

Iran Takes on the World

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THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN IS TODAY CHALLENGING THE WORLD. The Iranian leadership's appetite for power is growing, for they have become thoroughly convinced that no outside power—the U.S. included—will derail their rise to regional and even global prominence. “Whether you like it or not,” the Iranian cleric and politician Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, an influential figure and on-and-off mentor to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, publicly boasted to the U.S., “you have to regard Iran as a great power in the political sphere. The people of Iran have realized there is nothing you can do to us now or will be capable of doing [in the future]. So rather than using all your resources in failed attempts to oppose Iran, you should work with us.”¹

Khatami's statement, like many other recent pronouncements made by the Islamic Republic's leaders, underscores why Iran has not complied with years of American demands for full transparency in its nuclear programs, for putting a halt to its sponsorship of terrorism and propagation of militant Islam or Islamism globally, and for cooperation in regional affairs. Simply put, the Islamic Republic's ruling politicians no longer fear America; they believe the U.S. and its allies have lost the political will to preserve the current order. Tehran, therefore, no longer worries about the repercussions of pursuing an ever-more ambitious policy aimed at refashioning the international order and extending Iranian power and influence.

Students of history know this is not the first time a rising Iran has sought to dominate its neighbors and the world beyond. The first Persian or Achaemenid Empire ruled from Pakistan's Indus Valley to the Libyan Desert and from Central Asia to Turkey between the years 550 and 330 BCE. The second Persian Empire, the Sasanid one, contested both the Roman Empire and the Byzantine Empire from 224 to 651

CE while controlling the trading routes of the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean. Later, the Safavid Empire redefined both Islam and Muslim statecraft in the Middle East and Asia from 1501 until 1760 by, among other things, turning Iranians from Sunnis into Shiites, endowing Iranian Islam with militancy, and directly linking politics to Twelver or Ithna-Ashari Shiism.

It is not simply memories of imperial glory, but active engagement with the past through constant political, social, and religious references, that makes Iranians a most nationalistic people.² Such deeply-felt nationalist sentiments have proven enormously useful to the Islamic Republic's leaders, who have often adeptly appealed to national honor and identity while seeking to advance their hard-line Shiite Islamist vision both domestically and internationally.

However, while imperial Persia's achievements may be a source of national pride, few Iranians today can legitimately feel the same way about the Islamic Republic's present quest for world dominance. Now just over three decades old, the Islamic Republic's efforts to extend its power and influence have inflicted enormous suffering on the region and the Iranian people themselves. As a political venture, Shiite Islamism has been far from successful: Iran's economy and society are in shambles, and, with the exception of a few small groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, Iran's brand of religious fervor has generally failed to take hold elsewhere. While multi-national resistance to Iranian expansionism remains inchoate due to lack of international leadership, the Islamic Republic faces mounting popular hostility and backlash abroad. Far more decisive, Iran's international agenda is faltering due to rising popular discontent and anti-regime protests at home, as well as mounting divisions among its ruling elites. Islamic Iran's nuclear program and expansionist policies were the creation of a convergence of Shiite Islamism and Iranian nationalism. Today, the fact that all of these policies are meeting with setbacks is effectively undoing this political convergence, and this has further driven a wedge between secularists among the political elite who increasingly seek a more nationalistic basis for pursuing Iranian glory and Islamists who will not be swayed from theocracy.

Indeed, despite its bravado on the world stage, the Islamic Republic's multiplying failures have devastated whatever legitimacy it might have claimed for itself, and moreover, produced a widening gap between Iranian nationalism and the Shiite Islamist institutions upon which the Islamic Republic was founded. Tellingly, the regime is tightening its grip on dissent at home, and has also placed high-profile reformists once closely linked with the regime under house arrest, including now deceased Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, Mir Hussein Mousavi and Seyyed Mehdi Karroubi. These internal splits have only been exacerbated as Iran's leaders have pressed their expansionist agenda internationally. In time, these ever-growing strains on the Islamic Republic may ultimately lead to its undoing.

Revolutionary Ideology Meets Nuclear Power

IN THE WAKE OF THE 1979 ISLAMIC REVOLUTION, IRAN DECLARED ITSELF AT WAR WITH the United States and professed its desire to become a world power through propagating Islamist revolution globally. In recent years, the world has begun to take Iranian ambitions more seriously as a consequence of the maturation of its now decades-old nuclear program.³ To Iran's leaders, nuclear power and its weaponization represent security for the regime as well as a means by which Iran's internationalist agenda might be enlarged. It has also become a way for the Islamic Republic to shore up its rule domestically, as the nuclear power has allowed Iranian politicians to fuse nationalist aspirations with the Shi'ite Islamist ideology upon which the regime was founded.

Western governments and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have concluded that within a few years the Islamic Republic could refine large batches of weapons-grade or highly enriched uranium (HEU, containing 90 percent or more U-235). Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Lieutenant Commander General Hossein Salami noted, "We have reached a never-ending point in [increasing] the quantity of our ballistic missiles."⁴ Those missiles—and the possibility that one day soon they will carry nuclear payloads—frighten many nations, including Israel, which has thus far borne the brunt of Islamism's warmongering threats, as well as other states in the region like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia who resist Iran's imperialist ambitions.

Of course, the political leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran have consistently denied they seek anything more than nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. They claim their nuclear pacifism is based on traditional Islamic teachings. Current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei claimed in February 2010, "We've said time and again that our religious principles and beliefs consider such weapons to be a symbol of destruction whose use is forbidden." Indeed, Iran's revolutionary mentor and first supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini initially declared nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction to be *haram* or forbidden, by Islam generally and by Shi'ism specifically, in a *fatwa* issued during the Islamic Republic's enormously bloody war with Iraq (1980-1988).

