



THE FAILURE OF WESTERN POLICIES TOWARD IRAN'S POWER PROJECTION & RESILIENCE STRATEGIES

El fracaso de las políticas occidentales hacia las estrategias de proyección de poder y resistencia de Irán

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Today, the Islamic Republic has reached the age of reason after forty-three years in power. Its two pillars of existence are nationalism — reinforced by its exclusion from the international scene — and religion — as an ideological mechanism of resilience to evolve, and above all, to endure over time. This nationalist unconsciousness and the appropriation of its destiny in a logic of religious belief are the unexpected result of multiple offensive Western policies such as economic embargo, maximum pressure, sabotage, and targeted assassinations of Iranian personalities with the aim of putting an end to its nuclear programme and annihilating its unsuspected ambitions of expansion in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region. It seems that these Western, and more specifically American, policies have had the opposite effect and have only accelerated the rise of the principalists to power. Nowadays, this hard-line policy between conservatives and ultra-conservatives is more involved in logic of security and external defence policy to strengthen the economic, military and strategic capacities of the “axis of resistance”, and a new domestic policy called “economy of resistance” (a politico-religious project to counteract economic sanctions, as an alternative for the survival of the Islamic Republic while maintaining its independence from the West). The latter is based on logic of self-defence that aims to achieve economic self-sufficiency to counteract the external enemy, and adopts an internal policy that can broaden its popular partisan base. This would help maintain the goals of the imamate and, above all, keep Iran independent from the West.

Resilience strategies; power projection; Iranian domestic and foreign policy; political influence and National security.

Estrategias de resiliencia; proyección de poder; política interior y exterior iraní; influencia política y seguridad nacional.



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Hoy en día, la República Islámica ha alcanzado la edad de la razón tras cuarenta y tres años en el poder. Sus dos pilares de existencia son el nacionalismo —reforzado por su exclusión de la escena internacional— y la religión —como mecanismo ideológico de resistencia para evolucionar y, sobre todo, para perdurar en el tiempo—. Esta inconsciencia nacionalista y la apropiación de su destino en una lógica de creencia religiosa son el resultado inesperado de las múltiples políticas ofensivas de Occidente, como el embargo económico, la presión máxima, el sabotaje y los asesinatos de personalidades iraníes con el objetivo de poner fin a su programa nuclear y aniquilar sus insospechadas ambiciones de expansión en Oriente Medio y la región del Golfo Pérsico. Parece que estas políticas occidentales, y más concretamente estadounidenses, han tenido el efecto contrario y no han hecho más que acelerar el ascenso de los principalistas al mando. Actualmente, esta política de línea dura entre conservadores y ultraconservadores está más implicada en la lógica de la política de seguridad y defensa exterior para reforzar las capacidades económicas, militares y estratégicas del “eje de la resistencia”, y en una nueva política interior denominada “economía de la resistencia” (proyecto político-religioso para contrarrestar las sanciones económicas, como alternativa para la supervivencia de la República Islámica manteniendo su independencia de Occidente). Este último se basa en la lógica de autodefensa que pretende lograr la autosuficiencia económica para contrarrestar al enemigo exterior, y adopta una política interna que puede ampliar su base partidista popular. Esto ayudaría a mantener los objetivos del imanato y, sobre todo, mantener a Irán independiente de Occidente.



1. Sources and methods

This article offers a perspective on the failure of Western policies *vs* Iran. The author has been a journalist and documentary filmmaker for the past fifteen years working about/in the MENA region's conflict and post-conflict zones. She has travelled to Iran since 2006, covering the 2009 Iranian presidential elections and the protests that occurred during Ahmadinejad's re-election. The author has interacted with Iranians of all classes, popular, political and religious elites in Iran and its diaspora in Europe; and has conducted several works in Iran on social and political issues, as well as on the status of women in Shiism. The data of this article is collected from a variety of primary and open sources during her various travels, and from interviews conducted in the field and at a distance.

2. Introduction

The West and the world's leading power, the United States, seem to have failed to counter the emergence of Iranian power in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Among the political choices made is that of abandoning the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) nuclear negotiations with the arrival of Donald Trump in power. It must be noted that the latter's mandate only accelerated the rise of the principalists to power in Iran with the arrival of President Ebrahim Raisi. Today, with the return of the Democrats to the centre of power in the United States, President Joe Biden is trying to return to the nuclear negotiations. The objective of this dossier is to revive the 2015 agreement that limited Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for

the lifting of sanctions¹. Tehran refuses to talk directly with the US, and demands an end to all sanctions and a guarantee that the US will not be able to walk away from an agreement again². Europeans, Russians and Chinese are therefore shuttling between the Iranian and American delegations.

