

The State(s) of Ideology in Iran

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Iranian policymakers understand the failure of their effort to export the Islamic Revolution, and acknowledge the more feasible path to hegemony offered by geopolitics.

In January 2016, The Washington Institute sponsored a daylong workshop on the challenges to U.S. policy in the Middle East posed by new trends in political ideology. This PolicyWatch is part of a [series of written contributions by participants](#).

The conception of ideology expressed in the Islamic Republic of Iran's constitution gains clarity when placed in historical perspective.

Regional Background

The period of interest here dates to after World War II, when the so-called age of ideology emerged in the Arab Middle East after dimming in Western Europe. In particular, Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser championed Arab nationalism, which reached its apogee with the short-lived United Arab Republic of 1958-1961. Thereafter, the Baath Party, in both Iraq and Syria, carried the Arab nationalist banner.

As for the seeds of Islamic political ideology, they were sown in the early works of the Indian-Pakistani thinker Abul Ala Maududi (1903-1979), who continued developing these ideas in striving to make the Islamic Republic of Pakistan "an ideological state." In the Middle East and North Africa, Islamic ideology was radicalized by Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), who considered Nasser's Arab nationalist ideology false -- a mere imitation of the infidels' nationalism. Yet eventually, the Islamic ideology forged by Maududi and Qutb would mellow into "electoral Islamism," as embodied this century by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia. Against such developments, one can persuasively argue that the Islamic State considers the electoral Islamists imitators and regards its own mission as returning to the pure, anti-ideological tradition of the Salaf ("pious ancestors," or early generations of Muslims), uncontaminated by sectarianism or Western-inspired ideologies.

The Iranian Path

State ideology in Iran has had a trajectory distinct from that elsewhere in the Middle East. Iranian nationalism, in particular, arose during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911, in opposition to the decaying late-Qajar monarchy, and was appropriated entirely by the state's modernizers under Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-1941). Although the nationalism of Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq (1951-1952) troubled the West, he and his National Front allies were no ideologues, and the Iranian leadership successfully suppressed the Tudeh Party, along with its communist worldview. Also insignificant was the fascist SUMKA, although the party may now be enjoying an afterlife thanks to the retrieval of its Greater Iran maps by former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Mohsen Rezaii and their possible use by IRGC generals. Meanwhile, the Islamic ideology of Maududi and Qutb began creeping into Iran through translations in the early 1970s, but it paled against the modernist, eclectic, and revolutionary Islamic ideology of Ali Shariati (d. 1974). Ruhollah Khomeini's followers did not embrace Shariati's anticlericalist tone, however, and only during and immediately after the 1979 Islamic Revolution did Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti and Hassan Ayat quickly forge a suitably clericalist ideology to supplant it.

Shariati's conception of Islamic modernism was further assailed by Mehdi Bazargan, the former interim prime minister, beginning in the late 1980s. Ultimately, in his famous 1993 essay "Farba-tar az ideolozhy" (Richer than Ideology), published in the periodical *Kiyan*, Bazargan rejected ideology as demeaning when applied to Islam.

Latecomer though it was, the clericalist ideology based on Khomeini's vaguely sketched idea of *velayat-e faqih* (literally, guardianship of the jurist) was indeed incorporated into the Islamic Republic's constitution. From the viewpoint of ideology, however, the declared success of Iran's revolution as the first of a new global Islamic ideology marked a commitment to export the Islamic revolution. It is true that this commitment initially had a strongly pan-Islamic intent. The preamble to the Islamic Republic's constitution affirms this commitment to continuing the revolution abroad in order to create a "unified and universal community of believers (*umma*)."
Nevertheless, the attempt to implement the commitment soon proved feasible only in countries such as Lebanon, with the creation of Hezbollah. The venture failed badly in places like Iraq, Bahrain, Afghanistan, and especially Pakistan, provoking a Muslim sectarian backlash there and elsewhere in the long run.

