

Articles & Op-Eds

Iran Won't Give Up on Its Revolution

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Given Iran's hegemonic history under the Safavids, the Shah, and the mullahs alike, Washington should not expect the regime to compromise its principles any time soon.

The announcement last month of a preliminary agreement between the United States and Iran has led some to believe that Tehran will now enter the international system as a responsible actor. But such optimism ignores the fact that Iran's current government still bears the imprint of a long imperial history and longstanding Persian regional ambitions.

Iran is a revolutionary power with hegemonic aspirations. In other words, it is a country seeking to assert its dominance in the region and it will not play by the rules. Yet, the Obama administration hopes a nuclear agreement will have a "transcendental effect" on Iran and convince it to abandon its imperial aspirations in return for a sense of normalcy.

The world has lived with hegemonic powers in the past. Russia, France, Germany, Japan, and Britain all had similar aspirations before World War I. It was such powers that pushed the world into war in 1914 and again in 1939. Nazi Germany sought to dominate Europe from the Atlantic Ocean to the Volga River, reducing other countries to vassal states and establishing complete military, economic and diplomatic control.

In the wake of this ruin and chaos, the post-World War II order led by the United States established rules for the international community that sought to keep such powers in check. Even today, countries with hegemonic tendencies, like China, acknowledge the legitimacy of this international order.

Iran, however, has brazenly defied this international order and continues to expand its reach. It uses an assortment of terrorism, proliferation, military proxies, and occasionally old-fashioned diplomacy to further its dominance.

Although the 1979 Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is often cited as the beginning of this imperial worldview, Iran's hegemonic aspirations actually date back to the Safavid Dynasty of the 16th century. The Safavids sought to distance themselves from the powerful Sunni Ottoman Empire and refashioned Iran into the preeminent Shiite power (Iran became an officially Shiite country in 1502). In the ensuing centuries, Iran extended its control over Afghanistan, the "Persian" Gulf, Iraq and the southern Caucasus.

Iran halted its expansionism in the 18th century as it went into a decline after debilitating wars against the Ottomans and Russians. During the Cold War, the Shah took advantage of American backing to promote Iranian imperial power once again. He extended financial and military support to Shiite communities and proxies around the Middle East. In the early 1970s, for example, Iran backed the Iraqi Kurds to establish influence in Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Similarly, in 1975, Musa al-Sadr, an Iranian cleric backed by the Shah, issued a fatwa declaring the Syrian Alawites, who belong to a heterodox branch of Islam, as Shiites. This act brought the Syrian Alawites into Iran's permanent fold, with grave repercussions for today's civil war in Syria.

In 1979, the anti-American leaders of the revolution fused their nationalist claims of past Persian glories with a millennial ideology to create a single Islamic state militancy. However, after the bloody and protracted Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, the Islamic Republic realized that conventional military doctrine would no longer suffice. In conjunction with Tehran's doctrine of "exporting the revolution" to nearby Muslim countries, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps developed asymmetric warfare tactics aimed at building Iranian influence through sectarian and political alliances.

In doing so, Iran often acted as the guardian of the broader Shiite community in places such as Bahrain and Yemen. Iran has established a carefully crafted network of Shiite militias: Lebanon's Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthis and Iraq's Badr Corps, among others. Moreover, Iran controls the Shiite clerical establishment and financial networks throughout the Middle East.

Iran is not bound exclusively by sectarian politics. It has also befriended belligerent Sunni actors across the Middle East to bolster its regional status. To this end, Tehran has developed strong ties with Hamas and Islamic Jihad in

Gaza. Iran has even made inroads into Sunni Sudan, which it has used to transport weapons to Gaza.

At times, Iran does not care for Muslims, or even Shiites -- in the southern Caucasus, Iran has allied itself with Christian Armenia against the Shiite-majority Azerbaijan, which is pro-American. Ultimately, it is not religion but imperial ambition that drives Iranian foreign policy.

History offers few examples of bringing such powers into the international system. Revolutionary hegemonic powers combine the imperialist lust for "lebensraum" seen in Wilhelmine Germany with a religious or millennial worldview that rejects the principles of the classic international order.

In February 2013, Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader and the ultimate decision maker in areas of foreign and military policy, called the negotiations with the West a deceptive trick, proudly adding: "I am not a diplomat. I am a revolutionary." Khamenei will blame President Rouhani if the negotiations fail or move in a direction that he does not like. His legitimacy stems from the Iranian revolutionary project, and any compromise would be an admission that he does not believe in that narrative of world history.

Iran's imperial ambitions are not new. Under the Safavids, the Shah and the mullahs alike, Tehran has vied for regional domination. Do not expect Iran to compromise its principles any time soon.

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