

Under the supervision of
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Where is Iran heading?

Regime's battle for supremacy or survival?

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With the World Lacking a Common View of Iran, Tehran Takes Advantage

Lincoln P. Bloomfield Jr.

Compared to most governments, Iran's clerical leaders have defied convention. While countries normally strive to be better known and understood in order that their national interests may be respected by others, Iran's ruling regime thrives on quite the opposite phenomenon: being misunderstood. Put differently, the actions, motives and goals of the fundamentalists in Tehran are not openly debated and clearly articulated, and most outsiders who call themselves experts look for and find whatever statements or bits of evidence reinforce their own respective views. The result is that the revolutionary government that has held power in Iran for the past 38 years is perceived differently by at least seven different major constituencies within and outside the country.

In the United States, uncertainty about the true nature of Iran's leadership philosophy and the resulting disagreement over whether engagement with, or resistance to, Iran offers the more prudent course has benefited the clerics, who undoubtedly welcome divisive policy debates about Iran policy in Washington. While Tehran surely anticipated that the 2015 nuclear agreement with the P5+1 governments, although supported by the UN and by many arms control experts in Washington, would face harsh

criticism as well in the US, Iranian officials correctly saw many advantages that justified the effort.

Not only was a possible military strike against nuclear sites in Iran averted, but the agreement gained Tehran access to major financial assets, the legitimacy of being courted respectfully by the world's major powers for almost two years, the lifting of the arms embargo, western silence and inaction throughout the talks about Iran's domestic repression and regional destabilization, and the granting of legal status to Iran's nuclear activities in the future – including becoming a nuclear weapons state after the agreed restraints expire.

Notwithstanding the sanctions regime in place prior to the nuclear accord, forceful and unified international condemnation of specific violations of universal rights and norms by Iran has not been seen in recent years. Years of clandestine regime support for credentialed experts in western countries disputing criticism of Iran, defaming the regime's exiled resistance and any who stand with them, cautioning against confrontation and urging instead a path of engagement suggests that a concerted international focus on the government's serial transgressions against its own citizens and neighboring populations would be challenging for the mullahs to manage.

By acknowledging these troublesome issues only in broad rhetorical terms as a longstanding irritant that has already been politically addressed by sanctions, most of the world's governments have shown little interest in the question of why the Iranian regime engages in such behavior. Far more analysis by American foreign policy experts can be found regarding the nature of Russian, Chinese or North Korean politics than the politics of revolutionary Iran. Absent such interest, western governments appear uninterested in the rather central question of whether Iran's leadership is secure in its power and carrying out its intended

destiny, or acting out of vulnerability to long-suppressed popular disaffection, seeking to forestall an unstoppable Persian Spring.

As the regime's second Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, faces advanced age and reported medical issues, Iran is drawing toward a significant inflection point, a time when its ruling circle, left to their own devices, will attempt to rejuvenate the fortunes of the modern world's first sovereign state purporting to be a religious domain. If the world is looking to discourage the permanent imposition of Islamic caliphates rivaling the Westphalian system of state-based political organizations by which 21st century societies have agreed to live, what happens next in Iran is of no small consequence. That is why the clerics in Tehran fear nothing more than a unified international response to their many provocations.

To explore these differences in perception about Iran, we consider here the perspectives and interests of several different constituencies.

Iran's Clients: Shi'ite Militias and Mercenaries, Sunni Terrorists

It may appear obvious to list entities and individuals directly on the payroll of the Iranian regime such as Lebanon's Hizballah, whose leader has openly acknowledged that the organization is entirely funded by Iran. Yet the size and scope of non-Iranian paramilitary groups, militias and individual fighters is significant, and imposes annual costs likely measured in the tens of billions of dollars that are being diverted from alternative uses benefiting the lives of Iran's 79 million citizens.

With Tehran carrying such a financial burden even in a situation where no significant western effort has been mobilized to pressure the Syrian government, Iranian forces and their proxies as well as Russia to desist from their assaults on populated Syrian cities and towns, two questions arise: first, is this simply a costly exercise in the service of the Iranian revolution, or is the heavy cost

borne by Iran, in lives of its soldiers as well as money, evidence of a defensive campaign, signaling that Tehran fears the consequences to its own power of a political transition in Damascus? And second, would the application of meaningful military pressure against the Iran-led presence in Syria, in support of the UN-backed political transition process, expose a deep vulnerability of the Iranian regime, already facing pressures to address domestic economic hardships?

From regime media outlets the answer has been given: the clerics regard Bashar al Assad's regime in Damascus as a vital firewall against the eastward spread of popular protest and potential regime collapse as was experienced in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011. The author's own conversation with Bashar al Assad during a visit of analysts to Syria in January 2009 made clear that the alliance between a secular Alawite dictatorship and the fundamentalists of Iran was purely a marriage of convenience. Iran's financial support to Sunni Islamic extremists including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, at a time when Iranian forces and Shi'a proxy militias and fighters have waged sectarian warfare against predominantly Sunni communities in Iraq and Syria, indicates a tactical focus in Tehran that is devoid of religious design or principle.

