

**Ray Takeyh**  
**Senior Fellow, Middle Eastern Studies**  
**Council on Foreign Relations**  
**Prepared Testimony Before House Subcommittee on**  
**Middle East and South Asia.**

*More than Just Enrichment: Iran's Strategic Aspirations and the Future of the Middle East*

A state's international orientation is shaped by a variety of factors and historic interactions. Cultural traits, ideological aspirations, demographic pressures, and religious convictions are all critical in determining how a country views its environment and its place within its neighborhood. Iran is no exception, as its unique national narrative and Islamic pedigree define its approach to the Greater Middle East.

As with most revolutionary states, Iran has journeyed from being a militant actor challenging regional norms to being a more pragmatic state pursuing a policy based on national-interest calculations. However, Iran's journey has been halting, incomplete, and tentative. Through the 1980s, under the stern dictates of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran thrashed about the Middle East, seeking to undermine established authority in the name of Islamic redemption. Khomeini's successors would wrestle with this legacy, as they sought to integrate the theocracy into the global society. From Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to Muhammad Khatami to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran's presidents would seek the impossible, balancing Khomeini's vision with the mandates of the international community.

The best manner of understanding Iran's regional policy is to envision three circles: the Persian Gulf, the Arab east, and Eurasia. By far, the Persian Gulf would be the most significant, while the Arab east and Central Asian lands would assume lessened importance. The intriguing aspect of Tehran's policy is that while ideology may define its approach toward one of these circles, in the other, careful national-interest determinations would prove its guide. Thus, while in the 1980s the Saudis would decry Iran as a grave fundamentalist threat, Russian diplomats would just as convincingly testify to Tehran's pragmatism and moderation. Such a bewildering array of policies and priorities has often confounded the international community, making Iran's foreign policy difficult to comprehend. Through a more detailed assessment of the evolution of Iran's regional policy, one can better appreciate why the clerical state has made the decisions that it has and where it is likely to go from here.

**The Sources of Iranian Conduct**

More than any other nation, Iran has always perceived itself as the natural hegemon of its neighborhood. Iranians across generations are infused with a unique sense of their history, the splendor of their civilization, and the power of their celebrated empires. The Achaemenid Empire of the sixth century B.C. was, after all, the first global power, reigning imperiously over lands that stretched from Greece to India. Subsequent Persian dynasties of Sassanians and Safavids displayed similar imperial reach, as they intricately managed vast domains. A sense of superiority over one's neighbors, the benighted Arabs and the unsophisticated Turks, would define the core of the Persian cosmology. To be sure, that empire has shrunk over the centuries, and the embrace of Persian culture has faded with the arrival of the more alluring Western mores, but a sense of self-perception and an exaggerated view of Iran have remained

largely intact. By dint of its history, and the power of its civilization, Iranians believe that their nation should establish its regional preeminence.

Yet Iran's nationalistic hubris is married to a sense of insecurity derived from persistent invasion by hostile forces. The humiliating conquests by the Mongol hordes and Arabs have left Iran profoundly suspicious of its neighbors' intentions and motives. Few nations have managed to sustain their cultural distinction and even absorb their conquerors as effectively as the Persians. In due course, Persian scholars, scribes and bureaucrats would dominate the courts of Arab empires and define their cultural landscape. Nonetheless, such unrelenting incursions with their prolonged periods of occupation have had a traumatic impact, leading Iranians to simultaneously feel superior to and suspicious of their neighbors.

By far, the one set of imperial conquerors that proved the most formidable challenge to Iran were the Western powers. These states could neither be absorbed as the Arabs were, nor did they necessarily defer to Persians for the management of their realm. In a sense, Iran became another victim of the "Great Game," played by the British and the Russians for the domination of Central Asia, and later the intense Cold War rivalry between America and the Soviet Union. While it is true that Iran was never formally colonized as was India, nor did it undergo a traumatic national liberation struggle as did Algeria, it was still dominated and its sovereignty was still usurped by imperial intrigue. Behind every Shah lay a foreign hand that could empower or humble the Peacock Throne with ease. The Shahs and the parliaments debated and deliberated, but all Iranian politicians had to be mindful of the preferences of the imperial game masters. At times, a degree of autonomy would be secured by manipulating great-power rivalries, but this was a precarious exercise, as accommodation usually proved a better path toward self-preservation. Perhaps the Islamic Republic's stridency and suspicions of the international community can better be understood in the context of Iran's historic subjection and manipulation by outside powers.

However, to ascribe Iran's foreign policy strictly to its sense of nationalism and historical grievances is to ignore the doctrinal foundations of the theocratic regime. Khomeini bequeathed to his successors an ideology which the most salient division was between the oppressors and the oppressed. Such a view stemmed from the Shiite political traditions, as a minority sect struggling under Sunni Arab rulers who were often repressive and harsh. Thus, the notion of tyranny and suffering has a powerful symbolic aspect as well as practical importance. Iran was not merely a nation seeking independence and autonomy within the existing international system. The Islamic revolution was a struggle between good and evil, a battle waged for moral redemption and genuine emancipation from the cultural and political tentacles of the profane and iniquitous West. Khomeini's ideology and Iran's nationalist aspirations proved reinforcing, creating a revolutionary, populist approach to the regional realities.<sup>1</sup>

The Islamic Republic's inflammatory rhetoric and regional aspirations conceal the reality of Iran's strategic loneliness. Iran is, after all, a Persian state surrounded by non-Persian powers, depriving it of the ethnic and communal ties so prevalent in the Arab world. If durable alliances are predicated on a common vision and shared values, then Iran is destined to remain somewhat insulated from the rest of its region. Nor, until the emergence of the Shiite bloc in Iraq, has religion necessarily mitigated Iran's isolation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981); Ali Akbar Velayati, *Iran va Mas'eleh-ye Felestin* (Tehran, 1997), 3-10.

