



Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

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Revisiting Revolutionary Slogans in Iran Forty Years Later

by Kevin L. Schwartz

In a [series of tweets](#) celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, noted how the US government continues to be a worthy target of one of the Islamic Republic's most enduring slogans, "Down with the USA". He tweeted, "'Down with the USA' means down with @realDonaldTrump, @AmbJohnBolton, and @SecPompeo. It means death to the American politicians currently in power. It means death to the few people running that country; we have nothing against the American nation." "As long as the U.S. practices savagery and vice", he continued, "the 'Down with the USA' won't get off the Iranian nation's tongue".

Forty years after the Revolution, the enduring legacy of anti-Americanism shows no signs of faltering. The Iranian government continues to fall back on the old sloganeering against the "Great Satan" to demonstrate they have not yet forsaken their revolutionary bona fides and still adhere to one of the Islamic Republic's most dependable foreign policy maxims. The medium may be different, but the message remains more or less the same. Most regular Iranians, of course, have little taste for such a message. If anything, they bristle at the anti-American rhetoric, "Death to America" chants, and the often accompanying practice of US flag-burning. However, the regime persists in engaging in such practices, condensing their political opinions about the US into viral videos of fabricated madness and furor. This, of course, makes for less than ideal optics. These practices overshadow more sophisticated analyses of global developments, in general, and diverse opinions about the United States, in particular, to say nothing of how it portrays a population eager for increased acceptance and interaction on the global stage as irrational and bloodthirsty.

MES Notes

On Tuesday, 5 March 2019, Middle East Studies (MES) at the Marine Corps University (MCU) hosted Brigadier General Pekka Toveri, Finnish Defence, Military, Naval, and Air Attache in Washington DC, for a lecture entitled "Living Close to the Bear: Finnish View on Securing the NATO's Northern Flank and Stability in the Baltic Region" as part of the AY19 MES Lecture Series "Revisionist Powers, Rogue Regimes, and the International Order: The Evolving European Security Challenges".

Information about MES events and publications is available on the MES website at: www.usmcu.edu/mes, or you can contact Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or adam.seitz@usmcu.edu.

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MES at MCU Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps University or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement.

Despite isolated moments of cooperation, such as receiving US arms during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), modest coordination during the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 to curtail its nuclear program, the legacy of anti-Americanism in Iran endures. The general foreign policy position of opposing the US in both rhetoric and action has remained remarkably consistent, even if it needs to be tweaked now and again, for example, in reframing the slogan to target [misguided politicians](#) and not the American population writ large. Khamenei's focus on the US government and its two most prominent hardliners opposing Iran represents a savvy singling-out of the Trump Administration in a way that reflects the Iranian population's general disappointment in the current US government. They see the US government as an untrustworthy and unreliable actor. After the signing of the nuclear deal, [the Iranian population was at best split](#) as to whether the United States would live up to its obligations; by April 2018, with the US disavowal of the deal a month away, 92% were skeptical that the US would keep up its end of the bargain.

What is contributing to this disappointment? Not necessarily the political experiences most readily associated with US hostility to Iran, such as the memory of the coup backed by US and British intelligence agencies to oust Mohammad Mossadegh's elected government in 1953 and US support of Iraq in the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. Instead, the disappointment in America for renegeing on the nuclear deal belongs to a collection of more recent experiences, such as former president Mohammad Khatami's unheeded call for a "dialogue of civilizations" and the largest post-9/11 vigil in the Middle East being held in Iran but met with Iran's inclusion in then President George W. Bush's "axis of evil". Offer a diplomatic opening, see it be rebuffed. Offer sympathy for a terrorist attack on US soil, be threatened with war. Sign an agreement and [follow it to the letter](#), see it ripped to shreds. Khamenei, along with other government officials highlighting how the United States is an actor not to be trusted, has skillfully updated the "Down with the USA" slogan to match Iranian perceptions of the US in the twenty-first century, especially those of the new generation of Iranians.

