

The Ideological Constraints of the Islamic Republic

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Brief Analysis

As long as the Islamic Republic's decisions are dictated by rigid ideological imperatives, any shift in Tehran toward pragmatism in response to the new Trump Administration will likely be superficial at best.

As the U.S. prepares for a second Trump administration, the question looms: can Iran's Islamic Republic ever shift its deeply rooted ideological stance in response to external pressure? While some may hope that renewed 'maximum pressure' from Washington could nudge Tehran toward behavioral or even structural change, Khamenei's current position and the growing rigidity of Iranian ideology may make this impossible. The Islamic Republic's identity is not just a matter of politics but an ideological commitment enshrined since the 1979 Revolution—a blend of anti-imperialism, Shia Islamism, and revolutionary fervor that has defined its every action on the world stage. As a second Trump administration likely reintroduces its uncompromising stance, the real question is not if the Islamic Regime will change in response, but if it can.

Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential race has already prompted some sectors within the Islamic Republic to call for [rapprochement](#) (<http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/en/news/2029260/iran-and-the-second-trump-administration-need-for-rapprochement>) with Washington. Voices in the Islamic Republic have referenced [post-war negotiations](#) (<https://ifpnews.com/ex-iranian-diplomat-negotiation-saddam-talk-trump/>) with Saddam Hussein following Iran-Iraq war, suggesting that, if necessary, talks with the U.S. could proceed even after the killing of IRGC Commander Soleimani on Trump's orders. This perspective is far from being an isolated voice; [individuals](#) (<https://www.khabaronline.ir/amp/1983168/>) from the reformist camp within the Islamic Republic have echoed [similar sentiments](#) (<https://www.asriran.com/fa/amp/news/1011817>)

Ayatollah Khomeini famously [described](#) (<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/21/us/khomeini-accepts-poison-of-ending-the-war-with-iraq-un-sending-mission.html>) his decision to accept the ceasefire at the end of the Iran-Iraq War as "drinking the chalice of poison," underscoring that it was a choice born of necessity rather than preference. But for many Iranians, the war's conclusion represented a brief glimmer of hope in their post-revolution collective memory. Some likewise perceived the acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 598 as a potential pivot point, a chance for the Islamic regime to shift away from revolutionary ambitions and re-enter the global stage as a normalized state actor. However, the unfolding of Iranian politics dashed such expectations. Instead of a turn toward reintegration, the nuclear crisis ushered in a new era of confrontation between Iran and the West.

The current domestic calls for rapprochement assume that the Islamic Republic is willing and able to set aside its ideological commitments in favor of rational calculation in the manner it was able to achieve in the 1980s. In reality, given the strength of ideology in shaping its stance on international issues, a sudden shift toward calculating pragmatism by the Islamic Republic is highly unlikely.

The Islamic Republic is an ideological regime that, unlike most secular dictatorships, adheres to a distinct [guiding ideology](#). (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-debate-about-weekends-highlights-tehrans-ideological-constraints>) This ideology blends anti-imperialist Marxism, Shia Islamism, and reactionary Third-Worldism, a mix enshrined in the 1979 Revolutionary Constitution. This founding document mandates that the state to pursue the "complete elimination of imperialism" (Article 3.5) and to "frame foreign policy based on Islamic principles and solidarity with the oppressed (mustad'afun) worldwide" (Article 3.16).

These principles are far from symbolic; they have driven the regime to actively [export](#) (<https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/ideological-expansion>) its revolutionary ideals, particularly to other Muslim-majority states in the Middle East. Support for proxies in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon, as well as alliances with Sunni militias like Hamas, are offshoots of this revolutionary ideology that have been integral to the Islamic Republic since its inception. These ideological partnerships are based not only on shared theocratic ties but also on a collective mission to counter [U.S. influence](#) (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies>) in the region. Hezbollah, for instance, gained prominence after attacking American targets in Lebanon, and militias in Iraq and Yemen have fostered their own brands of militant anti-American ideology.

