

Through Khamenei's Eyes

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's unique take on the uprisings in the Arab World

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Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's adventurous approach with respect to the region provoked Saddam Hussein to invade Iran on 22 September 1980 and launch a devastating war that lasted for 8 years. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Khomeini's confident and former deputy commander-in-chief of Iran's armed forces, has said in an interview with Sadeq Ziba Kalam that Khomeini was pleased when Iraq invaded Iran: "Saddam trapped himself. Now we can solve Middle East problems forever." But Khomeini's assessment of Iran's military capability and Iraq's ties with the Arab and Western worlds was unrealistic and led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the maiming of millions—not to mention the destruction of much of Iran's infrastructure. The destruction ended only when Khomeini drank his "poisoned chalice" and accepted UN Resolution 598, which called for an immediate ceasefire.

Not long after the war ended in August 1988, Khomeini passed away and was succeeded as supreme leader by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Around the same time, Rafsanjani was elected president of Iran and given a mandate to rebuild the country. Unfortunately, this clashed with Khamenei's objective of reconstructing Iran's military capability by refashioning its military doctrine.



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei addresses a group of his followers in Mashad

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Iran's post-war policy was to expand its soft power in various Islamic countries through overt and covert propaganda tactics, as well as through charitable activities. This was evident in Iran's meddling in Azerbaijan's conflict with Armenia in 1990, its support for Hamas and Hezbollah against Israel, and its interference in Iraq and Afghanistan during the 1990s and 2000s.

Iran was covertly providing financial and military assistance throughout the war to groups it perceived as having mutual interests, although it never publicly admitted this. Indeed, the use of the Quds Force as an external operational wing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) played an important role in advancing Iran's interests in the region as well as outside the Middle East (for example, Iranian investment in Venezuela).

After eight years of war, the revolution's promises had not been fulfilled, leaving much of the population disenchanted. With the war over, the government could begin to focus on implementing these promises, including modernizing the country's infrastructure and improving the economy. Indeed, the government eventually adopted many policies that had been rejected following the revolution because they represented Western models of development. By the end of the war, most Iranians had begun to question the political legitimacy of the clergy and the theory of *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the Islamic jurist).

Iran's declaration of America and Israel as enemies is representative of its penchant for making enemies rather than finding friends. Iran has a problematic relationship with both its Arab neighbors and great Arab powers, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Its relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan are also very complicated. Tehran's relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan have been uneven since its support of Armenia in during the 1990s. Iran and Russia enjoy cooperative relations, but it seems that Russia sees Iran as leverage against the West more than as a strategic partner. Iran's foreign policy over the last three decades has helped it isolate itself, rather than building confidence with regional powers. The only exception is with Syria, where both sides had mutual interest in opposing Israel and the West—and also shared a hatred of Saddam.

The Islamic Republic is using two tools to consolidate its position in the Middle East. The first is soft power, which entails Iran's use of media and religious networks to proselyte Shi'ite Islamic ideology and to elevate Khamenei's cult status. Second, the regime has created proxies and established relations with various Islamic groups, both armed and non-armed, throughout the Muslim world. Many of these groups can be identified when they accept the Islamic Republic's invitation to travel to Iran to attend ceremonies celebrating the anniversary of the revolution or the annual memorial proceedings of Ayatollah Khomeini's death. Each year, more than ten thousand Muslims affiliated with various Islamic groups travel to Tehran to reinforce their relations with Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Khamenei also recruits Muslims to join his ideological agenda under academic pretenses. For instance, Al Mustafa International University, located in Qom, provides ideological training to Muslims and helps connect different Islamist groups across the world. It has dozens of branches outside Iran and hosts thousands of foreign students.

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What is astonishing is that despite the Islamic Republic's ongoing repression of its Sunni minority, it seems to have no problem making strategic and tactical alliances with Sunni organizations so long as they threaten Western or Israeli interests. Iran's longstanding cooperation with Hamas is a clear example of how two parties that are based on mutually exclusive ideologies can unite against a common enemy. The other obvious example is the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest Sunni organization in the world, which

also has significant ideological differences with the Islamic Republic. Just as the Muslim Brotherhood saw the emergence of the Islamic Republic in 1979 as the triumph of its vision, the Iranians view the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as the continuity of their own revolution. For instance, Ayatollah Khamenei disliked the expression “Arab Spring” because it suggests that recent Arab uprisings stem from a desire to establish democratic governments instead of tyrannies. Instead, Khamenei prefers the term “Islamic Awakening”, which both undermines the Arab nature of these movements and dismisses representative democracy as the principle demand of the protesters, while at the same time portraying these movements as Muslim aspirations to produce Islamic governments.

Central to Ayatollah Khamenei's military doctrine is the belief that Iran cannot afford another military confrontation on its own territory. He is well aware of Iran's relatively weak conventional war capabilities, as well as the ideological and political costs of war for the Islamic Republic. Khamenei also believes that governments, like Morsi's in Egypt, will eventually implement Shari'a law and come into conflict with both America and Israel. He also thinks that the “Islamic Awakening” movements are inspired by the 1979 revolution and influenced by its policies and ideology.