Historically, the persecuted Shiites have been held at arm's length by the Sunni Arabs, who harbor their own suspicions of their co-religionists. In a standard Persian self-justification, Iran has tried to turn its isolation into an advantage, as notions of self-sufficiency and self-reliance have had an emotive appeal to a beleaguered populace. Nonetheless, as Iran's rulers look over the horizon, they seldom see a placid landscape or ready-made allies.

Iran is a country of contradictions and paradoxes. It is both grandiose in its self-perception yet intensely insecure. It seeks to lead the region while remaining largely suspicious and disdainful of its neighbors. Its rhetoric is infused with revolutionary dogma, yet its actual conduct is practical, if not realistic. A perennial struggle between aspirations and capabilities, hegemony, and pragmatism has characterized Iran's uneasy approach to the Greater Middle East.

### **First Circle: The Persian Gulf**

Despite the mullahs' often-declared pan-Islamic pretensions, the Persian Gulf has always been Iran's foremost strategic priority. The critical waterway constitutes Iran's most direct link to the international petroleum market, the life-blood of its economy. Although the eight-year war with Iraq dominated Iran's concerns during the early revolutionary period, it is important to note that Tehran's concerns and aspirations in the Gulf transcend Iraq. The Islamic Republic, as with all its monarchical predecessors, perceived that Iran by the virtue of its size and historical achievements has the right to emerge as the local hegemon. The changing dimensions of Iran's foreign policy are most evident in this area, as revolutionary radicalism has gradually yielded to pragmatic power politics.

Soon after achieving power, Khomeini called on the Gulf states to emulate Iran's revolutionary model and sever relations with the "Great Satan," the United States. The profligate princely class, the hard-pressed Shiite populations, and these states' dependence on America were all affronts to Iran's revolutionaries. The theocratic state unambiguously declared the monarchical order a source of oppression and tyranny. "Monarchy is one of the most shameful and disgraceful reactionary manifestations," Khomeini declared.<sup>2</sup> An authentic Islamic society could not prevail under the banner of monarchy, as the proper ruling elite were the righteous men of God. Thus, beyond their foreign policy alignments, the character of the Gulf regimes proved a source of objection to Iran's new rulers.<sup>3</sup>

As Iran settled on its course of enmity and radicalism, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia emerged as the subject of particularly venomous attacks. In a sense, the two states had much in common, as they both predicated their legitimacy on a transnational mission of exporting religion and safeguarding Islam. The natural competition between their contending interpretations of Islam was sufficient to ensure a tense

---

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Ruhollah Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1986), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Christine Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf Policy* (London: Curzon, 2003), 62-100; Nader Entessar, "Superpowers and Persian Gulf Security: The Iranian Perspective," *Third World Quarterly* (October 1988); Roy Mottahedeh, "Shiite Political Thought and Destiny of the Iranian Revolution," in Jamal Al-Suwaidi (ed.) *Iran and the Gulf: A Search for Stability* (Abu Dhabi, UAE: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1996) 70-81.

relationship. To this pressure was added Saudi Arabia's close ties to the United States, further fueling Khomeini's already intense antagonism toward the House of Saud. "In this age, which is the age of oppression of the Muslim world at the hands of the U.S. and Russia and their puppets such as Al-Sauds, those traitors to the great divine sanctuary must be forcefully cursed," he said.<sup>4</sup> The Iranian revolutionaries saw the Saudis as not just sustaining America's imperial encroachment of the Middle East, but also employing a reactionary interpretation of Islam to sanction their hold on power.<sup>5</sup>

Tehran's mischievous efforts were not without success; in the early 1980s, demonstrations rocked Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. In the end, however, Iran's revolutionary message proved attractive only to a narrow segment of the minority Shiite population. Even the sporadic Shiite demonstrations were not designed to emulate Iran's revolution, but were rather an expression of the Shiites' economic and political disenfranchisement. The protesters used the specter of Iranian subversion to press their claims and extract needed concessions from the ruling elite. The prevailing regimes, for their part, seemed to appreciate this reality, and after putting down the demonstrations by force, they opted for economic rewards as a means of restoring quiescence. This strategy essentially ended Iran's attempt to exploit Shiite grievances to launch a new order. Tehran would subsequently rely on violence and terrorism, practices that were bound to alienate the local populace.

A campaign of bombings, targeting embassies, industrial plants, and even oil installations, was soon attributed to Iranian-sponsored opposition groups. The states that were particularly targeted by Iran's new tactics were those with substantial Shiite populations, namely Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. In many cases, the instrument of Iranian terrorism was the al-Dawa party, which has since become part of the ruling coalition in the post-Saddam Iraq. All this is not to point out the irony of the United States empowering an Iranian-terrorist client, but to suggest that Iran's revolutionary élan faded rapidly, forcing it to rely on terrorist tactics that would succeed in neither overthrowing the incumbent regimes nor enhancing its standing in the international community.<sup>6</sup>

By the time of Khomeini's death in 1989, Iran's revolutionary foreign policy had not achieved any of its objectives. Tehran's attempt to export its revolution had not merely failed, but it had led the Gulf states to solidify against Iran. Leading regional actors such as Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic ties with the Islamic Republic, while the sheikdoms put aside their historic enmities and came together in the Gulf Cooperation Council, an organization largely devoted to containing Iranian influence. Along these lines,

---

<sup>4</sup> David Menashri, "Khomeini's Vision: Nationalism or World Order?" and Farhad Kazemi and Jo-Anne Hart, "The Shi'ite Praxis: Democratic Politics and Foreign Policy in Iran," in David Menashri (ed.), *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World* (Boulder, 1990); Graham Fuller, *The Center of the Universe: Geopolitics of Iran* (Boulder : Westview Press, 1991), 8-34; Marvin Zonis and Daniel Brumberg, *Khomeini: The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Arab World* (Cambridge: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University, 1987), 31-37.

