

Associate Paper

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The Islamic Revolution's Impact on Political Islam and the Middle East

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Key Points

- The Islamic Revolution advanced the notion of Islamic activism as a potential force in governance by showing that participating in elections and governing (within limits), did not violate God's rule.
- Despite their mutual antagonism, Iranian theocracy and Arab autocracy are two sides of the same coin. Both advocate for political Islam; both abhor democratic politics and the freedoms that ensue.
- The fear of a foreign invasion has driven post-Revolutionary Iran to pursue active contacts with terrorist organisations, but Tehran has also worked closely with Washington against al-Qaeda and in post-invasion Iraq.
- In the years ahead, more ways should be found to better engage with Iran and the region, including the full re-instatement of the Iran nuclear agreement and inspections regime.

Summary

Iran celebrates the fortieth anniversary of the Islamic Revolution during the first ten "Days of Dawn" in February, beginning on 1 February, the day that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's plane landed in Tehran in 1979. Middle East observers generally agree that the establishment of the Islamic Republic has had a profound impact on the region: politically, socially, militarily, economically and culturally. Regional power configurations and alignments – in peace and in war – have been deeply affected by the resurgence of Shia Islam as a state religion in Iran and the centrality of religion to governance. Iran's relations with terrorist organisations and groups in the past generation have also been greatly influenced by the Islamic Republic.

Analysis

Right after the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979, neighbouring Sunni states were terrified of what they perceived as a Shia Crescent to the east and decided to back Sunni Iraq's unjustified war against Iran throughout the 1980s. Saudi Arabia and other family-ruled neighbouring states tried frantically to bolster their collective power position by forming a new organisation in May 1981, called the Gulf Co-operation Council. The goal of the GCC ostensibly was to preserve the *shaykhly* or "princely" tribal rule of the six member states. But the real objectives of the envisioned grouping included countering Iran's rising regional status as a revolutionary Muslim state, stemming its pro-democratic zeal and appeal to Shia and Sunni Muslims globally to overthrow their "un-Islamic" regimes, and supporting Saddam in his war with Iran.

The GCC states poured billions of dollars into Saddam's eight-year war effort against Iran and strongly urged Western powers, including the United States, to back Iraq. Washington was inclined to agree for a variety of reasons, including its traumatic experience with the Tehran embassy hostage crisis. American policymakers realised within 18 months of the war beginning that Saddam's promised quick victory was becoming more elusive. Once Washington decided early in the conflict that Iran should not win the war, US military, intelligence and targeting support began to flow into Iraq. In fact, by the mid-1980s, Iraq had re-established diplomatic relations with the United States, which had been severed following the 1967 war as part of the collective Arab anger at Washington for its perceived support of Israel.

In early 1981, I asked the Bahraini prime minister what he thought of the newly established Islamic Republic. He replied in jest without blinking an eye, 'We should become democratic!' At the time, the prime minister had no inkling of the import of his words for Bahrain and the neighbouring emirates, as developments in the Gulf over the past three decades have demonstrated.

Empowering Political Islam

Although the new Iranian religious leadership threatened to export the revolution to the Arab side of the Gulf, and despite street demonstrations across the Muslim world in support of the Islamic Republic, no real democracy developed, either in Iran or elsewhere in the Arab and Muslim worlds, as a result of the new order in Iran. What the Revolution did, however, was to give voice to Islamic activism as a potential force in governance. Iran's attempts to spread a populist notion of political Islam regionally and globally faced three serious obstacles.

First, Iran's dual system of theocratic democracy was more theocracy than democracy. Ayatollah Khomeini set himself up as the *Velayet Faqih* or the supreme leader, akin to the philosopher king in Plato's Republic, as the arbiter of national politics, including the elected president. The supreme leader spoke at public rallies, but did not trust the masses to elect their leaders without guidance from him. He represented the divine *hukm* or rule and in effect rejected all notions of a free, independent electoral system. The regime's brutal suppression of the "Persian Spring" protest movement in 2009 is a case in point.

