The sectarian wars in Iraq and Syria have fundamentally changed the Islamic Republic. They have become arenas for a new militant Shi’ite solidarity that has crossed the Arab-Persian divide: Iranian-led, non-Iranian militias, thousands strong, now fight in foreign lands. Not that long ago an academic consensus on the Islamic Republic told us that the mullahs could no longer generate the kind of religious allegiance to send Iranians, let alone non-Iranian Shi’ites, into combat far from home. If the Islamic Revolution was not completely out of gas, it certainly had lost its mojo. The idea that Iran was becoming a revolutionary Shi’ite imperial power would have seemed far-fetched.

The Islamic Republic now resembles the Soviet Union of 1979: a police state, incapable of reforming itself while drowning in corruption, expanding abroad to protect the nation and its “faith.” But unlike the USSR, which in the end just had Marx’s and Lenin’s desiccated shibboleths to sustain an empire, the Islamic Republic has a still vibrant Shi’ite identity. It is the only idea, mixed with revolutionary intent, that the mullahs and their praetorians, the Revolutionary Guards, can lock onto that can motivate the faithful and undermine critics who stopped believing in the cleric-constructed Islamic state.

**Ecumenicalism vs. Sectarianism**

Tehran can imagine a Middle East without the United States. The clerical regime quickly adapted to and exploited the American invasion of and withdrawal from Iraq. Both shocked and excited by the Great Arab Revolt in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010–11, and horrified when the rebellion hit Syria a year later, the mullahs have worked hard to turn instability to their advantage.

Unappreciated by Western observers, the pro-democracy Green Movement, which rallied millions of Iranians into street demonstrations in 2009 over a contested presidential election, also primed the regime for more outward expansion. The Green Revolt devasted what was left of the regime’s legitimacy, especially among the young and bazaaris, who had seen mullah-controlled foundations, such as the gargantuan owqaf religious trusts, and the Revolutionary Guards’ vast business empire eat away at their commerce and social status. Denied legitimacy at home, the clerical regime looked beyond its borders. Endangered Shi’ites became a new cause, both an excuse and a heartfelt mission for an Iranian elite itching to establish a new order.

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Qasem Soleimani, the leader of the Revolutionary Guards’ expeditionary outfit, the Quds Force, and the supreme commander of all of Iran’s foreign militias, has become a social media paladin for the regime. His pictures on the front lines of the empire are signposts of Iran’s new humanitarian, “anti-terrorist” mission. He is, as his brother proudly put it, “born in our family, but he doesn’t belong to us, he belongs to the country and to the Shiites.”

Although one may question whether all the Arabs, Afghans, and Pakistanis fighting for the Islamic Republic have done so because of militant Shi’ite fraternity, such a force could not take shape, let alone be used in the ghastly combat in Syria, unless its esprit were solid. No other Muslim state—not the pan-Arabists of yesteryear or the ever-proselytizing, super-rich Saudis—has been able to accomplish this trick in the modern era.

Until recently, the Islamic Republic had only organized and inspired the Lebanese Hezbollah, the first and favorite foreign child of the Islamic Revolution. Indeed, until the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Tehran actually preferred outreach more focused on Sunnis. Before the revolution in 1979, the Palestine Liberation Organization gave Khomeini’s followers paramilitary training. After the revolution, the ruling mullahs and the Revolutionary Guards saw themselves as the vanguard of an Islamic Revolution that would one day sweep away the Westernized elites of the Middle East.

The ultimate believer in soft power, Khomeini really did think the downfall of the shah could set off a chain reaction among Muslims, Sunni and Shi’ite alike. After the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) ended in a devastating Iranian defeat, the clerical regime still dreamed of an anti-American realignment among Muslim countries, offering its support to Sunni Muslims willing to emphasize their anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism more than their anti-Shi’ism. Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, who became speaker of Iran’s parliament (1980–89) and then president (1989–97), and his aide-de-camp Hassan Rouhani excelled at organizing ecumenical gatherings of anti-American Sunni Muslims.

And what the regime conducted publicly it also proselytized clandestinely: The Ministry of Intelligence and the Guards began organizing paramilitary training programs and weapon deliveries to Sunnis willing to oppose American, Israeli, and Arab enemies. Such ecumenical militancy probably reached its apex when, according to the 9/11 Commission Report, the Sudanese leader Hassan at-Turabi, who also thought Sunnis and Shi’ites should cooperate against common foes, orchestrated contact between al Qaeda and Iran.

The Iranian revolution’s ecumenical intent still lives on. The regime’s fundamental mission civilisatrice is inextricably attached to the idea that the Islamic Republic is on the cutting edge of showing all Muslims how Islamists can run a modern state without forsaking the faith and their resistance to the West. Yet Tehran has now embraced sectarian warfare as the means to expand its influence on the ground.

The evolution from ecumenicalism to Shi’ite imperialism likely was not done initially with much forethought. The über-Shi’ite option abroad was surely chosen at first by default. The fall of Saddam Hussein and Baghdad’s Sunni ruling class in 2003 freed the Iraqi Shi’a, who account for at least 60 percent of the country’s population. The irredentist Sunni insurgency against the Americans, which quickly mutated into ferocious attacks against Shi’ites, and the US military’s failure to break this insurgency in its infancy opened the door to savage sectarianism and the Islamic Republic.