<sup>5</sup> Marschell, "Iran's Persian Gulf Policy," 146-179; John Calabrese, *Revolutionary Horizons: Regional Foreign Policy in Post-Khomeini Iran* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1994), 45-73.

<sup>6</sup> Ali-Akbar Velayati, "The Persian Gulf: Problems of Security," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* (Spring 1991); Muhammad Javad Larjani, "Iran's Foreign Policy: Principles and Objectives," *Iranian Journal of International Affairs* (Winter 1996).

the Arab princes and monarchs further solidified their security ties to the United States and generously subsidized Saddam Hussein's military in his war with Iran. The revolution without borders seemed uneasily confined within Iran's borders.

The 1990s will stand as one of the most important periods of transition for the Islamic Republic. The end of the prolonged war with Iraq and Khomeini's death suddenly shifted focus away from external perils to Iran's domestic quandaries. The specter of invading Iraqi armies had ensured a remarkable degree of political conformity and allowed the regime to mobilize the masses behind its exhortations of national resistance. Khomeini's undisputed authority and his hold on the imagination of the public allowed the state to deflect attention from its domestic deficiencies and feel safe from popular recrimination. The basis of regime's legitimacy and authority would now have to change, as the Islamic Republic had to offer a reason for its rule beyond the catastrophic invasion of its territory and the moral claims of its clerical founder.

Along these lines, Iran's new pragmatic rulers, led by Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, began discussing a regional security arrangement whereby the stability of the Gulf would be ensured by the local regimes as opposed to external powers. After Saddam's eviction from Kuwait in 1991, and the deflation of his power, the mullahs perceived a unique opportunity to establish their hegemony in the region. Instead of instigating Shiite uprisings and exhorting the masses to emulate Iran's revolutionary model, Tehran now called for greater economic and security cooperation. However, the success of this ambition was predicated on the withdrawal of American forces. This was to be hegemony on the cheap, with Iran's preeminence recognized, the U.S. presence lessened, and a permanent wedge drawn between Iraq and the Arab Gulf states. The only problem with this proposal was that it remained fundamentally unacceptable to the sheikdoms to which Saddam's invasion of Kuwait had conveyed the danger of relying on imperious local regimes for their security.<sup>7</sup>

In essence, Iran's new stratagem conflicted with the Gulf states' survival tactics. The sheikdoms, with their perennial concern about the designs of their more powerful and populous neighbors, viewed Tehran's penchant toward collective security with apprehension. Although relations between Iran and the Gulf states did improve in terms of establishment of formal diplomatic ties and volume of trade, the local princes were not about to sever ties with the United States in order to appease Iran. In line with their long-standing historic practice, they sought the protection of external empires against neighboring states that have often coveted their wealth and resources. In the aftermath of the Gulf war, the level of defense cooperation between the United States and the Gulf regimes significantly increased, with America enforcing the containment of Iraq and the no-fly zones from the military bases in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Whereas in the 1980s Iran's revolutionary radicalism had polarized the Gulf, in the 1990s its insistence that these states share its opposition to the American presence proved a source of division and tension.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ali-Akbar Velayati, "The Persian Gulf: Problems of Security," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* (Spring 1991); Muhammad Javad Larijani, "Iran's Foreign Policy: Principles and Objectives," *Iranian Journal of International Affairs* (Winter 1996).

Once more, the failure of Iranian ambitions triggered reliance on terrorism and intimidation. If the Gulf leaders refused to sever ties with America, then perhaps violence directed against U.S. troops would lead Washington to voluntarily withdraw from the region. For the clerical regime, as well as much of the Middle East, the American departure from Lebanon after the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks was an indication that the United States was unwilling to accept casualties and a spectacular act of violence could trigger America's exit. The presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia proved tantalizing to the mullahs, as Riyadh had remained largely aloof from Iran's blandishments. The 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers, housing American military personnel has been attributed to Tehran by Washington.<sup>8</sup> Given Iran's policy of pressing for eviction of U.S. forces through acts of violence, this claim has a degree of credibility. As with the Islamic Republic's previous acts of terrorism, once more, its strategy of selective violence failed to achieve its ambitions.

In the end, Rafsanjani and his pragmatic allies did not fundamentally harmonize Iran's ties with its neighbors. To be sure, the Islamic Republic did dispense with much of its revolutionary radicalism and began to project the image of a judicious state basing its policies on careful calculations of national-interest. However, Tehran's tense relationship with the United States and its insistence that the Gulf states share its antagonism undermined its own gestures of goodwill. Once Iran fell back on its predictable response of terrorism, it essentially ended the possibility of emerging as a critical player in its immediate neighborhood.

The most momentous change in Iran's regional policy came with the election of the reformist president Muhammad Khatami in 1997. Khatami's international perspective grew out of the debates and deliberations prevalent in Iran's intellectual circles. Many dissident thinkers and clerics were uneasy about the static nature of Iran's foreign policy and its evident inability to respond to the changing global and regional realities. The reformist perspective was not limited to making the theocracy more accountable to its citizenry, but also sought to end the Islamic Republic's pariah status and integrate Iran into global society. As with his political reforms, Khatami was drawing on the works of intellectuals outside a power structure that had grown stagnant and complacent.

In terms of his approach to the Gulf, Khatami appreciated that previous attempts at reconciliation with the sheikdoms had failed due to Iran's dogmatic insistence that they share its hostility to America. In essence, Khatami compartmentalized Iran's relations. To be sure, Tehran continued to object to the U.S. military presence in the Gulf and persisted in calling for an indigenous network to displace the American armada. However, the refusal of the Gulf states to embrace Iran's proposals did not trigger a counter-reaction and unleashing of terror. Khatami was willing to normalize relations with the Gulf states despite their attachment to the United States. For all practical purposes, Iran was prepared to live in a Gulf whose balance of power was determined by the United States.