While some revolutionary regimes have moderated over time, ideologies that have become deeply entrenched within the political elite make such shifts nearly impossible. [Kissinger](#) (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20026982>) observed the powerful influence of ideology on communist leaders, noting: "Ideology can persist long after its initial fervor has been spent. Whatever the ideological commitment of individual leaders, a lifetime spent in the Communist hierarchy must influence their basic categories of thought—especially since Communist ideology continues to perform important functions." In this sense, ideological regimes construct their own reality, creating a self-sustaining narrative that justifies their existence. In such an environment, "orthodoxy substitutes for conviction and produces its own form of rigidity." Hannah Arendt, one of the foremost theorists of ideology, further explores this phenomenon. She describes what Kissinger calls "orthodoxy" as a kind of [logical certainty](#) (<https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/how-antisemitism-shape-shifts-2024-03-10#:~:text=Arendt%20argues%20that%20antisemitism%20gains,to%20do%20with%20actual%20Jews.>)—a fixation on a pseudo-scientific conception of reality as an ultimate, unquestionable truth. According to Arendt, it is at this point that ideology "ruins all relationship with reality."

The Islamic Republic exemplifies the phenomenon of bureaucratized ideology through its structure as a theocratic regime, legitimized by the concept of "divine sovereignty" (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-the-royal-asiatic-society/article/direct-flight-to-revolution-maududi-divine-sovereignty-and-the-1979moment-in-iran/469BE06D4D083FB575608BB909C40EB7>) "for the Jurist Guardian, or Wali Faqih—a role embodied in the Supreme Leader's extensive powers. While the Islamic Republic adheres to a totalitarian interpretation of political Shia Islamism, ultimate authority within the regime rests with the Supreme Leader, who embodies both political and religious authority. During his tenure, Khomeini famously ruled that if the Wali Faqih (Supreme Leader) [deems](#) (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/how-islam-rules-in-iran/khameinism-and-the-absolute-velayate-faqih/FE78D0BA6EDEEB6F1F02C6602AE58522>) it necessary, even obligatory Islamic practices like prayer and fasting can be suspended. Khamenei upholds this expansive view of the Supreme Leader's powers, exercising them without accountability. This unchecked authority depends on a "beyond-law" status supposedly granted by divine will, a notion embraced without irony by Khamenei's supporters, who see his rule as a continuation of the prophets' and Shia Imams' tradition. These expansive powers also grant him the final say on matters of foreign affairs.

Both leaders of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini and Khamenei, exhibit an unwavering ideological commitment with little difference in outlook. A recent survey by [Radio Farda](https://www.radiofarda.com/a/exploring-word-cloud-of-ali-khamenei-in-his-public-speeches-during-1402/32905724.html) (<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/exploring-word-cloud-of-ali-khamenei-in-his-public-speeches-during-1402/32905724.html>) of Khamenei's speeches in 2023 found that he used the term "enemy" no fewer than 373 times and mentioned "U.S." 299 times, without a single reference to Russia or China. On average, "enemy" appeared seven times per speech. In Khamenei's rhetoric, resistance against the "enemy"—however vague—has become a foundational pillar of his ideology. In this approach, Khamenei echoes [Carl Schmitt's](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schmitt/) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schmitt/>) political philosophy, which defines the friend-enemy distinction as the ultimate marker of political identity.

This perspective aligns with Khamenei's early influences as a young revolutionary. He translated [three books](https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=19773) (<https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=19773>) by Sayyid Qutb, the father of modern jihadism, from Arabic into Persian, and he shares Qutb's deep-seated animosity toward the United States and its secular, liberal foundations. Qutb [divided](https://www.kalamullah.com/Books/Milestones%20Special%20Edition.pdf) (<https://www.kalamullah.com/Books/Milestones%20Special%20Edition.pdf>) the world into two realms: *Dar al-Islam* (the land of peace) and *Dar al-Kufr* (the land of disbelief), with the former, in his view, obligated to conquer the latter and reshape it. This worldview underpins the IRGC's transnational ambitions abroad and serves as justification for labeling dissenters as "[enemies of Islam](https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/beyond-borders-expansionist-ideology-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps) (<https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/beyond-borders-expansionist-ideology-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps>)" domestically.