The clerical regime intervened decisively. Tehran increased aid to well-established Shi’ite organizations that had taken refuge in Iran during Saddam’s rule and, more importantly, also threw its support to militant, homegrown Shi’ite groups, such as the Sadrist, willing to attack US forces. In this period—2004 to 2006—Tehran realized
it could create effective Hezbollah-like militias well anchored inside Shi’ite Iraq. Once the Islamic Republic Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei saw how hesitant the United States was, how it seemed incapable of suppressing the insurgency, the temptation to make Americans bleed was seemingly irresistible. Besieged by Sunnis who adopted evermore vicious tactics, the Iraqi Shi’a community, which historically had intimate but often distrustful relations with Iran, had nowhere else to turn for support but to Tehran—especially once the Iraqi Shi’ite establishment realized the Americans were leaving.

The Syrian rebellion in 2012 against the regime of Bashar al Assad, a secular tyrant from a small heretical Shi’ite clan, the Alawites, further cemented into place this new approach to Shi’ite solidarity. The mullahs could not afford to lose their ally in Damascus without risking the Lebanese Hezbollah. Since the clerical regime created the Hezbollah in the early 1980s, Alawites have reliably funneled Iranian weaponry and supplies into Lebanon. A Sunni victory in Damascus would have signaled Iranian weakness throughout the region, especially in the Levant, where a Syrian Sunni victory might reanimate the downtrodden Lebanese Sunnis and throw into question Hezbollah’s dominance. A Syrian Sunni victory would have also strengthened the spine of Iraqi Sunnis, who obviously remain opposed to Shi’ite supremacy.

Brigadier General Hosein Hamedani, who had operational control of the Revolutionary Guard’s expeditionary Quds Force in Syria, led the effort to create and direct these new units. Before he died in the battle for Aleppo in October 2015, he gave a revealing interview on how important the Syrian war effort was to the Islamic Republic and how critical the creation of militias was to frontline combat and regime survival. For him, the Levant and Iraq are holy ground where “100,000 [special] individuals from our divine prophetic history are buried.” And so earthly politics intertwine with religion. “The enemy hasn’t come to destroy the Syrian Baath Party,” the general tells us, referring to the political party through which the Assad family officially rules. The Americans “themselves tell us they’ve intervened to cut short Iranian influence, to weaken the [Lebanese] Hezbollah, and, the ultimate objective, to guarantee the security of Israel . . . . Syria is the key region [in the Middle East]. In comparison to Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, Syria is the most important . . . it is in Syria, where our interests can most be hurt . . . To protect the accomplishments of the Islamic revolution, we had to intervene.”

In recognizing his achievement, the Guards published a tribute, 1600 Hours [4:00 p.m.] in Aleppo, in which Hamedani is the “master of the asymmetrical wars of the resistance axis.” Where once the “resistance” would have been synonymous with the clerical regime’s opposition to the United States and Israel, it now includes Sunni Arabs, too, who have allied themselves violently against Assad and the Shi’ite government in Baghdad. Iranian propaganda frequently describes the Islamic State, like its predecessor, the Shi’ite-killing al Qaeda in Iraq of Abu Musab az-Zarqawi, as an organization that sprang from American and Zionist conspiracies. 1600 Hours creates a seamless history for the general, who was the lead officer in crushing the pro-democracy Green Movement, from his combat in the Iran-Iraq conflict through his battles in Syria. On both the home front and abroad, Hamedani was on the cutting edge of why and how the clerical regime adopted Shi’ite imperialism as the vehicle to ensure the Islamic Revolution’s survival.

**Shi’ite Solidarity, Shi’ite Vengeance**

The wars in Syria and Iraq play powerfully on long-standing Muslim sentiments. Modern Iranians and Arabs—those educated to think of themselves in nationalist terms and even many who are deeply religious but still cherish an inclusive Islamic identity—often dislike talking about the divisions within the faith. Perhaps because of the violent convulsions in early Islamic history, where the fear of fitna—a seditious fracture among believers—became
seared into the collective memory of Muslims, even the most anti-Shi’ite Sunni or anti-Sunni Shi’ite may pause in expressing his antipathy before nonbelievers.

Yet Shi’ites and Sunnis, even among the secular, usually have an acute sense for recognizing who each other are. And all Shi’ites, except those who have been raised in the West and in Iran, are conscious of their historic political inferiority. The unspeakable savagery of Saddam’s regime against the Shi’a, the ferocity of the post-Saddam internecine strife, and the ugly sideshow in Yemen, where Houthi Shi’ites clash with native Sunnis and Saudis, and blood-soaked Syria have turned the Sunni-Shi’ite divide into the biggest fault line in the Middle East.

Unlike militant Islamic ecumenicalism, Shi’ite chauvinism has running room inside Iranian society. The failures of the Islamic Revolution—the oppression that climaxed in 2009 and 2010 when the Iranian elite turned on itself and started torturing the children of those who had made the revolution—have made Islamism an increasingly hard sale. The enormous intellectual vibrancy of Iranian society in the 1990s—the open discussion of the virtues and the sins of Western societies and the despotism of the Islamic Republic—had by 2010 died. It is impossible to overstate how intellectually arid Iranian culture has become in comparison to the heady days of the 1990s when many college-educated Iranians, including some clerics, believed a smooth transition from Khomeinism to something softer and more democratic was possible. Many Iranians wanted a hybrid society that proudly mixed Western and Islamic Persian ideals. This optimism could also be seen among Western journalists, scholars, and diplomats who then covered Iran.

