

The Iranian Paradox

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Among Middle Eastern states, Iran often seems like an awkward outlier. It is Persian in a region that is overwhelmingly Arab and Shi'ite in a region that is overwhelmingly Sunni. Iran is also a large country with an imperial history that goes back centuries, surrounded by smaller countries less than 100 years old. When Iranian president Mohammed Khatami advanced the idea of a "Dialogue of Civilizations" in the late 1990s, his categories were notable: the West was a civilization, China was a civilization, and Iran was a civilization. After all, the country has its own language, its own literature, and its own cuisine.

Iran is also an avowedly revolutionary regime in a region that has come increasingly to value the status quo. The Israeli government increasingly finds common bonds with Arab governments that are similarly distrustful of popular movements and fearful of Iranian subversion. While most regional governments believe they face many of the same threats, Iran remains the outlier. It has no closely aligned governments in the Middle East except for Syria, and it maintains an array of guerrilla groups and paramilitary organizations on the payroll when most governments are preoccupied with fighting such groups.

The Iranian government appears to resent not only its relative isolation in the region but also the entire international system. That system, Iranians say, unfairly marginalizes Iran and denies the country its rightful role leading the Middle East. Yet, by attacking the international system, by threatening its neighbors, by arming a wide array of proxies, Iran perpetuates the conditions it deplors. It deepens its isolation and it bands together its enemies. Iran has become a paradox, and not merely because its politics are so opaque. Iran is a paradox because its actions often seem to prompt precisely the actions by others to which it objects. Escaping from a downward spiral of aggression that prompts isolation, which prompts greater aggression and greater isolation, is a challenge that has vexed Iranian and U.S. governments for decades.

For most Americans, Iran is a problem that began when the shah was overthrown in 1979 and a student group seized the U.S. embassy and held 52 U.S. diplomats hostage for 444 days. The image of bearded and veiled protestors—often politely separated—taking to the streets and

chanting “Death to America” was unnerving; the humiliation of seeing U.S. diplomats blindfolded and held at gunpoint by scruffy revolutionaries for months on end was a profound defeat. For its neighbors, however, Iran has been a problem for millennia. It was a large and strong state surrounded by small and weak emirates, and a haughty regional power that demanded tribute from local sheikhs. For centuries, Iran had an intricate imperial culture and a strong coercive capacity that seemed jarring and a bit dissolute to the Bedouin, sailors, and traders who tried to eke out a living in its shadow.

Iran struggled into the modern period with its own humiliations, as economic and political disorder ushered in Russian and British influence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By 1915, Great Britain was calling most of the shots in Iran, and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (majority owned by the UK government) had secured the rights to the country’s energy. Two world wars made an already tumultuous internal situation even more so. Iranians elected a nationalist prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, in 1951, but by 1953 the British and Americans had tired of his rhetoric and his populism, precipitated a coup, and ensured the return of the more pliable Mohammed Reza Shah. Iran’s new ruler was a modernizer and an ally of the West—Iran, alongside Saudi Arabia, formed the “Twin Pillars” of the U.S. strategy in the Gulf—but growing numbers of Iranians saw him as a Western puppet, not the anti-Communist bulwark he represented to Washington and London. In the minds of many Iranians, the shah was not the solution to Iran’s weakness in the world—he was a principal cause of it.

In 1979, the revolutionaries swept in and discarded many of the shah’s most precious priorities. Iran would no longer seek modernity on Western terms, but instead on Iranian terms. Secularism was eviscerated. Clerics swept into government offices, and suave cosmopolitan bureaucrats were shown the door. Chadors were made mandatory for women, and ties were banned for men. Within a few months, it was clear that in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the emphasis was on the word “Islamic” and not “Republic.”

All of the shah’s work was not destined for the dustbin, however. One priority that the revolutionaries did not discard was Iran’s sense of its own greatness. In 1971, the shah hosted a gala commemoration of the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Empire in Persepolis. The multimillion-dollar party became legendary for its excesses, and was precisely the sort of thing the revolutionaries bristled at. But the shah’s broader attitude, that Iran was a great civilization surrounded by barbarians and the rightful dominant power in what Iranians of every political stripe agree should be called “the Persian Gulf,” persisted well into the revolution. What was different in the new era was an overwhelming sense of grievance. In particular, the revolutionaries did not believe that the United States and its allies were facilitating Iran’s rise, as the shah had done. Instead, they were convinced these powers were undermining and subverting Iran. The United States became “the Great Satan” in Iranian political rhetoric, and Iranians were exhorted to fight it.