In a remarkable gesture, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, successor to Khomeini, endorsed Khatami's initiative. In a speech to the gathering of Arab dignitaries at the Organization of Islamic

---

<sup>8</sup> This point has been particularly emphasized by Louis Freeh, see: Louis Freeh, *My FBI: Bringing Down the Mafia, Investigating Bill Clinton, and Fighting the War on Terror* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

Conference's 1997 meeting in Tehran, Khamenei plainly declared, "Iran poses no threat to any Islamic country."<sup>9</sup> Tehran's "Vision Statement," which was approved by Khamenei, recognized the sovereignty of local states and the inviolability of borders, and it pledged non-interference in the internal affairs of the incumbent regimes. The mystery lingers of why Khamenei so fundamentally departed from his established antagonism toward the Gulf princely elite. Certainly, the popular appeal of Khatami in his honeymoon period must have impressed the Supreme Leader to adjust his positions. Despite the fact that Khamenei's powers are not contested by elections or plebiscites, he has always been somewhat sensitive to public opinion and shifts in the popular mood. Moreover, despite his stern ideological predilections, Khamenei has historically exhibited sporadic bouts of pragmatism and must have sensed that Iran's lingering isolation in its immediate neighborhood was ill-serving its interests. Gazing across the region, the Leader may have perceived that Khatami's elections offered Iran certain opportunities for mending fences and reconciliation with important states, such as Saudi Arabia. At any rate, Khamenei provided the essential backing that Khatami's diplomacy of reconsideration required.

Khatami's "Good Neighbor" diplomacy finally managed to rehabilitate Iran's ties with the local regimes. An entire range of trade, diplomatic and security agreements were signed between the Islamic Republic and the Gulf sheikdoms. In this way, Khatami managed finally to transcend Khomeini's legacy and to displace his ideological antagonisms with policies rooted in pragmatism and self-interest. This is the impressive legacy that Iran's unnecessarily maligned president has bequeathed to the callow reactionaries that have succeeded him.<sup>10</sup>

Today, as a hard-line government consolidates its power and proclaims a desire to return to the roots of the revolution, there are dire warnings on the horizon. Both Washington policymakers and their European counterparts seem to suggest that the regime will once more resort to violence and terror to subvert its neighbors and export its Islamic revolution. Such alarmism overlooks Iran's realities. As we have seen, under Khatami's auspices, Iran's Gulf policy has undergone a fundamental shift, with national-interest objectives as its defining factor. Irrespective of the balance of power between conservatives and reformers, Iran's regional policy is driven by fixed principles that are shared by all of its political elites.

This perspective will survive Iran's latest leadership transition. Although Ahmadinejad and his allies are determined to reverse the social and cultural freedoms that Iranians have come to enjoy during the reformist tenure, with regard to Persian Gulf issues the new president has stayed within the parameters of Iran's prevailing international policy. In his August 2005 address to the parliament outlining his agenda, President Ahmadinejad echoed the existing consensus, noting the importance of constructive relations with "the Islamic world, the Persian Gulf region, the Caspian Sea region and Central Asia."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the most important voice on foreign policy matters, the Supreme Leader, has reiterated the same themes.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, February 25, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> R.K. Ramazani, "The Emerging Iranian-US Rapprochement," *Middle East Policy* (June 1998); Mohsen Milani, "Iran's Gulf Policy: From Idealism to Confrontation to Pragmatism and Moderation," in Jamal a-Suwaidi (ed.) *Iran and the Gulf: The Search for Stability* (Abu Dhabi, UEA: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), August 23, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> *Sharq*, July 26, 2005.

Unlike the 1980s, Ahmadinejad's Iran has not embarked on attempts to subvert the sheikdoms and has not revived its links to the Gulf terrorist organizations unleashing violence as a means of fostering political change.

Today, the political alignments of the Gulf are in constant change. The U.S. invasion of Iraq has facilitated the rise of Iran's most intimate Shiite allies to power. As the Bush Administration contemplated its attack on Iraq in the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedies, it is unlikely that it appreciated how its plans would enhance Iran's stature and security. The Islamic Republic now stands as one of the principal beneficiaries of America's regime change policy. However, in assessing the ironies and paradoxes of the Middle East, one need not descend into a zero-sum game whereby any measure that benefits Iran is necessarily viewed as endangering America's interests. The fact is that much of the tension and instability that has afflicted the critical Persian Gulf region in the past three decades has stemmed from animosity between Iran and Iraq. The contested borders, proxy wars, and finally a devastating eight-year conflict between the two powers not only destabilized the Middle East, but also threatened global economy with its reliance on the region's petroleum resources. The new Iraq that is emerging from the shadow of American invasion is likely to coexist peacefully with its Persian neighbor. And that development is good not just for Iran and Iraq, but also for the United States.

### **Second Circle: The Arab East**

One of the more enduring ideological aspects of the Islamic Republic's international relations has been its policy toward the Arab east. The defining pillar of Iran's approach to this region has been its intense opposition to the state of Israel and the diplomatic efforts to normalize relations between the Jewish state and its neighbors. Iran's strident ideological policy has been buttressed by strategic incentives, as its support for militant groups such as Hezbollah gives it a power to influence the direction of politics in the Levant and inject its voice in deliberations that would otherwise be beyond its control. Along this path, Iran has made common cause with the radical Syrian regime that shares its antipathy to Israel, while alienating the key Egyptian state that has often sought to resolve the divisive Arab-Israeli conflict. So long as Iran's policy toward the Arab east remains immured in its conflict with Israel, Tehran is unlikely to edge toward the type of pragmatism that it has demonstrated in the Gulf.