But the pull of Shi’ism is something else. Although it is difficult to quantify, the Shi’ite content of Iranian internal propaganda has definitely increased in the past decade. This partly reflects the increasing importance of the Basij, the “mobilization” corps under the control of the Revolutionary Guards, which monitors, polices, and, at least in the eyes of the state, inspires Iranian society. The Basij mostly come from the non-college-educated base of the regime, the “urban peasants” who rally to the revolution whenever demonstrations are called for. Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13) came from this lower-class milieu, and his Shi’ism was exuberantly popular.

As the old Islamic Republic has waned, as the first-generation revolutionaries have grown old and become associated with rampant corruption or even joined the opposition, revolutionary rhetoric has calcified. It is not just the college educated who have grown bored with Mercedes-driving, uncharismatic mullahs preaching virtue. Anticlericalism, always a stable of Persian poets and humor, is today a serious concern for mullahs who fear the increasing distance between the clergy and the working class. We have seen a precipitous drop in the number of Iranian men willing to become seminarians even though that remains the route to power in the Islamic Republic.

The mullahs know they have lost the college educated. The Green Movement, which brought between two to three million people onto the streets of Tehran, is irrefutable evidence that theocracy does not sit well with those who have received Westernized educations. Since the revolution, university enrollment has skyrocketed (though academic standards have declined), leaving the regime with a seemingly intractable problem: It has educated millions in universities that, despite innumerable “reforms,” Islamize poorly.

The great unknown in Iran is the depth of regime support among the urban poor. Twenty-five years ago, Ayatollah Mohammad-Reza Mahdavi-Kani, a prominent conservative mullah, a mainstay of the theocracy, openly worried whether regime clerics who made every political issue religious, who were quick to condemn opponents as “enemies of God,” were rendering the holy law meaningless and destroying Islam. He was concerned that an explicitly religious regime was secularizing Iranian society through the excesses of a state-enforced faith. The
nationwide anti-regime demonstrations that erupted in December 2017, which may have been spearheaded by the non-college-educated, suggest that the regime is in deep trouble with the provincial “urban peasantry,” too.

The secularization of Iranian society has been a favorite theme of French observers of the Islamic Republic, who are always attentive to the friction between church and state. Their focus is undoubtedly warranted: First-rank intellectuals, both lay and clerical, have produced fine—in the Muslim Middle East, unparalleled—critiques of theocracy and popular sovereignty. Some of these men—Khomeini’s “defrocked” successor Ali Montazeri, Abd al-Karim Soroush, Mohsen Kadivar, Mohammad Mojtabahed Shabestari, Hasan Yusofi Eshkevari, and, in his own bumbling, contradictory way, former President Mohammad Khatami—have become known in the West. (Soroush and Kadivar both live in exile in the United States.) Many more have gone to ground in the Islamic Republic, waiting perhaps for another opportunity to speak their minds without fear of imprisonment and torture.

We do not know how much the Islamic Republic has degraded or depoliticized the people’s attachment to their faith. We do know that mosque attendance has plummeted. In 2015 a Revolutionary Guard commander, Zia Eddin Hozni, revealed that only about 3,000 of the country’s 57,000 Shi’ite mosques were fully operational—and of the 3,000 some were only functioning during the religious months of Ramadan and Muharram.11

The Shi’a have usually been less diligent than Sunnis in mosque attendance, but it is striking that in an explicitly Shi’ite state run by mullahs, the faithful are staying away in such numbers. We can make educated guesses that a cleric-lite religion has become much more popular. Since the fall of Saddam in 2003, the popularity in Iran of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the preeminent cleric of Iraq who is Iranian by birth, has exponentially increased. That rise is undoubtedly in part a reflection of his strong preference for clerics keeping a certain distance from government, which is a rebuke of Khomeini’s innovative velayat-e faqih, or “the rule of the jurisconsult.” Sistani’s carefulness about seeing Iranian officials and the suspicions he expresses, via his aides, about Tehran’s intentions in Iraq also are well-known among both Iranians and Iraqis. Inside the Islamic Republic, we also know that “peasant Shi’ism,” which is ritual-heavy and mystical, has not been hurt by the revolution, probably in great part because of its ambivalent and ambiguous relationship with mullahs, who have often been viewed by Iranians as acquisitive and licentious.

It is not unreasonable to surmise that part of Ahmadinejad’s considerable lower-class appeal was his skepticism about clerical Shi’ism, which by the end of his presidency became an open dismissiveness toward the politicized clergy, even Khamenei himself. This “democratized” Shi’ism eventually doomed Ahmadinejad with the supreme leader and other powerful mullahs.

