revealed in a leaked interview with Iran’s foreign minister, after the Ukrainian passenger flight was shot down by an IRGC missile in January 2020, Revolutionary Guard commanders adamantly denied any responsibility for the incident, and in a closed meeting urged Zarif and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to strenuously deny the regime’s culpability.<sup>25</sup>

Officials so routinely make statements that are later exposed as untrue, and habitually attack and contradict one another, that public confidence has been steadily eroded in the regime’s ability to govern. The bitter blame game has fostered a culture of apathy among a disillusioned electorate who are sporadically manifesting signs of passive resistance.<sup>26</sup> The latest in a long list is the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the prevailing culture of securitization, the policy of politicizing the pandemic has resulted not only in widely suspected distortion of the death rates but also in endemic failures by the authorities to deliver on their vaccination promises—with no single minister or state body assuming responsibility for the fiasco.<sup>27</sup>

## Nuclear Controversy

Iran’s nuclear program encapsulates many of the characteristics that define the regime’s strategic culture. The Islamic Republic vehemently objects to international efforts that seek to monitor and curb its nuclear activities. Its indignation stems in part from a worldview that portrays the West as duplicitous and hypocritical. The regime likes to point out that Iran’s nuclear program dates back to the prerevolutionary era, when the Pahlavi monarchy (1925–79) was openly expressing a desire to turn Iran into a world power.<sup>28</sup> Yet, despite such blatant ambitions, the country’s nascent nuclear program received direct Western assistance from both the United States and the Europeans.<sup>29</sup>

Discarded in the immediate postrevolutionary period, renewed interest in the nuclear program arose in the mid-1980s. Although the Islamic Republic maintains that its program is strictly civilian—with the supreme leader issuing a religious *fatwa* (ruling) on the matter—it has met with a wall of international condemnation. This plays into the regime’s ideological narrative that portrays Iran as a victim of selective application of international law, and the West as hypocritical for ignoring the nuclear activities of other countries, such as Israel and India. The West, according to the regime, is determined to protect its vest-

ed interests in a hegemonic order by keeping the Islamic Republic boxed in and preventing its rise from challenging the existing system.<sup>30</sup>

Publicly, the Iranian regime maintains that its nuclear program is necessary for generating power for a large country with a growing population. Its infrastructure, it insists, has been devastated by four decades of sanctions and lack of foreign investment. When confronted with the fact that Iran has vast reserves of oil and gas, the regime offers the further justification that civilian nuclear power is a right under international law; and conforms to the Islamic Republic's mantra of forging an independent path free from foreign influence. While these explanations should not be dismissed out of hand, the controversy surrounding Iran's program often obscures a simple truth: the preservation of the regime is the key to understanding Tehran's nuclear outlook.

Tellingly, it was around 2002 that the scale of Iran's nuclear program was first publicly exposed by an Iranian opposition group that revealed covert facilities and extensive investment in dual-use technology. Iran's nuclear ambitions make sense in the light of the geopolitical developments that accompanied the Global War on Terrorism.<sup>31</sup> The U.S. military buildup along the Islamic Republic's periphery, President George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech, which lumped Iran with North Korea and Iraq as potential targets—and Vice President Dick Cheney's ominous threats about "real men" marching on Tehran, were all indicative of an existential threat.<sup>32</sup> The fate of Saddam Hussein in Iraq—in sharp contrast to a nuclear-armed North Korea—would have been a lesson not lost on the Iranian leadership.

It may seem counterintuitive to propose a link between regime security and nuclear policy when the latter has precipitated a raft of secondary U.S. and European punitive measures on top of international sanctions imposed on Iran by the United Nations (UN) Security Council. Undoubtedly, it is a high-cost strategy that seems to yield little in tangible dividends and has instead put the Islamic Republic in an ever-greater bind economically while confirming its status as an international pariah. Yet, the fact that Tehran is willing to accept these costs—even at the risk of further alienating a disgruntled Iranian population—shows the imperative of the nuclear program for the regime.