Recent demonstrations in Islamic countries and attacks on American embassies and diplomats are being used by Iran as proof that the most genuine characteristic of the “Islamic Awakening” is in fact anti-Americanism. The uprisings in Arab countries could have been a sweet experience for the Islamic Republic had not Syria been involved.

For the last three decades, Syria has become Iran's closest ally. This has, in turn, allowed Iran to establish a presence closer to Israel. Iranian threats towards Israel and America are central to its foreign policy, and its current military doctrine places emphasis on avoiding direct military confrontation with its enemies while building up its asymmetrical warfare capability. Syria is the backyard through which Iran runs both its soft war and proxy war against Israel and the United States.



السعي نحو الكمال الثروة، ماذا تعني لك؟

قد يتطلب تحقيق الكمال سنوات من التفاني والالتزام، ونحن في باركليز وبلت نفهم ذلك تماما. ولهذا السبب، نقدم لك أعلى مستويات الخبرة والخدمة مع التركيز على أهدافك المالية القصيرة والطويلة الأجل. نستطيع مساعدتك في الاستفادة من ثروتك بأكثر شكل مُمكن وذلك كي تتركس وقتك للسعي وراء اهتماماتك. اتصل بنا في دبي على +٩٧١ (٤) ٣٦٥٢٩٠٠ وفي أبو ظبي على الرقم +٩٧١ (٢) ٤٩٥٨٣٢٩ وفي دولة قطر على الرقم +٩٧٤ (٤) ٤٩٦٧٥١٥ وفي المملكة العربية السعودية على الرقم +٩٦٦ (١) ٨٨٠٦٥٠٠ أو تفضل بزيارة موقعنا الإلكتروني barclayswealth.com اليوم.

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As much as Ayatollah Khamenei views the Arab Spring uprisings as a genuine crystallization of people's hatred of dictatorship and poverty, he firmly believes that the Syrian revolt was provoked by the United States and aimed at weakening the anti-Israeli front in the Middle East—and consequently, the Islamic Republic. In other words, for Khamenei, if the Syrian crisis results in the collapse of the Assad regime, it could be a prelude to military action initiated by Israel or the United States against Iran.

The fall of Assad, when coupled with an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, would cause Iran to lose two key aspects of its strategy. This means it has to advance its foreign policy in such a way that it guarantees its supremacy in the region, and makes Iran appear dangerous to Israel and the West. Separately, the loss of Assad cannot be compared to the loss of the Iranian nuclear program. For this reason, Khamenei believes that Iran should support Arab uprisings in other countries and help Assad suppress the opposition, which is funded and supported by the US and its allies.

The recent murder of the US ambassador and three others in Libya will likely discourage Western governments who are contemplating intervention in Syria. Conversely, Iran is delighted to see that an amateur anti-Islamic movie has mobilized Islamists to come to the streets in the Arab world and express anti-American sentiments.

In its 16 September editorial, *Kayhan*, Iran's official newspaper, recommended that "two actions should be taken: first to punish all those who were involved in insulting religious sacred principles and second to pursue this issue through legal process." Since Shari'a law calls for death in cases of blasphemy, *Kayhan* appears to be demanding the death of those behind the film

Iran sees the furor in the Middle East as an opportunity to distract the focus from its own Tehran's nuclear program and the on-going Syrian crisis. This is evident in Iran's renewed campaign against Salman Rushdie. For instance, the 15 Khordad Foundation, a government entity under Khamenei's direct supervision, has recently increased the reward for killing Salman Rushdie by \$500,000, and has announced that as long as Khomeini's fatwa against Rushdie has not been fulfilled, insults to Islam would persist. Now the Foundation



During the Iran-Iraq War, thousands of Iranian Basiji (mobilized volunteer forces) hold religious banners and a portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini at a rally before their departure for the front, Shiroudi Stadium, Tehran, 4th February 1986

Photo © Getty Images

will pay \$3,300,000 to anyone who kills or provides information leading to the death of the British novelist and the author of the *Satanic Verses*.

So far, Iran holds the upper hand in the Syrian crisis. The recent outrage in the Muslim world has helped Assad and Khamenei by expanding the zone of fear to countries that were previously deemed safe for the United States. Khamenei believes the West's weakness to be his strength. He welcomes all efforts to make West—especially the United States—more uneasy. He has full confidence in both the nuclear program and the Assad regime. The two are

safe—at least until the US presidential election in November. Developments over the next few months will show to what extent Iran and Syria could benefit from the multitude of distractions that currently plague the United States. ■

Mehdi Khalaji is a Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shi'ite groups in the Middle East. A Shi'ite theologian by training, Mr. Khalaji has also served on the editorial boards of two prominent Iranian periodicals, and produced for the BBC as well as the US government's Persian news service.