Despite this early resistance to nuclear weapons on traditional religious and humanitarian grounds, the Islamic Republic's clerics, politicians, and intellectuals later began to gradually reconcile weapons of mass destruction with Islamic tenets. For instance, influential clerics like Mohsen Gharavian declared in a *fatwa* that the

“use of nuclear weapons may not constitute a problem, according to Sharia, but be only natural.” Gharavian’s mentor, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, among other ultra-hardline clerics, has also approved “of all means necessary, since religion necessitates the victory of believers.”⁵

Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani laid the groundwork for Iran’s nuclear revival during an October 1988 speech to the IRGC. Rafsanjani, who was the Speaker of Iran’s *majles* or parliament at that time, called for the development of nuclear and other unconventional weapons because the need for such armaments “was made very clear during the [Iran-Iraq] war ... [so] we should fully equip ourselves both in the offensive and defensive use of chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons.” Rafsanjani claimed the survival of “both Iran and Shiism are paramount.” Likewise, Mohsen Rezai, then commander of the IRGC, wrote to Supreme Leader Khomeini requested permission for the revolutionary guards to initiate a nuclear weapons program “to protect religion and state.” Mousavi, who served as Iran’s Prime Minister from 1981 to 1989, supported the requests by Rezai and Rafsanjani. Indeed, state and religion have been seen as twins throughout the entirety of Iranian history and political thought. The Sasanian state’s manifesto was “faith and state were born of one mother, joined together never to be sundered.” Of course, the Zoroastrian religion of ancient Iran to which the Sasanians and most of their citizens subscribed did not espouse global militancy like modern *mullahs* or Muslim clerics do.⁶

Then Supreme Leader Khomeini eventually relented, saying “we have nothing against setting up atomic installations.” Subsequently, as a two-term president of Iran (1989-1997), Rafsanjani ensured that Iran would fully resume its quest for nuclearization. His presidential successor, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), and Ahmadinejad (2005-present) have continued the program while further integrating it into Iran’s Islamist and nationalist ideologies.⁷

Given this convergence of nationalism with religious zeal, both firmed up by anti-Westernism and by Iran’s devastating experience in its border war with Iraq, it should not be surprising that the majority of Iranian politicians, including individuals now in opposition to the regime, support their country’s nuclear ambitions. Hence, Iran is unlikely to abandon either nuclear power or the possibility of weaponization even if regime change occurs there. The negative responses by Mousavi, Rezai, Rafsanjani, and former Speaker turned presidential candidate Karroubi to Ahmadinejad’s attempts to reach a nuclear fuel swap deal with the West in 2009 and again in 2011 serve as confirmation of this stance. Indeed, many of Iran’s Shiite clergy believe that so long as Western superpowers can be held up as a threat to the survival of Shiism and Iran, they can cling to power through militantism. Moreover, non-clerical as well as secular politicians as diverse as Ahmadinejad and Mousavi believe the same foreign bogeymen will fuel nationalism in their political favor.

They point to events involving the other two countries labeled by the U.S. as elements of the “axis of evil,” believing that nuclear power saved North Korea from the fate that befell Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.⁸

Thus, they conveniently accept the ideas of Islamist ayatollahs like Mesbah-Yazdi who propose that Iran should “not deprive itself of the right to produce special weapons.”⁹ According to this interpretation, both Islam with its *umma* or community of believers and the Iranian nation with its Shiite citizens must be defended at all costs.¹⁰

Despite this support, Iranian leaders are becoming increasingly unsuccessful in their nuclear goals. The Stuxnet computer worm slowed Iran’s nuclear quest by 20 to 25 percent, pushing the possible deployment of a nuclear weapon to 2014 or 2015. Assassination of nuclear scientists has compounded that problem. Both situations showed Iran that it is vulnerable to outside, non-military, interventions. Indeed, President Ahmadinejad was forced to acknowledge publicly that “it would be premature for Iran to count on a nuclear bomb in global power dynamics, for our bomb is without sound or physical shape.” Moreover, international sanctions seem to have forced draconian economic belt-tightening and slowed the flow of resources to Iran’s nuclear program. Iranian leaders have needed to scramble to reestablish and maintain sources and suppliers of technology, raw materials, and hard currencies for their nuclear program, while trying to maintain a steady flow of dwindling basic amenities for the country’s citizens—as revealed by WikiLeaks cables.¹¹

A World Strategy

FROM THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC’S VIEWPOINT, NUCLEAR POWER REFLECTS ONE VITAL step in the overall progression toward world domination. By offering to share “the experience, knowledge and technology of its [nuclear] scientists” with other Third World nations, Iran’s leaders seek to undermine the current superpowers’ control over nuclear technology and the international institutions that govern it, all the while expanding Iran’s clout militarily, politically, and ideologically. But this is only one step. Most of all, they desire to exclude the U.S., E.U., and Israel from playing any role in the Middle East and Asia. By facing down the U.S., Britain, France, and Germany, and by constantly attempting to split Russia and China from other nations in the Security Council over the nuclear issue, Iran seeks to demonstrate to the rest of the world that America and its partners are no longer pre-eminent. In so doing, Iran is trying to return to prominence on the world stage “as a great and proud inheritance” from its historical empires but with a demonstrably militant Shiite flavor.¹²

President Ahmadinejad’s own words show that Iran’s politicians are attempting

to craft a new world order: “We need to establish new systems and take measures based on those systems ... Many countries will join the new systems.” Such comments indicate the rationality of Iran’s leadership’s geopolitical maneuvers. They are testing the limits of American power and influence and of the current world order, seeking to prove that both are limited to hollow words and ineffective deeds. As noted earlier, Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami and other radical clerics approve of this relentless but calculated Iranian challenge to the West, hoping it will spread not only Iran’s nationalist views (which many of them, on theological principle, only barely tolerate) but, more importantly, their own fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.

One part of this nationalistic and Islamist-based expansionist policy is economic, another part diplomatic, yet another militaristic, and still another educational.

Energy is a key part of Iran’s international economic strategy. For example, Iran is aiding construction of power plants and dams in Lebanon in a move to shore up its influence in a nation bordering both Israel and the Mediterranean Sea. Syria and Iran have worked on energy and heavy industrial expansions together too. Those activities also provided cover when Syria began collaborating with Iran to obtain technology and raw materials for its own nuclear plant at al-Kibar until that facility was destroyed by Israeli bombs in September 2007. Across the Persian Gulf, in a sign of strengthening links between the IRGC and its own defense forces, Oman cooperates with Tehran on matters of mutual security in addition to staging joint military exercises.¹³

In the Horn of Africa, Iran and Sudan are establishing economic ties based on Iranian maritime use of Port Sudan as a transit between the Suez Canal and the Arabian Sea. Not all the goods transferred there are benign, however. U.S. intelligence sources fear Port Sudan has become a shipping point for Iranian arms to Hamas in Gaza and to Islamist organizations in both North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Iranian corporations, often owned by the IRGC, are prospecting for and purchasing Sudanese gold and lithium to circumvent international sanctions on dual-use minerals. Again, Tehran’s aims are less than peaceful—for many of the mineral deposits needed for Iran’s weapons program are found in South Sudan. Hence, the Islamic Republic is reaching out to rebels there as that region becomes independent. Likewise, Iran has reinforced its links with Shiite militias and politicians in Iraq in order to ensure that the successful rebuilding of its neighbor will require Tehran’s cooperation.¹⁴

