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Iran's Hollow Victory

The High Price of Regional Dominance

Karim Sadjadpour

Few countries have maintained clearer or more consistent aspirations over the last four decades than the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since 1979, when Islamic revolutionaries transformed the country from an U.S.-allied monarchy into an ardently anti-American theocracy, Iran has sought to expel the United States from the Middle East, replace Israel with Palestine, and remake the region in its image. Unlike U.S. strategy toward Iran and the greater Middle East, which has shifted markedly with different administrations, Iranian strategy toward the United States and the Middle East has exhibited remarkable continuity. Tehran has not achieved any of its lofty ambitions, but it has made progress toward them—and it is feeling emboldened by its recent successes.

Over the last two decades, Iran has established primacy in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, the four failed or failing states that constitute what Iranian officials call their “axis of resistance.” It has done so by successfully cultivating regional militias, such

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as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, and by exploiting the power vacuums left by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab uprisings of 2010–11. Neither the United States nor Iran’s regional rivals have demonstrated the will or the capacity to challenge Tehran’s foothold in these countries.

Iran has also exacerbated numerous other U.S. national security challenges, including nuclear proliferation, cyberwarfare, terrorism, energy insecurity, and the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen and that between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Although Tehran and Washington have faced numerous shared threats since 1979—including the Soviet Union, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Islamic State (or ISIS)—U.S. attempts to induce or pressure Iran to shift course have repeatedly failed. The Islamic Republic has proved too rigid to bend and too ruthless to break.

Like a bodybuilder with failing organs, however, Iran displays external vigor that conceals ultimately incurable internal maladies. The historian John Lewis Gaddis defines grand strategy as “the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities.” Iran has invested more of its limited capabilities in its aspiration to upend the U.S.-led world order than perhaps any other country in the world, including China and Russia. In so doing, it has neglected the well-being of its people and made itself poorer and less secure. Moreover, the gulf between the Islamic Republic’s aspirations and its capabilities means that Iran will continue to bleed national resources to subsidize regional militias and external conflicts,



deepening the public's economic, political, and social frustration and necessitating ever-greater repression.

Despite the disillusionment it has wrought, Iran's revolution has not mellowed with age. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country's 82-year-old supreme leader, is one of the world's longest-serving and most dogmatic autocrats. Since becoming supreme leader in 1989—the last time he left the country—Khamenei has skillfully vanquished four Iranian presidents, brutally quelled several mass uprisings, expanded Iranian power throughout the Middle East, and withstood efforts by six U.S. presidents to sideline him, engage with him, or coerce him. He has never met face-to-face with a U.S. official and has so far prohibited Iranian diplomats from talking to their U.S. counterparts during the ongoing negotiations over whether to revive the 2015 nuclear deal. He has handpicked fellow hard-line “principlists”—so called for their loyalty to the revolution's principles—to run the regime's most powerful institutions.

Khamenei's commitment to Iran's revolutionary principles is driven by his own desire for self-preservation. Like many dictatorships, the Islamic Republic faces a reform dilemma: it must open up and adapt to survive, but doing so could destroy it. In contrast to more pragmatic Iranian revolutionaries, such as the former presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Hassan Rouhani, who favored a Chinese-style economic opening and rapprochement with the United States, Khamenei long ago concluded that abandoning the revolution's principles—including its opposition to the United States and Israel—

would be like taking a sledgehammer to the pillars of a building. The collapse of the Soviet Union, which Khamenei believes was hastened by Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost reforms, further convinced him of the wisdom of Alexis de Tocqueville's warning that “the most perilous moment for a bad government is one when it seeks to mend its ways.”

Although ending their four-decade cold war would serve the interests of both Iran and the United States, Washington will not be able to reach a peaceful accommodation with an Iranian regime whose identity is premised on opposing the United States and whose leader believes that softening this opposition could cost him everything. Nor are there any quick fixes—whether in the form of greater U.S. engagement or more pressure—that can swiftly change the nature of the U.S.-Iranian relationship or the Iranian regime. For this reason, the United States must deal with Iran like any adversary: communicate to avoid conflict, cooperate when possible, confront when necessary, and contain with partners.

IDEOLOGY BEFORE NATION

Like many old civilizations that have experienced great triumphs and great humiliations, Iran is both self-assured and deeply insecure. The ancient Persian Empire was arguably the world's first superpower. But for centuries before 1979, foreign powers usurped Iran's territory and violated its sovereignty. Between 1813 and 1828, imperial Russia forcefully seized vast territories in the Caucasus from Persia under the Qajar dynasty. In 1946, Soviet forces occupied and sought to annex Iran's northwestern province of Azerbaijan,

only to be expelled thanks to the efforts of U.S. President Harry Truman. Seven years later, in 1953, the United Kingdom and the United States orchestrated a coup that deposed Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq.