Second, as a Shia state, Iran could not make serious inroads into Sunni-majority states, especially since Sunnis comprise between 85 and 90 per cent of all Muslims worldwide. During the rise of Islamisation and Islamic activism between the late 1980s and early 2000s, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey competed for the hearts and minds of Islamic activists in many parts of the Muslim world – from Nigeria to the Balkans and from South-East Asia to Central Asia – through schools, textbooks, scholarships, charitable societies, food and health aid programmes, and proselytising. Iran lost that competition, and not only because of the abundance of Saudi oil money. The Islamic Republic could not really penetrate Sunni communities, even with the active efforts of the Iranian-funded Ahl al-Bayt society.

Third, Saddam skilfully used his aggression against Iran in the 1980s to pit Sunni-based Arab nationalism against Persian Shia Iran. For most of that decade, the Islamic Republic was preoccupied with repelling the existential threat that it saw coming from Iraq with Arab and American help, which, of course, made spreading the populist Islamic doctrine less urgent. The war also drove the Islamic Republic to forge relations with some unsavoury radical groups that were prone to revolutionary zeal and violence.

Ironically, however, it was the Shia Iranian Revolution that pushed Sunni Islamic activism into politics. Although by the 1980s Islamisation was already taking shape in Sunni societies, the Iranian Revolution showed politically-active Sunni Muslims that their faith was not inimical to the political process and that participating in elections and governing, within limits, did not violate God's rule.

By the early 1990s, several Sunni Islamic parties – from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to PAS in Malaysia – were participating in national legislative elections, either as independent parties where permitted or in alignments with recognised political parties. The Egyptian regime banned the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), for example, from contesting the elections as a religious political party but allowed it to run jointly with another party: the Wafd in the 1980s and the Socialist Labour Party in the 1990s. After the MB broke with the Socialist Labour Party, the movement ran “independent” candidates in national elections and won impressive victories. In fact, MB candidates constituted the largest bloc in the Egyptian parliament behind the regime's National Democratic Party.

The Palestinian Hamas, another Sunni political party grounded in the MB ideology, won the national elections in Gaza in 2006 by defeating the pro-PLO secularist candidates. Since running Gaza over the past 13 years, Hamas and other Palestinian factions in Gaza have reportedly received some military and financial support from the Islamic Republic.

Lebanon's Hezbollah (“Party of God”), the only Iran-supported Shia political party, scored impressive electoral victories over the years in national elections and has remained until this day a major powerbroker in Lebanese politics. Hezbollah's pivotal influence is evident in the recently formed government in that country.

In Turkey, the Sunni Islamic Refah Party participated in national elections in the early 1990s, for the first time since the establishment of the Kemalist Republic in the 1920s. The AKP, under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is the latest reincarnation of Islamic politics, which has dominated the Turkish political scene for the past 30 years.

Despite the differences between Sunni political activism and the Islamic Republic's form of Shia populist Islam (and between Iran and most other Sunni-majority states), Iran's theocracy and Arab autocracy are two sides of the same coin. Both advocate for political Islam, but they both abhor democratic politics and the freedoms that ensue. Unbridled autocracy in Arab countries, Turkey and other Muslim states is as circumscribing and restrictive of electoral politics as Iran's theocracy.

The Islamic Republic in its infancy raised the possibility of normative politics in Islam, which required free discourse and calls for a reformist approach to political Islam. Unfortunately, however, as Islamic activists assumed power across the Arab and Muslim world, including in Iran and Turkey through revolution or the ballot box, they drifted towards autocracy and repression. Secular leaders like Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt have also ignored democratic and constitutional constraints on the executive, and have altered their own constitutions to give themselves a life-long hold on power.

Pushing the Boundaries of the Iranian Nation-State

The United States and other countries have branded the Islamic Republic for most of its 40-year history as a state supporter of terrorism and it has endured crushing sanctions imposed primarily by the US or by the United Nations at the behest of Washington. Threatened with regime change for most of that history, Iran has formed different alliances with state and non-state actors as part of its strategic doctrine.

Iran has accused the United States and Israel of undermining the Islamic Republic and its political system. The fear of a foreign invasion has driven Iran to pursue active contacts with terrorist organisations. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Iran has not preached a radical ideology of Islam based on the Hanbali-Wahhabi-Salafi doctrine. The Islamic Republic has used radical and terrorist groups in the pursuit of a strategic doctrine that serves its national interest and survival. It has maintained relations with Sunni and Shia groups – including al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, and other groups in Yemen, the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan and elsewhere – regardless of their religious ideology and doctrine or sectarian identity.