On the eastern fringes of the E.U., Iran is suspected of influencing Turkish politics by funding Islamist parties and training Muslim clerics in Anatolia. Likewise Iran is expanding its economic presence in that nation, which bridges Asia and Europe, through bilateral trade targeted to reach the equivalent of U.S. \$30 billion. Iranians and Turks move freely across the border between the two countries, and Iranian companies circumvent U.N. sanctions by means of Turkish companies. Energy coop-

eration by the two regimes includes the Tabriz-Erzurum gas pipeline. If and when the Nabucco pipeline eventually connects Turkey to Austria, the E.U.'s reliance on Russia as a source of energy will be replaced by dependence not only on Turkey as a transshipment point but also on Iran as its supplier.¹⁵ Through these religious and economic ties, Iran has found an ally in Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who joined in demanding that Arab leaders like Mubarak be ousted and replaced with Islamic regimes. Likewise, Iran and Turkey have begun to share a common goal in supporting Palestinian statehood and Hamas' role in Gaza and the West Bank.¹⁶

Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, a former IRGC commander, emphasized the value to Iran of all these forms of involvement, claiming that as a consequence "Iran enjoys a high geopolitical status and has become a great power in the Middle East." Yet, this foreign adventurism added to calls among Americans and Israelis for a preemptive strike against Iran with an expectation that Tehran's leaders cannot hope to win such a military confrontation. Indeed, Tehran downplays any prospect of its becoming involved in a "hot war"—saying instead that its policies of asymmetrical warfare and cold war will bring about "sweet and silent death" to Western power and influence.¹⁷

These developments are not merely the result of endeavors by the Islamic Republic. When the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century transformed Iran from a Sunni state into a Shiite one, it recruited mullahs from among coreligionists in Lebanon, southern Iraq, Bahrain and other Gulf nations, and also Kashmir. Those familial, intellectual, and religious ties have endured over the subsequent generations. Through these linkages, Iran still shapes sociopolitical events in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf region not merely by using financial incentives and ideological affinities but also by drawing upon the personal connections between clerical families. In Iraq, for instance, political infighting among the various parliamentary parties permits Tehran to serve as a powerbroker among the Shiite polity there as the U.S. military presence winds down. The same holds true in Lebanon where Hezbollah's ties to Iranian mullahs run much longer and deeper than that country's post-civil war sociopolitics.¹⁸

Iran has been cultivating connections with economically strapped former Soviet states like Belarus and Azerbaijan as well—investing the equivalent of more than U.S. \$1.5 billion on development projects and agreeing to energy exchanges, respectively, in exchange for cultural and confessional access to Muslim populations there.¹⁹ Iran has focused considerable attention over the past few years on the governments in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, challenging the secular Russian and democratic American influences on those Central Asian nations.²⁰ The Iranians appear to be playing both sides in the Afghan struggle by financing the government of President Hamid Karzai with

cash payments of over U.S. \$500 million, while providing training and supplying weapons to the Taliban. Again, as in Iraq, the Iranian government is attempting to position itself as a socioreligious, political, and diplomatic powerbroker that can effect, should it wish, the termination of hostilities and reconciliation between factions within Afghanistan.²¹

Iran has additionally been negotiating a natural gas pipeline to India via Pakistan so that it can become a major supplier of energy throughout South Asia. Iran's energy clout in India, created by dependence on oil and gas, forced the Reserve Bank of India (that nation's central bank) to find an alternate means—utilizing Euros and a joint German-Iranian bank—to continue commerce after the U.S. and E.U. blocked dollar-based payment by India to Iran through the Asian Clearing Union.²² Additionally, Iran's mullahs know that India's Shiite and Sunni minorities feel sidelined by Hindus and are thus susceptible to radical influences. Because of this, Iran is channeling funds, educational materials, and religious teachers into Indian Muslim groups.

Further to the southeast, the IRGC's Quds Force reportedly trains officers of Sri Lanka's army and intelligence service while Iran Navy destroyers dock in the island's ports. Iran is constructing oil refineries there both for domestic Sri Lankan use and for export. A steady convoy of Iranian merchant vessels passes through Sri Lankan ports bearing small electronics for sale and utilizing the island as a transit point for shipments of oil to and from China. Moreover, China has begun cooperating with Iran to fund construction of deep-water ports not only at the Sri Lankan capital city of Colombo but also along the island's southern and eastern shorelines. These ports, once operational, will strengthen the Iran-China alliance—benefiting Iran by permitting more of its exports to reach not only Sri Lanka and China but also countries in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, establishing economic and military footholds in Sri Lanka facilitates both Iran's and China's use of their military ties as a challenge to American and British mercantile and naval dominance in the Indian Ocean.²³ Yet again, Iran's thrust even on this Indian Ocean island is not merely military and economic. Iranian clerical foundations or *bonyads* are opening cultural centers and religious schools among Sri Lanka's small Shiite and Sunni communities.

As a result of Tehran's active courting, and through shared economic and military ties, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has replaced the E.U. as Iran's largest trading partner. Billions of dollars of Chinese capital have become the mainstay of Iran's oil and gas industries, and so indirectly sustain Iranian nationalism and Shiite Islamism too.²⁴ The PRC-Iranian economic alliance reaches well beyond the Indian Ocean. The PRC and Iran have joint ventures to develop gas and oil fields in collaboration with Malaysian companies. Iranian *bonyads* and IRGC-owned corporations have opened offices in many major cities of Indonesia as well. Again, Iran is utilizing its multi-pronged thrust to gain influence within the world's most populated

Muslim country, which is already experiencing a rise in homegrown fundamentalism.²⁵ As a result, not only has Jakarta endorsed the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's presidency, but it has also voiced support at the United Nations for a peaceful Iranian nuclear energy program. Further to the northeast, even a major U.S. ally like South Korea increasingly feels the need—despite American displeasure—to position itself in a neutral capacity toward Iran due to its own lucrative trade connections with the Islamic Republic.²⁶