Given this history, many Iranians, regardless of their politics, believe that great powers want to prevent their country from becoming prosperous and independent. The Islamic Republic, like many dictatorships, exploits this history to justify its internal repression and external ambitions: peaceful protesters, civil rights activists, and journalists are invariably tarred as foreign agents and subjected to violence and imprisonment. Iran defends its nuclear ambitions and its cultivation of regional militias—which flagrantly violate the sovereignty of its Arab neighbors—as both an inalienable right and a form of resistance against foreign imperialism.

Since its inception, Tehran's revolutionary regime has placed its ideological aspirations above the prosperity and security of the Iranian people. In doing so, it has routinely made decisions that were deeply detrimental to the country's national interests—for instance, prolonging its ruinous eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s in order to consolidate domestic power and, more recently, prohibiting COVID-19 vaccines from the United States in the midst of a pandemic that has devastated Iran. (After thousands of preventable COVID-19 deaths, the ban was quietly rescinded.)

No country in the Middle East has Iran's combination of geographic size, human capital, ancient history, and vast natural resources. But instead of leveraging these endowments to become a global economic power or to promote

its national interests, the Islamic Republic has built its foreign policy on the twin pillars of confronting the United States and Israel. Using three distinct ideologies—anti-imperialism, Shiite sectarianism, and Iranian nationalism—it has cultivated diverse partners across the Middle East and beyond and used them as proxies against its enemies.

Tehran's ideal vision is a Middle East in which there is no U.S. presence, a popular referendum has rendered Israel a Palestinian state, and Khomeinist theocracy is a source of inspiration for Arab and Muslim hearts and minds. This vision is far from becoming a reality. Despite its military drawdowns from Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States retains between 45,000 and 65,000 troops in the Persian Gulf, mostly to deter Iran. Israel, for its part, is a global technological hub that is more integrated into the Arab world than ever before, especially now that it has normalized relations with Bahrain, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates. And the model most Arabs aspire to is the socially liberal, globally integrated, and economically prosperous UAE, not Khomeinist Iran.

Still, Iran is closer to realizing its vision than it was a decade ago. Back then, the United States had nearly 200,000 troops in Afghanistan and Iraq; now, that number is 2,500. Meanwhile, Syria's once embattled leader, Bashar al-Assad, who owes his life to Iranian support, is slowly being normalized by Arab governments. And in addition to Hezbollah in Lebanon and various Shiite militias in Iraq, Iran can count the Houthis in Yemen as devoted allies willing to launch attacks against their common adversaries.

AXIS OF MISERY

Iran's success in the Middle East is as attributable to opportunism as it is to resolve. The Lebanese civil war, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the Arab uprisings all created power vacuums that Iran filled with its network of foreign militias, whose total ranks now number between 50,000 and 200,000 fighters. In other words, the story of the modern Middle East is more about Arab weakness than Iranian strength: Arab disorder has facilitated Iranian ambitions, and Iranian ambitions have exacerbated Arab disorder.

The crown jewel of the Iranian Revolution is Hezbollah. Founded in 1982, following Israel's invasion of Lebanon, the group pioneered the strategy that Iran would come to embrace with other proxies: carrying out lethal attacks against U.S. forces in the Middle East in order to turn American public opinion and weaken U.S. resolve. In October 1983, it attacked a multinational peacekeeping operation with truck bombs, killing over 300 people while they slept, including 241 U.S. soldiers. Iran and Hezbollah celebrated the attack but denied official responsibility. Four months later, the Reagan administration began withdrawing U.S. forces from Lebanon.

Today, Hezbollah is the most powerful force in Lebanon. It assassinates its political opponents and critics with impunity, runs its own underground economy, and reportedly has more than 100,000 rockets and missiles capable of striking Israel. It denounces its Lebanese adversaries as traitors but no longer even pretends to be independent from Iran. "We are open about the fact that Hezbollah's budget, its income, its

expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, are from the Islamic Republic of Iran," Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, said in a 2016 speech. "As long as Iran has money, we have money. . . . Just as we receive the rockets that we use to threaten Israel, we are receiving our money."