On the surface, the high-profile visits, and the wide variety of compacts and accords, may give the impression that Iran and Syria are intimate allies sharing the same vision and embracing similar priorities. However, the ties between the two states are at best an alliance of convenience based on shared fears and apprehensions. For the past two decades, Iran's persistent animosity toward Israel has coincided with Syria's quest to exert pressure on the Israelis as a means of recovering lands lost during the 1967 war. However, while Iran's policy is driven by Islamist determinations, Syria is propelled forward by cold, strategic calculations. Tehran may view Hezbollah as a vanguard Islamist force struggling against the "Zionist entity," while for Damascus, the Lebanese militant party is just another means of coercing Israel. As such, potential conflict between the two states looms large. Syria may yet accept an agreement that

exchanges recognition of Israel for the recovery of the Golan Heights, while Iran's more ideologically driven hostilities are not predicated on territorial concessions.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond the issue of Israel, Iraq also constitutes a potential source of division between Syria and Iran. During Saddam Hussein's reign, the two powers shared yet another antagonist. The Syrian Baath Party long condemned the so-called revisionism of its Iraqi counterpart and viewed itself as the legitimate representative of the Arab socialist cause. The very secular objections of the Syrian regime were shared by the Iranian mullahs, whose own war with Saddam made them equally hostile to the Iraqi dictator. However, once more, there are indications that Iran's lone Arab alliance may not survive the changing politics of the Middle East. Unlike the Iranian theocracy, Syria does not wish to see a further empowerment of religious forces, particularly Shiite actors, in Iraq. As a secular state that has waged a merciless war against its own Islamists, Syria finds the ascendance of religious parties in Iraq particularly disconcerting. As with most of the Sunni dynasties and republics of the region, Syria had hoped that Saddam's demise would somehow bring to power yet another Baathist amendable to the predilections of the secular Arab bloc. The intriguing aspect of Iraq's current tribulations is the extent to which Iran and Syria are on the opposite sides, with Damascus fueling the largely Sunni insurgency, while Tehran lends its support to the ruling Shiite parties. One state is hoping to destabilize Iraq through continued violence, while the other views the conventional political process as the best means of securing its national objectives.

In yet another paradox of the Middle East, what is increasingly binding Damascus and Tehran together is the Bush Administration. The inability or unwillingness of Washington to substantively engage in the Arab-Israeli peace process and craft an agreement acceptable to Syria has made Iran an indispensable partner for Damascus. The relentless pressure brought on both parties by the Bush White House has compelled them to rely on each other as they face yet another common enemy. Nonetheless, developments in the region during the next several years may yet disentangle ties between these two unlikely allies. In the end, as a state that neighbors Israel, Syria will one day have to accept a territorial compromise with the Jewish state and end its prolonged and self-defeating conflict. However, an Iran that is beyond the reach of Israeli armor can afford its militancy and persist with its ideologically determined policies. In the meantime, as a secular state, Syria may find Iran's new Shiite allies in Iraq as objectionable as do the Saudis and Jordanians, who are loudly decrying the emergence of the "Shiite Crescent." As the Middle East increasingly polarizes along sectarian lines, Syria will have to choose between its contentious alliance with Iran and its alignment of interest with the larger Arab bloc.

Whatever the vagaries of the Iranian-Syrian alliance, Egypt remains the epicenter of Arab politics. Egypt's population now exceeds that of the rest of the Arab east, and its geographic size dwarfs peripheral states such as Lebanon and Jordan. Moreover, Egypt's encounter with modernization is the longest, its industrial and educational structures the most extensive, and its cultural and intellectual output the most prolific. Cairo's influence has ebbed and flowed over the years, but it is hard to imagine Arab cohesion without its active leadership. Iran's tense relations with Egypt have drastically limited its influence in the

---

<sup>13</sup> Shireen Hunter, "Iran and Syria: From Hostility to Limited Alliance," in Hooshang Amirahmadi and Nadar Entessar (eds.) *Iran and the Arab World* (New York, 1990).

Arab east. No alliance with Syria or patronage of Hezbollah can compensate for Tehran's estrangement from the most pivotal state in the region.<sup>14</sup>

Although many in the United States are accustomed to perceiving Iran as unrelentingly hostile to America, during the early part of the revolution, Iran's animosities were distributed more widely. For Khomeini and his followers, no leader symbolized the pusillanimity of the Arab political class more than the Egyptian president, Anwar al-Sadat. The Camp David Accords ending Egypt's hostility toward Israel were bitterly denounced by Iranian clerics as a gesture of un-Islamic behavior, even apostasy. For Khomeini, the accords proved that Sadat was the purveyor of "false Islam" and an agent of Zionism. Sadat's warm embrace of the exiled Shah (who spent the last days of his life in Egypt) further enraged the reigning Iranian clerics. Tehran's crass celebration of Sadat's assassin by naming a prominent street after him and even issuing a stamp commemorating the occasion in turn infuriated an Egyptian ruling elite that was already anxious about the potential of Iran's revolutionary Islam. These early policies established a certain legacy for Iran's relations with Egypt that would prove difficult to surmount. In the intervening decades, other events would intrude, buttressing the legacy of mistrust and animosity.<sup>15</sup>

The Iran-Iraq war further added fuel to the Iranian-Egyptian antagonism. For Cairo, which was ostracized by the Arab bloc because of its reconciliation with Israel, the war offered a unique opportunity to reassert its Arabism and to mend ties with its erstwhile allies. Soon after the war began, Egypt started furnishing arms to Iraq despite the fact that the two powers had spent decades bitterly vying for the leadership of the Arab Middle East. Beyond exploiting an opportunity to return to the Arab fold, Cairo's policy was designed to contain Iran's revolution within its borders. An Iran that was preoccupied with the daunting challenges of a prolonged war was bound to be a less mischievous state. For the Islamic Republic, such policies were tantamount to Egypt effectively joining the war, congealing the clerical class's animus toward Cairo.