Shi’ite Islam, with all its mysticism and historical magic men, may remain as strong an identity inside Iran as it was at the revolution. What has changed is how Iranians filter the faith through the clergy. What Eshkevari, a cleric, said in 2000 in Berlin, before he was arrested in Iran, sentenced to death for apostasy, and then just imprisoned, is certainly still true: “We can say clearly that the conflict between Islam and Western modernity is the most critical and crucial problem that the Muslim world has confronted in the past 550 years. It is so grave that the destiny of Muslim societies depend on finding a way out from this conflict.”12

Today the corruption, the clerical arrogance, and the regime’s nastiness have either concluded this debate in favor of the West or made this once-primal question a contretemps. Many Iranians may still have a problem with the West, especially the United States, but the omnipresent, oppressive hand of the regime and the increasing staleness of society have made anti-Western propaganda much less compelling. The United States is far away; the clerical regime is at the front door.
Iranian imperialism today plays on the complexity of the country’s internal and shifting allegiances. Preaching about Iran liberating the mostly Sunni Muslim world from the yoke of the United States and Westernized native oppressors simply does not ring true when Sunnis have largely sat on the sidelines, encouraged, or actively participated in the slaughter of Shi’ites. It does not ring true when Islamic universalism at home is often rhetorical camouflage for government incompetence. The base of the Iranian regime today—unlike at the time of the revolution, when the muscle and dynamism belonged to the university educated who had blended Islam and Marxism into a convulsive cocktail—are the less-educated faithful who ardently feel their Shi’ite identity and inextricably and effortlessly mix their religious commitment with their Persian pride. The Islamic Republic’s ruling elite has understandably fallen back on the country’s inner themes as revolutionary dogma has lost its appeal.

This approach probably has some traction even with Iranians who hate the regime. During the Green Movement protests, the demonstrators famously mocked many of the holies of the Islamic Revolution. “Na Ghazeh, Na Lobnan, janam feda-ye Iran” [Not for Gaza, not for Lebanon, I sacrifice my life only for Iran] was a popular protest chant. Given the re-eruption of this chant and many others aimed at the mullahs’ foreign adventures in the December 2017 demonstrations, Iranian youth do not appear wild about the clerical regime’s war in Syria, its machinations in Iraq, and its clandestine weapons deliveries to the Houthis in Yemen. Iranian social media certainly reveals unease among Tehran’s college-educated with the regime’s policy in Syria, or as one brave student put it in person to the Second Deputy Speaker of Parliament Ali Motahari: “Are we on the right side in Syria? . . . We are definitely guilty before the tearful eyes of Syrian children.”

But it is, nevertheless, tricky for Iranians to mock the regime’s commitment to defending Shi’ites (even dubious ones like the Alawites) who are being challenged by Sunnis. The eruption of the Islamic State, even though the clerical regime and its sectarian machinations fertilized the ground for its birth, has made it easier for the mullahs to play the Sunni terrorist card in domestic politics. The theocracy’s constant propaganda—that Iran is the only thing standing in the way of a broader Middle Eastern implosion—appears to have influenced Iranian dissidents, even those ardently opposed to the mullahs. Akbar Ganji, the former Revolutionary Guardsman turned journalist turned Iran’s most famous imprisoned dissident turned exile, is monomaniacal on this theme of Iran as an island of stability. And he has excused Tehran’s complicity in the death of hundreds of thousands of Syrian Sunnis, preferring to blame everyone, including the United States and Israel.

Other Iranian exiles who actually focus on human rights have been more forthcoming, but it is still striking, given the massive destruction that Iran and its allies have wrought in Syria, how few, brief, and equivocating these condemnations are. The Obama administration’s obvious hope that Iranian casualties would mount sufficiently in Syria to cause disquiet at home never made much sense among the revolutionary set, especially younger Guards who finally have found an opportunity to show their fidelity and bravery as their fathers showed theirs against Saddam. The death toll among them in Syria since January 2012 is around 500, an easily sustainable loss rate for a 125,000-man corps, which rotates both Quds Force and mainline officers and soldiers regularly through Syria.

Social media reveals some anxiety among college-educated Iranians about Iranian deaths in Syria. But such views and emotions appear sporadically, perhaps because the regime so efficiently silences them. Dissent on Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen appears to be far from developing into a movement. Publicly siding against Shi’ites in favor of Sunnis can be an arduous existential exercise for Iranians.
Lasting Scars

There is no good historical parallel for today’s sectarian clash in the 1,350 years of tension between the shi’atu Ali, or the party of Ali—that is, those who believe rightful rule belonged to the prophet’s family via his cousin and son-in-law Ali bin Abi Talib—and the Sunna, or those who have recognized as legitimate whoever holds “the reins of power” (ulu’ul-amr). Once upon a time, in the formative period of Islamic history, the Sunni-Shi’ite clash was about an elemental conception of salvation: If Muslims followed errant leaders, then the community as a whole could be damned. As the idea of salvation in Islam became more individualized and less communitarian, the Shi’ite-Sunni rivalry became less intense though remained omnipresent. Shi’ism became an escape route for all forms of heterodoxy. The long battle between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shi’ite Safavids, which had been the fiercest clash between Sunnis and Shi’ites in Islamic history, never produced the level of barbarism that has become routine in the 21st century.

And given the death toll and destruction in the Sunni insurrection against the Assad dictatorship, Sunni antipathy for Arab and Iranian Shi’ites is unlikely to diminish for decades. Somewhere around 500,000 people have likely died in this conflict, the majority of whom are Sunni civilians slaughtered by the regime and its allies. Around five million Syrians, again mostly Sunni, have become refugees abroad, and perhaps as many as seven million people have been internally displaced. Vast tracks of Sunni Syria, especially the oldest, richest, and largest city of the country, Aleppo, which anchored Syrian Sunni society, have been devastated.