In this article I examine the ins and outs of this thesis; that Western sanctions, maximum pressure and the US attitude towards Iran have been and are a Gordian knot to the strengthening of the Iranian revolutionary base, as well as the expansion of its platform of resistance inside and outside the country. The legitimate question to be announced here is whether the Western sanctions against “the mullahs’ regime” are not ultimately counterproductive?

The Iranian presidential election campaign of June 2021 in the hands of the ultra-conservatives has made the nuclear dossier and negotiations with the West its hobbyhorse by vigorously criticising the political choices of the former administration of the outgoing President Hassan Rouhani. Although this dossier also aroused keen international interest with the arrival of the Democrats in the White House under the mandate of Joe Biden in January 2021, the negotiations carried out could not lead to a result.

This article aims to demonstrate how Western policies against Iran aimed at curbing its influence in the region, or even ending its “mullah regime”, have instead backfired by strengthening the rise of its principalist wing to power and have only hardened the Islamic Republic’s posture towards the West.

3. Revolution beyond borders

Many US foreign policy experts³ agree that the long and tumultuous US history with the Islamic Republic is based on a genuine rivalry equation that can hardly be put on a pedestal.

It is interesting to understand the Iranian choices by an ability to transform a disadvantageous situation towards them by capitalising on it through a strategic posture to take advantage of it. To this end, how does the Islamic Republic of Iran compete with the world’s leading power to circumvent the policy of the strong over the weak? Is it a strategic investment in irregular warfare? How does it manage to circumvent Western sanctions and gain the support of its popular mass and even achieve influence outside its borders?

To answer this set of questions, it is necessary for our reader to take note of Khomeini’s strategic thinking embedded in Iran’s military defence doctrine. In Ayatollah Khomeini’s mind, the Islamic Revolution is hardly an Iranian property. It is above all a divine grace to share his message, and to carry it beyond Iranian borders. Ayatollah Khomeini thus became a missionary in the name of God to transmit the “know-how” of the Imamate (Wilayat e-Faqih)⁴ in Iran and elsewhere. This thought marked the beginning of hostility towards the Islamic Republic from its Persian Gulf and Middle Eastern neighbours.

In Ayatollah Khomeini’s mind, the Islamic Revolution is hardly an Iranian property

1 Franck Mathevon (2021, December). *Lueur d’espoir dans les négociations sur le nucléaire iranien*. France Inter.

2 Nourredine Al Dagher (2021, January 10). *Iranian Nuclear Negotiations*. Al Jazeera Arabic Report.

3 Anthony H. Cordesman (2010, August 13). *Strategic Competition with Iran: The Military Dimension*. Center for Strategic & International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/strategic-competition-iran-military-dimension>

4 Interviews with religious intellectuals: female Mujtahidates and Ayatollahs in Qom, Mashhad and Tehran between 2006 and 2010.

It should be noted that the strategies for exporting political or cultural models to the Middle East since the second half of the 20th century constitute a significant phenomenon, the analysis of which allows for a better understanding of the evolution of internal political processes and relations between states. While the Nasserite legacy did not outlive its initiator in Egypt, declining even more in Syria after the collapse of the United Arab Republic (1958-1961), the expansion of Saudi Salafism has been relatively successful but undeniable. The Nasserite and Saudi Salafist Arab nationalist models were at the heart of the “Arab Cold War” that dominated Middle Eastern power relations in the 1950s and 1960s. The death of Nasser in 1970 allowed the Saudi model to flourish until the Iranian revolution broke out in 1979.

By proclaiming its desire to export its own, the Islamic Republic of Iran has heightened the competition between these models in the Middle East and reactivated the Shiite/Sunni antagonism that had taken a back seat in the twentieth century, when nationalist ideology and the mimicry of “imported models”⁵ were hegemonic. However, for a variety of reasons, the export strategy of the Iranian revolution has been met with hostility in the region, and the strengthening of the US presence in the Middle East has contributed to the revolution’s loss of momentum. From this perspective, it is generally accepted that the Islamic Republic of Iran has not been able to export its revolutionary model to other countries in the region. The resistance and solidarity of Middle Eastern states to Iranian strategies have been mitigated by the greater receptivity of non-state actors to the appeal of the Khomeini model, particularly within Shiite communities. Thus, Iran has succeeded in imposing the military-ideological model of the Legion (Sepah) formed by the Revolutionary Guard Corps in several Middle Eastern countries through organisations such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq and Ansar-Allah in Yemen⁶.