Embedded in Iranian politics seems to be a consensus that the status quo should tilt in Iran’s favor, and it is due to the U.S. commitment to its own global hegemony—and to what Iran sees as unprincipled U.S. allies in the Gulf and Israel—that Iran cannot assume its rightful role. Iran is poised for greatness, this argument seems to say, but the United States is using its might to deny Iran its role. The Iranian economy is limping, it is true, but that need not be a consequence of



Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei delivering a message from his office on Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, on March 20, 2016.

Source: Photo by www.khamenei.ir, available at <https://newsmedia.tasnimnews.com/Tasnim/Uploaded/Image/1395/01/01/139501010956178177380124.jpg>.

mismanagement, cronyism, and shadowy untaxed parastatal foundations controlling vast industries. It is easier instead to blame Iran's woes on the fact that the country has essentially been on a war footing for more than 35 years, and that sense of siege can be laid at the U.S. door. It began in the early days of the revolution, when the United States and its Gulf Arab allies supported Saddam Hussein's armies when they invaded Iran in 1980. It continued through a vigorous arming of Iran's Arab neighbors and a military embargo on Iran, and a remarkable armed buildup in the Gulf. According to Anthony Cordesman, not only has military spending by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) exceeded Iranian spending by a factor of eight for most of the last 20 years, but much of the Iranian arsenal has become obsolete while its Gulf neighbors are buying some of the most modern equipment in the world.¹

Iran's politics are imperfectly understood, both in the West and in Iran itself. Of course, politicians' words can be imperfect guides to their thinking and their intentions. But in Iran, understanding exactly who makes what decisions and for what purpose is unclear. The Iranian president is neither Iran's only foreign policy decisionmaker, nor even its most important. Not only does the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, head the clerical establishment but the military, security, and intelligence forces report to him. Reports suggest that these other, extremely powerful elements of the Iranian government are even more skeptical of U.S. intentions than many powerful politicians are. Further, many in the security establishment have deep economic ties to businesses and smuggling operations whose profits depend on enmity with the West and business practices that are unattractive for foreign firms.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took office in 2005 with a commitment to populist policies and confrontation with Iran's Western tormentors. Ahmadinejad sought to tweak the West with outrageous statements, and he delighted in the capture of 15 British sailors who strayed into Iranian waters in 2007. While Iranian rhetoric heated up, so too did Iran's visible commitment to its nuclear program. While Ahmadinejad was in office, Iran went from having fewer than 100 centrifuges enriching uranium at the beginning of his term to more than 11,000 when he left. Ahmadinejad continually wrapped himself in the language of fairness and justice, seemingly undaunted by the overwhelming force of the United States. While Iran was aggressive, the government seemed to act surprised every time it was called to account. It was a not very subtle bid to highlight Iran's deep sense of victimhood.

In practice, Ahmadinejad's gambit deepened Iran's isolation. His rhetoric and his actions led to European and global sanctions against Iran, which restricted Iranian oil exports and starved the economy of funds. The Iranian political establishment didn't disagree with his analysis that Iran was struggling mostly alone in a hostile world. It came to conclude, however, that his bluster was needlessly raising the costs of the world's hostility.

When President Hassan Rouhani took office in 2013, he represented a refutation of Ahmadinejad's tactics, but not of his basic strategy. Rouhani was a conservative and not a reformist, and by the time he took office he had been a central figure in the national security decisionmaking of Iran for

1. Anthony Cordesman and Abdullah Toukan, "Iran and the Gulf Military Balance," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 4, 2016, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/161004_Iran_Gulf_Military_Balance.pdf.

decades. He served for 16 years as secretary general of the Supreme National Security Council from its founding in 1989, was a member of Iran's Expediency Council since 1991, and was the national security adviser to two Iranian presidents in the 1990s and 2000s. For 20 years, starting in 1980, he was a member of the Iranian parliament, and at various times served as chairman of the foreign policy committee and the defense committee, as well as deputy speaker. In the foreign and security policy establishment in Iran, Rouhani is at its center.