Syria and Iraq are the historical heartland of the Sunni Arab identity: The Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1258) caliphs reigned in Damascus and Baghdad, respectively. Shi’ites challenged both dynasties. In both cities, Shi’ites now rule, and Sunnis bow down or risk their lives. It is impossible to overstate how galling this is to the Arab Sunni consciousness.

Assad’s Alawite regime would have fallen if it had not been for the military and financial aid that Tehran extended. Not long ago, both Iranian and Iraqi mullahs, who come from the “Twelver” branch of Shi’ism and represent the vast majority of Shi’ites, treated the Alawites as beyond the pale. The Iranian-regime clergy has now officially recognized them as canonically acceptable. For both Shi’ites and Sunnis, the war in Syria has fundamentally changed once-cherished conceptions of the sacred and the profane.

And Iran’s mullahs have undoubtedly done the math: In the classical Middle East—from Egypt through the Persian Gulf and from the Levant to Afghanistan—Sunnis and Shi’ites are roughly even in number. Although the Islamic Republic still conducts cultural and religious missions among non-Arab Sunni Muslims, its focus has always been squarely on its own neighborhood and overwhelmingly on the Arabs. Sectarian politics make excellent tactical sense since possible Arab Sunni coalitions against Iran have no cohesive military power, have little expeditionary capacity, and inevitably will default back to supporting radical Sunni groups, which are the only armed force capable of making the Iranians and their allies bleed. This Sunni extremist temptation, of course, further cements the Islamic Republic’s centripetal position among the Arab Shi’a.

No Sunni Arab force has put boots on the ground in defense of its religious brethren in Syria and Iraq. Egypt, the only Sunni Arab state that could conceivably deploy an expeditionary ground force if someone else supplied the transport and logistics, refused to fight the Saudis’ war in Yemen. In Syria, Abd al-Fattah as-Sissi, field marshal turned president for life, has come out in favor of Assad. He even deployed a small, symbolic force to Syria on Assad’s side. In Yemen, the Saudis and the Emirates, with overwhelming air power, have probably managed to make a bad situation worse, proving that their battlefield incompetence is matched by their strategic inability to
exploit the differences within the Houthi community and, more importantly, recognize the permanence of Houthi power in northern Yemen.

Saudi actions, more than any preexisting ideological affinity between the Houthis and the Iranians, have likely gained Tehran a permanent foothold in the peninsula. Imagining the Revolutionary Guards building a Yemeni version of the Hezbollah is now not unthinkable. Yemeni militancy on the Sunni side, which has produced one of the most lethal branches of al Qaeda, could see a much more organized Shi’ite twin capable of abetting Iranian efforts to radicalize and organize the Saudi Shi’a, the ultimate prize.

The Middle East has essentially reverted to where it had been from the 10th century to 1918: Just two peoples—the Turks and the Iranians—can dominate the region. And unlike the past, where Turkish warriors usually held the high ground, today the Turkish Republic has no stomach for wars much beyond its borders. That leaves the Iranians versus the (Sunni) Arabs.

No one in the Middle East believes that the advanced Western weaponry in Gulf Arab armies has made these states capable of checkmating Iranian designs. They may not be paper tigers when guarding their own borders, but they have no capacity to project power. Once the Iranians start to load up with advanced conventional Russian hardware, which they can commence in under four years according to United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, Gulf Arab self-confidence will undoubtedly be shaken.18

Even before the Great Arab Revolt convulsed the region, the secular Arab-state Middle East was dying, and Shi’ite and Sunni Islamists were the only ones creatively and aggressively imagining the future. All Shi’ites can find some passionate common ground in how much they loathe the Shi’ite-hating Wahhabis and the Gulf princes who indulge them. The Iranians probably have not been the catalyst for the rising violence in Bahrain, but they have surely done what they can to encourage Shi’ite insurrection.

Although the United States has come to think of the Saudis as a permanent fixture of the Middle East, it is doubtful that the Iranians view the family as immovable. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain oppress the largest number of Arab Shi’ites in the Middle East. If the ruling Sunni families of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia could be upended and the Shi’a in the oil-rich Eastern Province and Bahrain freed, the Middle East would be transformed. Only the United States’ military might—the perception in the Middle East that Washington will use its armed forces to check Iranian adventurism—keeps the southern Middle East from becoming unhinged.

**Iranian Advantages**

The Russians, too, have done the math. Iran has never posed a strategic threat to Moscow. The Islamic Republic has never gained a foothold in the Caucasus and Central Asia outside of Tajikistan, the only Persian-speaking country in the former Soviet Union. And even in Tajikistan, anti-Iranian sentiments are widespread. The Islamic Republic’s cultural and religious outreach to the region has flopped, thwarted by the Sunni-Shi’ite divide (the vast majority of Central Asian Muslims are Sunni), Iranian cultural arrogance, and the superior efforts of Turkish Gülenists, Saudis, and other Sunni missionaries.

Vladimir Putin has already calculated that his own brutal actions toward Sunni Muslims in the Caucasus and his support of ferociously anti-Islamist rulers in the former Soviet Union do not have a prohibitive downside. He does not seem to fear Sunni Islamic radicalism in Russia: Whatever anti-Russian designs the Islamic State or al Qaeda may have, they have so far failed to launch major terrorist operations inside the Russian police state. Putin’s
alliance with Shi’ite Iran is a logical extension of this domestic self-confidence; it is also a smart strategic move since Iranian power has no effective Arab counterweight. The closer Russia is to the Islamic Republic, the more the Arab states, particularly oil-rich Gulf states, must treat Russia with greater respect and deference.