The Revolution's legacy of anti-Americanism, of course, took shape within the larger matrix of political thought defining Iran's wider engagement with the surrounding world, encapsulated by the idea of "Neither East nor West". This slogan was articulated in the lead-up to the Revolution, made a rallying call as the events of 1979 unfolded, and more or less followed in practice ever since. Revolutionary thinkers like Ali Shariati, Jamal Al-e Ahmad, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini cultivated a belief that Iran as a nation should seek to chart a path distinct from the capitalism of the West and socialism of the East and develop outside the political orientations and security umbrellas of the United States or the Soviet Union. True, it is quite likely the Iranian government much rather would have preferred if this slogan did not correspond in reality to their political relations with the outside world as much as it has. Since the Revolution, in both East and West, Iran has struggled for acceptance and been viewed with caution and suspicion at best or as an international pariah at worst. Even so, "Neither East nor West" is a legacy of the Revolution all the same and one that the Islamic Republic, willingly or not, has been forced to deal with. Iran is never fully secure in alliances, regional organizations, or multilateral institutions, but left partnering with Russia in Syria when interests align, working with European countries to salvage a faltering nuclear deal when necessity demands, and engaging in large-scale, albeit indeterminate, projects like the development of the [Chabahar port with India](#) and the '[One Belt, One Road](#)' corridor with China in hopes of greater global economic integration. Iran essentially flits its way through global politics and crises, unmoored from any community or long-lasting alliance, whether in the "East" or "West", to seek stability and support. The fact that the Islamic Republic has survived as such is surely one of the most understated political success stories of the last forty years.

The other main legacy of the Revolution was that it could save society's dispossessed from the political rapacity of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's regime and establish in its place a system of redistributive economic and social justice. Encapsulated in the revolutionary chant "Saving the Downtrodden: This is the people's slogan", the Islamic Republic was founded on a promise that it could deliver a better life for many of those left behind under Pahlavi rule. As evidenced by recent protests of late-2017 and 2018 aggravating for greater economic justice, this promise is now in question more so than at any other time during the last forty years.

Unlike the threats posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, regional and global rivals like Saudi Arabia and United States, opposition groups in exile like the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MeK), or the Green Movement protests following the contested 2009 presidential election, the recent protests were kindled by economic anxieties and stresses in daily life that challenge whether the Islamic Republic, indeed the Revolution itself, can deliver on its fundamental promise of a more equitable and just existence.

The ire of the 2017-2018 protests and the general societal discontent that has followed in their wake are foregrounded by anger over inflation for basic goods, money spent on foreign adventurism in Syria and Yemen, cronyism, economic mismanagement, the siphoning of money by religious endowments and military entities, and low employment prospects. These are afflictions plaguing one's achievement of a better life that confront head-on the *raison d'être* of the Revolution itself. Such discontent, or perhaps dispossession, cannot so easily be cast aside by sloganeering like "Down with the USA" or the deflection of blame to an internal or external political bogeyman. The government now finds itself in a precarious position, where not unlike their Pahlavi predecessor, they are regarded as either incapable of making or unwilling to make the necessary changes for which many across different swaths of society are beginning to more vocally advocate. Increasingly, it seems, the class of "dispossessed" and "downtrodden" has expanded beyond the confines of urban and rural poor to include significant sections of the working and middle classes.