Iran's Allies and Potential Friends: Russia and China

Throughout the nuclear negotiations beginning in the fall of 2013, one heard diplomats representing the US and its European allies UK, France and Germany repeatedly speak as though the P5+1 countries – the aforementioned four plus Russia and China – were united in their thinking regarding the potential bargain to be struck with Iran. These governments maintained the appearance of a shared strategic perspective throughout the process, culminating in agreement of the parties to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on July 14, 2015.

In the final days – literally the final hours – of the nuclear talks, a non-nuclear issue was added to the package, and the US consented to the lifting of the international conventional arms embargo on Iran. This concession was granted even though no reciprocal restrictions were required, or pledges solicited, by the P5+1 relating to Iran's use of military weapons against neighboring Iraq and Syria despite more than three years of Iranian paramilitary aggression in both countries, and the takeover of the Hadi government in Sana'a, Yemen by the Iran-supplied Houthi fighters just five months previously.

Perhaps Russia had diligently adhered to the arms embargo, in spirit as well as letter, prior to the lifting of the embargo. But within very short order, agreement was announced for the sale of the S-300 long-range surface-to-air missile system to Iran by Russia; deliveries were made within one year. While this arms transfer may have been planned prior to the arms embargo, the growth of trade in both sensitive military items as well as industrial and manufactured exports from Russia to Iran suggests that the two countries had shared an agenda for expanded relations even as Russian diplomats sat with Iran's counterparties in the nuclear talks.

It is clear that, separately from the nuclear talks, Russia shared common cause with Iran in defending the embattled Assad regime in Damascus. Barely a year after the nuclear agreement was reached, Russia's defense ministry announced that its Tu-22 bombers had staged bombing attacks against targets in Syria flying out of an Iranian base near Hamadan in western Iran. Stationing of military forces on another country's sovereign territory with the host country's full consent, and waging combat operations from there, is a strong measure that two countries are engaged in a de facto alliance.

While China has not made the kind of overt diplomatic or military moves with Iran that Russia has done, there is a history of

major Chinese arms sales to Iran during the 1980s and the early 1990s before international sanctions curbed this relationship. Today, China has a considerably more advanced arms industry than it did twenty years ago, and ambitions to support its defense industrial sector through arms sales. China's ability to deliver major weapons systems at substantially lower prices than comparable US or European systems (which of course are not being offered to Iran) will likely appeal to Iran given popular pressures inside Iran for economic relief.

Where China finds political alignment with Iran is the fact that both countries are one-party dictatorships with no provision for ever yielding power. While the same might be said about Russia under Vladimir Putin, China shares a further common cause with Iran insofar as the Chinese government has for decades championed the international norm of "non-interference in the internal affairs" of a state. As the world focuses on the extremely high per capita rate of executions in Iran and the heavily-controlled, undemocratic nature of its Presidential elections in particular, the clerical leaders in Tehran undoubtedly appreciate China's position that these matters – and the frequent evidence of internal popular disaffection – are not legitimate subjects of concern for the international community.

Europe

There is risk of inaccuracy, unfairness and offense in an American observer seeking to characterize European attitudes and positions regarding Iran. In hopes of minimizing that risk, the observation here starts with a self-awareness that the United States sometimes becomes intractable in its moralistic approaches to the world, such that it is not clear what standard the Americans are observing in their efforts to reduce conflict and tensions among states. Europe has its own views of Iran and the Middle East region, informed by a much longer and deeper history of

involvement with the peoples and problems involved in today's circumstances than that of the Americans.

And yet, it is the Americans who are expected to set the tone and the course for western relations with Iran – whether insisting on punitive sanctions, or seeking rapprochement as President Obama did beginning in 2013 in announcing the start of nuclear negotiations. The US spends so much more on defense of the transatlantic alliance than any other ally, and has been the superpower partner of choice for most Arab countries as well as Israel for over 35 years, creating an expectation in Europe that on important issues of alliance solidarity such as how to deal with a threatening Iran, some deference will be shown to American policy.

Nevertheless, European foreign policy, while in some ways more moralistic than American, has traditionally been far less inclined to restrict commerce as a tool of foreign policy. Iran under the mullahs has had considerable trade relations with European countries even when foreign and defense ministries were concerning themselves with Iranian terrorism and other serious misbehavior. Moreover, while Europe has been victimized by the clerical regime of Tehran, it is the US whose Embassy was sacked and occupied by Ayatollah Khomeini's followers, and pro-regime crowds have chanted "Death to America" – not "Death to Europe" – for nearly four decades.

There is no doubt that the UK, France and Germany, as members of the P5+1 group negotiating nuclear restraints with Iran, were as concerned as the US that the terms of the JCPOA effectively block any Iranian pathways to the bomb. Indeed, it is well known that during a key juncture in the talks, the French government took a stronger line and persuaded the US side to harden its position out of concern that too much latitude was being given to the Iranian side.

However, in the aftermath of the agreement, it is no less striking that Europe has taken a markedly different approach than the US in authorizing, indeed promoting, major commercial deals with Iran now that sanctions have been lifted. On the US side, the Obama Administration actively encouraged American companies to do business with Iran, recognizing that engaging with the Iranian people would likely yield longer-term benefits by lessening hostility between the two and thus giving more latitude to their governments to explore a less hostile relationship.