Tehran is set to become the largest single client for Russian military hardware. Moscow finally delivered to Tehran S-300 antiaircraft missiles, which have certainly complicated any Israeli threat to the clerical regime’s nuclear sites. The Russian-Iranian axis has become militarily dominant in the northern Middle East. The Syrian refugee maelstrom, which Iran and Russia in part provoked, has worked brilliantly for Putin, further destabilizing the European Union.

And spiritually, on the most important issue, Russia and Iran are a pair: Russian propaganda against America’s insidious efforts to spread its values in the Russian realm, undermining traditional culture and the mores of the Russian Orthodox church, is remarkably similar to Khamenei’s gravamen against the morally corrupting soft-power machinations of the United States. Unlike the Soviet Union, Russia does not pose an ideological temptation for Iranian youth and intellectuals. Iranian Shi’ite imperialism dovetails nicely with Putin’s great power ambitions.

And the United States is in an extraordinarily difficult position to counter, let alone roll back, Iranian influence and military adventures, at least in the northern Middle East. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has put Washington into a surreal situation: The nuclear deal funds Iranian expansion. The crux of that accord is to trade commerce for (temporary) nuclear restraint. The Obama administration fully understood this conundrum, which is why the president and those charged to sell the agreement highlighted the politically “moderating” potential of the JCPOA and Iran’s domestic economic demands, as if the Islamic Republic were a Western democracy inclined to take from the military and give to the commonwealth.19 Open-source information already shows a 24 percent increase in the Revolutionary Guard Corps budget for 2017–18.20

President Barack Obama believed the United States was overextended in the Middle East. For him, Washington had no major national security interests in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, or Yemen that warranted risking nuclear diplomacy with Tehran. In effect Obama ceded those countries to Iranian mischief and possible control.

The president certainly understood that the mullahs were spreading sectarian strife across the region (he repeatedly said so), but either he did not believe the harm done transcended the benefit of punting the nuclear question down the road or he hoped the accord would economically transform the Iranian regime, by making the so-called moderate faction behind Rouhani politically dominant or the “hardline” faction behind the Revolutionary Guards less malign. Or he did not really care since he no longer wanted the United States to be a hegemonic power in the region. Those really are the only possibilities.

We already know the atomic accord has not moderated the Revolutionary Guards. A quick read of Rouhani’s speeches and books, or a review of the Islamic Republic’s economic and foreign policies in the 1990s, should have told Obama and intelligence analysts, who remain addicted to the “Rouhani is a moderate” meme, that tens of billions of dollars’ worth of trade with Europe and Asia in the 1990s failed to moderate Iran’s foreign policy, its campaigns of bombings and assassinations abroad, or its internal oppression. Moreover, if pushing back against the mullahs includes imposing new sanctions of any strength, then Washington will potentially face a Tehran walking away from the nuclear deal, creating a crisis that Washington might not be prepared for and doing so in opposition to Europeans who are eager to increase trade with Iran and want the agreement to stand.21
Cracking a Would-Be Empire

Locked into an arms-control agreement that was sold in part as a vehicle for moderating Iranian behavior, Washington remains unprepared, if not unwilling, to confront the Middle Eastern power that is trying to transform the region. Many Republicans and Democrats, chastened by the Afghan and Iraq wars, remain allergic to the Middle East. Few in foreign policy circles believe Obama's nuclear deal was a brilliant piece of diplomacy. They just view it the way the president probably did: a means to avoid answering hard questions about war and peace.

Still hooked on the optimistic possibilities of Rouhani, a big slice of the foreign policy establishment in Washington does not want to see the Islamic Republic as an imperial enterprise, and among those who do, some may even find it a positive development. The reasoning: Chaos is awful, and Sunnis have lost their minds (for example, look at the Islamic State, al Qaeda, and a myriad of other primitive radical groups), but Iran comparatively is an island of gradually modernizing stability. The mullahs have not bombed Americans and Europeans outside of a war zone in years and largely restricted their hostages to overly adventurous American backpackers, poorly led US sailors, a hapless retired FBI officer, and dual nationals who have had the bad judgment to visit or work in the Islamic Republic. Since America is not going to intervene militarily to pacify the Middle East, then it is better to have Iran and its Shi'ite allies dominate than Sunni Arabs, who are too divided, weak, politically unstable, or religiously unhinged.

As for the president, Donald Trump has so far given little indication that he sees the Islamic Republic as President Obama did—moderates versus hard-liners. But beyond describing the nuclear deal as dumb and poorly negotiated, Trump has not extensively critiqued the Islamic Republic or its foreign policies. He may view it as a Shi'ite Islamist threat that must be countered militarily, regardless of what happens to the nuclear deal—or not. He may view it as a menace to Persian Gulf oil—or not. Or he may see Iran as a state that nevertheless can be traded with. It is all uncertain.

What is clear, however, is the Islamic Republic and the United States remain fundamentally at odds as regimes; their guiding principles do not amicably coexist. And Iran's success in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have only whetted the clerical regime's appetite to push forward. In their success, in their hunger to hurt the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, the mullahs may yet provoke Americans, even those who would rather forget about the Middle East.