Iran followed a similar approach to turn Iraq into an inferno for the United States, fearing that Washington planned to use a successful, democratic Iraq as a platform to subvert or threaten Iran. Iranian-backed Shiite militias employed improvised explosive devices to cause as many as 1,000 American casualties. Unlike the United States, which was saddled with the task of rebuilding Iraq, Tehran sought only to thwart Washington's efforts. As Qais al-Khazali, the leader of an Iranian-backed Shiite militia in Iraq, told U.S. military interrogators, the United States spends "billions" on the war, while Iran spends "millions"—and yet Iran is more effective. Today, Iran's Shiite militias are Iraq's most powerful fighting force and a predatory Mafia that both enriches itself and secures Iran's interests in the country.

Iran and its militias also played a decisive role in preventing the collapse of the brutal Assad regime in Syria, Tehran's lone governmental ally in the region. What began as a tactical partnership against Saddam's Iraq in the 1980s has been sustained by mutual antipathy toward the United States and Israel and by shared survival instincts. Despite renewed efforts by Arab states to lure Assad away from Tehran, the two governments are now dependent on each other: Assad needs Iran's money and arms, and Tehran needs Syrian

territory as a bridge to Hezbollah and a beachhead against Israel. In 2017, the BBC reported that Iran was building a “permanent military base” in Syria as an additional front against the Jewish state.

Despite theocratic Iran’s moral pretensions, its proxies, under economic duress, have increasingly turned to the illicit economy to grow their wealth. The cash-strapped Syrian government’s most valuable export is now Captagon, an illegal amphetamine that Hezbollah traffics globally with Tehran’s tacit support. The Iranian government, which has executed thousands of its own citizens for drug offenses, has become the de facto kingpin of one of the world’s largest narcotics smuggling networks.

More recently, Tehran has added Yemen to the list of countries where it wields significant sway through proxy militias. Iran provides the Houthis, who seized power in Sanaa in 2014, with weapons and other forms of support—also reportedly financed in part through the illicit sale of drugs. This has proved to be a low-cost way for Tehran to inflict enormous financial and reputational damage on Saudi Arabia, which is estimated to have spent over \$100 billion on its intervention in Yemen and is widely considered to be responsible for the conflict’s horrific humanitarian toll. The Houthis’ intolerant rule and provocative slogans—wishing death to America, Israel, Jews, and followers of the Bahai faith—reflect the ideology of their Iranian patrons. And the group has sought to do to Saudi Arabia what Hamas and Hezbollah have long done to Israel—except with precision drones and other twenty-first-century technology instead of antiquated rockets and suicide bombers.

As the Middle East’s lone theocracy, Iran has learned to harness Islamist radicalism—Sunni as well as Shiite—better than any of its peers. Among the reasons Tehran has bested its Sunni Arab rivals is that virtually all Shiite radicals are willing to fight for Iran, whereas most Sunni radicals, including al Qaeda and ISIS, oppose the ruling Arab governments. Indeed, Tehran’s top criterion for strategic alliances is ideology, not religion, as evidenced by its close ties with the Sunni radical groups Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, to which it has given billions of dollars to fight Israel. “Iran is one of the countries that helps Hamas most,” Moussa Abu Marzouk, a grateful Hamas official, said in a 2021 interview. “The only country that ignores the limits imposed on Hamas is Iran. It helps us militarily in training, weapons, and expertise.”

Tehran has even occasionally worked with Sunni fundamentalists—including al Qaeda and the Taliban—who regularly attack Iran’s Shiite brethren, whom they consider to be heretics. Instead of prioritizing Iran’s national interests, the Islamic Republic’s grand strategy is built on a hierarchy of enmity: any enemy of the United States and Israel is a potential partner for Tehran. As Khamenei put it in 2021, “We will support and assist any nation or any group anywhere who opposes and fights the Zionist regime, and we do not hesitate to say this.”

SUCCESS BEGETS HUBRIS

What began as a revolution against the corruption and repression of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi is now an Islamist foreign legion that is elbow deep in its own far greater political

repression, assassinations, hostage taking, economic corruption, and drug trafficking. For all of Iran's success in cultivating militant groups across the Middle East, however, there are tangible signs that it has overreached. Opinion polls show that nearly two-thirds of young Arabs in the region now view Iran as an adversary, a sizable majority of Arabs of all ages want Iran to withdraw from regional conflicts, and more than half of Arab Shiites hold an "unfavorable" view of Iran. In recent years, Iraqi protesters have attacked and set fire to the Iranian consulates in Najaf and Karbala—two Shiite shrine cities that are longtime Iranian strongholds in Iraq—and Lebanese Shiites have protested against Hezbollah in the southern Lebanese city of Nabatiyah.

