

# The Challenge of Iran

**Robin Wright**

Iran, proud and passionate, has been a conundrum since its 1979 revolution. It stunned the world by introducing Islam as a form of modern governance. It rattled the region by exporting its zealous ideology; it sired or sponsored militant allies from Lebanon to the Gulf. It also unnerved both East and West by defiantly challenging international norms. For decades, a confluence of challenges – political and cultural repression, menacing rhetoric, and defiance over its nuclear program – complicated dealing with the Islamic Republic.

Iran's actions will be pivotal to global events in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century because of its resources, ideology, weaponry, allies and location. Iran now represents a complex challenge for several reasons:

- Politically, Iran was the first experiment in blending Islam and democracy – and the experiment is far from over. It continues to play out in an environment rife with rivalries and disparate interpretations of an ideal Islamic state.
- Strategically, Iran's frontiers and coastline have for millennia been central to political, military and commercial developments. Today, it spans three of the world's most volatile regions and its most vital shipping lanes for oil. Iran has the potential to help stabilize or destabilize all four.
- Militarily, Iran has the largest armed forces in the Middle East and, with the exception of Israel, Egypt and increasingly Saudi Arabia, the largest arsenal, although much of its weaponry is of low quality, aging or obsolete. It has also armed militant allies from Lebanon to Afghanistan.
- Economically, Iran is one of the world's largest and most valuable properties, rich with oil and natural gas. Its assets in turn give it leverage and political leeway globally.

## The revolution

Iran's 1979 revolution was one of the three most innovative revolutions of the Modern Age. Like two other revolutions, it introduced a new ideology and redefined the world's political spectrum.

In toppling the Bourbon monarchy, the French revolution introduced equality and civil liberty as the basis of modern democracy. The Russian revolution overthrew the Romanov dynasty in the name of classless egalitarianism, the foundation of communism. By ousting the last in a string of dynasties dating back more than 2,000

years, the Iranian revolution sought to demonstrate that Islam was an effective idiom of political expression, opposition and governance.

For the Middle East, the revolution was also one of the three most important turning points of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The collapse of the five-century-old Ottoman Empire after World War I and Israel's creation in 1948 were the other two. In many ways, Iran was a logical place for sweeping political innovation because of its own rich history, religious tenets, two earlier attempts at reform, and struggle to end foreign influence.

Historically, Iran has more independent political experience than virtually any other modern Muslim state. Most were created or gained independence from European colonial powers only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But Iran had a long, if somewhat varied, history of sovereignty. Persia also had long exposure to ideas from the outside world, as a crossroads between East and West and as a target of invading armies from ancient Greece to contemporary Britain. With more than five millennia of civilization, Iranians have a sense of historic importance and a role in shaping the world.

Yet the Islamic Republic still has to prove the long-term viability of its zealous ideology and its hybrid political system.

## **Revolution within Shiism**

The Islamic Republic also represented a revolution within Shiism. More than any branch of Islam, Shiites historically were wary of political power. They viewed the state as imperfect, corruptible and a source of persecution. They deliberately distanced themselves from politics.

But Islam provided a banner to unite Iran's opposition. In several ways, Shiite Islam was a logical force for change. Its clerics are empowered to interpret God's word for the faithful. Their fatwas have absolute authority in telling a believer what is right or wrong, what to do or not do. (In contrast, Sunni clerics are advisers.) Shiite clerics also have a leadership hierarchy. And, central to the original schism in the seventh century, Shiite Islam demands that the faithful fight against injustice, even if it means certain death.

In tapping into strong Shiite traditions, revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became the most credible authority to mobilize disparate Iranian factions against the last shah. After Iran's revolution, the clergy emerged as major political players, changing their role as well a central tenet of the "quietist" Shiite faith.

The new Islamic Republic was the first experiment in blending Islam and democracy. Iran's 1979 constitution borrowed heavily from French and Belgian law. It called for separation of powers between the three branches of government. It stipulated that the

president and legislature, as well as provincial and local councils, should be popularly elected by men and women, originally as young as 15. It imposed a two-term limit on the presidency. And it continued the monarchy's practice of allocating seats in parliament for Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians – at least token acknowledgement of individual or minority rights.

