

IRAN'S VARIOUS VOICES

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Is the Islamic Republic of Iran a country or a cause? For decades, the question is one that has bedeviled Western observers. Foreign politicians and diplomats long have struggled to reconcile the Iranian regime's radical rhetoric and destructive international behavior with its pragmatic participation in numerous treaty arrangements, and its prominent role in various multilateral forums.

The dichotomy has become even more acute over the past two years. Since November of 2013, the Islamic Republic has engaged in extensive diplomacy with the P5+1 powers (the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, China, France and Germany) over its nuclear program—a dialogue which, as of this writing, appears likely to result in a political settlement that will be exceedingly favorable to Tehran. Yet the same period has seen a surge in destabilizing global activity instigated or abetted by the Islamic Republic. Indeed, even as it engages in diplomacy with the West regarding its nuclear ambitions, Iran is actively seeking to revise the geopolitical *status quo* in its favor, both in the Middle East and beyond.

It has done so through four distinct ideological narratives, each of which is carefully calibrated to appeal to different constituencies and designed to accomplish different strategic goals.¹ Cumulatively, these messages play a critical role in advancing Iran's foreign policy objectives along separate—

and often seemingly contradictory—lines.

Pragmatic Mercantilism

Today, the dominant face that Iran presents to the world is pragmatic in appearance, and transactional in disposition. The nuclear negotiations of the past year-and-a-half are perhaps the most visible examples of this narrative, yet they are far from the only ones. Through the current talks, the Iranian regime has conveyed the appearance of flexibility over its three-decade-old nuclear program, even as its officials have continued to insist on their “inalienable” right to atomic status² and to rule out the possibility of full Western oversight of it.³

Not surprisingly, the messengers for this narrative are those with whom Western audiences find themselves most comfortable. They include Iran's “moderate” president, Hassan Rouhani, its Westernized and charming foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, and a coterie of lesser—but equally urbane—diplomats.⁴ These individuals

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Strategy
BRIEF

1. My sincere thanks go to Michael Doran of the Hudson Institute for his assistance in formulating this argument.

2. Adam Kredo, "Iranian Negotiator: U.S. Must Bow to Our 'Inalienable Nuclear Rights,'" *Washington Free Beacon*, November 12, 2014, <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/iranian-negotiator-u-s-must-bow-to-our-inalienable-nuclear-rights/>.

3. Karen DeYoung, "Kerry, Iranian Envoy Discuss Unsettled Issues as Nuclear Deadline Nears," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/kerry-set-to-meet-with-iranian-envoy-as-nuclear-deadline-approaches/2015/05/29/d53c1fd6-04a3-11e5-93f4-f24d4af7f97d_story.html.

4. See, for example, Matthew Continetti, "The Appalling Mr. Zarif," *Washington Free Beacon*, May 1, 2015, <http://freebeacon.com/columns/the-appalling-mr-zarif/>.

5. Ruhollah Khomeini, as quoted in Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 21.

6. David Wurmser, "The Sunni-Shi'a Divide and Today's Iran," American Foreign Policy Council *Iran Strategy Brief* no. 6, June 2013.

7. "Lawmaker: Uprisings in Region Promising Birth of Islamic Middle- East," FARS News Agency (Tehran), February 5, 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8911161168>.

8. See generally Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

9. "Bahrain Accuses Iran of Aiding Rebels," *Al Jazeera* (Doha), January 3, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/01/bahrain-accuses-iran-training-rebels-201413144049814960.html>.

10. Eric Schmitt and Robert F. Worth, "With Arms for Yemen Rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role," *New York Times*, March 15, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/middleeast/aiding-yemen-rebels-iran-seeks-wider-mideast-role.html>.

have become the primary interlocutors of the Iranian regime with the West, precisely because of their well-heeled manners, their fluency in the English language, and their ostensibly pragmatic, technocratic worldview. With precious few exceptions, these emissaries have charmed Western elites and enthralled foreign audiences.

In the process, they have successfully obscured the repressive, ideological nature of the Iranian regime, and the radical worldview of the clerical elite that controls it. Deeply engaged in diplomacy with Iran, and hopeful of some sort of compromise with it, Western nations have paid scant attention to worsening human rights and political conditions within the Islamic Republic, much to the detriment of the country's political dissidents and pro-democracy forces.