Building strong ideological, diplomatic, economic, and military ties with Latin American countries—a region considered U.S. dominion since the articulation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823—is one more aspect of Iran's plan for globalizing its influence. Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Brazil, and not surprisingly Cuba are forming alliances with Iran aimed at limiting and even challenging U.S. goals for security, stability, democracy, and development in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Brazil has even let Iran influence its relationship with the Palestinian Authority, and Brasilia now recognizes Palestine as an independent nation. Iranian parliamentarians hail their country's growing ties with Latin American nations as “exporting revolution to the backyard of the U.S.” As part of Iran's adventurism in the western hemisphere, the IRGC is believed to engage in weapons sales to Venezuela and Bolivia via its ally Syria in violation of U.N. sanctions. It now intends to expand that activity by “sharing its military know-how and exporting its products” to many other Third World nations via Latin America, a move which like nuclear proliferation would extend Tehran's global reach.²⁷

Ahmadinejad has made several visits to Caracas and Hugo Chavez has traveled back and forth to Tehran as ties between the two nations have strengthened. Iran has invested approximately \$40 billion in the Venezuelan economy, including joint ventures for prospecting and mining rare minerals—including uranium. Chavez's regime may be exporting those prohibited materials to Iran. Iranian banks based in Caracas circumvent banking restrictions imposed by the U.S. Treasury, funneling funds to terrorist and fundamentalist organizations located in both Africa and Asia. In return, Iranians have assisted Venezuela's nascent nuclear ambitions.²⁸ Likewise, Bolivia's President Evo Morales makes annual visits to Tehran not only to discuss bilateral cooperation but also, in his own words, to “undermine the capitalist system.”²⁹ U.S. officials believe the IRGC is involved with Venezuelan, Bolivian, Brazilian, and Colombian drug cartels—supplying them with munitions in exchange for rare earth minerals while also hoping that narcotics and gang violence will bring down America and other Western societies. Iran's efforts may be expanding into Ecuador too, with Ahmadinejad courting its president, Rafael Correa, for similar reasons.³⁰ Again, all these activities are a part of Iran's at times convergent but now increasingly contradictory policy of globalizing nationalist and Islamist goals.

When dealing with poorer nations in Asia and Africa, Iranian officials extend development aid, preferential trade status, and community-based services as means of making headway into those societies. Sub-Saharan African countries increasingly regard Iran as a “reliable partner.”³¹ Indeed, Iranian leaders are teaming up with other despotic regimes like Robert Mugabe’s in Zimbabwe to criticize the existing global order that seeks to change their behaviors. In meetings with his counterparts, former Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki attempted to cast both Iran’s Islamist ideology and international role in altruistic terms: “The Islamic Revolution was not only for Muslims, but for all the dispossessed people of the world.” Yet, again, Iran’s motives are far from altruistic; Zimbabwe, for example, has deposits of uranium that Tehran wishes to access for its “Shiite nuclear program.”³²

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) with its one hundred and eighteen member states, sixteen observer nations, and nine observer organizations has been a focus of Iranian overtures too. When the NAM’s foreign ministers met for their 15th meeting in July 2008, Tehran took center stage as the host city. A public statement by the attendees at that ministerial conference lent support to Iran’s nuclear program, warning against action by the U.S. and other nations wary of proliferation. In June 2010, the NAM reiterated its support for Iran’s nuclear program and for a trilateral fuel swap deal—and it has even inexplicably praised Iran for its “cooperation with the IAEA”! The NAM’s 16th Summit will be held at Kish Island in 2012, where Ahmadinejad will assume the Secretary-Generalship of that influential multinational organization. This leadership will give Iran yet another global platform to air its fundamentalist views, radicalize other Third World nations, and work against the West.³³

Iran’s expanding role in the Group of Fifteen (G-15)—now numbering seventeen member states—enables it to influence developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In May 2010, Tehran hosted the 14th Summit of that international organization where Ahmadinejad used the opportunity to deride the U.N. Security Council, question the free market entrepreneurial system, and champion Iran’s growing role as a country leading the opposition to the U.S., E.U., and Israel.³⁴ Subsequently in 2011, Iran’s Foreign Minister Ali Asghar Soltanieh was elected chairman for the G-77, which now covers 130 nations.³⁵ Likewise, Iran hosts meetings of the Asian Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) whose thirty-one member states include those in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council. Again, Ahmadinejad utilizes these gatherings as public platforms to champion Iran’s global agenda: “We need a new order ... it has become clear that the order stemming from Western materialist ideology has failed both in theory and in practice.”³⁶

At the U.N., Iran has steadily acquired seats on the governing boards of several major agencies.³⁷ It also has maneuvered its way onto the Commission on Science and Technology for Development under the Conference on Trade and Development,

and onto the Office of Drugs and Crime. Iran has even held the vice chairmanship of the Executive Council of the U.N. Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the chairmanship of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. Iran seems to wager that leadership roles in such international agencies will translate into perceptible power. So, for instance, it is employing knowledge and technology gained via these agencies to develop both low orbital satellites for Defense Ministry and IRGC reconnaissance use and booster rockets that could not only carry the satellites but also deliver conventional and nuclear payloads. Secularist Iranian leaders like President Ahmadinejad view these endeavors as building up a strong nationalistic nation; activist mullahs see Shiite missiles and bombs as an extension of their religious might.

Within the U.N. Security Council itself, Iran has often succeeded in dividing Russia and China from the three other permanent members—namely, the U.S., Britain, and France. Russia’s loading of fuel into the Bushehr reactor in August 2010 was a stark example of Iran exploiting superpower rivalry for its own ends. Likewise, Iran convinced Prime Minister (and former President) Vladimir Putin to declare that Russians “don’t have any grounds to suspect Iran, in the sense that they seek to possess nuclear arms.” Moreover, in early January 2011, just prior to a resumption of negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran in Istanbul, Russia again warned the U.S. not to sabotage nuclear talks by upping sanctions against Iran.³⁸ Through consistent diplomacy, Iran has gained the cooperation and support of several rotating members of the Security Council as well—especially Turkey, Brazil and Lebanon. As a result, Iran’s leaders, and particularly Ahmadinejad, dismiss the Security Council’s following of the U.S., Britain, and France as turning it into a “discriminatory, unjust, and the most undemocratic international body.” They show little respect for its authority. Thus, even the U.N. has become a platform for disseminating Iranian ideologies and for thwarting American and European ideals. Consequently, Iran’s leaders feel a “sense of power,” independence, and accomplishment that emboldens them to challenge the world’s great powers.³⁹ That challenge is both nationalistic and Shiite Islamist, and it is intended to lead Iran into primacy on both fronts.