But the constitution then added a provision that all laws must be compatible with Islamic law, or Sharia. It also established a set of parallel Islamic institutions that mirrored each of the republican branches of government – and often had more power. And on top of it all, the constitution imposed a supreme leader, who had absolute powers. The supreme leader became the equivalent of an infallible political pope.

Tehran's Shiite theocracy is the only time Muslim clerics have ever ruled a state. Iran has in turn put Shiism – Islam's so-called second sect, making up between 10 percent and 12 percent of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims – on the political map. In its first three decades, the Islamic Republic fostered a network of Shiite allies in both the Arab world and south Asia. Sunni governments began to fear the so-called Shiite crescent, anchored by Iran, that stretched west across Iraq, into Syria and Lebanon, and south through Shiite minorities in the oil-rich sheikhdoms.

## Political phases

Iran's revolution has passed through at least five phases:

**Phase one:** The first phase was the Khomeini decade from 1979 until the ayatollah's death in 1989. It was a tumultuous period of revolutionary extremes that included killing off supporters of the *ancien regime*, taking foreigners hostage, and fostering zealotry across the Islamic world. The turmoil was exacerbated by an eight-year war with Iraq that proved to be the Middle East's bloodiest modern conflict. It produced more than one million casualties (deaths and injuries). Iran was widely viewed as an international pariah throughout the revolution's first decade.

**Phase two:** The second phase coincided with the two terms of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, from 1989 until 1997. The revolution's early passions were replaced by a hard-earned pragmatism, produced in part by excesses that backfired against the clerics and exhausted the population. Under Rafsanjani, arrogance gave way to a conservative realism. The government of God increasingly ceded to secular statecraft.

**Phase three:** The third phase between 1997 and 2005 coincided with the reformist era of President Mohammad Khatami, a dark horse former cabinet minister who tapped into the groundswell of interest in political openings. The government improved relations

with its own people as well as the outside world. Iran had, temporarily, a freer press, freer speech, wider debate, relaxed social restrictions and a burgeoning civil society. But parliament failed to legislate reforms. And by the end of Khatami's two terms, a political schism had developed between the regime headed by the supreme leader and the government headed by the president.

**Phase four:** The fourth phase between 2005 and 2013 coincided with the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The little-known mayor of Tehran won an upset election over Rafsanjani. The emergence of hardliners reflected three broader shifts: Disillusionment with politics led many, especially young Iranians and women, to boycott the poll. Public anger swelled against the clergy, especially Rafsanjani, for corruption and failing to improve the average Iranian's life in a quarter century. And a second generation of revolutionaries hardened by the Iran-Iraq War, largely laymen, began to challenge the clerics who ended the monarchy.

**Phase five:** The fifth phase began with the election of President Hassan Rouhani, a cleric and former national security advisor, in 2013. In a field of six candidates, he campaigned on a platform of "hope and prudence" to end the economic crises and resolve the international showdown over Iran's nuclear program. Rouhani represented the rise of realists and centrists in both foreign and domestic policies.

## **Domestic Politics – and Splits**

Through each phase, Iranian politics increasingly splintered. In the early 1980s, Iran was a virtual one-party state. The Islamic Republic Party dominated all branches of government. But the infighting quickly became so serious that Khomeini publicly rebuked its officials, "Stop biting one another like scorpions." The divisions became a chasm; the party was dissolved in 1987.

Three decades after the revolution, Iran had more than 200 parties, factions and political groups – many of them still squabbling. A common political axiom in Tehran joked: "Where there are five Iranian Shiites, there are six political factions."

The depth of the divide among the original revolutionaries was witnessed after the 2009 presidential election. Mir Hossein Mousavi, the prime minister who led Iran throughout the Iran-Iraq War, charged the regime with massive fraud in his loss to Ahmadinejad. Millions took to the streets in 2009 to demand a recount on behalf of Mousavi. Unrest raged sporadically for months. The election crisis reflected the diversity of political thought and the growing unease about the system, even among those inside it. Mousavi publicly warned that the Islamic Republic was turning into a dictatorship led at the top by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who as president had been Mousavi's colleague in running the government during the 1980s.