Moreover, if President Trump is serious about eliminating the Islamic State and its successors and denying al Qaeda further allies, he will have to, directly or indirectly, take up arms against the clerical regime and its Shi’ite proxies. Islamic State 2.0 and al Qaeda 3.0 are a foregone conclusion unless the Shi’ites are checked or Iran and its allies obliterate their Sunni foes. And the Islamic Republic simply does not have the Shi’ite resources to definitively beat the Syrian Sunnis; even permanently downing the Sunnis of Iraq will be a demanding task.

But Tehran certainly has the capacity to continue to destabilize the region and sow the sectarian strife that has made the clerical regime for the first time since the revolution a power to be reckoned with far beyond its borders. Sectarian warfare has driven non-Iranian Shi’ites into Tehran’s welcoming arms, making the Islamic Republic the dominant power in the Arab Near East. The founding fathers’ revolutionary dreams—a Middle East reordered, anti-American, and following the lead of the Islamic Republic—have never been closer.

The Islamic Republic’s ambitions are not complicated. As with the former Soviet Union, defense is offense. Gen. Hamedani’s tour d’horizon of threats all lead Tehran to intervene throughout the region. And as the regime’s internal legitimacy has collapsed, its external drive—the ruling elite’s determination to prove its mettle and exert its writ—has increased.
Fearful of a head-on collision with Tehran, Washington can approach the Iranian threat sequentially, as the military strategists Frederick and Kimberly Kagan have advised in their war-gaming against the Islamic State and al Qaeda. The United States first builds up a Sunni Arab force in Syria within an American-protected safe haven near the Jordanian border—far enough away from Iranian-directed forces and the Russians to avoid a direct confrontation. As the US-supported resistance force becomes larger and more effective, superior on the battlefield to the Islamic State and al Qaeda–affiliated groups, it will rally nonradical Sunnis. Eventually judgment day will arrive, however: American soldiers and their Arab allies will face off against Russia, Iran, and Tehran's foreign and Syrian militias. And if that day arrives, significant nonnuclear sanctions will surely follow. The JCPOA, if it is still alive, will expire soon after.

If the United States is unwilling to commit to an anti-Iran ground game in Iraq and Syria—and the Trump administration so far appears determined to avoid such commitments—then there will be no real pushback against Tehran. What Obama declined to do and gave up in Syria and Iraq will not be coming back. Buoyed by its victories in Syria and Iraq, Tehran will surely try to spark greater violence against the ruling families in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The thousands of Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani Shi’ites whom the Iranians have deployed will likely become permanent auxiliaries of the Revolutionary Guards.

The Iranian intelligence ministry and the Guards are certainly already sifting through volunteers for clandestine operatives. When they go home, they will recruit and train others, expanding the Iranian network throughout the Greater Middle East. The Islamic State and al Qaeda have built up affiliates throughout the Muslim world; Iran is probably doing so in a more organized manner.

Washington really has not caught on to how the Iranians are trying to change the game. Compared to the Islamic Republic, Sunni non-state actors can be a lethal nuisance. They drive American and especially European counterterrorist officers nuts. At worst, they draw funds—table scraps—from pillaging the wreckage of failed states and the generosity of rich, anti-Western Gulf Arabs. Iran's Shi’ite imperialists, however, feed off the most talented people in the Muslim Middle East, the only country in the region that has really fused its national identity with religion and its national glory with a higher cause.

If Washington were bright, it would go after the clerical regime where it is the weakest—the fissures in the current amalgam that makes the Islamic Republic. Khamenei lives in fear of the American bully pulpit and its insidious soft power. He literally cannot stop talking about this menace. We should give him far more to talk about. An anti-imperialist American foreign policy ought to target Rouhani's circle, far and away still the most competent and clever theocrats. The Iranian president wants to rescue the regime, not reform it, to expand the tent and the wealth of those who support the system that he has doggedly and ruthlessly supported since the revolution. An ardent supporter of the war in Syria, he wants to advance Tehran’s reach throughout the Middle East, using European investment and increasing energy sales to pay for the effort.

In turn, Washington should want to undermine the more vibrant economy that Rouhani has promised. Failed aspirations have always been an excellent kick-starter for domestic upheaval, as we saw again in the recent nationwide, provincial protests. And Iran is a volcano of contradictions. To the extent that it can, Washington should accentuate those contradictions, especially the century-old Iranian quest for representative government.

The Islamic Republic has an irremediable birth defect: Popular sovereignty and theocracy, in theory, coexist. In practice, the clerics try to “manage” democracy. In 2009, as Khamenei has himself admitted, that management proved “a great challenge.” Gen. Mohammad Ali Jaafari, commander of the Revolutionary Guard, was even more
explicit about the democratic threat. He revealed in a (leaked) videotaped meeting of senior guard officers that the presidential election had to be curtailed given how many reformists had already penetrated the government. “This slope was worrisome, and everyone analyzed that if the trend continued, the election would go to a second round; and in the second round, the outcome would be unpredictable.” 27 In a public speech, Jaafari declared that during the Green Movement protests, “the Islamic system went nearly to the border of overthrow.” 28 An intelligent American foreign policy would give due attention to the confessions of our enemies. It would start with planning the incremental steps behind any regime-change strategy.