The complication for American companies has been that US law continues to ban commercial engagement with entities tied to the regime; and while there is no clear guide to Iran's "front companies," sanctions experts continue to warn American companies that they face likely prosecution in dealing with all but a fraction of Iranian commercial entities, such is the extent of regime control over the country's private sector. While the American airplane manufacturer Boeing has been pursuing a major sale of commercial aircraft to Iran, this potential transaction has been politically controversial and faces significant opposition in the US Congress.

Europe, by contrast, has not seemed to labor under such constraints, whether imposed by law or policy. The day after the nuclear accord was reached, the French Foreign Minister announced that his Iranian counterpart, Javad Zarif, had invited him to Tehran, and Germany's Economy Minister announced a 60-person business delegation to travel to Tehran within the week. In mid-January 2016, just as the EU lifted its sanctions on Iran in accordance with the JCPOA, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani led a delegation to Europe that signed a reported \$22 Billion in business contracts with European entities spanning several industries, in the space of two days.

Thus, while Europe and the US hold many foreign policy perspectives in common relating to Iran, the very different US and

European experiences in the commercial realm following the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions indicates a not insignificant difference in the respective American and European sensitivities to the idea of politically bolstering the ayatollahs of Tehran.

The Arab States

Much of the political and military activity presently underway in the Middle East is commonly attributed by analysts to a geopolitical contest for primacy between Iran and the Arab Gulf led by Saudi Arabia. While there is no doubt that this proposition fairly explains much of the rhetoric and maneuvering involving these two regional powers, the Western tendency to focus on military activity may be missing the more important dimension of the rivalry.

Following the September 24, 2015 stampede at Mecca, Saudi Arabia that killed at least several hundred, and reportedly as many as 2,400, religious pilgrims, the majority of them from Iran, President Rouhani preceded his formal speech to the UN General Assembly on September 28, 2015 by referring to the "old, young, men and women who had come together in the grand and global spiritual gathering of the Hajj, but unfortunately fell victim to *the incompetence and mismanagement of those in charge.*" (Emphasis added)

With respect to 'those in charge,' Rouhani continued, "Due to their *unaccountability*, even the missing cannot be identified and the expeditious return of the bodies of the deceased to their mourning families has been prevented." (again emphasis added) The "unaccountability" of "those in charge" was, of course, a veiled reference to the House of Saud, whose King carries as his formal title "The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." It is no exaggeration to assume that the Saudi leadership took these words to be an attack on their legitimacy, a subversive message implying a wish for regime change in the Kingdom.

The following summer, on July 9, standing before an estimated 100,000 spirited opponents of the Iranian regime at the annual National Council of Resistance of Iran rally, former Saudi Intelligence Minister and Ambassador to the UK and US, HRH Prince Turki bin Faisal al Saud, called for regime change in Iran – a goal he repeatedly said the Iranian people shared. Pledging support to Maryam Rajavi, head of the Paris-based resistance organization that has long embraced gender equality, women’s empowerment and a modern, tolerant practice of Islam, Prince Turki said, “your aim to rid your people of the cancer that is Khomeini is an historic epic and...it will remain inscribed in the annals of History.”

Prince Turki described the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini critically, citing interference and threats to neighboring Arab states, and concluding that the fundamentalist regime had broken with the tradition of historic collaboration between Persians and Arabs, depriving the Iranian people of the kind of leadership they had sought after the Shah’s demise, and ultimately deepening Iran’s isolation. Citing a litany of offenses against the Arab states and people by Iran under Khomeini and his successor as Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Prince Turki referred to “its policy of interference based on its insistence and perseverance in founding sectarian organizations and illegal armies in the name of Islam to serve the interests of the leadership in Iran.”

There is no question that the Qods Force and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – both organizations created explicitly to protect and perpetuate the religious authority of the Supreme Leader (*Velayat e faqih* or “Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist” under the constitution instituted by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979) – are heavily engaged in combat operations in Iraq and Syria, and provide essential support to the Houthi fighters that took control of Yemen’s seat of government in September of 2014.

These paramilitary forces are not equivalent to the military organizations in most countries. Iran has a national army separate from the IRGC, the Islamic Republic of Iran Army, whose mission is to defend the territory and sovereignty of the state. The IRGC and its elite element the Qods Force are more properly understood as extensions of a Shi'a caliphate, envisioned by Khomeini as a boundless religious domain including but not limited to the sovereign territory of Iran, with both answerable to his divinely-vested constitutional power. The distinction between agents of a sovereign country and agents of a self-appointed religious empire could be relevant to anti-terrorist designations aimed at "non-state" entities which are not privileged by sovereign purposes and duties.

While western governments have, understandably, focused on Iran's long record of terrorist attacks and support for violent non-state actors conducting terrorist activities, it is the religious misconduct of the fundamentalist enterprise spawned by a deeply ambitious cleric with grand visions of unprecedented power that animates the leaders of the Arabian Gulf countries. Islam underpins the legitimacy of leadership in all the GCC countries as well as Jordan, whose Hashemite leaders trace their lineage to the Prophet.