Alongside Iran's growing ballistic missile capability, nuclear technology provides the regime with leverage in negotiations with the world's leading powers. Under the cover of nuclear talks, the Islamic Republic's representatives can engage in direct discussions on a wide range of issues with their Western counterparts, including the Americans. Drawing on support from Russia and China, albeit intermittently, Iran's nuclear diplomacy looks to secure short-term concessions from the West in search of longer-term political and security settlements. It uses the threat of uranium enrichment and the installation of ever-more advanced centrifuges as bargaining chips to sustain the dialogue. Negotiations may also occasionally provide the regime with an opportunity to play off the European powers against one another and against Washington.<sup>33</sup>



Tehran's ultimate objective of securing guarantees against regime change have not so far materialized, but the 2015 *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA) shows that its nuclear policy has not been entirely in vain.<sup>34</sup> Leading world powers know that, short of a major military undertaking, Iran's nuclear program can only be slowed down—mainly through sanctions, sabotage, and targeted assassinations—but cannot be entirely halted nor Tehran's know-how be quickly reversed. Conversely, high-profile nuclear negotiations have given the regime some international prestige, a platform, and much-needed domestic collateral by providing a weary Iranian public with hope of an end to the sanctions regime.

In the West, there are contrasting opinions over the efficacy of negotiating with the ayatollahs and disagreements about whether Iran has a covert nuclear weapons program or merely dual-use installations that can be converted into something more sinister. According to reports produced during the past two decades by the U.S. intelligence community, the aim of the regime may not be to produce weapons per se but to have the capability to do so.<sup>35</sup> This has raised questions about Tehran's intermediate- to long-term objectives, especially as it continues to master the art of ballistic missile technology. Nor are international concerns alleviated when Iran's nuclear program is managed by the IRGC—the organization entrusted with the regime's expeditionary operations, including illicit activities such as money laundering and traffic in small arms and training of a host of regional substate entities.

The ambivalence that surrounds Iran's nuclear intentions is characteristic of the regime. So is Tehran's repeated attempts at dissimulation. Misrepresentations of the program as entirely civilian, and the camouflaging of key facilities, are consistent with the norms of the Islamic Republic. They go hand in hand with measures conceived to mislead international inspectors, such as the geographical dispersion of nuclear installations, which have the dual purpose of discouraging aerial bombing. Also characteristic of the regime is the bifurcation of nuclear functions between the Office of the Supreme Leader and elected officials. Jurisdiction over nuclear policy lies exclusively with Ayatollah Khomeini. Yet, delegations dispatched to nuclear negotiation are diplomats who tend to be nominated by the elected government, even if they operate under strict instructions of the supreme leader.

In practice, the executive and legislative branches of the Iranian government have no say on nuclear policy. But this has not stopped rival factions from attacking one another—or the elected government—for perceived shortcomings. The Hassan Rouhani administration, for example, is regularly targeted by parliamentary hard-liners for making too many concessions to the West.<sup>36</sup> Surprisingly, the regime allows for a lively discourse to play out in the media that is imbued with contrasting points of view regarding Iran's handling of nuclear diplomacy. Naturally, there is never any acknowledgment of the limitations imposed on negotiators by the supreme leader nor his culpability as the country's

ultimate nuclear arbiter. As with other spheres of life in the Islamic Republic, there is palpable dissonance between who controls and shapes policy and the assigning of responsibility and blame.

Ever since President Donald J. Trump unilaterally pulled the United States out of the treaty, voices that consider the JCPOA as “capitulation” to the West have become conspicuously louder in Iran. Instead of the boom in trade and foreign investment that was promised by the JCPOA, the Islamic Republic has been subjected to what the Iranian leadership calls economic warfare. A perpetual sense of victimization and outrage at Western duplicity has led to pressure by hard-liners for Iran to abrogate its existing commitments under JCPOA. In December 2020, a parliamentary bill was passed to stop all international inspections.<sup>37</sup> But such theatrics by Iran’s elected institutions do not belie the reality that nuclear policy is made elsewhere. Tehran will remain engaged in nuclear negotiations because it desperately needs economic relief to ease the pressure on the regime and, ideally, a settlement that provides it with security guarantees. The 2021 presidential victory of Ebrahim Raisi—a man with close links to the supreme leader and the security services—will not change this imperative.