The Iranian government must respond to this popular discontent against the backdrop of tightening US sanctions and an economy predicted to contract by 3 percent in 2019, according to the [International Monetary Fund](#) (IMF). Iran's success in staving off future popular discord may very well depend on its relations with the outside world, for example, in maintaining oil exports at current levels (1.25 million bpd), deepening economic ties with [regional partners](#), [continuing to trade with European countries](#), and participating in Syria's post-war reconstruction. The level of success Iran can achieve on any of these fronts is uncertain. The future of oil exports to countries like India, China, Japan, and South Korea, whose [waivers to import Iranian oil expire in May](#), is unknown. So too is the extent to and manner in which the country will participate in rebuilding Syria, whether in terms of actual construction projects or the export of Syrian resources. Any economic windfall in this regard is far from settled, as Iran is likely to find itself in increased competition with Russia over potentially lucrative contracts. There is only so much of the reconstruction pie to go around. But the hope (and expectation) of the Iranian government is that their participation will include semi-governmental entities like Khatam al-Anbiya, the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps' (IRGC) engineering arm, and the Social Security Investment Company, which manages investments in petrochemicals, oil, and other industries, and also companies in the private sector. This would provide a boon to the economy.

If Iran can cobble together from East and West a series of economic salves to bolster its "resistance economy" and signal to the public it is taking steps to [address corruption](#) and [hold semi-state companies to account](#), then it may be able to keep widespread discontent in check. If not, then the government will likely find itself the continued target of a disenchanting public seeking to increasingly challenge government elites to make good on the social contract upon which the Islamic Republic was founded. Either way, what is clear is that forty years later the Islamic Republic continues to find itself defined by and indebted to the very same slogans that took shape during the Revolution. While the political legacy of "Down with the USA" and "Neither East nor West" may be as stalwart as ever in defining Iran's course of interactions with the outside world, the Revolution's promise of delivering a better life for an ever-expanding "downtrodden" class remains an ongoing predicament.

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MES Elective on Israel Garner's Student Support

For the second year, Professor Amin Tarzi, Director of the Middle East Studies, offered an elective for Marine Corps University's Command and Staff College (CSC) on Israel. Overall, 22 students, including eight foreign and three US interagency civilian students, have enrolled in the course, entitled "The State of Israel in Context, 1948-2018". Dr. Tarzi developed this course in response to a myriad questions raised within MCU about Israel. To further enhance his own understanding of Israel and to prepare to offer the elective at CSC, Dr. Tarzi applied and received a coveted scholarship granted by the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University to enroll in the Summer Institute for Israel Studies in 2017. The course, instead of examining Israel through the lens of conflict, delves into the complex layers within Israeli history, society, and politics. The course also looks externally, e.g., how the State of Israel, given its complex identity, interfaces with its regional neighbors, the international community, and the United States, in particular. Of course, no examination of the State of Israel can be undertaken without the inclusion of the Palestinian story. The parallel narratives of the Israelis and Palestinians (or Jews and Arabs) are what make studying the State of Israel challenging and what makes this course fascinating. To augment class discussion and broaden the perspectives represented, Dr. Tarzi invited General Robert Magnus (USMC ret.), the 30th Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, and Brigadier General (IDF ret.) Shlomo Brom, currently a Senior Research Associate at the Institute for National Security in Tel Aviv University.

Overall, student response to the elective has been very positive. One respondent wrote that the course did the following:

A great job of demonstrating the importance of challenging ingrained biases within a subject matter that elicits strong emotional opinions from all sides. It touched on critical thinking, the importance of information operations and narratives on effecting national politics and world opinion, and examination of state craft and security strategies, political maneuvering, the effects of interstate proxy conflicts and politics.

Another student, pointing to the fact that several students from Middle Eastern countries participated in the class, wrote the course introduced "not only the intricacies of Israeli politics, but also the greater Middle East power dynamics," adding that having "students from the Middle East enhanced the learning experience beyond measure." A third student, writing directly to Dr. Tarzi, recognized the complexity and emotionally charged nature of the subject matter and Dr. Tarzi's ability to teach the value of understanding "other" and differing perspectives. She noted,

The topic is so complex and emotional, but you presented multiple points of view and in a neutral manner that I didn't think was possible. I hope I can learn from you and apply those same skills in future endeavors. Trying to help people see the value in another perspective is very challenging when you're talking about conflicting views of the world, but it is so important in my line of work.

MES is already preparing for the next academic year and looks forward to offering CSC students the opportunity to take the Israel elective in January 2020.



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