The World Transformed

IN THE MIDST OF THE PRESENT-DAY UPRISINGS IN THE ARAB WORLD, THE ISLAMIC Republic is attempting to seize what it perceives as new opportunities to make its power felt. Iran’s leaders and their Islamist ideology have thus far not been a major force behind the large-scale street protests that erupted in the Winter of 2011 against Jordanian monarch Abdullah II, Bahraini King Hamad al-Khalifa, and Yemeni President

Ali Abdullah Saleh, the rebellion against Libya's colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi, or in the ousters of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. But this has not stopped Iranian ayatollahs, including Khamenei, Ahmad Khatami, and Mesbah-Yazdi, from claiming—even as they suppressed renewed protests over festering discontent at home—that the Arab uprising was an “Islamic awakening reminiscent of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.”⁴⁰

Iranian mullahs point to years of ideological and operational cooperation with the Arab Muslim Brotherhood and regard Egypt's Brotherhood and the ideologically affiliated Jordanian Islamic Action Front as the heirs of Iran's revolution-era seminary and university students (even though the Arab Brotherhoods were established long before the Iranian revolution, and are also Sunni). As is well documented, a key pillar of Iran's regional strategy for influence has involved providing ideological and financial assistance to Islamist movements like the Brotherhood. Military aid is extended as well to some of those militant Sunni organizations like Hamas, an offshoot of the Brotherhood. Indeed, the Hamas leadership has publicly thanked Tehran for its “limitless support” of Islamist movements.⁴¹

Through its outreach, Iran's leaders envision the emergence of new Arab governments led by fundamentalist Islamist leaders—like, though not necessarily identical to, Iran's *velayat-e faqih* with its supreme leader as Allah's representative on earth. Iran does not expect such new polities (should they emerge) to be absolutely loyal to it or to its supreme leader; rather, Iranian political elites believe that Islamist nations will likely turn to Tehran for guidance on international affairs. As such, Tehran provides financial and instructional support for madrasas and for Islamic centers, both Shiite and Sunni, in countries with Muslim majorities as diverse as Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Malaysia, and Indonesia. In addition it provides support to countries where Muslims are far from the largest confessional group, such as India, Sri Lanka, Brazil, and even Canada. The ranks of those trained in Iranian and Iranian-influenced madrasas include not only influential Iraqi Shiite clerics like Ayatollah Moqtada al-Sadr (leader of the Mahdi Army) and Hassan Nasrallah (Secretary General of Hezbollah) but also many less well-known mullahs. The latter are perhaps even more persuasive in shaping the minds of younger Muslims toward militancy and Islamism than the former. They also earn their livelihoods teaching at institutions like Kabul's Khatam al-Nabyeen Islamic University and Toronto's Iranian Islamic Center where the curriculums, inflammatory speeches, and intolerant attitudes are virtually indistinguishable from those in Iranian madrasas—even the textbooks come from Iran. Students at these institutions, some of whom will become Muslim clerics and *qadis* or jurists, learn and internalize Shiite militancy. Indeed, in Supreme Leader Khamenei's vision of the future, “Islamism is the most powerful force.”⁴²

According to Supreme Leader Khamenei, Iran seeks a region-wide “Islamic awak-

ening” and the establishment of new regimes “based on religion.”⁴³ Iran’s theocrats hope events in the Arab world will create a unified Muslim Middle East that looks to Tehran for support and guidance in a common struggle against the West. With this end in mind, Iranian leaders have not hesitated to back protests against pro-Western regimes. The Majles’ Speaker Ali Larijani announced, “Our parliament supports the uprising of the Tunisian and Egyptian people for it is the revolution of the noble.” Not to be outdone, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi asserted Iran’s desire that “Egyptians’ high aims, national demands, and resurrection of their glory could be achieved in the very near future.” One tangible benefit to Iran has been post-Mubarak Egypt’s desire to resume full diplomatic relations with Tehran.⁴⁴

The important role of Qatar-based Al-Jazeera in spreading news of the protests on Arab streets has been well documented, but less attention has been given to the impact of Iranian media. Indeed, the Islamic Republic News Agency and the semi-official Mehr and Fars news agencies also command substantial audiences across the Middle East. Through those outlets, combined with a network of fundamentalist preachers trained by the state, Tehran’s exhortations regularly reach Arab Sunni Muslims alienated from the status quo and susceptible to radicalization. Not surprisingly, portions of the Arab press found common ground with Iran’s state-controlled media, as their optimism for change overlapped with Iranian anti-Western propaganda, in claiming, “Pro-Western Arab Countries in Turmoil.”⁴⁵ The Iranian regime’s outreach has never been simply media-based, however. Tehran provides hundreds of scholarships for Arab, Asian, and African students to attend Iranian universities and madrasas. Iran additionally supports numerous pan-Islamic youth organizations’ missionary work and hosts their gatherings.⁴⁶

Iran covertly provides the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt with millions of dollars for political and religious endeavors. Paralleling activities in southern Lebanon via Hezbollah, Iran directs resources through the Brotherhood to increase radicalism among poor and middle-class Egyptians. Iran’s funds facilitate the Brotherhood’s role in street protests as well. The uprising enabled thirty-four Brotherhood leaders to escape from Egyptian custody. Those ideologues will play important roles not just in shaping protests but also in Egypt’s future as a whole; and they are beholden to Tehran. “You can call this an Islamic revolution,” predicted Essam el-Erian, a prominent Brotherhood leader.⁴⁷

Likewise, Iranian diplomats and news media heralded the return of fundamentalist preacher Rashid Ghannouchi to Tunis after more than two decades in exile. Having established ties with Ghannouchi during his years in London, Iran’s mullahs are counting on him to propel the *Harakat al-Nahda al-Islamiya*, or Islamic Renaissance Movement, to the forefront of Tunisian politics. Essentially, Tehran seeks an outcome through Ghannouchi like that of Ayatollah Khomeini’s return to Iran from

Paris in February 1979—a fundamentalist takeover. Espousing anti-Western Arab sentiments no longer shields Arab leaders from Tehran’s machinations either. Libya’s Muammar el-Qaddafi quickly became a target as the mullahs sought to radicalize hitherto largely quietist political establishments elsewhere in North Africa.⁴⁸ So Iran makes unfounded claims of its ideology having triggered the Libyan rebellion.