In the foreign policy calculus of most states, ideology is [subordinated](https://www.jstor.org/stable/30135382) (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30135382>) [saml_data=eyJzYW1sVG9rZW4iOiI0ZGU2ZmJkMy0zMzcwLTRkYmYtOWNiNy05OGU2OTk0MjA1MDIiLCJpbmN0aXR1dGlvbkkyI6WyIxMjJMTFJOS00YWE5LTQyZU2U2YwQzZS0xMr](https://www.jstor.org/stable/30135382) to the objectives of the state and serves as a justification for those objectives once they are established. In ideological regimes, however, national interest becomes a means to the end of sustaining deeply held beliefs. Such complexities render ideological regimes especially prone to "[cognitive dissonance](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-53603-3_2#:~:text=Leon%20Festinger's%20(1957)%20A%20Theory,enter%20a%20state%20of%20dissonance.) ([https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-53603-3_2#:~:text=Leon%20Festinger's%20\(1957\)%20A%20Theory,enter%20a%20state%20of%20dissonance.](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-53603-3_2#:~:text=Leon%20Festinger's%20(1957)%20A%20Theory,enter%20a%20state%20of%20dissonance.))," disregarding realities that contradict their ideological constructs. This dissonance, in turn, impacts how the costs and benefits of policies are evaluated. For example, during Trump's first Maximum Pressure campaign, Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei and his close advisors consistently asserted that resistance was [less costly](https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2019/06/18/Khamenei-representative-Cost-of-compromise-greater-than-cost-of-resistance) (<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2019/06/18/Khamenei-representative-Cost-of-compromise-greater-than-cost-of-resistance>) than compromise or submission. This alternative perception of reality permeates the Islamic Republic's strategic thinking, from the concept of "martyrdom," where life is viewed as a worthy sacrifice for resistance, to the notion of an "economy of resistance," envisioning economic independence from the global order. This same ideological fervor may prevent Khamenei from acknowledging the significant blows inflicted on the regime's proxy networks by the October 7th attacks and leads him to describe these attacks as "[logical](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/04/world/middleeast/ayatollah-khamenei-iran.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/04/world/middleeast/ayatollah-khamenei-iran.html>)."

A key maxim in the Islamic Republic has been that "[preserving](http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/c76_156815/%D9%BE%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%B4_%D9%88_%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AE/%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%88%D9%85%DB%8C/%DA%86%D8%B1%I) (http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/c76_156815/%D9%BE%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%B4_%D9%88_%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AE/%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%88%D9%85%DB%8C/%DA%86%D8%B1%I) the Islamic Regime is the most important of all priorities." For some pragmatic officials within the regime, this has meant that if necessary, a departure from ideological ambitions can be justified to safeguard the regime's survival. Such reasoning was used to explain Khomeini's decision to [accept](http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/n20434/Imam_Khomeini_considered_Resolution_598_in_interest_of_nation_revolution) (http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/n20434/Imam_Khomeini_considered_Resolution_598_in_interest_of_nation_revolution) Security Council Resolution 598, which led Iran to agree to a ceasefire with Iraq after an eight-year war. However, the pragmatic thinking that marked the end of the Iran-Iraq War appears to have largely disappeared from the mainstream political logic of the Islamic Republic.

Khomeini's personal influence played a key role in persuading hardliners to set aside their warmongering ambitions when a decision was reached to end the war. Today, however, the legitimacy crisis facing the Islamic Republic, the growing alienation of the Iranian public from its discourse, and the current conflict against Israel have made the regime [increasingly](https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/08/22/the-threat-of-war-is-empowering-the-islamic-republics-hardliners) (<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/08/22/the-threat-of-war-is-empowering-the-islamic-republics-hardliners>) reliant on hardline loyalists who resist changes in both foreign policy and domestic governance. This reliance has, in turn, intensified internal dissatisfaction and led to a more rigid ideological stance. Over time, hardliners have entrenched themselves further within the Islamic Republic's leadership and structure, shifting the balance of power significantly toward a system more favorable to the Revolutionary Guards and radical factions. Though the executive branch may appear to be represented by the so-called reformists or moderates, these figures [hold](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iran/why-irans-new-president-wont-change-his-country) (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iran/why-irans-new-president-wont-change-his-country>) no real sway in matters of foreign policy and often serve as a mask for the more radical voices that wield actual power.