The aftermath of the war did not necessarily lead to a thaw in relations. The 1990s witnessed yet another radical divergence of perspectives between Tehran and Cairo. For the United States and Egypt, the defeat of Saddam's armies constituted an ideal time to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, while Iran perceived the time ripe for the advancement of its Islamic model. Militant Islam seemed an ideology on the ascendance with Islamic Jihad challenging the Egyptian regime, Hezbollah assuming a greater prominence in Lebanese politics, and the Islamic Salvation Front triumphing in democratic elections in Algeria. The Palestinian resistance that had historically been led by secular leftist parties was increasingly being spearheaded by violent Islamist organizations such as Hamas. For the Iranian mullahs, it seemed that the region was finally embracing Khomeini's message. While the Egyptian state was seeking to stabilize its domestic situation and persuade the Arab states to follow its path of reconciliation with Israel, Iran was actively promoting the fortunes of the emboldened Islamists.

---

<sup>14</sup> Shahrough Akhavi, "The Impact of Iranian Revolution on Egypt," in John Esposito (ed.) *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact* (Miami: The University Press of Florida, 1990); Nadar Entessar, "The Lion and the Sphinx: Iranian-Egyptian Relations in Perspective," in Hooshang Amirahmadi and Nadar Entessar (eds.) *Iran and the Arab World* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1993).

<sup>15</sup> R.K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenges and Responses in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 162-172.

In a sense, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's blaming of Iran for the surge of fundamentalism in Egypt and the wider Middle East was self-serving and convenient. Egypt has long struggled with Islamic radicalism and the roots of the Islamist rage lay deep in the Egyptian society. After all, the most significant fundamentalist party in the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood, was born in Egypt in the 1930s, and since then has found a ready audience across the region.<sup>16</sup> The fascination with Wahhabi Islam ought not to obscure the fact that the intellectual and tactical architects of al-Qaeda are mostly Egyptians, led by the notorious second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, even the modest support that Iran did offer Egypt's religious extremists was sufficient to antagonize an Egyptian state that in the early 1990s was battling a very serious Islamic insurrection.

During the Khatami era there were attempts to relax the tensions with Egypt. However, it appeared that such normalization was not at top priority for either state. Khatami's internal struggles and his attempts to reach out to the United States were sufficiently contentious to preclude yet another provocative diplomatic foray. In the meantime, the Mubarak regime was struggling with its own domestic challenges and with a foundering peace process, and so it was also disinclined to move forward aggressively.

Today, the relations between the two states may not be as inflammatory as during the early periods of the revolution, but they do seem frozen in time, as neither side seems inclined to press ahead. The hard-line Ahmadinejad regime is unlikely to normalize ties, as many conservatives in Iran have yet to forgive Egypt for the Camp David Accords. The reactionary newspaper *Jumhuri-ye Eslami* captured the sentiment of many on the right in noting, "Any form of political relations with Husni Mubarak is tantamount to getting digested into the system prepared and designed by America and Zionism in the region."<sup>18</sup> Given such sentiment within his support base, it is unlikely that Ahmadinejad can move forward toward more proper relations, despite his demonstrated inclination to do so.

In the Persian Gulf, the Islamic Republic finally appreciated after years of revolutionary radicalism that it could not have suitable relations with the Gulf sheikdoms unless it first came to terms with Saudi Arabia. Such lessons have yet to be fully absorbed by the Iranian elite when it comes to the Arab east. The reality is that Iran cannot be part of the larger Middle Eastern landscape until it rationalizes its relations with Egypt. Tactical alliances with a beleaguered Syrian regime and patronage of terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah will not ease Iran's path to the heart of the Arab world. Tehran can be mischievous and use terrorism and violence as a means of attracting attention to its claims and obstructing peace initiatives between Israel and the Arab bloc. However, for Iran to assert its influence in the region, it has to have a more constructive agenda than prefabricated Islamist slogans and hostility to the Jewish state. Hovering over all this is the gradual fracturing of the Middle East along confessional lines, with the Shiite Iran being increasingly pitted against the alarmed Sunni powers. The Islamic Republic may emerge

---

<sup>16</sup> Richard Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1-12.

<sup>17</sup> Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 119-15; Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 70-81.

<sup>18</sup> *Jumhuri-ye Islami*, November 21, 2005.

as a critical player in its immediate neighborhood, but as a non-Arab, Shiite state it is unlikely to ever become a significant actor in the Arab east.

### **Third Circle: Eurasia**

In contrast to its policy toward the Persian Gulf and the Arab east, Iran's approach toward its northern and eastern neighbors has been one of sustained realism. The proximity to a strong Russian state and the prospect of commercial contracts and important arms deals have always injected a measure of pragmatism in Iran's policy. In a curious manner, despite its declared mission of exporting the revolution, the Islamic Republic has seemed perennially indifferent to the plight of the struggling Muslims in Central Asia. A beleaguered Iranian state requiring arms and trade and an aggrieved former superpower seeking profits and relevance have forged an opportunistic relationship that eschews ideology for sake of tangible interests. Nor is such pragmatism unique to Russia, as when the theocracy has looked to Afghanistan, its priority has always been stability, not Islamic salvation. In essence, the fears of being isolated in the international arena and having Afghan troubles seep over its borders have compelled Iran's theocratic oligarchs to transcend their ideological exhortations and focus on achieving their practical objectives in the vast Eurasian land mass.