After 9/11, Iran worked closely with the United States against al-Qaeda but also gave refuge to some al-Qaeda leaders. Iran also co-operated with the United States after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the collapse of the Saddam regime. Tehran collaborated with Washington for a stable and unitary Iraq. Both states and their proxies in Iraq, including the pro-Iranian Sadr militias, collaborated in the fight against al-Qaeda, the Zarqawi group, and later the Islamic State in Iraq.

Iran has worked diligently to protect its strategic religious and political interests in Iraq. It has also viewed Iraq as a land bridge to Syria, which became more critical as Tehran decided to support the Syrian tyrant in crushing the opposition to his regime.

Iran's ultimate defeat in the Iran-Iraq war, and the rise of Gulf-funded Sunni terrorism since the early 1990s, forced the theocratic regime in Iran to de-emphasise the duality of Islam and politics and focus instead on safeguarding the national interest and regional power posture of Iran as a nation-state. Iran's trade with Western countries and its economic and

military outreach to Russia and China are designed to bolster its economy, defend its interests and strengthen its strategic doctrine.

To expand its status as a regional power, Iran began to develop a sophisticated uranium enrichment programme with an eye towards becoming a nuclear-capable power. The Islamic Republic has always maintained that it was not interested in becoming a nuclear power. The nuclear programme, together with Iran's other troubling activities including its continued support for, and engagement with, terrorist groups in the Gulf region and the wider Middle East posed a serious problem for the United States and other members of the UN Security Council.

The Obama Administration decided to separate the two sets of problems – the nuclear programme and support for terrorism – and initiated contacts with Iran to contain its nuclear programme. The resulting nuclear deal, which was a welcome bright spot in the bloody history of the Middle East, promised to bring relief from the sanctions under which the Iranian people have suffered for many years.

President Trump, however, withdrew from the nuclear deal, despite all the evidence from his intelligence chiefs that Iran was living up to the conditions of the deal. Trump reinstated crushing sanctions on Iran's oil industry and has pushed the region towards more conflict and suffering. Trump's national security advisor seems to be signalling that another war is on the horizon – yet another military conflict with an Islamic country.

The Path Forward

As the Islamic Republic faced more existential threats, it moved away from theocracy towards *realpolitik* and the politics of national survival. Whereas the twentieth century in the Middle East was an "Arab Century", in which foreign powers created and directed Arab states, the twenty-first century is a non-Arab one, in which Iran, Turkey and Israel are emerging as the three pivotal states in the region.

In the first half of the last century, Arab states became independent but with close relations to external actors: British, American, French and Russian. In the second half, Arab states fought among themselves and with their peoples and neighbours. They achieved no tangible accomplishments in innovation, industrialisation, manufacturing, technology or scientific discoveries. The region continues to produce per capita more violence, human misery, war deaths and displaced persons than any other region in the world.

If Western policymakers understand these regional realities and are interested in advancing their national interests, they should search for common ground with those three key states. Admittedly, Iran – whether an Islamic Republic or a nation-state – will pose the greatest challenge, but not an insurmountable one. Western policy strategists should, at the very least, resurrect the Iran nuclear deal and maintain the inspection regime to detect possible violations. They should find ways to engage the region and its peoples in a search for innovation, creativity and a hopeful future for the unemployed and millions of alienated youth. As Pope Francis said in Abu Dhabi on 4 February: 'War cannot create anything but misery, weapons bring nothing but death.'

About the Author: Dr Emile Nakhleh was a Senior Intelligence Service officer and Director of the Political Islam Strategic Analysis Programme at the Central Intelligence Agency. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a Research Professor and Director of the Global and National Security Policy Institute at the University of New Mexico, and the author of *A Necessary Engagement: Reinventing America's Relations with the Muslim World*, *Bahrain: Political Development in a Modernizing State*, and *The Persian Gulf and American Policy*. He has written extensively on Middle East politics, political Islam, radical Sunni ideologies and terrorism. He is also a Board Member of the World Affairs Council of Albuquerque. His recent writings on terrorism and contemporary regional politics are posted on LobeLog.com and on [The Cipher Brief](http://TheCipherBrief.com). Emile received his BA in Political Science from St. John's University (Minnesota), his MA in Political Science from Georgetown University, and PhD in International Relations from the American University. He and his wife live in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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