The uprising was also part of a longstanding debate over Iran's political system. After the shah's ouster, the revolutionaries were divided between ideologues and realists on the shape of a new government. Ideologues argued that the first modern theocracy should be a "redeemer state" championing the cause of the oppressed; restoring Islamic purity and rule in the 57-nation Islamic world; and creating a new Islamic bloc to defy both East and West. Realists argued that Iran should seek legitimacy by creating a capable Islamic state and institutionalizing the revolution. They, too, wanted a new political and social order independent of the outside world, but they also wanted to be realistic about Iran's need to interact economically and diplomatically with the world.

The central issue had been variations on the same theme: whether to give priority to the revolution or to the state. Put another way: whether the Islamic Republic is first and foremost Islamic or a republic. The same theme played out in the 2009 election. Ahmadinejad championed the revolutionary clerics' original vision of helping the oppressed, while Mousavi campaigned on the need for a viable and practical state. The same issues were also central to the post-election turmoil. Mousavi warned that the alleged vote-rigging was killing the idea that Islam and republicanism were compatible.

The uprising was the biggest threat to the regime since the revolution. The regime, briefly, appeared on a precipice. Tehran eventually restored control. But its tactics indicated the regime's insecurity. It had to militarize to survive. And the crackdown did not end tensions within the regime. The splintering continued. By the end of Ahmadinejad's second term, even hardliners were critical of him.

## **Relations with the Outside World**

Historically, many of Iran's most tumultuous times have been caused by foreign invasions, meddling or influence. From the Persian prism, the showdown with the outside world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is only the latest round. Long experience has bred deep suspicion and xenophobia.

Ancient Persia was pivotal to Alexander the Great's drive into India in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Its conquest by Arab armies in the 7<sup>th</sup> century gave the then new Islamic Empire access to central and eastern Asia. Persia was invaded by Turks in the 11<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was conquered by Genghis Khan's Mongol army in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and by Tamerlane in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The Safavid dynasty actually converted to Shiism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – some 900 years after Shiism's birth in Islam's great schism – to create a separate identity and prevent the encroachment of Sunnis in the neighboring Ottoman Empire. Persia was then challenged by the Afghans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Iran was occupied by Britain and the Soviet Union. The Persian Corridor was also the most viable supply route for U.S. Lend Lease aid to the Soviet Union during World War II. Some 40,000 American soldiers were deployed in Iran to

keep the train link open. After the war, Iran was the first crisis of the new United Nations when the Soviets refused to leave. In 1946, the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution calling on Moscow to pull-out its forces from northern Iran. President Harry Truman's ultimatum to Joseph Stalin on Iran spawned a new U.S.-Iran friendship that steadily deepened until the revolution. But the subsequent Cold War arguably also had its origins in this confrontation.

The fight against foreign influence has also been central to the Iranian campaign for empowerment over the past century. The 1905-1911 Constitutional Revolution erupted after the monarchy doled out political and economic concessions to Britain and Russia. The backlash sparked prolonged instability and forced the Qajar dynasty in 1906 to accept demands for a constitution and parliament, both of which limited the king's powers. Iran had only the second constitution and parliament in Asia, after the Ottoman Empire. The first round of political reforms ended when an army colonel seized power in 1925, crowned himself Persia's new king, took the name Pahlavi, changed the country's name to Iran, and launched rapid modernization. He was forced to abdicate for pro-Nazi sentiments in 1941.

In 1953, Iran went through a second burst of democratic activism. An elected government led by Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh challenged the second and last Pahlavi shah, who was also heavily influenced by foreign powers. Mossadegh's four-party coalition advocated constitutional democracy and limited powers for the monarchy. It wanted to nationalize Iranian oil after the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company refused a 50-50 profit-sharing deal. The shah's attempt to have Mossadegh dismissed backfired; the backlash forced the monarch to flee to Rome. Foreign powers restored the monarchy. The CIA and British intelligence orchestrated riots that forced Mossadegh from power and allowed the young king to return to the Peacock Throne for another quarter century.

In many ways, the 1979 revolution was an extension of the two earlier challenges. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the struggle against foreign influence still defines Iran's stand-off with the world. When the outside world calls for cooperation, many Iranians see it as an attempt to co-opt or coerce them into conformity – to Western ways, morals and influence.

## **Strategic value**

The outside world has always valued Iran because of its location. Today, no nation can afford to ignore Iran, regardless of who is in power, for several reasons:

- It holds some 10 percent of the world's oil reserves. Iran is OPEC's second largest oil producer. It also has the world's second largest reserves of natural gas.
- Iran's vast resources provide enormous leverage in an oil-hungry world. Since World War II, petroleum has been essential to the movement of modern armies and

for development of modern industry. Free access to oil has also been essential to both political and economic power.

