

# A New Iran for a New Middle East: Aligning Discourse and Behavior

by [Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](#)

Hassan Mneimneh is a contributing editor with Fikra Forum and a principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington.



## Articles & Testimony

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In the aftermath of the P5+1 agreement with Iran, the Arab Middle East has been processing two widely conflicting messages from Tehran. The first message is a soft appeal for friendship directed at the global community as a whole, which is built on promise and good intentions. The second message, aimed at the region itself, is a harsher message of hegemony gleaned from deeds rather than words.

Optimists may assume good faith and believe that the current dual messaging is a temporary manifestation of the regime's transition from its decades of isolation and ostracization into engagement and openness. However, many societies in the region have observed that the only tangible change in the behavior of Iranian allies and proxies is increased boldness and aggressiveness. For them, the visible changes in Iran policy do not favor Iran's soft message of 'promise.' Instead, many fear that the soft message is merely a maneuver in Iran's expansionist vision, a change in tactic rather than content from the call for "exporting the revolution" of past decades.

Irrespective of on-going controversies, it is certain that Iran ought to settle in as an active and influential actor in the Middle East. This shift may conflict with the wishes of those who call for Iran's containment and isolation, but it will also require Iran to abandon its illusions of hegemony, superiority, and custodianship over much of its neighborhood. To facilitate this change in Iranian behavior, all parties must reconsider the narratives surrounding Iranian ascendancy. Yet the confusions and contradictions surrounding views on the Iranian role in the region are not solely a local product, and a realistic view requires shifts in international narratives as well.

The Iranian "promise" message to the world is itself built on a narrative of hope developed and adopted in Western settings. This narrative points to contradictions between the nature of Iranian society and the character of the ruling theocratic regime. It characterizes Iranian society as possessing the positive attributes of a cherished history and civilization, an educated middle class that ascribes to universal values, openness and tolerance, and political pluralism. This view relegates the repressive and totalitarian aspects of theocracy to the status of incidental impositions on a society that rejects them. Participatory practices adopted by the regime, notably elections, are interpreted as concessions grudgingly adopted by the regime to delay the inevitable transformation that will reconcile Iranian society's vision and the shape of its government.

From this Western perspective, the presidential success of Hassan Rouhani and the rise of reformers in the legislative elections are vindications of this narrative of hope as an accurate reading of Iranian reality, confirming that Rouhani's Iran will truly call for the peaceful resolution of pending issues. Consequently, international embrace of this Iran will enable it to face and overcome the remaining restrictive internal.

The case is not as evident from an Middle Eastern Arab perspective. To begin with, there are some questions on the underlying Western new narrative in its description of Iranian society. No challenge is posited to the factual nature of the description, of Iran's history and civilization, or the current qualities of its middle class, but to the purpose of the selective highlighting: What is true for Iran, on the question of a venerable history, is also true for Turkey, and even more so for Egypt — history's oldest nation-state with a continuous institutional tradition; and what is applicable to the Iranian educated strata in their assimilation of universal values can also be extended to Egypt and, a fortiori, to Turkey, where the acceptance of secularism is deeply anchored even in religious settings. Yet, Western discourse on Turkey and Egypt showers neither with the praise and admiration of their culture and civilization. Is Iran really so exceptional, or are there considerations of a more subjective nature?

The answer may be in another narrative coalescing in many Western settings, one shedding negative lights on Arab states of the Persian Gulf in general, and on Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular. In many circles of today's Washington DC, such narrative has implicitly gained the status of a normative discourse, all the while its proponents present themselves as iconoclasts and mavericks. The positive presentation of Iran is less about what Iran has and more about what, through reductionism, the Arab states of the Gulf are claimed not to have. Almost invariably, the positive portrayal of Iran is contextualized against its neighborhood. Direct designation may be scarce, but it is evident who this neighborhood, lacking in history, middle class, and assimilation of universal values is. And, as is often noted, presumably of relevance, most of the suicide bombers of September 11th came from this neighborhood. It is apparently a daring position to take, a break with the collective; except that much of the collective, reportedly from the President down, espouse it.

The dual narratives—positive towards Iran, negative towards the Arab Gulf state—lay the ground for a prima facie acceptance of President Rouhani's message of goodwill to the world as putative if not actual Iranian policy. Accepting this message has allowed for its proponents to neglect the hard message demonstrated by the actions of the IRGC, the pronouncements of the Supreme Guide, and the practices of Iranian proxies across the region as all incidental.