Not only do the Gulf States object to the armed destabilization of Arab states and the inflaming of sectarian hatred led by Iran, they are even more concerned by two forms of hostile action that may be less visible in the West. First is the alleged effort by Iranian agents to support seditious activity in majority Shi'a communities inside Arab states including Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. The fact that Iran exercises major influence in Iraq's majority Shi'ite community, and is overtly fighting to maintain Shi'a-related (Alawite in Syria, Zaidi in Yemen) clients in power in Damascus and Sana'a, is consistent with claims that it is promoting sectarian interests throughout the Arab world, which is predominantly Sunni.

The second and potentially most important form of hostile action by Iran is the effort to shore up the diminishing regional religious influence of the *faqih* himself, the Supreme Leader of Iran. The fact is that since Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, the prestige and followership of the Supreme Leader within Shi'a Islamic communities has declined. The author has described elsewhere how Ayatollah Khamenei was selected by Khomeini as his successor only after a far more senior and respected cleric, the Grand *Marja* Ayatollah Montazeri, displeased him by openly challenging Khomeini's order to execute 30,000 dissident political prisoners – a crime against humanity that has gained political salience recently as audio recordings of Montazeri chastising senior clerics for blackening their historic reputation have been made public.

The author has additionally described elsewhere the thesis derived from regime writings that Ayatollah Khamenei pushed for a nuclear weapons program not as a necessary measure to defend Iran so much as a way to compensate for his deficient religious charisma in the Muslim world. The reality is that in Iraq, the venerated Shi'ite cleric Ayatollah Sistani does not accept the religious authority of Iran's Supreme Leader. The same can be said for many Shi'ite religious authorities in the Arab world; as has been noted, Hizballah in Lebanon is entirely funded by Iran, and hence is not a valid indicator of religious influence.

What will happen when the aging Ayatollah Khamenei passes from the scene? Iran's Arab neighbors recognize that the opportunity for the Iranian regime to elevate a third Supreme Leader would be exploited for maximum effect in the Muslim world, as a potential means of increasing Tehran's leverage over neighboring country populations via religious channels and media. The final period of Ali Khamenei's tenure, therefore, may be the most opportune time to organize Arab Shi'ite clergy in opposition to the Iranian *Velayat e faqih* claim of supreme authority.

The stakes are very high in Iraq in particular. At least three significant Sunni tribes share family ties spanning from central Arabia north to Mosul. For the Saudi royal family, Iraq's Sunni tribes are not foreign neighbors, but blood relatives. Saudi Arabia has re-engaged in Iraq recently at more senior levels than had been used for over a decade. From the Saudi perspective, the prospective passing of Iraq's greatly respected Shi'ite *Marja*, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who will be 87 years of age in August 2017, is of fundamental importance.

As Sistani has resisted Iran's attempts to exercise religious hegemony over southern Iraq, his departure is expected to trigger a major Iranian regime effort to establish dominion over the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, both of which represent more sacred sites of Islam than any of Iran's shrines. It is a matter of long-term national security concern to Saudi Arabia, and likely many of its neighboring Arab states, that Iran's fundamentalists not breathe new life into a declining – one could say failed – caliphate after the authority of Ayatollah Sistani is no longer there to maintain a barrier.

Just as Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq was seen by some American security analysts, incorrectly in retrospect, as a major obstacle to a more cooperative and secure Middle East order, now Iraq looms a second time as a lynchpin of the region's future, except in this case, the salient factors are tribal and religious, hence all but unseen through the lenses of western democratic governments. The only common thread is that both communities share a deep concern that the heirs of Khomeini not be further empowered to threaten regional stability and undermine shared interests.

The United States – Pivoting, Tilting, and in Search of Lost Leverage

It is not gratifying for a former US official whose inclination is to promote policies that offer improved prospects for success, to

critique policies that have fallen short of success. However, history will likely conclude that President George W. Bush's 2003 Iraq intervention, whether justified at the time or not, suffered from failure to mobilize sensible plans and adequate resources to help restore stability and security as the Iraqi citizenry began their national life post-Saddam. The consequences were grave.

One consequence was that Bush's successor, President Barack Obama, came to office in 2009 determined to extricate US military forces from their extended operations in Iraq and Afghanistan for nearly a decade following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Obama's precipitous withdrawal of combat forces from Iraq is seen as having created a vacuum that allowed the Islamic State, or Daesh, to establish a successful foothold in Iraq as well as Syria, with adverse consequences that continue in 2017. Mr. Obama promoted a strategic "pivot" to Asia, signaling a diminution of America's strategic appetite to invest further in stabilizing the Middle East.

Adding to the perceptions of declining American interest in the region, the Obama Administration appeared content with the removal from power of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, and readily engaged in technical assistance programs with the Muslim Brotherhood-oriented regime of Mohammed Morsi, before large-scale protests against Morsi's anti-democratic leanings led to his stepping down in what some Egyptians termed a "popular impeachment."