On the eve of the Islamic Revolution, Iran's prevailing foreign policy slogan was "neither East nor West." Khomeini was as contemptuous of Soviet Communism as he was of Western liberalism, and he often denounced the Soviet Union in harsh and unyielding terms. Iran vocally condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and materially assisted the mujahedin's resistance to the occupation. On the domestic front, the mullahs relentlessly persecuted the Communist Tudeh Party and other leftist forces attracted to the Soviet model. For its part, Moscow proved a generous supplier of arms to Saddam Hussein, as he waged his war of aggression against Iran, and often supported Iraq against Iran in various international forums.

Yet even as tensions were simmering, both sides seemed to veer away from active confrontation, as trade between the two powers continued to increase, and the Soviet Union was never without an extensive diplomatic representation in Tehran. In a manner radically different from its approach to the United States, the theocratic regime seemed to appreciate that its geographic proximity to the Soviet Union and its estrangement from the West required a more realistic relationship with Moscow. The two sides would often differ, as they did on critical issues of Afghanistan and Iraq, yet somehow Khomeini managed to suppress his ideological animosities and pursue ties with the Soviet state that seemed beneficial to Iran's overall interests.<sup>19</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the rise of the Russian Federation ushered in a new regional policy in Moscow. The Soviet state had been inordinately invested in the fortunes of radical Arab regimes and shared their concerns regarding developments in the Arab-Israeli arena. For the new masters of Kremlin, the direction of the newly independent Central Asian republics and the nature of Islamic

---

<sup>19</sup> Shireen Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 79-98; Graham Fuller, *The Center of the Universe: The Geopolitics of Iran* (Boulder, 1991), 168-188

awakenings in that region were far more relevant than the plight of the Soviet Union's Arab clients. The stability of the Russian frontier was now partly contingent on Tehran resisting the impulse to inflame Islamic sentiments in Central Asia. Moreover, with its imperial reach dramatically contracted and the country in dire need of hard currency, Russia began to auction off its military hardware to the highest bidder. Iran proved a tempting market for Russian arms merchants, as it possessed both cash and a seemingly insatiable appetite for military equipment.<sup>20</sup>

The Islamic Republic had to make its own set of adjustments to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Central Asia. During the Soviet era, Iran had propagated its Islamic message over the airways in a variety of local languages without evident anticipation that it would have any impact. Such limited propaganda effort satiated its ideological imperatives without unduly straining its relations with its powerful neighbor. But the collapse of the Soviet empire and the independence of the Central Asian republics presented Iran with the need for circumspection. The Islamic Republic had to balance its strategic ties with Russia with its declared mission of exporting its revolutionary template to new, fertile grounds. In a unique display of judiciousness, Iran largely tempered its ideology, essentially denoting the importance of trade and stability over propagation of its Islamic message.<sup>21</sup>

The full scope of Iran's pragmatism became evident during the Chechnya conflict. At a time when the Russian soldiers were indiscriminately massacring Muslim rebels and aggressively suppressing an Islamic insurgency, Iran's response was a mere statement declaring the issue to be an internal Russian affair. At times, when Russia's behavior was particularly egregious, Iran's statements would be harsher. However, Tehran never undertook practical measures such as dispatching aid to the rebels or organizing the Islamic bloc against Moscow's policy. Given that Iran had calculated that its national interests lay in not excessively antagonizing the Russian Federation, it largely ignored the plight of the Chechens despite the Islamic appeal of their cause.<sup>22</sup>

The Chechnya issue reveals that during the past decade, a tacit yet important bargain has evolved between Russia and Iran. The Islamic Republic has emerged as Russia's most important partner in the Middle East and as a valuable market for its cash-starved defense industries. Although in recent years the nuclear cooperation between the two states has garnered much attention, the more significant fact is that Russia has also been willing to sell Iran a vast quantity of conventional arms, including sophisticated aircraft and submarines. Iran, on the other hand, has kept a low profile in Central Asia and has refrained from destabilizing a region critical to Russia's security. This important relationship has led Moscow to provide Iran indispensable diplomatic support, particularly at a time when its nuclear portfolio is being

---

<sup>20</sup> Robert Freedman, "Russian Policy Toward the Middle East: The Yeltsin Legacy and the Putin Challenge," *Middle East Journal* (Winter 2001); Hooman Peimani, *Regional Security and the Future of Central Asia: The Competition of Iran, Turkey and Russia* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), 41-129.

<sup>21</sup> Hanna Yousif Freij, "State Interests vs. the Umma: Iranian Policy in Central Asia," *Middle East Journal* (Winter 1996); Shireen Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy," *Journal of International Affairs* (Spring 2003).

<sup>22</sup> A. William Samii, "Iran and Chechnya: Realpolitik at Work," *Middle East Policy* (March 2001); Svante Cornell, "Iran and the Caucasus," *Middle East Policy* (January, 1998).

addressed in a variety of international organizations. The United States, hopeful of garnering Russian support for its policy of sanctioning and ostracizing Iran, would be wise to consider the overall nature of relations between Moscow and Tehran. Given that reality, the notion that Russia would assist in applying significant economic pressure on Iran for its nuclear infractions is far-fetched and fanciful.

A similar penchant toward national-interest calculations has defined Iran's policy toward Afghanistan, its neighbor to the east. Despite Iran's close linguistic and cultural ties to Afghanistan, the relations between the two countries have not always been simple. The fiercely independent Afghan tribes have historically resisted Persian encroachment and have jealously guarded their rights. Tehran's most natural allies are found in the province of Herat, whose proximity to Iran and large Shiite population has welcomed the establishment of close relations. However, for Tehran the issue in Afghanistan has not been ideological conformity but stability. Since assuming power, the theocracy has looked warily upon its neighbor with its war against the Red Army, the rise of Taliban fundamentalism, and finally the American invasion. Afghanistan's tribal identity, ethnic diversity, and largely Sunni population have made it an uneasy place for implanting the Islamic Republic's revolutionary message. And, to its credit, Iran has not been active in seeking to export its governing template to its troubled neighbor.