From many Arab perspectives, the divergence between reformers and conservatives within the Iranian political establishment does not appear to extend to the pursuit of influence and hegemony across the region. The Supreme Guide and the IRGC may be ideologically driven while Rouhani and his team may be animated by a pragmatic desire to restore the balance of power in the region to reflect Iran's actual importance. The outcome, however, is the same - - Tehran continues to support actors and regimes that stand in the way of stability and civil peace. Furthermore, it may be inaccurate to assume that Iran's soft message is based on pragmatism while its hard messages revolve around ideology. The IRGC has displayed its own brand of pragmatism, while statements by close Rouhani associates that have hailed an Iranian restoration of past imperial glory reveal ideological passion, albeit of a nationalist rather than religious bent.

Ideologies aside, Iran's multi-faceted interference has denied Iraq the opportunity to usher in a national renewal after the fall of the dictatorship, although it should be noted that Iran is not the sole malignant influence, nor does its role excuse the Arab abandonment of Iraq in its moment of need. In its support of the murderous regime in Syria, Iran has expanded the Syrian tragedy's length and scope, as well as its metastasizing into a potentially perennial sectarian conflict. In propping Hezbollah up as a forward fighting force openly under its command, Iran has denied Lebanon the ability to reconstitute its state structures after its long civil war and has physically eliminated many of the political opponents to its project there. And in its attempt to apply its successful Lebanese model in Yemen, Iran

has dissipated the positive outcome of the 2011 Yemeni revolution, allowed the former dictator new room for maneuver, and subjected Yemen to immensely damaging wars. As Iranian “reformer” voices in Tehran hailed the achievement of four Arab capitals falling to Iranian might, Arab security agencies across the Gulf uncovered weapons, cells, and plans for disruptive action that were all traceable to Iran and in some cases had proven intent to attribute said violence to third parties.

It may well be that the most dangerous position assumed by Iran towards the region is its ambiguous relations with, manipulation, and leverage of radical Sunni Jihadism. Tehran has successfully transitioned Shi’i Jihadism from a position of open enmity towards the West to an implicit truce, and ultimately to a de facto alliance against Sunni Jihadism. Iran is certainly not the only state attempting to penetrate and manipulate Jihadist organizations. Such feats have been undertaken by many governments – from both the regional axes of “moderation” and “resistance” and beyond. Iran, however, engages in direct empowerment of these forces. This is visible in the case of al-Qa’idah, where Iran has served as the geographic link between its two main theaters of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. There also appears to be deliberate enablement at work, as in the case of the “Islamic State” (ISIS). Evidence to such effect is abundant, including the Osama Bin Ladin correspondence recently released by U.S. Intelligence.

For many in the Middle East, a fundamental question is whether the West in general and the United States in particular are willing to bypass all this malevolence in a quest for a partner they presume is capable of a better control of the trouble region. But Iran’s expansion has been achieved solely on the basis of voids left by tangential events, from the exit of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon in the 1980s, through the collapse of the claim of resistance and steadfastness against Israel professed by the Arab political order in the 1990s, to the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in Baghdad in 2003. Iran’s entrance into these volatile areas has not encouraged the creation of any stability in any local setting, raising great skepticism over whether Iran is capable of achieving stability at the regional level.

The answer from the West may be that politics is the art of the possible, and that real alternatives are virtually non-existent. Attempting to secure immediate political interests through encouraging a greater Iranian role, however, may not achieve any of its intended goals while severely damaging the prospects for long-term stability. Supporting greater Iranian involvement also amounts to catapulting Iran –which already displays an inflated sense of its ability in its domestic political culture—towards further adventurism and unforeseen consequences.

Iran’s policy approaches are in need of a thorough reconsideration separated from any reckless desire for immediate change. A prerequisite for such reconsideration is a maturity that could expunge the counter-productive ambitions of hegemony. But this maturity has yet to materialize in the Iranian political discourse. This, in turn, necessitates a reworking of the Western narrative on Iran that shifts away from both demonization and glorification. It also requires a frank examination of the troubled relationship between the West and the Arab world in general and the United States and the Arab Gulf states in particular – one that removes itself from platitudes, reductionist claims, and one-liner theories.

*Hassan Mneimneh is the Contributing Editor at Fikra Forum. This item was originally published on [the Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8983&lang=en#.Vv24TuIrLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8983&lang=en#.Vv24TuIrLIU). ❖*

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