Longstanding Arab allies of the US reacted negatively to the perception that decades of cooperation by Mubarak had earned him no American 'loyalty' as he was driven from power. Iranian citizens, in contrast, may have drawn hope and inspiration from the example set by peaceful protestors in both Tunisia and Egypt in what became known as the Arab Spring. Iranians had, after all, exercised the power of protest numerous times, in 1979 as the Shah's regime collapsed; in June 1981 as Khomeini's

fundamentalist regime banned political activism led by Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) leader Massoud Rajavi and impeached popularly-elected President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr; in 1999 as student protestors were attacked and reportedly thrown from buildings by regime enforcers; and in 2009 as people took to the streets in protest of President Ahmadinejad's falsified re-election vote tally and were met by lethal force.

As if the chaos from President Bush's mishandling of the aftermath of regime change in Iraq and President Obama's seeming abandonment of American commitments to uphold a stable order in the Middle East were not disturbing enough to regional allies, the Obama Administration's Iran diplomacy and accompanying failure to take any measures to arrest the spiraling catastrophe in Syria created major doubts throughout the Middle East regarding the direction and guiding principles of US policy.

When the JCPOA was presented to the US Senate in the summer and fall of 2015, President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry were at pains to explain that the concessions to Iran were justified because the sole focus of the entire negotiating effort had been to avert a dangerous crisis precipitated by Iran reaching the threshold of producing a nuclear weapon. This was a distortion of the recent past: President Obama had made clear in his speech to the UN General Assembly on September 24, 2013 his belief that "if we can resolve the issue of Iran's nuclear program, that can serve as a major step down a long road towards a different relationship, one based on mutual interests and mutual respect."

To be sure, the P5+1 nuclear accord with Iran was an arms control agreement, one that diminished the prospect of near-term military conflict and one that American nuclear nonproliferation experts had hoped to see for decades. But it was more than those things: the overture by President Obama was an offer to explore the possibility of *détente* between Washington and Tehran. A generation of US Foreign Service officers, stung by the lingering

trauma of the 1979 Tehran Embassy takeover and holding of American hostages, has spent the intervening 38 years hoping for a turn of events that could restore diplomatic relations with a major country, and return Persian studies and Farsi language training to the core competencies of the State Department.

With a circle in power holding the dubious distinctions of being the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, the leading state in per capita executions of its citizenry, and the principal defender of a leader in Damascus guilty of massive war crimes against innocent civilians, the perceived Obama "tilt" toward Iran raised questions that are still not answered. Does the US not stand with its traditional allies? Does the US not object to Iran's active destabilization of neighboring states, including Iraq, where so many US soldiers were killed or wounded in order to relieve Iraq from dictatorial and violent rule? Is there still a US policy in the Middle East?

As the Administration of President Donald Trump settles into office, answers to these questions are taking two forms. Respected senior cabinet appointees, including former General and now Secretary of Defense James Mattis as well as former ExxonMobil CEO and now Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, have signaled a continuity of solidarity and cooperation with traditional Arab allies including Saudi Arabia. At the same time, early signals from the Trump White House have made clear that far from pursuing a rapprochement with Iran, the US under Mr. Trump will maintain the American commitment to the JCPOA but be vigilant in resisting Iranian provocations.

As this is written, the Trump administration is reinforcing its military capabilities on the ground in both Iraq and Syria, and indication that a more coherent policy is probably forming among the national security team, which also includes the recently-appointed National Security Advisor, Army Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, the heads of the National Intelligence Directorate

and the CIA, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Commander of US Central Command covering the Middle East region. Together, these predominantly military officials have extensive knowledge and experience in the Middle East, and a reputation for strategic thinking and planning. They also share a well-informed aversion to Iran's malevolent role.

The Iranian Resistance – National Council of Resistance of Iran, including the Mujahedin-e Khalq

Experts on Iranian affairs will point to a number of groupings of mostly exiled Iranians, each of which could be characterized as opponents of the regime. With a population of 79 million and a culture that has long been noted for scientific achievement and respect for education, Iranians are a sophisticated and politically-aware people. This was clear in 1980 after the Shah had departed, as Iranians representing every region, minority, gender and political stripe embraced the opportunity to campaign for elected office.

What Iranians learned, to their dismay, only after welcoming Ayatollah Khomeini back from exile as a symbol of nationalist resistance to Communism and western materialism, was that Khomeini's burning ambition was not on behalf of his fellow citizens' sovereignty and political rights, but rather on behalf of his own limitless ambitions for personal power and authority. An intellectually vibrant culture's desire to exercise political rights without fear – already delayed for a generation after nationalist Prime Minister Mossadegh was deposed in a CIA-led coup and the Shah returned to the Peacock Throne in August 1953 – would be crushed a second time, by Khomeini's fundamentalist regime enforcers, in June 1981.

To this day, the deep-seated aspirations of Iranians to control their affairs remain denied by a brutal dictatorship that fears free dialogue and uncensored media more than it fears foreign

invasion. The Islamic revolutionary government imposed a cruel sequel to the Shah's repressive and corrupt reign, during which dissenters faced brutal punishment by the dreaded SAVAK security service. Indeed, the initial revolutionary stirrings of public sentiment for representative democracy date back to more than a century ago, in 1906, when Iran's first constitution Parliament were created. Both came under extreme pressures and were thereafter subordinated to the Pahlavi Dynasty.