## Growing Tensions

When considering the Iranian worldview, we must acknowledge that modern Iran is a nation-state of around 85 million people. The majority may identify as Persians, but the country is also home to a growing Azeri Turkic (Azerbaijani) population as well as Kurds, Balochis, Lurs, Arabs, and other ethnicities. While predominantly Shia Muslim, Iran has a Christian Armenian and Assyrian community dating back to antiquity, and the largest Jewish population in the Middle East outside of Israel. The Iranian-born diaspora around the world, estimated at around 4 million, has a diverse worldview shaped partly by its environment. Additionally, we must be aware of the *Persianate*: the term scholars use for societies along Iran’s periphery whose history, language, and culture are extensively influenced by Iranian traditions.<sup>38</sup>

Yet, since 1979, the Islamic Republic has used the extensive tools at its disposal to submerge Shia and Iranian national identity in subordination to the regime’s Khomeinist ideology. In projecting itself as the embodiment of Shia Islam, it wears its international pariah status as a badge of honor by portraying Iran’s isolation as the virtue of *mazlumiât*—the fate that befalls the righteous in the struggle against the injustices of tyrannical oppression. As a result, it has formalized a sense of perpetual victimization by portraying the country as being consistently under siege—attacked by domestic and international enemies for no other fault than defying a grievously unjust international order and exposing the malevolence of its hegemonic benefactors.<sup>39</sup>

In response to stringent international sanctions, the regime continuously urges Iranians to accept the sacrifices necessary for economic and cultural resistance.<sup>40</sup> While a convenient rationalization for the regime’s domestic failures and its decades of economic mismanagement, it is a narrative that is wearing

thin. By inextricably identifying itself with Shiism, and by hijacking its rituals and traditions to its service, the clerical hierarchy has contributed to a widening dissonance between public and private religion. Although opinion polls are not readily available in a country that is autocratically governed, reports suggest a growing rift between people's private beliefs and what they disapprovingly regard as *Islam-e-Akhondi*—the “Islam of the clerics.”<sup>41</sup> It is not clear whether behind closed doors Iranians are abandoning Islam, Shiism, or merely the regime's representations of it. But 40 years of Islamism is changing popular perceptions of religion.

A sharp decline in mosque attendance and negative attitudes toward the clerical class have been accompanied by a rise in secularism and covert conversions to other religions, including Iran's pre-Islamic Zoroastrian faith and, in particular, Christianity.<sup>42</sup> The regime is also finding itself at the wrong end of the very resistance culture it has been promoting. Not coincidentally, the eternal struggle against tyranny is just as much a central theme in Iranian national mythology as it is in Shiism. From chants of “death to the dictator” by protesters condemning the supreme leader, to women pushing back against the mandatory hijab, a sizable segment of the Iranian public exhibits its disenchantment with social restrictions and “clerical Islam” in everyday life.<sup>43</sup>

Not unlike the structures of the regime, duality is a characteristic feature of Iranian culture. Visitors are often surprised by the disparity between the average Iranian's conceit in public and how they conduct themselves in private. The experience of two and a half millennia of turbulence and change has instilled in Iranians a predilection for playing the long game: perseverance in adversity and not revealing too much of one's intentions under duress or in negotiations. These traits are identifiable in the way the Islamic Republic has operated internationally. Domestically, however, the regime is not immune from its dangers. Twentieth-century Iranian history shows that popular expressions of support for a regime can be fleeting, with demonstrators quickly changing sides when expedient.<sup>44</sup> The mass rallies that officials claim show passionate enthusiasm for the Islamic Republic may be subject to this pattern, not least because the authorities are known to use a combination of handouts and intimidation of public sector workers to bolster numbers.<sup>45</sup>