During much of the 1980s, Iran's policy toward Afghanistan was opposition to the Communist regime and assisting forces battling the Soviet occupation. In yet another uneasy paradox, this decade saw a rough coincidence of objectives between Iran and the United States as both parties had an interest in holding back Soviet power in Southwest Asia. Although Khomeini attempted to justify this policy on Islamic grounds, the instability of the war and the extension of Soviet influence southward offered sufficient strategic justification for Iran's conduct. At a time when Iran was housing nearly two million Afghan refugees, the clerical state understood that it could not afford a failed state next door.<sup>23</sup>

In a similar manner, Iran had to endure the prolonged years of the Taliban rule. The radical Sunni regime that waged a merciless war against Afghanistan's intricate tribal system and routinely massacred Shiites provided a formidable challenge for the Islamic Republic. In the summer of 1998, the killing of ten Iranian diplomats by Taliban forces in Mazar-i-Sharif nearly led the two states to go to war against each other. Beyond active confrontation, Iran was extraordinarily alarmed by the puritanical Taliban regime's reliance on the drug trade and on Sunni terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda to sustain its power. Today, a large portion of Afghan drugs end up in Iran, creating its addiction crisis; it is estimated that the Islamic Republic may have as many as two million drug addicts. Given these realities, Iran soon emerged as the most durable foe of the Taliban. Indeed, despite the presence of American forces in Afghanistan since 2001, the theocratic regime finds the existing configuration of power whereby Sunni militancy is largely tempered and a benign government reigns in Kabul an acceptable outcome.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Adam Tarock, "The Politics of the Pipeline: The Iran and Afghanistan Conflict," *Third World Quarterly* (Volume 20, 1999); Valerie Piacentini, "The Afghan Puzzle," *Iranian Journal of International Affairs* (Summer 1996). Olivier Roy, "The New Political Elite of Afghanistan," in Myron Weiner and Ali Bnuazizi (eds.) *The Politics of Social Transformation in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 72-101.

<sup>24</sup> Barnett Rubin, "The Fragmentation of Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs* (Winter 1989/1990); also "Post-Cold War State Disintegration: The Failure of International Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan," *Journal of International Affairs* (Winter 1993).

While Iran's relations with Afghanistan have improved over the years, its ties to Pakistan have at times been problematic. The Pakistani policy of using Afghanistan as a conduit for assertion of influence over Central Asia has greatly troubled Iran.<sup>25</sup> At a time when the Bush Administration loudly proclaims Pakistan a valuable ally in its "war against terrorism," it conveniently neglects the fact that it was Islamabad that sustained the Taliban and tolerated its al-Qaeda ally. The cynical Pakistani policy of unleashing the Taliban upon the hapless Afghan nation as a means of securing a bridge to Central Asia confronted Iran with a pronounced strategic threat. Since the demise of the Taliban, the relations between the two powers have markedly improved, as the issue of Afghanistan no longer divides them. However, Iran does remain concerned about internal stability of the Pakistani state, with its ample nuclear depositories. From Tehran's perspective, the prospect of a radical Sunni regime coming to power in Pakistan with its finger on the nuclear button is nearly an existential threat. As such, once more stability is the guide of Iran's policy toward yet another unpredictable neighbor.

It may come as a shock to the casual observer accustomed to American officials' incendiary denunciations of Iran as a revisionist ideological power to learn that in various important regions, the Islamic Republic's policy has historically been conditioned by pragmatism. Today, Iran's approach to the Persian Gulf sheikdoms and its Eurasian neighbors is predicated on national-interest designs largely devoid of an Islamic content. The same cannot be asserted in the case of the Arab east, as the theocratic state's dogmatic opposition to the state of Israel has deprived its policy of the nuance and flexibility that has characterized its approach to many of its neighboring states. It is likely that this central contradiction in Iran's regional policy will persist, as Tehran may continue with its perplexing mixture of radicalism and moderation, pragmatism and defiance.

In the end, in formulating its regional vision, the Islamic Republic has sought to marry the two disparate strands of Iran's identity: Persian nationalism and Shiite Islam. As a great civilization with a keen sense of history, Iran has always perceived itself as the rightful leader of the Middle East. For centuries, Persian empires had dominated the political and cultural landscape of the region, inspiring a national narrative that views Iran's hegemony as both beneficial and benign. At the same time, as a persecuted religious minority, Shiites in Iran has always been suspicious and wary of their neighbors. The reality of rising Arab states, domineering Western empires, and Iran's religious exceptionalism has not ended Tehran's perception of itself as the "center of the universe," a society that should be emulated by the benighted Arab masses. Successive Persian monarchs and reigning mullahs would subscribe to this national self-perception, giving Tehran an inflated view of its historic importance.

A final important factor that has intruded itself uneasily in Iran's international orientation is pragmatism. Iran may perceive itself as uniquely aggrieved by the great powers' machinations and it may nurse aspirations to emerge as the regional leader. However, the limitations of its resources and the reality of its actual power have sporadically led to reappraisal and retrenchment. The intriguing aspect of Iran's policy is that it can be both dogmatic and flexible at the same time. The Islamic Republic may take an ideologically uncompromising position toward Israel, yet pragmatically deal with its historic Russian

---

<sup>25</sup> Hunter, *Iran and the World*, 130-138; Fuller, *The Center of the Universe*, 230-231.

nemesis. The tensions between Iran's ideals and interests, between its aspirations and limits, will continue to produce a foreign policy that is often inconsistent and contradictory.