In 2009, people took to the streets in defiance of the corrupted election results favoring a second presidential term for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad against his rival Mir Hossein Mousavi. The Green Movement, as it was called, sought more than mere election, demanding regime change. It drew international attention to the prospect that outside dissidents could possibly mobilize popular protest sufficient to drive the regime from power. Upon his election in 2013, President Rouhani promised to release Mousavi along with former Speaker of the Parliament Mehdi Karroubi from house arrest within a year – a pledge he has not honored four years later.

There is, in sum, a rich history of modern Iranian pressure for democratic governance in some form. Many colorations of political views have been seen among the regime's internal critics – some who emerged from inside the regime, and others in varying degrees of disaffection with the record of clerical rule. To listen to any of these critics is to hear very similar condemnations of the various misdeeds by a regime that commands no respect among exiled Iranians.

No group has held a more critical view of dictatorial rule in Iran, sustained it longer, actively resisted dictatorship more forcefully, paid a higher price for its opposition, articulated a more coherent and plausible future vision for a post-fundamentalist and democratic Iran, more robustly communicated its defiance of the mullahs' repression to the population inside Iran, or mobilized

more exiles and foreign supporters regularly to denounce the Tehran regime, than the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) which includes the MEK.

The author has, since 2011, independently researched the most credible facts behind familiar allegations commonly repeated in reference to the MEK, and the picture that has emerged from this research is of a proud and independent group of educated Iranians seeking a more just and democratic society, whose refusal to accept repressive and corrupt rule under the Shah led to the execution of most original members by the early 1970s. Those who continued the cause under surviving leader Massoud Rajavi after the revolution soon encountered a wall of brutal repression by Ayatollah Khomeini's regime enforcers, and those dissidents who had not been killed or jailed escaped to life in exile.

Iranians living for nearly 40 years under clerical rule have endured a highly controlled and propagandistic domestic information environment, casting the MEK as traitors when they gained refuge within Iraq under Saddam Hussein's rule during the 1980s Iran-Iraq conflict. While the MEK took up armed resistance against regime targets between 1981 and 2001, the government distorted and embellished this activity by attributing to the resistance controversial and indiscriminate attacks of violence for which no MEK attribution has ever been demonstrated or claimed.

Tehran's diplomats repeatedly leveraged acts like the taking of French and American hostages in Lebanon during the 1980s, and the surreptitious pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability, offering potential cooperation as an inducement to Western governments if they would formally designate the MEK and NCRI as foreign terrorist organizations. By placating Tehran and officially designating the exiled resistance as terrorists starting in 1997, the US and other western democracies placed their intelligence and security organs at the service of Iran's notorious Ministry of

Intelligence and Security in the latter's quest to silence its political opposition.

In 2017, five years since court challenges in the EU, UK, France and the US confirmed the absence of corroboration for the terrorist designations of the NCRI and MEK and formally removed them all, mainstream perceptions of this global network of regime opponents have evolved considerably. No longer do credible voices in the West reflexively repeat the discredited allegations against the resistance. Those who do may be motivated by concern that the nuclear agreement could be abandoned. Others may be slow to accept that long-believed information is unreliable.

In addition to maintaining a coherent, organized, active and forward-looking focal point for exiled Iranians and influential supporters from many countries, the NCRI has been an island of refuge and resilience for the surviving members, families and friends of the tens of thousands of men, women and children jailed, tortured and executed by either the Shah's enforcers or the clerical regime. The NCRI and MEK have followed a remarkable path through a half century of resistance, a path marked by sustained sacrifice and courage that will be remembered by history.

The inward focus and mutual commitment within this society of survivors has been exemplified by the nearly 4,000 who built their own city at Camp Ashraf in Iraq starting in 1986, becoming isolated and endangered after US forces departed Iraq in 2009, and braving seven lethal attacks staged by troops and militias at Iran's behest, until 2016 when the last of the remaining 3,200 were relocated to safety in Albania.

The hesitation among some Iranians in exile to engage with the MEK out of fear of legal recriminations in their host countries, reprisals against their family members in Iran, or jeopardy of their ability to conduct business with Iranian entities had affected the potential for unity among critics abroad. The uniquely amazing

life experience of this dedicated society of men and women has, understandably, separated and even alienated them from other exiled Iranians who may hold similar aspirations for change in Iran. Decades of effective isolation from so many other Iranians remains a future challenge as the resistance seeks to broaden international understanding of, and support for, a unified policy confronting Tehran's rulers on moral, religious and political grounds.

No group more closely follows and documents the deception, hypocrisy, corruption and abuses of the mullahs, and their failure to uphold even a basic social contract with the citizens of Iran. While ISIS and the Taliban commit shocking atrocities and destroy world heritage sites in the name of religion, the modern, gender-equal NCRI conducts cordial diplomacy with political and religious notables from around the world. Unlike any other group that has ever been labeled terrorist, the NCRI produces thoroughly-researched and well-written tomes on topics of strategic importance such as the locations, troop numbers, commanders, proxy fighters, casualties and costs of Iran's military operations in Syria. In 2017 the NCRI published a detailed primer on the financial network controlled by the IRGC.