Moreover, in the 1980s, when Iran agreed to a ceasefire with Iraq, the regime had substantial reasons to believe that this concession would bring an end to its external conflict. Today, however, that calculation has reversed. The Islamic Republic fears that any retreat from its hardline stance, particularly in the conflict with Israel, would be perceived as [a sign of weakness](https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/MCU-Journal/Journal-of-Advanced-Military-Studies-SI-2022/The-Strategic-Culture-of-Resistance-Iranian-Strategic-Influence-in-its-Near-Abroad/) (<https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/MCU-Journal/Journal-of-Advanced-Military-Studies-SI-2022/The-Strategic-Culture-of-Resistance-Iranian-Strategic-Influence-in-its-Near-Abroad/>), prompting further demands in the future. In other words, the regime is now facing an existential crisis unlike any it faced in the 1980s, where loosening its ideological stance is seen as potentially accelerating its collapse.

Some may [suggest](https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/42/1/152/12165/What-the-Iran-Iraq-War-Tells-Us-about-the-Future) (<https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/42/1/152/12165/What-the-Iran-Iraq-War-Tells-Us-about-the-Future>) that the conclusion of an agreement like the JCPOA belongs to the same class of pragmatic decisions as Ayatollah Khomeini's acceptance of the ceasefire at the end of the Iran-Iraq War, leaving a glimmer of hope for the future. The JCPOA initially appeared to signal such a shift, hinting at the possibility of reemerging rationality. However, from the perspective of Trump's first administration, the agreement [fell short](https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-islamic-republic-of-iran-a-dangerous-regime/) (<https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-islamic-republic-of-iran-a-dangerous-regime/>) of driving a broader behavioral change in the regime's anti-American rhetoric or its proxy activities. Furthermore, the regime squandered the opportunity presented by the Biden administration to revive the JCPOA, choosing instead to throw its [full support](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/iran-nuclear-deal-plan-b-contain-islamic-republic) (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/iran-nuclear-deal-plan-b-contain-islamic-republic>) behind Russia in the conflict in Ukraine. As a result, the JCPOA has gradually lost its relevance, diminishing to the point where its full or even partial restoration now seems entirely out of reach—marking yet another instance where ideology trumped pragmatism.

Finally, decisions like the ceasefire at the end of the Iran-Iraq War remain [exceptions \(blank\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/iran-nuclear-deal-plan-b-contain-islamic-republic) within the broader framework of strategic choices made by the Islamic Republic. In most cases, both domestic and foreign policy decisions align closely with the regime's ideological foundations. Within this framework, rationality holds value only insofar as it serves ideological goals. This does not necessarily imply that an all-out war with the Islamic Republic is imminent, although the rigidity of the regime may delineate the boundaries of the current strategies of coercion employed by policymakers in Washington. Whether the Trump Administration adopts a more aggressive stance compared to the previous "maximum pressure" campaign will likely depend on several factors, including the potential for the current conflict to escalate and the evolving nuclear dynamics shaping the situation. Equally significant is the extent to which Trump's potential isolationist tendencies might define the limits of his administration's "maximum pressure" strategy. In such a scenario, limited clashes could become more frequent while both states maintain a cautious deference to each other's spheres of influence.

Following Trump's victory, Iran's current foreign minister—known within the regime's inner circles as a more pragmatic figure—posted on X: "Attempting 'Maximum Pressure 2.0' will only result in 'Maximum Defeat 2.0.' Better idea: try 'Maximum Wisdom'—for the benefit of all." Yet "maximum wisdom" remains far removed from the reality of an ideological regime whose foundational commitments limit its flexibility. As long as the Islamic Republic's decisions are dictated by rigid ideological imperatives, any shift toward pragmatism will likely be superficial at best, leaving the regime constrained in a world that demands adaptability. ❖

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