The Islamic Republic has for many years provided weapons, cash, and indoctrination to Hezbollah cadres in Lebanon. Hezbollah’s current Secretary General Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah was not only trained in the madrasas at Qom but also later represented the organization in Tehran. The transformation of Hezbollah from an anti-Israeli militia into a street-savvy Shiite political party that today dominates Lebanese politics is one of the greatest triumphs of the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy. Mullahs trumpet the Iran-Hezbollah alliance as a fundamentalist, Islamist counterthrust against moderate Sunni Arabs.⁴⁹

At the other end of the Arab world, Iran is attempting to ensure that Houthi Shiite rebels seizing territory along Yemen’s border with Saudi Arabia will look to Tehran for guidance. Certainly the Yemeni government fears the worst, especially as the Arab uprising has taken hold there and citizens from different political and socio-religious backgrounds are demanding the ouster of President Saleh’s pro-American regime. So, too, are Iran’s ties with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula strong, despite the fact that the Houthis and al-Qaeda are fighting each other as well. Although not fully trusting the Sunni al-Qaeda terrorists or the Zaydi Houthi, the Ithna-Ashari, or Twelver Shiite mullahs of Iran, have not hesitated to use them as fronts for spreading Tehran’s influence and ideology through violent battles and street protests in Sanaa and other towns.⁵⁰

Closer to home, Tehran’s mullahs see political and religious opportunities in Bahrain as that Gulf nation’s Shiite majority seeks to cast off the yoke imposed by a Sunni ruling class. Allying themselves with Bahraini Shiites brings the Iranian fundamentalists even closer to Saudi Arabia’s restless Shiite underclass, including especially those located in the Arabian kingdom’s oil-plentiful eastern province. Attempts by the Sunni ruling family of Bahrain to violently quash the majority Shiite population’s aspirations using Saudi Arabian and U.A.E. troops plus Pakistani Baloch mercenaries, coming as it did on the heels of visits to that Gulf nation by American politicians and generals, played right into militant Iranian clerics’ hands. The presence of U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates there just days before the Gulf Cooperation Council’s Peninsula Shield Force entered the island has been construed and condemned by Bahraini Shiites and Iranian politicians as tacit U.S. approval for the bloody crackdown.⁵¹

Internal Struggles and Worldwide Repercussions

EVEN AS TEHRAN PUSHES TO EXPAND ITS INTERNATIONAL REACH, A BATTLE IS brewing at home as motives and goals diverge between post-Khomeinist, secular-leaning Iranian nationalists and Shiite Islamists who are the heirs of the 1979 revolution. In this particular struggle, which is distinct from the one where religious and non-religious reformers like the Green Movement wish to oust all political incumbents, the executive branch led by President Ahmadinejad and a group of technocrats from within the military and bureaucracy is attempting to slip off the leash placed on Iran's foreign affairs by the Shiite clerical establishment.

For Ahmadinejad and his aids, often known collectively as the Principlists, the key to winning this struggle begins with re-grounding Iranian politics and the state in traditions other than Shiite clericalism. They've focused especially on revivifying the older traditions of Iranian nationalism. In a widely reported and revealing event, for instance, President Ahmadinejad beamed at a 2010 meeting in Tehran for Iranian expatriates when his Chief of Staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei (a potential successor to Ahmadinejad) announced, "We must present the tradition of Iran to the world. Without Iran, Islam would be lost. We should wave the Iranian flag." Essentially, Ahmadinejad and Mashaei were borrowing a page from the last Shah's playbook by embracing Iran's "great and proud inheritance" from ancient—and also pre-Islamic—times. They also, for instance, celebrated the short-term return (from the British Museum) of the Cyrus Cylinder—a document from the sixth century BCE that hails the imperial rule of Cyrus the Great. Nav Roz or Persian New Year, on March 21st, has become a platform for Ahmadinejad to laud Iran's mighty imperial past plus its renewed ties with neighboring states by hosting multinational celebrations with other heads of state.⁵²

To acquire more power over foreign policy, Ahmadinejad has directly appointed his own special envoys on international affairs—bypassing even the Foreign Ministry, which is still technically under the president's jurisdiction, though not always willing to follow in lockstep. He then fired Foreign Minister Mottaki, who was close to the supreme leader, so that the more xenophobic Khamenei will have as little say in foreign relations as possible.⁵³

The ambitious internationalism of men like Ahmadinejad and his right-hand man Mashaei have cost them the support of the Islamic Republic's most powerful clerics. One main point of divergence stems from the fact that, as part of their expansionist agenda, Ahmadinejad and his allies are attempting to strike a balance between rivalry

with the West and a new, secular realization that Iran needs to be more economically and socially open to Europe and the U.S. to succeed. For hard-line mullahs, this represents nothing shy of accommodation with un-Islam. As such, influential clerics like Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati (who chairs the Guardian Council that approves candidates for elections) and Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami (who is an influential member of the Assembly of Experts that elects the supreme leader) have begun demanding that Ahmadinejad “fall in line” and that Mashaei (who was demoted by the clergy in April 2011) “stay silent,” letting clergymen determine foreign policy, military affairs (including nuclear policy), and internal administration. Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, who was once one of the president’s spiritual mentors, has also chastised Ahmadinejad for being “ungrateful” to the Islamic revolution and to the Shiite clergymen.

In response to the rise of secular nationalism within the regime’s own ranks, fundamentalist Shiite politicians and newspaper editors have begun to rail against Ahmadinejad’s government, and the prospect of “Iran minus mullahs,” “Iranian nationalism rather than Islam,” “the Cyrus Cylinder instead of the Quran,” and “Iran for the world.” Essentially, the Shiite Islamists view “talk of nationalism as incompatible with the Islamic Revolution.”⁵⁴

The Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and the Basij militias, too, are becoming increasingly divided over the competing aspirations and goals of Shiite Islamism and Iranian nationalism. Some military and paramilitary commanders support the nationalist and international trends; others speak out against them. For example, the Sepah News Agency generally tends to side with the nationalists while another IRGC publication, *Payam-e Enqelab*, which is managed by the supreme leader’s military allies, criticizes them.⁵⁵

While snubbing the Shiite clergy, the executive branch’s quest for international prominence has gained increasing popularity among individuals who themselves do not have clerical backgrounds—including, most importantly, rank and file members of the civil service, the IRGC, and the Basij. Despite hostility still held against President Ahmadinejad for the contested 2009 elections, his nationalistic actions, as well as those undertaken by his appointees, have greatly enhanced the chief executive’s stature among the masses, who increasingly identify the mullahs with three decades of deteriorating socioeconomic standards and increasing international isolation. Compared to the mullahs and their regime, ordinary people increasingly see Ahmadinejad and his allies as the lesser evil.⁵⁶