From the Sura the Thunder, verse 11 that it all began. These Qur’anic words were the first breaths of the Iranian revolution in 1979, and then were a force in the institutionalisation of the Islamic Republic

4. What does Iran mean after 43 years of Islamic revolution?

“Allah does not change the condition of a people until he changes their mindset”⁷

From the Sura the Thunder, verse 11 that it all began. These Qur’anic words were the first breaths of the Iranian revolution in 1979, and then were a force in the institutionalisation of the Islamic Republic. This process of institutionalisation of the Islamic revolution found two possible levels of immersion. The first is the mindset of Iranian society to want change, but not just any change; but the one with the return of religion in the public affairs of civil society. The second level of immersion is the ability of Ayatollah Khomeini, with his scholarly background, to carry out a politico-religious project for an Islamic society, thus responding to the demands of the population, which was angry with the former regime. The two levels of ideological dimensions are certainly a conditional in the concretisation of the institutionalisation of the Islamic

5 Fatima Moussaoui, “Asymmetrical Strategies of the Imamate Influence and the Empowerment of Ansar Allah”, UNED, February 2021.

6 Ibid.

7 That is, some form of reset of the mind is required for the change to take place (from) Quran, Surah the Thunder, verse 11.

Revolution. That said, they must also be accompanied by a significant capacity for strategic and organisational vision on the part of the revolutionary core. The latter was, of course, created and nurtured by Ayatollah Khomeini throughout his career as a scholar, and then as a religious and political activist from outside Iran. The birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran was not accidental; it was a response to a popular expectation.

Certainly, with hindsight, a large proportion of those who went to the streets to overthrow the Shah did not know what this politico-religious project of the imamate, which will be gradually put in place, really was. One of the mothers interviewed after the demonstrations following Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009, shared her testimony with a sad and disarmed air:

Thirty years ago, I went down with my husband, our friends and neighbours in the streets of Tehran like thousands of Iranians to demand the departure of the Shah. I was pregnant with Soumeya, who was born a few days after the revolution. We did not know that this revolution would become what it is today⁸.

The Iranian revolution was in the eyes of the disappointed being confiscated and deviated from its initial goals of not only reducing the social class system, rehabilitating religion in the public space and defeating imperialism but also enjoying freedom of expression and thought, which was banned by the Shah's regime. It is essential to mention that the construction of the Islamic Republic of Iran was done step by step and could not fully enjoy all its faculties of political and military strategist and regional force overnight until the years and especially with its experience of war with Iraq which lasted 8 years.

It is also worth mentioning that this Islamic institution did not disappear with the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. On the contrary, it continued to evolve on many levels in terms of managing the economy, education, industry... One of the institutional wings that saw a transcendent transformation was the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the first revolutionary core. The Revolutionary Guard Corps was Ayatollah Khomeini's bodyguard, tasked with protecting the values of the Islamic Revolution and, above all, ensuring the continuity of the Imamate and its transmission to the next generation. Without forgetting, the ambition to carry his torch beyond the Iranian borders as a pact signed with God; that of sharing his knowledge and benefit with his Muslim brothers in the first place and with all humanity in the second place. An act of Muslim self-giving commitment to the other has been and still is a "powerful" form of ideology in the Iranian Islamic revolutionary functioning.

The Iranian revolution has been able to create a state institution after more than 40 years in power, far from being perfect it has established Islamic social model, an Islamic education system, technological and military development, social evolution and social justice, developed domestic economy, carried the voice of the revolution to the poor and oppressed beyond Iran's borders, and continues to set new goals, thus continuing its quest for which it was intended⁹.

The reality of Iranian society today remains mixed between several voices that are not necessarily pro-regime, and far from being completely against the Iranian state since the Western

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8 Interviews made with Iranian families who participated in the overthrow of Reza Shah in 1979 (as part of the coverage of the 2009 presidential elections in Tehran).

9 Interview, (phone) Mostefa Khoshcheshm, Public Diplomacy Strategist, Senior Analyst of FP and Strategic Affairs, Tehran, Ramadan 2021.

political will towards Iran has reinforced the Iranian nationalist sentiment. This has created a balance of power and has served to consolidate the power position of the principalists in Iran.

5. From the West to the East: Crossed Views on Iran

Iran is a “rogue state” for Bill Clinton, a member of the “axis of evil” for George W. Bush, a “state of concern” for Obama, and, for Donald Trump, a “terrorist state”. Iran’s operational policies in support and empowerment of the neglected minorities in the region, otherwise known as “militias”, as well as its political and military assertiveness probably threaten the national security of the Gulf Arab countries. Finally, its nuclear programme and technological advances in the military sector seem to be one ambition for too many, confirming the suspicions of Western countries and allies about Iranian influence policies in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. U.S having used the White House bully pulpit to reach out to the Iranian people to little effect, the administration — with eager support from both parties in the Congress — also embraced a high profile effort to support opponents of the Iranian regime. The centrepiece of this policy was the February 2006 announcement of a \$75 million fund to promote democracy in Iran¹⁰.