- Iran's geo-strategic location bridges the world's most volatile blocs of countries – the Middle East to the west, the Asian subcontinent to the east, and the Caucasus and Central Asia to the north. Peaceful relations with Iran are pivotal to the stability of more than one dozen countries.
- Iran's position and the traditions of its Aryan people, the Indo-European race whence Iran gets its name, have long made Iran the crossroads of culture and geography.
- Iran's population is now among the world's top twenty. In the first decade after the revolution, it almost doubled from 34 to 62 million when the clerics called on Iranian women to breed an Islamic generation.

## **U.S. relations**

Since the revolution, Iran's showdown with the world has pivoted most of all on the United States. The shah's ouster transformed a country that for three decades had been one of two pillars – along with Israel – of U.S. policy in the Middle East. After the United States took in the ailing shah, Tehran began to view Washington as the ultimate enemy. The revolutionaries suspected another CIA plot to put the monarch back on the throne.

Defying international law, Iranian students responded by seizing the U.S. Embassy in a drama that dragged out for 444 days. The ordeal of 52 American hostages was largely responsible for ending the presidency of Jimmy Carter after one term. In the mid-1980s, Iran's double-dealing during the covert arms-for-hostage swap – in which Iran helped free three American hostages in Lebanon, only to have three more picked up – was the biggest scandal for the Reagan administration. Iran has been a consistent thorn for all six American presidents who tried to figure out how to deal with Tehran.

The two sides shouted at each other. In 1979, Iran dubbed the United States the "Great Satan." In 2002, the Bush administration called Iran part of an "axis of evil." Both countries occasionally tried outreach, although they were never on the same page at the same time. Their counterparts often suspected that the other would not or could not deliver; opportunities to at least explore rapprochement were missed. The most significant effort by Iran was President Khatami's call to bring down "the wall of mistrust." But it went largely unheeded in Washington until it was too late to salvage the effort.

American presidents also singled out Iran for mention in important speeches. In his 1989 inaugural address, President George H.W. Bush offered "new engagement" to the world, but made a special offer to Iran. "There are today Americans who are held against their will in foreign lands, and Americans who are unaccounted for. Assistance

can be shown here, and will be long remembered. Good will begets good will. Good faith can be a spiral that endlessly moves on.”

After the announcement of his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize, President Obama said it had to be “shared with everyone who strives for justice and dignity – for the young woman who marches silently in the streets on behalf of her right to be heard even in the face of beatings and bullets.” He did not name her, but Iranians knew he was referring to Neda Agha Soltan, the aspiring 26-year-old musician who was shot on a Tehran street during the 2009 election protests. The cell phone video capturing her bloodied death was transmitted around the world.

By the end of Ahmadinejad’s presidency in mid-2013, tensions between Washington and Tehran had reached new heights because of suspicions about Iran’s long-term nuclear intentions, support for Iraqi and Afghan militias targeting U.S. troops, Ahmadinejad’s denial of the Holocaust and Israel’s right to exist, and human rights abuses.

The tide began to turn after Rouhani’s election in 2013. During a visit to the United Nations just weeks after taking office, the new president had a brief telephone conversation with President Obama. Within months, his administration launched diplomacy with the world’s six major powers – Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States – to resolve the nuclear crisis. In 2015, after 20 months of tough diplomacy, Iran and the so-called P5 + 1 countries announced an agreement. During the negotiations, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif spent more time with each other than with any other senior foreign official. The nuclear deal did not, however, mark formal rapprochement between Tehran and Washington. Both countries insisted that renewal of relations was still a long way off.

## **Iran’s Neighborhood**

Iran stands apart geographically because of two great mountain ranges, the Alborz and the Zagros, and three great bodies of water, the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. In terms of territory,

- Iran is roughly one-fifth the size of the United States.
- It ranks 18<sup>th</sup> among the world’s nations in geographic mass.
- Neighboring Afghanistan, by comparison, is 41<sup>st</sup>.
- Neighboring Iraq is 58<sup>th</sup>.
- Iran is more than twice as large and twice as populated as both countries.