And yet despite, or perhaps because of, Rouhani's centrality to Iran's foreign policy concerns, he has long been an outspoken advocate of diminishing the level of hostility between Iran and the West. In a celebrated 2004 interview in Paris after the U.S. government sent Iran humanitarian assistance following an earthquake, Rouhani said, "We need bulldozers to demolish the wall that separates our two countries."² Less noticed in that interview, Rouhani predicted that U.S.-Iranian ties would be reestablished. He added, "Our skill, I would say our art, will be to choose the best time."³ Campaigning for president three years ago, Rouhani made similarly reassuring comments. Speaking of U.S.-Iranian ties in an interview with the Saudi newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat*, he said, "Extremists on both sides seem to be determined to perpetuate the situation of animosity and hatred between the two countries. However, common sense dictates a change in this trend with a view to opening a new chapter in this uneasy and challenging relationship to decrease enmity and mistrust."⁴

Even so, Rouhani has consistently appeared to be persuaded that the United States remains a hostile power. Speaking with *ABC News* in 2002, Rouhani said,

America is not pleased with the Islamic Republic of Iran and the revolution of Iran because during the Shah's regime, there was a government in power that was a puppet at the service of the United States that would act on America's orders. Generally speaking, America is not keen on independent countries. America is not keen on people's freedom. America is keen on countries that completely surrender themselves and act according to America's demands.⁵

Even after the conclusion of the nuclear deal, Rouhani expressed deep skepticism over American intentions. He told Chuck Todd of *Meet the Press*, "If the future administration of the United States wishes to continue animosity, it will receive the appropriate response. But if it wishes to bring an end to that animosity and start respecting the right of the Iranian nation where it has trampled upon the rights in many instances in the past, of course it will receive the appropriate response in that scenario as well."⁶

2. Claude Lorieux and Pierre Prier, "An Interview with the Secretary General of the Supreme Council on National Security," *Le Figaro*, January 17, 2004 (in French).

3. Ibid.

4. Ali M. Pedram, "In Conversation with Hassan Rouhani," *Asharq al-Awsat*, June 15, 2013, <http://english.aawsat.com/2013/06/article55305525/in-conversation-with-hassan-rouhani>.

5. "Exclusive Interview with Iranian Adviser," interview by Chris Wallace, *ABC News*, September 12, 2002, <http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=132082&page=1>.

6. Interview with Hassan Rouhani, "Rouhani: 'Syria Doesn't Have a Military Solution,'" *MTP Daily* (video), September 21, 2016, <http://www.msnbc.com/mtp-daily/watch/rouhani-syria-doesn-t-have-a-military-solution-770472515941>.

To take Rouhani's words at face value, then, he seems just as skeptical of U.S. intentions as his predecessors. Where he seems different is his long-standing willingness—and seeming eagerness—to find ways to negotiate over ways to reduce tensions between Iran and the West, even if the underlying hostility cannot be erased. Whereas Ahmadinejad seemed to thrive on distance, Rouhani seems to seek proximity.

Seen broadly, then, the nuclear agreement appears to have been intended to moderate the world's antagonism toward Iran, and not end it. Further, in his words and actions, Rouhani seems alert to the possibility that the United States and its allies would use the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to serve their supposedly unchanged strategic goal of undermining the Iranian government. His response seems to be to accrue assets that can be bargained away in exchange for things Iran wants to gain.

For his part, Ayatollah Khamenei seemed skeptical that the nuclear deal would do anything to reduce the world's enmity with Iran. He seemed to be willing to give his longtime associate the benefit of the doubt on the nuclear deal, provided that Iran made no permanent concessions. In the months since, he has expressed a sense of vindication that ties have not grown significantly warmer.

We probably will never understand all of the nuances of Iranian foreign and security policy thinking, but a basic outline does seem clear. The Iranian leadership is preoccupied with two things: regaining the grandeur that it believes is its national due, and overcoming the very weak hand that it holds in what it sees as an existential battle with a much larger power. Hopelessly overmatched in conventional forces, Iran has developed an unconventional arsenal of tools and allies that it leverages throughout the Middle East and around the world. In seeking to deter Iran, foreign powers risk exacerbating the very preoccupations that drive Iran's hostile behavior. The question remains, however, whether Iran's preoccupations can be assuaged. How much is enough grandeur, and what is enough strength? Given Iran's national patrimony, the desire may be too great.

It leaves us with a paradox: If Iran's hostile actions elicit conciliatory responses from its neighbors and the world, it sends a message that those actions are working. Yet if Iran's hostile actions elicit opposition, it reinforces Iran's perceived need to act asymmetrically. President Rouhani suggested more than a decade ago, "Our skill, I would say our art, will be to choose the best time" to improve relations with the United States. Yet diminishing tensions between Iran and the United States will require considerably more art than merely getting the timing right.