So, the expansionist foreign agenda pursued by Iranian politicians is heightening the internal tension between Iran’s nationalist identity and honor and its now three-decade Islamist and isolationist experiment. The executive branch’s disposition to the Shiite mullahs who have shaped Iranian politics since 1979 was summed up, stating “*din* or religion should be distinct from *dowla* or state so Iran can be a world

leader again.” A salvo via a website called *Mashanews* run by Mashaei did not mince words: “Iran needs to remove the mullahs from power once for all and return it to a great civilization without the Arab-style clerics who have tainted, isolated, and destroyed the country for the past thirty-one years.”⁵⁷

Such calls represent a growing desire on the part of the executive branch to abandon the institutions of clerical rule, though not of Shiite Islamism itself. Indeed, the Principlists’ reach for world power is inspired not just by nationalism but also by its combination with Shiite messianism, as well as apocalyptic notions. Many Iranian powerbrokers hold onto the idea that Iran must regain its international stature so that it can prepare humanity for a supposed end of time when the twelfth imam—the Mahdi or savior—will reappear to ensure spiritual salvation. Such ideas are basic to Iranian religiosity since early antiquity; indeed, they entered the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions from parallel ideas in Zoroastrianism, the faith of ancient Iran.⁵⁸ Yet some worry that Ahmadinejad subscribes to violent Shiite millenarianist beliefs surrounding the Mahdi’s impending return that are allegedly linked to the Anjoman-e Hojjatiyeh or Association of God’s Proof. The Hojjatiyeh are, in fact, part of the quietist Shiite tradition rather than the activist or political one currently led by Khamenei, Jannati, and other Islamist ayatollahs. Indeed, members of the Hojjatiyeh oppose *velayat-e faqih* or guardianship of jurists institutionalized by the first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who himself spearheaded the activists’ rise to power.⁵⁹ So again, Ahmadinejad—if he is a secret member of that banned organization—has yet more reason to undermine the theocracy while expanding Iran’s global reach.

Speculation that Iran’s nuclear quest may be tied to messianism has been fueled by disclosures of simulated warhead explosions while theme music for the movie “Chariots of Fire” played in the background.⁶⁰ Earlier in his presidency, Ahmadinejad spoke of the end of the world in religious terms. Recently, under immense international pressure, and as part of his attempt to re-establish ties with the West, he has begun rephrasing those statements too. So in an interview with U.S. news media he commented, “The Mahdi or final imam will come with logic, with culture, with science ... The stories that have been disseminated around the world about extensive war, apocalyptic wars ... are false.” Not many outside Iran are convinced by his words. Yet, if true, even Ahmadinejad’s representation of a nonviolent apocalypse serves to distinguish the Principlists from the mainstream mullahs in power who maintain the notion of a conflagration at the end of time. Moreover, Iranian Foreign Ministry officials attempt to reassure their Third World counterparts that no apocalypse will be provoked by Tehran and therefore those countries should not hesitate to “explore greater cooperation” with Iran.⁶¹ The president and his supporters seem to be exploiting messianic motifs to appeal to the pious and superstitious in Iran. They are

thereby building up yet another political base not just for Ahmadinejad but also for Mashaei so perhaps he can overcome clerical opposition and then run for executive office in 2013. All the talk and piety surrounding the supposed coming of the Mahdi also permits Iranians who subscribe to Mahdism to begin sidestepping the precepts of the mullahs as unnecessary, for it is believed the messiah will establish the perfect polity and reward those who heralded his coming.

Finally, there has been no direct input from Iran's citizens on the prudence of developing atomic weapons, of furthering religious and nationalistic goals with nuclear power, and especially of spreading fundamentalism and Iranian influence to other societies. Indeed, ordinary members of the public only poorly understand the overall goals of their government's foreign policy, military plans, and ideological program. Moreover, while most Iranians regard nuclear energy as a desirable alternative to fossil fuels, it seems only a minority wish to pursue atomic weapons capability for any reason whatsoever. These internal debates have intensified as the economic toll of sanctions has mounted and the regime's popularity has tumbled.⁶²

A new realism about increasing isolation is engulfing Tehran. Even Iranian newspapers have sounded conciliatory notes toward the West regarding working toward compromise on the nuclear weapons issue: "Positive steps are being taken in the right direction toward a solution." Indeed a poll in September 2010 by the international Peace Institute revealed that 75 percent of Iranians want closer ties with the West—rather than anti-Western behaviors based on nationalism and fundamentalism.⁶³

Continued support of terrorism and militants has negative impacts on relations with Third World nations as well. Nigeria complained to the U.N. Security Council that Iran is covertly shipping weapons via the port of Lagos in violation of International sanctions. Gambia severed diplomatic relations and cooperative agreements with Iran in November 2010 once it was revealed that Iran had requested those weapons be re-routed to Banjul.⁶⁴ Senegal too downgraded its diplomatic ties with Iran, fearing the weapons were destined for rebels there. Indonesians have begun reacting negatively to increased drug trafficking—a capital offense in their country—fueled by the IRGC and its transcontinental illicit networks.⁶⁵ Brazilian authorities, detecting illegal uranium mining along its border with Venezuela, attributed this activity to Iran's quest for nuclear power and increased their watchfulness of Iranian expatriates and Iranian-funded organizations among that Latin American nation's growing Shiite communities.

As the negative impacts of Iranian expansionism become clearer, the influence it had hoped to gain through bilateral relations and multinational organizations is waning. Several hundred economic, social, and political agreements with Sub-Saharan nations remain unfulfilled. In particular, due to rising fiscal constraints and bureaucratic inefficiency, Iran has been unable to meet its development aid commitments to African nations.⁶⁶ Likewise, Iran has failed in attempts with its new-found

partners to constrict U.S. world-wide economic influence. It sought to convince other members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to peg oil's value to a basket of currencies rather than the U.S. dollar in response to U.S.-led attempts at reining in Iran's militancy, Iran even championed conversion of cash reserves into currencies other than the U.S. dollar." Yet, none of these attempts gained international traction. Moreover, economic schemes like the gas pipeline that Iranian leaders are signing with Asian nations are unlikely to materialize for decades, if at all. In the meantime, Iran, one of the world's largest exporters of crude oil, ironically has inadequate refined gasoline for its domestic consumption due to economic sanctions brought on by belligerence toward the West.⁶⁷