As Western policymakers and analysts call for Muslims to more actively defend their own religion against extremist interpretations, resistance leader Maryam Rajavi has done just that, publishing a cogent rebuttal to those inciting violence in the name of Islam, an essay drawing on the Koran and Islamic teachings to dispel the notion that killing innocents and attacking other faiths is a religious duty. One searches in vain for other examples of accused terrorists, particularly in the Middle East, whose message for years has been to promote religious tolerance, separation of church and state, political legitimacy derived from the ballot box, gender equality and rights for all, and a non-nuclear Iran.

It is not unreasonable to predict that the resistance will soon outlive the defamatory allegations and propaganda wrongly attached to their history, and gain acceptance as a valued resource for governments, including the United States, whose patience with Tehran's criminal vandalism of the international order may finally be running out.

The Iranian People

For an outsider who is not an expert on Persian affairs to presume to enlighten others about the people living in Iran is fraught with risk. Yet, to discuss perceptions of many interested parties regarding the history and future of this important country without considering its own people would, one fears, be the greater injustice. For if justice informs the growing international desire to see a change in Iran that would allow for political legitimacy, transparent governance, guaranteed rights, rule of law and due process, and an end to the long nightmare of judicial abuse, corruption and external aggression, surely it is the citizens of Iran whose wishes must be respected above all.

For many years, one has heard analysts of Iranian affairs in Washington confidently assert that the clerical regime enjoys broad popular support. Many of these analysts took a keen interest in the possibility of curbing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's hard-line influence when the so-called Green Movement attracted attention during the 2009 uprisings. These same observers have encouraged policymakers to hope that so-called "reformist" figures like President Rouhani hold the potential of transforming Iran's behavior from a serial international outlaw and threat to a normal state that accommodates international law and norms.

History has not been kind to these analysts, and certainly in Washington one will not find much traction for views anticipating that the mullahs will transform the manner in which they exercise

power, even less so after the death in January 2017 of the leading "reform" figure, former President Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Thirty-eight years of professed hatred of the exiled resistance, relentlessly echoed through state-controlled media, has most foreign analysts persuaded that the NCRI and MEK enjoy no meaningful support in Iran. The NCRI, by contrast, broadcasts Farsi television programming via satellite and finds viewers surreptitiously telephoning in contributions to its periodic telethons from all over Iran; it also receives continuous videotaped acts of protest staged at recognized sites in Iran.

These indicators of support are understandably rare, since the regime incarcerates, tortures and executes citizens for the simple crime of harboring sympathy for the NCRI. Among the information reaching the NCRI is videotaped footage of regime tanks crushing scores of confiscated satellite dishes, and photographs of equipment emitting powerful jamming signals from elevated sites including the top of Tehran's Milad Tower.

The reason for the regime's near-obsession with the NCRI is that, unique among regime opponents, the NCRI has always rejected Khomeini's brand of Islam. By daring to defy the core of the fundamentalist Islamic enterprise, insisting that Islam is tolerant, peaceful and consistent with the life of modern, educated men and women exercising self-determination, the NCRI threatens the heart of the revolutionary government's claim to power in Tehran.

There are polling organizations in the US that claim to be able to profile the opinions of the Iranian people. Under such conditions of state coercion, such a claim is not credible. The fact is that Iranians do their best to live happy lives under the constraints of the revolutionary government. The authorities cannot prevent news from escaping the country about young people being punished for fraternizing between the sexes, or for posting western-inspired music and dance videos. One can see footage of

demonstrations by striking teachers or pensioners suffering from low purchasing power. There are continuous indicators that younger Iranians, including children of senior clerics, indulge in Western-style luxury and ignore religious taboos.

Does this mean that the regime is riddled with corruption and hypocrisy? That Iran's youth aspire to live more freely as others of their generation do even in predominantly Muslim societies? That large segments of the population are discontented due to rampant corruption and diversion of state resources to disrupt political transitions in neighboring countries?

Of course, no definitive answers to these questions can be given so long as the people of Iran are denied any means of political participation.

Conclusion

For a group with so many accumulated violations of international norms, so many transgressions against neighboring states and the international order generally, and the blood of so many principled opponents of religious dictatorship on its hands, the Tehran regime has achieved remarkable success in preventing all who should be its critics from forging a unified view and, most importantly, a unified response. Today we find western governments pondering the implications of a Russian leadership circle utilizing secretive methods of deception, disinformation and suppression of dissent, and Asian countries contemplating a rising China that seeks to lead new multilateral trade and finance institutions. Yet Iran, too, merits global attention as a disruptive actor that has exhibited an impressive ability over a considerable period to control a large population and deflect pressures to change.

Veteran policymakers will say that Western governments have been resolute in condemning Iran's bad behavior and imposing

sanctions that brought the Iranians to the nuclear negotiating table. They might also reflect the view that President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, and the Parliament – the most visible Iranian actors one sees in the international media – represent the core of Iran’s government, and that more secretive entities including the IRGC, Qods Force, Guardian Council and Expediency Discernment Council represent hard-line tendencies of lesser political importance.