Mutual fears of Iran also helped midwife the Abraham Accords, the 2020 normalization agreements that gave Israel a strategic foothold several dozen miles from Iran's border. Khamenei, who denounced the accords as a "betrayal to the Islamic world," still contends that the plight of the Palestinians is the most important issue in the Islamic world, and he continues to dedicate significant resources to resisting Israel. His support for regional proxies in the occupied territories and elsewhere has created an axis of misery that stretches across the Middle East: Syria and Yemen are still mired in civil war, and in Lebanon, a recent Gallup poll revealed that 85 percent of the population finds it difficult to get by, over 50 percent cannot afford food, and 63 percent want to leave the country permanently.

Iran's regional policies may be alienating Arabs, but they are unlikely to provoke a meaningful backlash from

the United States. In contrast to radical groups that have launched direct attacks on U.S. soil, such as al Qaeda and ISIS, Iran's theocrats—who control a nation-state with vast resources and therefore have much more to lose—target U.S. interests in the Middle East using proxies and drones, giving them two degrees of separation. Moreover, Iran aims to wield its significant influence in the Middle East without taking any responsibility for day-to-day governance. No major national security decision can be made in Iraq or Lebanon without the blessing of Iran's Shiite militias, yet those same militias bear no responsibility for addressing unemployment or corruption, or for collecting garbage. Iran's militias have the power; the government has the accountability.

Where the Iranian regime's grand strategy threatens its own survival is on the home front. As Iran's economy has deteriorated, Iranians have naturally come to question the government's policies, including its hostility toward the United States and its external adventurism. Among the slogans commonly heard at popular protests in Iran are "Forget about Syria; think about us" and "They are lying that our enemy is America; our enemy is right here." Yet there are often two prerequisites for the collapse of an authoritarian regime: pressure from below and divisions at the top. Although Iran is experiencing increasing popular tumult, for now the regime's security forces appear—from afar, at least—to be united and willing to kill, while the country's discontented masses are divided and leaderless.

This near-term stability means that Iran's grand strategy will not change as long as Khamenei is supreme leader, and

it will probably outlast him, given its perceived success. The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan has emboldened Tehran to try to force Washington to abandon Iraq and its military bases in the Persian Gulf. And given the relatively low penalties Iran has paid for its regional policies—certainly compared with the enormous costs Tehran has endured in the form of sanctions and sabotage for its nuclear intransigence—it has little reason to cease supporting militias across the Middle East.

UNITED FRONT

Four decades of hostility have spawned a library's worth of facile prescriptions for ending the U.S.-Iranian cold war. Why doesn't the United States simply pursue diplomacy, make peace with the Islamic Republic, or side with the Iranian people to overthrow the regime? Yet the most fundamental question has no easy answers: How should Washington deal with an adversary that eschews direct dialogue, whose identity is premised on hostility to the United States, and that has both the resources and the resolve to sow chaos throughout the Middle East and kill thousands of its own citizens to preserve its power?

Washington's perception of Iran has suffered from four decades of estrangement and strategic narcissism, with policymakers believing that Iran's revolutionary ideology can be either moderated by American engagement or extinguished by American toughness. Many progressives think that Tehran's intransigence is merely a reaction to hostile U.S. policies, whereas many conservatives have posited that greater economic hardship would force Tehran to choose between its ideology and the

regime's survival. Yet for Khamenei, preserving Iran's revolutionary ideology is both an end in itself and a means to ensure the regime's survival.

As is often said of Russia, the Islamic Republic has sought security in the insecurity of others. And just as Iran has taken advantage of ideological, sectarian, and religious divisions to gain influence in weak states, it has proved equally adept at exploiting competition among great powers. Given that Washington has only limited leverage over Tehran—virtually all Iranian trade is with countries other than the United States—an effective strategy to contain and counter Iran will require both U.S. leadership and international consensus building.

The first step toward such a strategy is forging domestic political consensus. Up until the 2015 nuclear deal was signed, Democrats and Republicans were in broad agreement about the nature of the Iranian regime and its threats to regional security. The 2015 accord—which lifted U.S. and international sanctions in exchange for Iranian nuclear concessions—polarized the policy debate along partisan lines: Republicans accused the Obama administration of appeasement, and Democrats accused the Republicans of being warmongers.