Pan-Islamism

Iran's leaders believe fervently that their regime is the natural ideological leader of the Islamic world and the rightful inheritor of the mantle of the Prophet Mohammed. The idea dates back to the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's belief that the founding of the Islamic Republic marked the start of a global caliphate with his country at its head, and that Iran's revolution would augur the dominance of its brand of Islam "in all the countries of the world."⁵

Iran's conviction in its religious primacy lies at the heart of its long-standing strategic rivalry with Saudi Arabia, Sunni Islam's most important player. It is a contest that Iran's leaders see as one not only for contemporary strategic position, but also as a competition for ideological primacy.⁶ Iran has thus shaped much of its present-day foreign policy in the Middle East in opposition to the House of Saud, which it views as an inauthentic steward of the Muslim faith because of its intimate relationship with the West and because of the long-running and widespread discrimination against the Shi'a that has taken place in the current, Saudi-dominated Persian Gulf order.

This religious will to power has found new expression with the outbreak of the Arab Spring. The start of anti-regime ferment in Tunisia and elsewhere in late 2010 and early 2011 was greeted with optimism

by officials in Tehran, who took pains to depict it as an outgrowth of the Ayatollah Khomeini's successful 1979 revolution and the start of an "Islamic awakening" in which the Islamic Republic would inevitably play a leading role.⁷ In the years since, the Islamic Republic repeatedly has sought to harness, co-opt and shape the revolutionary currents in the Greater Middle East, and by doing so increase both its regional stature and religious legitimacy.

Shi'ite Sectarianism

Third, and related, is a sectarian narrative now actively being promoted by the Islamic Republic. The Iranian regime views itself as the vanguard of the so-called "Shi'a crescent" in the Middle East, and as the ideological champion of the interests of the beleaguered Shi'a minority in the Sunni-dominated Muslim world.⁸

This outlook helps inform Iran's longstanding sponsorship of its primary—and most important—terrorist proxy, Hezbollah. Since the early 1980s, the Lebanese militia has served as a faithful steward of Iran's governing ethos of *velayat-e faqih* (Rule of the Jurisprudent), as well as a potent force multiplier for the asymmetric activities carried out by Iran's clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Over the past three years, this allegiance has led Hezbollah to involve itself deeply in the Syrian civil war on behalf of the regime of Bashar al-Assad at the behest of the Iranian government.

Iran likewise has attempted to empower Shi'a elements as part of the Arab Spring uprisings, with considerable effect. In Bahrain, Iran's quiet encouragement of the country's Shi'a majority in the opening stages of the Arab Spring almost led to the overthrow of the ruling Sunni al-Khalifa family—and prompted a large-scale intervention by a Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council military contingent. Since then, regime officials have charged the Islamic Republic with continuing to provide the Bahraini opposition with both arms and training in an attempt to effect regime change there.⁹ Likewise, in Yemen, Iranian support has been an essential component of the political gains made by the country's Shi'ite

Houthi rebels, who leveraged the clandestine aid provided by Iran in the form of weapons, materiel and military training¹⁰ to overthrow the government of Yemeni president Abed Rabbo al-Hadi in Sana'a. And in neighboring Iraq, the Iranian regime is using the current fight against the Islamic State terrorist group to expand its already-extensive influence by empowering the country's radical Shi'ite militias—thereby ensuring their dominance in Iraq's political environment in the years ahead.

Third-World Populism

Finally, the Iranian regime has embraced the language of third-world populism, using it in its efforts to enlist countries in Latin America and Africa in a shared revisionist agenda on the global stage. The crux of this message was encapsulated in then-Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's September 2012 address before the United Nations General Assembly, in which he called for the formation of a "new world order" as a substitute for the current domination of the "bullying" West.¹¹ It is a call that has resonated in many corners of the third world.

Thus, the past decade has seen a systematic intrusion of the Islamic Republic into Latin America. Beginning with the warm personal bonds forged between Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chávez and then-Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the mid-2000s, the Iranian government has dramatically broadened its presence in the Americas. This outreach is extensive in nature, and includes diplomatic and economic contacts with various nations in Central and South America. But Tehran has naturally concentrated the bulk of its attention on the countries of the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA), the radical leftist political and economic bloc established by Chávez and Cuba's Fidel Castro in the early 2000s. And while Chávez and Ahmadinejad have now both departed from the political scene, Iran's Latin American policy persists; shortly after his inauguration as president in 2013, Hassan Rouhani declared his government's commitment to expanding ties to Latin America.¹² Since then, multiple Iranian trade delegations and political missions to the region have confirmed that Iran's interest is

decidedly not a thing of the past.