Despite fervent claims by ayatollahs, freedom rather than Iranian-style religious radicalism was the main factor rallying Arab citizens against their autocratic heads of state. Indeed, understanding this, even Arab Islamist groups funded by Iran have decided to bide their time rather than demand that countries like Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan transform into Sharia-based nations.⁶⁸ Additionally, most Arabs are well aware that Iran violently and unhesitatingly suppressed its citizens' aspirations for freedom in the summer and fall of 2009 and again in February 2011. Likewise, many disgruntled Iranians believe their protests of 2009, rather than the 1979 revolution, provided inspiration for the Arab revolts of 2011. So Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt, realizing that the mantles of Khomeini and Khamenei will not serve them well either with their own people or in creating the needed working relationships with the U.S. and the E.U., have sought to distance themselves from the negative images of Iranian fundamentalism.⁶⁹

Moreover, while the ayatollahs would like to claim that the seeds of Iranian-style religiopolitical revolutions were finally germinating in Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen, dissidents at home took lessons from the success of citizens in Tunisia in driving off tyrannical leaders. Green Movement leaders like Mousavi even draw inspiration from the Arab uprisings in their attempts to oust the mullahs from power.⁷⁰

Finally, the fiscal cost of Tehran's aiding and abetting of Islamism, terrorism, and revolution has fueled much dissatisfaction among the increasingly poor, oppressed masses at home. Extending aid to other poor nations reduces hard currency reserves available to an Iranian regime already under considerable economic pressure at home after years of international sanctions. As a consequence, internal discontent has grown stronger because Iranians question why their leaders attend to the needs of others while overlooking those at home.

These negative developments are one reason why some Iranian politicians, especially the secular nationalists, are increasingly willing to challenge the fundamentalist mullahs, including Supreme Leader Khamenei, who still wish to cut off the

nation from the rest of the world. When Khamenei denounced the presence of Western, secular education and knowledge in Iranian schools and universities, Mashaei responded, “I do not believe that we should not translate foreign humanistic writings or that our students should not study them. I believe that the path of success is development and production ... The East-West struggle must end.” President Ahmadinejad went even further: “We should plan our activities according to an Iranian interpretation of Islam which is compatible with our capacities rather than choosing options that weaken us.”⁷¹ So, while the fundamentalist mullahs seek to strengthen Islam and Islamist behavior at home and abroad, the secular and nationalist Principlist faction pushes ever more vocally for strengthening Iran on the world stage even at the expense of Islam if necessary.

Such direct contradictions of the ayatollahs, and of the institutions and legacy of the Khomeinist revolution as a whole, are becoming increasingly commonplace. They are noteworthy not only because they reveal deepening rifts in the political status quo but also because they violate the deeply-entrenched Iranian notion of *tarof* or etiquette. Iran’s executive branch knows that the country is on the verge of internal socioeconomic collapse and is trying desperately to avoid that fate by reaching practical accommodations with the West while maintaining verbal bravado at home.⁷²

Realism or Ruin?

THIRTY-THREE YEARS AGO, IRANIANS FROM ALL POLITICAL AND CONFESSIONAL backgrounds joined together in a struggle to be free and to create a new society. Many had hoped to oust a monarch and build a representational, tolerant, and free society. Their aspirations were cut short when Khomeini and his cohorts seized control of the revolution and imposed a tyrannical and stridently anti-Western Islamic state that has ruled all Iranians ever since. Khomeini outmaneuvered Iranians who sought plurality, first by claiming he would fulfill their expectations and then, once they had acceded to his leadership, by brutally removing them from the political scene. Today, the Shiite Islamists who still cling to the dream of promoting Islamic revolution internationally are seeking to employ the very same Khomeinist strategy for seizing power from their very own followers in the Arab Middle East. Through the propagation of Shiite Islamism and other efforts, including the pursuit of nuclear power, Iran’s ayatollahs are attempting to set the stage for the Islamic Republic to become an important player within Arab politics; their aim is to move the region further away from representational governance and the temptations of the West and into a new world order fashioned along Islamist lines.

Yet, the challenge that Iran poses to the world is more complicated and multifaceted

than the rise of nuclear mullahs. Iranian nationalists like President Ahmadinejad believe “the world is on the threshold of major developments” and they also want Iran to play an important global role in the twenty-first century. Like the mullahs, they also seek nuclear and other powers to advance their aims. But their vision of a new world order shaped by Iran’s rising power is very different from the one on offer from the mullahs. When interviewed by American news media in September 2009, Ahmadinejad stressed the overall goal of Iranian global expansion: “For one or two countries to think they still are the ones who make the major global decisions which others should follow, well that period has come to an end.” His Chief of Staff Mashaei has pointedly added, “What Westerners are most concerned about is Iran leading the world.” Basij Commander Mohammad Reza Naghdi claims Iran will become “the mother of all freedom-seeking revolutions in the world.”⁷³

The Islamic Republic’s appetite for power seems to keep growing. Iran seeks at most to wrest world dominance and international influence from the U.S. and at least to claim “its prominent place on the world stage” for their Shiite nation and its politicians alongside the current superpowers and their leaders.⁷⁴ For this reason, the more secular-minded individuals among the Iranian leadership are working steadily to outfox both international and national foes—with or without possessing nuclear weapons—“in the present and soon,” as Ahmadinejad has told other Iranians. Those desires even draw inspiration from the late Ayatollah Khomeini, who urged his followers “to correct the political balance” in Iran’s favor; although the nationalists are steadily rejecting the Islamist system that the first supreme leader created.⁷⁵

Yet while the regime in Tehran pursues all manner of policies to establish itself as a world leader, this very pursuit is opening up gaps between the various groups within Iran’s ruling class. For the clerics in particular, there is a growing perception that they stand to lose both Muslim principles and the Islamic Republic itself if the nationalist political elites either fail or succeed. Indeed, they have valid reasons to be concerned. The stark reality is that Iran’s economy is crumbling under the stress of U.S.-led and U.N.-imposed economic sanctions. At the same time, ordinary Iranians seeking greater political and social freedoms are brutally suppressed by regime security forces. Beyond Iran’s borders, many countries are coming to view Tehran’s global political and arms expansions as destabilizing, and they aim to resist.

Tehran’s international power play may not only collapse like a house of cards because of these internal splits, it may also bring down Iran’s economy, the mullahs’ power base—and the Islamic Republic itself. Collapse could have a silver lining, however, if it means the separation of religious ideology from the state and a retreat of activist mullahs from statecraft back to theology. After all, nationalism without both Islamism and belligerency would not threaten the world, and would facilitate Iranians coming together to rebuild their nation.

NOTES

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10. Ali Akbar Salehi, Iran's Foreign Minister and former Director of the Atomic Energy Organization, even claims his country has begun a quest toward nuclear fusion. This program is supposedly also for peaceful energy needs, but it could covertly lead to the production of a hydrogen bomb. Having

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