Just as problematic for the regime is a steady resurgence in Iranian nationalism. As heirs of a succession of great empires, and as proprietors of a language that was once lingua franca from the Indian subcontinent to Anatolia, Iranians have an exaggerated view of their rightful place in the world.<sup>46</sup> For a time, this played into the regime's interventionist proclivities. While frowning on manifestations of pride in Iran's pre-Islamic history, the clerical leadership has periodically—and selectively—used nationalism by redefining it within Islamist ideology and incorporating it into its narrative. For example, by framing the country's nuclear policy as a matter of national pride, and by depicting international curbs as efforts to prevent Iran from reclaiming its rightful place as a regional power, the regime has successfully co-opted nationalism in support of

its controversial program. Similarly, in drawing attention to the substitution of “Arabian” for the Persian Gulf, the regime insists that its invocation by Western commentators shows that enmity is not confined to the Islamic Republic but is directed more perniciously at Iran’s heritage.

By casting itself as the champion of Iranian national unity, the regime has sought to link itself to the survival of the nation-state: without the Islamic Republic, it warns, the West will dismember the country along ethnic lines to prevent Iranian resurgence.<sup>47</sup> There are, however, tensions between the regime’s selective application of nationalism and Iranian collective identity and attitudes. For instance, the clerical hierarchy celebrates the Arab-Muslim conquest of Persia as a splendid turning point in history whereas, for a vast majority of Iranians, it was nothing short of a travesty.<sup>48</sup> The regime’s diminishing popularity has seen a commensurate upsurge in public fascination with Iran’s pre-Islamic past. Annual gatherings around the tomb of Cyrus the Great—the founder of the Persian Empire—have been accompanied by public defiance in commemoration of Iranianism sans Islam. Notable among them is the Zoroastrian ritual of jumping over fires before the Iranian New Year—a tradition that the authorities have been unable to stop despite concerted efforts.

The struggle to keep the “un-Islamic” behavior of the public at bay has been echoed in political circles by warnings about the return of the “Iranian School”—the fear that the prevailing Islamist ideology might be subsumed into Iranianism.<sup>49</sup> Keeping Iranian nationalism submerged is likely to be a challenge. Iran’s population is young and has no memory of the heyday of the revolution. It looks to the West for inspiration, and it is influenced by a large and strident expatriate community that is predominantly secular, nationalistic, and intensely hostile to the Islamic Republic. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Iranian literature, language, and ancient festivities have also seen a mini-revival in the Persianate—notably the countries in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. Even as the regime continues to promulgate Islamism in favor of Iranianism, Iranian identity remains a powerful driver in the strategic culture of a people who are more likely to turn their back on Khomeinism than abandon their history and traditions.

## **Conclusion**

Since 1979, the Islamic Republic regime has been the dominant voice in expressing the Iranian worldview. In the service of promoting Khomeinism, its leadership has often demonstrated uncanny pragmatism in drawing selectively from Iran’s Shia and national identity to build consensus around itself. But rising discontent over draconian social controls, mismanagement of the economy, and falling living standards have been chipping away at the regime’s popular legitimacy. The intensification of factional politics, interdepartmental rivalries, and the culture of accusations and recriminations among officials are paralyzing the regime from within. With the old consensus crumbling, recent developments suggest that the supreme leader—and his orbit—are intent on bringing

an end to structural and factional divisions by replacing plurality with an absolutist theocracy.<sup>50</sup> This may create a more unitary state but at the cost of stripping away any remaining vestiges that connect the regime to the popular will. History shows that no regime that has subordinated Iranian national identity to its ideology has survived for long.

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## Endnotes

1. *Velayat-e-faqih*, or the “rule of the jurisprudence,” is an Islamic doctrine that promotes the idea of government by the learned cleric. By interpreting it in absolute terms, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s regime endowed Iran’s supreme leader with guardianship powers over every facet of life.
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