Yet the broad contours of a bipartisan Iran strategy are clear. Republicans may passionately oppose the Iranian regime and the nuclear deal, but they also recognize that their constituents do not want another U.S. conflict in the Middle East. Democrats, for their part, may be generally supportive of engaging with Tehran and returning to the nuclear deal, but polls from the Pew Research Center show that 70 percent of Democratic voters have an “unfavor-

able” view of Iran. In other words, there is enough bipartisan common ground to build consensus around a sober understanding of the nature of the Iranian regime, one that does not exaggerate the threat Iran poses to the United States itself but also does not minimize the threat it poses to Washington’s interests and partners in the Middle East.

Transatlantic consensus is also critical. For the last few decades, European countries have intermittently pursued dialogue with Tehran, and dangled economic incentives, in the hopes of moderating Iranian policies in four areas: human rights, proliferation, terrorism, and Middle East peace. Yet this dialogue has failed to yield any meaningful changes in Iran’s internal or external policies. To the contrary, Tehran has threatened to exacerbate Europe’s refugee crisis with its regional policies and has continued to take European residents and citizens hostage, even executing a French resident in 2020. Partly as a result, European public opinion remains as critical of Iran as is U.S. public opinion.

Arguably the only time that European policy has positively influenced Iranian behavior was in 2012, when the EU, in close coordination with the Obama administration, ceased importing Iranian oil, which paved the way for the 2015 nuclear deal. An Iranian government that feels that Europe is on its side—as it did in 2018, after U.S. President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the nuclear deal—will not compromise in the face of U.S. demands.

But Washington will need to pursue cooperation beyond Europe. By some estimates, Iran’s oil exports to China have quadrupled over the last year,

reducing the urgency of Tehran’s need to return to the nuclear deal. Any effort to shift Iran’s calculus will require buy-in from China. Although Washington and Beijing view Iran differently, they share the common goal of wanting to avoid both an Iranian bomb and conflict with Iran. What is more, China seeks a stable Middle East to ensure the free flow of oil from the region. Iran’s detention of oil tankers and drone attacks against Saudi Arabia and the UAE—each of whose trade with China exceeds Iran’s—threaten Chinese interests more than they threaten U.S. interests, given that the United States has become a net energy exporter.

Finally, the United States will need to help strengthen those Arab countries where Iran currently holds sway and foster unity among them. Iran exploits Arab states with weak and embattled governments or fractured societies. Just as nationalism played an instrumental role in combating Soviet and Western colonialism in the twentieth century, Iraqi, Lebanese, Syrian, and Yemeni nationalism—or a collective Arab nationalism—will be needed to repel Iranian influence and restore these countries’ sovereignty. Inter-Arab unity is also crucial. The recent rift between members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, resulting in Saudi Arabia and the UAE blockading Qatar from 2017 until early 2021, significantly undermined the council’s ability to articulate common concerns about Tehran’s nuclear and regional policies.

Although the United States, Europe, and China have divergent interests vis-à-vis Iran, none of them wants to fight a war with Iran or see Tehran get the bomb. Washington united these

powers during the negotiations that preceded the 2015 nuclear deal, and it should try to do so again in new talks on Middle Eastern security. A region that does not respect the rule of law, sovereignty, or the free flow of energy serves no one's interests (with the possible exception of Russia's). The same is true of a region where terrorist groups are resurgent. Washington must work to persuade its partners of this fact—and then rally them to expose Iran's malign activities and limit and counter its capabilities.

KING OF THE RUBBLE

Iranian power in the Middle East appears ascendant, but it will likely prove ephemeral. Arabs who chafed under centuries of Turkish and Western hegemony will not countenance Iranian influence easily. Even those Arabs seen as sympathetic to Iran, such as former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who spent years living in exile in Tehran prior to his political career, harbor private resentment toward the country. "You don't know how bad it can be until you're an Arab forced to live with the Persians," Maliki once told the U.S. ambassador in Baghdad.

Tehran's grand strategy burns the candle of Iran's resources and credibility at both ends, exporting the same political repression, social intolerance, and economic misery abroad that Iranians have long endured at home. Iran could remain king of the rubble for years or even decades. Few foreign or regional powers have the desire or the capacity to challenge Iranian primacy in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, and after two decades of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is virtually no U.S.

support for sending more American troops to die in the Middle East. Like a skyscraper with a rotting foundation, therefore, the Islamic Republic could continue to cast a shadow over parts of the Middle East, although precariously, for the foreseeable future.

Or the structure could come crashing down. Washington cannot change Iranian aspirations to counter American influence and end Israel's existence, but it can—with the help of other countries—contain Tehran until the country gets a government that seeks to do what is good for Iran instead of what is bad for its ideological enemies. Ultimately, the Islamic Republic's grand strategy will be defeated not by the United States or Israel but by the people of Iran, who have paid the highest price for it. 🌐