Almost everyone on the left and right actually wants to see the regime change in Iran—to see real popular sovereignty develop. Where people differ, of course, is whether the United States should try to advance the cause and what means it should deploy to help effect the downfall of theocracy. Given the certainty that the Islamic Republic will have an industrial-size uranium-enrichment capacity when the nuclear deal’s sunset clauses kick in in under 15 years and given that Rouhani has proudly proclaimed that one of his notable nuclear achievements is the continuing development of the IR-8 advanced centrifuge (once the IR-8 is deployed, with its small, easily concealable cascades, UN monitoring and safeguards will become all but impossible), it behooves Washington to at least plan for the possibility that a malign Islamic Republic could have missile-ready nuclear weapons within 15 years.

Accordingly, we should want to see a popular counterrevolution, à la the Green Movement, succeed. Misagh Parsa of Dartmouth makes a convincing case that the Islamic Republic simply cannot reform itself through the type of peaceful evolution that President Obama hopefully envisioned. 29 The Green Movement radicalized within one week: It went from protests seeking transparency and fairness in a disputed presidential election to an explicit revolt against the regime. Those convulsive factors are all still there, as is the regime’s intent to brutalize those who aim to change the system.

At a minimum, Washington should plan for this eventuality, for another big eruption of discontent. In covert action, it always takes two to tango. Iranians will not do anything they do not want to do; Americans can only suggest things that Iranians themselves believe are worthwhile and practicable. If the theocracy goes down, it will be because millions of Iranians will it. It is long past time for Washington to treat the Islamic Republic as it treated the Soviet Union: We should have a strategy to contain and collapse our enemy. And as with the USSR, we should not allow arms-control agreements to blind us to the ultimate objective.

In Washington’s continuing tug-of-war with the mullahs, the Iranian people have remained an untapped resource. When the Green Movement first took to the streets, Iranian youths, who had misinterpreted Obama’s Cairo speech, called out to the young president. Playing with his name in Persian, they hoped he was *u ba ma*—“he is with us.” He was not.

It is hard to imagine Donald Trump taking the bully pulpit or using sanctions on behalf of these people. Supporting democracy among Muslims is not his thing. But events make a presidency. As the Islamic Republic’s Shi’ite imperialism continues to advance, an American containment strategy may well develop. Cracking Shi’ite fraternity in Arab lands will not be easy since Shi’ite-hating Sunnis are all around. Inside Iran, however, this fraternity is far from rock-solid. The appeal of democracy is stronger.


5. Sa’at-e 16 be vaqt-e halab, ravayetha’i az zandegi-ye ustad-e jengha-ye namutaqaren-e mehvar-e muqavamat, Tehran, Nashr-e 27, 1394. Translated by the author.

6. For an excellent discussion of what was, see Mehran Kamrava, Iran’s Intellectual Revolution (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

7. See, for example, Farhad Khosrokhavar and Olivier Roy, Iran: Comment sortir d’une révolution religieuse [Iran: How to escape a religious revolution] (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999). This is the best book on the challenges of peaceful political evolution in the Islamic Republic written during that period.


15. Ali Alfoneh (nonresident senior fellow, Atlantic Council), email message to author, April 17, 2017. Alfoneh derives his figures from tracking funeral announcements for fallen members of the corps. According to Alfoneh, the command structure between the Quds Force and mainline units has become interchangeable if not indistinguishable.


22. To get a sense of this “pro-Iran” sentiment, read essays about Iran and Syria in both the New York Review of Books and the American Conservative. Although the journalist Christopher de Bellaigue, the Review’s most elegant writer on the Islamic Republic, and Patrick Buchanan, a founding editor of the American Conservative, are universes apart, they both are essentially pro-Iran in their discussion of the Middle East, including the war in Syria. In sync with the populist right, the American Conservative has perhaps the most constant voice for recasting Iran as a nonthreatening enemy or even a potential ally. Fox’s Tucker Carlson appears to be moving in the same direction. On the left, the liberal writer Peter Beinart regularly depicts Iran as an anti–Islamic State/anti-Sunni jihadist force for good in the Middle East. The New Yorker journalist Robin Wright, who is a fan of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad-Javad Zarif, consistently writes favorably about Iran under Rouhani. Or see the commentary of former senior US officials Jessica Mathews and Thomas Pickering, who both regularly write on Iran in the New York Review of Books and who never dwell on the clerical regime’s actions in Syria and Iraq, preferring to keep the spotlight firmly on the soundness of the nuclear agreement. This preference has become almost de rigueur among the liberal foreign policy set. A pro-Iran, pro-engagement (but anti-hard-line mullah) sentiment is also notable at the New York Times, which sponsors for-profit tourism to the Islamic Republic. It is difficult to imagine the New York Times doing such trips today to Putin’s Russia. The richness of Persian culture has something to do with this moral blind spot. (The advertising I have seen for these trips does not mention Iran’s brutal suppression of dissidents; the persecution of the Baha’i, Jews, and homosexuals; or the vast slaughter that the clerical regime has abetted in Syria.) See Reuel Marc Gerecht, “Radioactive Regime: Iran and Its Apologists,” Weekly Standard, May 20, 2013, http://www.weeklystandard.com/radioactive-regime/article/722050.

23. To date, the Trump administration has been notably quiet about Boeing’s $17 billion sale of aircraft to Iran.


25. With this in mind, Parsa’s Democracy in Iran may be the single most important book in English since the Islamic Revolution.


27. Parsa, Democracy in Iran, 249.