This backlash was fiercest in the emergence of the Sunni global jihad led by al-Qaeda in the 1990s and later the rise of the Islamic State, developments that deflated Iran's role as the exporter of Islamic revolution. The makers of Iran's foreign policy, irrespective of their varying positions on other issues, have no illusions about the embrace of their Islamic ideology in the Middle East today. They know it expired long ago.

Given this awareness, one can proceed to an assessment of the relative weights of ideological commitment versus regional hegemony in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. The story thus turns to the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whose personal contribution to the country's official ideology was highlighted in his campaign targeting former president Mohammad Khatami and the notion of Western "cultural invasion" (*hojum-e farhangi*). More recently, while he refrained in 2014 from explicitly endorsing the nuclear talks, hardliner opponents of a nuclear deal, led by the newspaper *Kayhan*, waited in vain for the ayatollah to signal a return to his earlier position. When the signal finally came late in 2015, it took the softer form of preventing a "cultural penetration" (*nofuz-e farhangi*) from accompanying lifted sanctions. Such a gesture, however, was likely meant as domestic appeasement for hardliners after the nuclear deal and will not affect Iran's foreign policy. The hardliners' foreign policy aims, meanwhile, appear to be geopolitical rather than ideological. The same effectively holds for President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, although they tend to emphasize long-term regional hegemony and the shorter-term goal of ending economic sanctions and Iran's isolation as a pariah state.

Old Maps, Enduring Ambitions

The maps recovered by IRGC commanders roughly show the boundaries of the Sasanian Empire on the eve of the seventh-century Muslim conquest. Its capital, Ctesiphon, is located near Baghdad, and the map encompasses the southern shore of the Persian Gulf as well as Yemen. To be sure, the dusting off of these maps did not indicate an interest in reviving SUMKA ideology but rather a desire to restore Iran's regional hegemony. In April 2015, the day before parameters for a nuclear deal were announced in Lausanne, Switzerland, Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi paid a well-choreographed visit to downtown Tikrit, which had recently been liberated from Islamic State control. Despite unconvincing denials on all sides, every player knew the previous week of U.S. air attacks had been decisive in breaking the siege.

Stepping back a bit further, the Islamic State's capture of the so-called Sunni Triangle forced the Iranian government to dispatch Gen. Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC Qods Force, to Baghdad in June 2014, ahead of Iranian ground troops. In 2008, it should be recalled, Soleimani had proposed a deal with the United States through Jalal Talabani, a Kurd who was then Iraq's president, completely bypassing the Iraqi prime minister and his government. In September 2014, on the very day of President Rouhani's arrival in New York, the United States launched its first air raid in Syria, attacking the training camp of the Khorasan Group, an al-Qaeda offshoot declared by the U.S. national intelligence director to be a greater homeland security danger than the Islamic State. The group's leader had been identified by the U.S. Department of State in 2012 as an al-Qaeda operative given asylum in Tehran after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the director of its operations from Iran. There can be little doubt that the Qods Force gave the U.S. commanders in Iraq valuable information about Khorasan for launching its raids in Syria.

Grasping Reality

In the more general picture, Iranian policymakers, extending to Ayatollah Khamenei, clearly understand the failure of their effort to export the Islamic Revolution, most glaringly in Iraq, where they lost the war to Saddam Hussein, and in Pakistan, where sectarian violence was particularly damaging to the Shiite community. They recognize further that Iran's gains in regional politics owe nothing to the revolution's export and effectively everything to the fall of its chief neighboring enemies, Saddam in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan. And they know they have ceded the mantle of revolutionary Islam -- first to the global jihad of al-Qaeda and now to the Islamic State's so-called caliphate. National interest and realpolitik, by contrast, aptly explain the foreign policy of post-revolution Iran, from its attempt to end the country's diplomatic isolation to its support for the Assad regime against the Sunni Islamists and for the Zaidi Houthis against al-Qaeda in Yemen.

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