By now, as the hand of these paramilitary forces has been more fully exposed in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere, and as the Supreme Leader’s religious foundations along with the IRGC have been estimated by Reuters to control as much as 80 percent of Iran’s economy, it is no longer possible to view anyone other than the *Velayat e faqih* – the Supreme Leader and the instruments of his direct authority – as the center of power in Iran.

President Obama told the UN in 2013 that President Rouhani, in his June 2013 election, had “received from the Iranian people a mandate” to pursue a moderate course. The reality is that for more than 20 years, fewer than 2 percent of individuals who registered to run for President have been allowed on the ballot after loyalty vetting by the Guardian Council. The vote electing Hassan Rouhani only had 8 of 686 registered candidates on the ballot. The only mandate Rouhani has since followed has been to achieve a nuclear accord that preserves Iran’s future rights to become a nuclear weapons state. That mandate came solely from the Supreme Leader, for whom Rouhani had previously served as a nuclear negotiator.

Human rights organizations continuously sound the alarm at the relentless pace of executions in Iran. Suspicion is widespread among resistance families that regime authorities are closely monitoring suspected dissident behavior, and pulling people from their homes without even a judicial process. Others may say that Iran is deeply concerned about the social threat of drug use and

that many of those executed are engaged in drug trafficking. The population almost certainly would not receive media reports such as the German Deutsche Welle report on January 18, 2017 that two trucks belonging to the IRGC had been apprehended transiting Germany with a reported 150 kilos of heroin.

Can the international community compare notes and forge a more coherent, common position that demands an end to Iranian meddling in its neighbors' affairs and to the epidemic of executions at home? Can Iran's Muslim neighbors make clear that any successor "Supreme Leader" after Ali Khamenei's passing will receive no homage from Shi'ite clerics outside of Iran? Can the world's democracies come together and make clear that farcical staging of elections allowing only hand-picked loyalists are damaging to democracy everywhere and will be condemned? Can governments pool their resources and compile dossiers on leading regime figures in Iran to hold them accountable at The Hague or the ICC for atrocities such as the 1988 massacre of 30,000 political prisoners?

The fact is that every constituency discussed above has witnessed, and most have endured, Tehran's unceasing international provocations over the years. These include embassy seizures, terrorist attacks, assassinations of regime opponents on the streets of foreign capitals, hostage-takings, mining of the Persian Gulf, arming and funding of terrorist militias, waging of sectarian war against Sunni populations in Iraq and Syria, illicit trafficking in weapons along with human trafficking, and serial violations of other international laws, conventions and norms necessary to the maintenance of a stable international order. By now there can be no disagreement that Iran's revolutionary government since 1979 has imposed a heavy burden on the world.

What is lost when there is no recourse and no relief from this burden is more than the oppression of a great people, large numbers of whom can never return to their beloved country under

its present leadership. The countries of the Middle East cannot stabilize hostilities and enable political processes to forge accepted political arrangements. Europe and the United States are torn as they engage in commerce with Iran because they recognize that profits are sustaining the regime's harmful behavior.

The time may finally have arrived when the regime's ability to portray itself in an innocent and sympathetic light will no longer find a credulous audience in the world, when its decades of deceptions have finally been unmasked and recognized as hostile behavior, implicating western governments in its own improprieties. Iran has pushed its neighbors, the major democracies, and one imagines, its own citizens too far, and for too long.

What is the solution? The resistance and its supporters advocate change from within, a resurgence of popular protest in Iran demanding that the clerics step down. Exactly such a scenario materialized in June of 1981, as massive demonstrations across the country stood in opposition to religious dictatorship; the mullahs literally shot their way to power, suppressing the unfulfilled goals of the 1979 revolution and imposing what one scholar described as a "reign of terror."

Having seen the chaos in Iraq and Libya following the collapse of dictatorial regimes there, and the uncertain path in Egypt after Mubarak's removal, governments will be nervous about the prospects for stability in the event of regime collapse in Iran. Could the regime, as a measure to forestall its demise, remove the divine writ of *Velayat e faqih* from the constitution? In that event, there would be no Supreme Leader and no Guardian Council hand-picking candidates for office.

These questions can never be answered with certainty. Events will take their course. But as much as one might fear the uncertainties of an end to religious tyranny in Iran, a consensus is surely growing around the world that the status quo is no longer

tolerable. To reclaim the primacy of universal norms and principles in Middle Eastern affairs; to allow for stabilization, reconciliation and reconstruction in a region that has suffered devastating hostilities of late; to give the traditional authorities of Islam an opportunity to reclaim their religion from extremists; and to end, once and for all, the toxic fusion of religious and political authority initiated by Khomeini and imitated by ISIS, it is necessary for the international community to stand united and demand that Iran's regime cease its destructive actions, or face comprehensive action to compel that result.

At last, radical forces have lost their momentum, and stakeholders of international peace and security have recognized the folly of passivity and accommodation. There is a new recognition that peace will only come when justice is upheld. The tide of history will restore Iran to its people.

Ambassador Lincoln Bloomfield served in a number of administrations including as the assistant secretary of state for political military affairs from 2001 to 2005