Iran’s nine other frontiers are important for more than trade and transit.

**Iraq:** To the West, Iran's 910-mile border with Iraq is an entry point into the Arab world's Fertile Crescent.

**Turkey:** To the northwest, Iran shares a 312-mile border with Turkey, a vital member of NATO.

**Afghanistan:** To the east, Iran shares a 585-mile border with Afghanistan; the two countries share one of the world's most active routes for trafficking narcotics.

**Pakistan:** To the southeast is the 570-mile border with Pakistan. The father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb provided pivotal equipment to Tehran.

**Gulf states:** Iran's frontier along the Persian Gulf, through which more than 40 percent of the West's oil passes daily, is the longest of the six countries that rim the strategic waterway. Iran effectively controls the Strait of Hormuz, the so-called chokepoint for Gulf oil exports.

**Turkmenistan:** To the north, Iran has a 620-mile border with the former Soviet republic, the most autocratic of the Central Asian nations.

**Azerbaijan:** To the north, Iran shares a 270-mile border with Azerbaijan. About one quarter of Iran's population is ethnic Azeri.

**Armenia:** To the north, Iran's smallest frontier is the 22-mile border with Armenia. Armenians are among the Christian minorities represented by specially allocated seats for Christians in Iran's parliament.

**Azerbaijan-Nakhchivan exclave:** To the north, Iran shares a 112-mile border.

Ethnically, Iran is also a geographic crossroad mirroring most of its neighbors. Only 51 percent of Iranians are pure Persians. The rest are Azeris in the northwest and Turkoman in the northeast. Kurds live along the western border with Iraq. Baluchis (or "wanderers") straddle the arid and unruly southeast border with Pakistan. Arabs live on the southern coast. The Lors, an Arab-Persian mix, live mainly in the mountains, while nomadic herding tribes live in the south.

## **The Role of Nationalism**

Tehran's policies and world perspective today are rooted in a past rich with accomplishments. Iranians are notoriously chauvinistic. Persia produced some of history's greatest scientists, physicians, astronomers, mathematicians, philosophers, architects, artists and poets. Iranians believe their contributions are not over – if only the outside world will give them a chance.

Zoroaster founded the first monotheistic religion, which introduced the ideas of good and evil and a day of judgment even before Judaism. Avicenna, or Ibn Sina, was an 11<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and physician whose medical texts were taught in Europe until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A crater on the moon is named after him. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Omar Khayyam was one of the world's leading mathematicians and astronomers as well as a poet famed for more than 1,000 quatrain verses. Rumi, a 13<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, is the world's most popular poet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hafez, Saadi, and Ferdowsi were other great medieval poets whose works are still admired today. The list goes on and on.

Iran's intellectual culture has been evident even in the current political infighting. Some of the most modern and democratic ideas in the Islamic world today have emerged among Iranian philosophers, reformers and dissidents. Iranian philosopher Abdulkarim Soroush was the intellectual father of the reform movement. A former revolutionary, he turned on the regime. In the mid-1990s, he began to challenge the theological justification for a supreme leader and called for separation of mosque and state. He also declared that freedom always had precedence over religion because Muslims could only be true believers if they embraced the faith with their own free will.

Given their past, Iranians see only greatness in their future; they view their current status as only a blip on the screen of history. The quest for nuclear energy, which dates back to the shah, is viewed as a key to modern development. For many ordinary Iranians, the right to enrich uranium to fuel nuclear reactors is first and foremost an issue of sovereignty. As they modernize, they want to avoid any further dependence on the outside world. To understand Iranian nationalism, think of a proud, chauvinistic Texan – then add 5,000 years.

## **Trendlines**

- In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Iran's unique version of God's government must prove its viability on earth – and that it can deliver what its people want – or risk the same fate as other utopian ideologies.
- No Islamic country is likely to replicate the Iranian experience. The costs are too high, the results too controversial. The Shiite character of the revolution also makes it unlikely to be repeated among Sunni-dominated societies.
- Yet Iran's Shiite alliance remains a major power bloc capable of heavily influencing the outcome of elections and conflicts – and sparking tensions with Sunni communities.
- Iran's labyrinthine political system – and competing sources of power – complicate diplomacy.

- Rapprochement with the United States will remain become a domestic political issue, even as Iran improves relations with the outside world.

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