In Africa, too, Iran has successfully translated its vision for third-world solidarity into concrete gains. Recent years have seen Iran significantly expand both its diplomatic and asymmetric presence on the African continent. This has included forging a "strategic partnership" encompassing both military aid and political coordination with the government of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir.¹³ It has also entailed a political effort to woo regional states like Gabon, Togo and Uganda, which occupy strategic positions in multilateral organizations such as the United Nations Security Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency, in an attempt to generate support for their political priorities—and to undermine the fragile international consensus regarding Iran's isolation.¹⁴

Advantage: Iran

Western powers, now heavily invested in reaching a negotiated settlement over Iran's nuclear program, have chosen to focus on Iran's first narrative while ignoring and minimizing Iran's other "voices"—particularly when those messages run counter to the dominant view of the Islamic Republic as a potential strategic partner and strategic opportunity for the United States. Thus, the Obama administration has come to view Iran as a potential ally in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq, despite the fact that Iran's strategy involves empowering radical Shi'ite militias who may come to dominate Iraqi politics. It has chosen to ignore Iran's ongoing and extensive assistance to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria,¹⁵ which has helped to perpetuate the *status quo* in Damascus at horrific human cost. Simultaneously, the parameters of the emerging P5+1 deal over Iran's nuclear program have solidified the view of many in the Persian Gulf that the United States has come to accept the Islamic Republic as a *de facto* regional hegemon—a state of affairs that threatens to touch off a cascade of nuclear proliferation in the already-volatile Middle East.¹⁶ Nor has Washington responded forcefully to Iranian activities in theaters such as Latin America and Africa, even when this activism threatens the national security

11. "Transcript: Read Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Speech at the U.N. General Assembly," FoxNews.com, September 26, 2012, <http://insider.foxnews.com/2012/09/26/transcript-read-mahmoud-ahmadinejads-speech-at-the-u-n-general-assembly>.

12. See, for example, "Iran Firm to Boost Ties with Latin America: Rouhani," Press TV (Tehran), February 10, 2014, <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2014/02/10/350081/iran-vows-close-ties-with-latin-mexico/>.

13. See, for example, Eric Reeves, "Sudan Embraces Genocide, Terrorism—and Iran," *Washington Post*, November 30, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/sudan-embraces-genocide-terrorism--iran/2014/11/30/2ed603ae-75bb-11e4-a755-e32227229e7b_story.html.

14. Michael Rubin, "Africa: Iran's Final Frontier?" *American Enterprise Institute Middle Eastern Outlook* no. 2, April 2013, https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/-africa-irans-final-frontier_145228692703.pdf.

15. Eli Lake, "Iran Spends Billions to Prop Up Assad," *BloombergView*, June 9, 2015, <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-06-09/iran-spends-billions-to-prop-up-assad>.

16. David E. Sanger, "Saudi Arabia Promises to Match Iran in Nuclear Capability," *New York Times*, May 13, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-promises-to-match-iran-in-nuclear-capability.html>.

17. See, for example, J. Matthew McInnis, *Iran's Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolution* (American Enterprise Institute, May 2015), <http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/IRANS-Strategic-Thinking.pdf>.

18. Arash Karami, "Ayatollah Khamenei Urges Iran to Prepare for 'New World Order,'" *Al-Monitor*, September 5, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/khamenei-new-world-order.html#>.

19. Stephen Graubard, "Lunch with the FT: Henry Kissinger," *Financial Times*, May 24/25, 2008, <http://www.henrykissinger.com/interviews/FinancialTimes240508.html>.

interests of the United States.

This partial focus constitutes a strategic error. As the foregoing suggests, Iran is not an essentially defensive power, as many observers and experts have apparently come to believe.¹⁷ Despite its current, dulcet diplomatic tones, it is a country with a distinct manifest destiny and ideological vision—one that remains both revolutionary and deeply anti-Western in character.

It is a worldview that holds more salience than ever before. As Iran's Supreme Leader told a September 2014 meeting of the Assembly of Experts, the Islamic Republic's premier religious supervisory body, the existing international system is now "in the process of change" and a "new order is being formed." These changes, he made clear, are a mortal blow to the West and a boon to Iran. "The power of the West on their two foundations—values and thoughts and the political and military—have become shaky"

and can be subverted, Khamenei insisted.¹⁸

Several years ago, in an interview with the *Financial Times*, former secretary of state Henry Kissinger famously remarked that Iran would ultimately need to decide between being "a nation" or "a cause."¹⁹ That, however, has not proven to be the case. Today, Iran's leaders have come to believe that their regime can simultaneously behave as a modern global actor, with all of the political and diplomatic benefits that accrue from that role, and as a radical movement dedicated to the spread of its Islamic revolution. And, even as it engages in a dialogue with the West over their nuclear program, the Iranian regime is acting out that conviction, with detrimental effects for both regional and global security. With the Islamic Republic poised on the brink of détente with the West, its leaders may soon have far greater freedom and resources pursue its ideological objectives.

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