Consequently, Iran has “hegemonic” and even “expansionist” visions through its engagement with the poor and oppressed in their own countries under the leadership of the Shiite crescent. This Western reading of contemporary Iran certainly has repercussions on Iranian civil society and above all reinforces its national adherence. The latter is only an unsurprising observation since Iran has a civilisation of a 3000 years old empire, and above all has nothing to envy either to the West or to the East. Is this perception of Western incomprehension of this budding rival ultimately biased?

The West does not understand Iran because it does not respect it. It cannot face a country that is jealously proud of its independence, and ambitions to acquire technology, to have its own cultural model and to claim it loud and clear. It does not respect Iran because it is not subject to its political, cultural and other dictates¹¹.

The understanding of Arab-Muslim countries of Iran is still different, tinged by distrust and even rejection of Iranians in the line of the Imam¹². Since it is not only a question of political ambition for regional expansion, but also a question of divergence based on religious readings; on the one hand between the two Sunni and Shiite trends with the distribution of Muslim leadership in the world and on the other hand within the Shiite camp itself disputing the Imamate value and the function of his leadership; very critical of the Imamate version of Wilayat e-Fagih. In Ayatollah Khomeini’s vision it is primordial to set up a government ruled by Islamic precepts under the authority of a “wilaya” or “faqih”, a jurist invested by God who takes on the functions of the Prophet, explains Constance Arminjon in her essay¹³. Ayatollah Khomeini’s doctrine in-

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¹⁰ Suzanne Maloney (2008). ‘U.S Policy Toward Iran: Missed Opportunities and Paths Forwards’. *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 32(2), 25-48.

¹¹ Interview with Dr. Mohamed Marandi, 09-13 avril 2021.

¹² The Imam’s Line, a term for the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini, pursuing the doctrine of Wilayet e-Fagih in contemporary Iran.

¹³ Constance Arminjon (2010). L’Instauration de la “Guidance du Juriste” en Iran: Les Paradoxes de la Modernité Chiite. *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, (149), 211-228. <https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.21941>

novates by promoting the role of the Imam to a superior rank which is equivalent to the role of prophets as he is considered as “infallible”. Let us stress that this remains a very important point of contention between Shia thinkers, such as the position of Ayatollah Ali Sistani in relation to the innovation of Ayatollah Khomeini. On the other hand, no rivalry is to be highlighted, since Iran’s opposition to Saudi Arabia is no longer really of the order of a dispute over religious leadership but above all of the acceptance of the other as a neighbouring regional actor of weight with whom to coexist and cohabit without calling upon external forces to manage regional security affairs.

The Islamic republic is not a threat to its Arab neighbours. It did not invade Iraq, nor Syria. The fragility of governments like Saudi Arabia is due to their political reliance on the United States against the will of its civil society¹⁴.

This point of view expressed by this Iranian academic that Iran is, in no way, a threat to its Arab neighbours acquires some nuanced truth; but at no point does it exclude that Iranian ambitions are a danger for them and it’s a reaction to their alliances with the US and Israel.

To better understand this reasoning, it should be noted that the Gulf countries being royalist regimes in an increasingly globalised world, the significant advance of the Arab revolutions throughout the MENA region, and the new millennial youth demanding more social and economic justice, put these young GCC countries in a fragile position due to their precarious constitution in terms of political legitimacy and in easy prey to substantive political changes, in this unstable and shifting climate. Iran uses this to its advantage to assert its presence, ideas and regional influence.

I can’t put all the Gulf countries on the same level when it comes to their relations with Iran and the image they have. If we talk about KSA, there is a fear of the Islamic republic because it has a legitimacy that the royal family has not acquired, and the consolidation of Iranian power in the region and on the international scene can foil the flaws in the foundation of KSA, and moreover it is no longer a state, it is rather, there is an individual in charge. Moreover, it is an ally of the United States¹⁵.

What needs to be pointed out is that Iran’s operational policies in the region are reactions to specific political contexts. These are the results of the governmental political agendas of these countries. The Islamic Republic appears to be flexible and adapts more quickly to these same contexts to achieve predefined goals or seize opportunities that it may not have thought of or predicted. Iran’s investment in the Gulf countries certainly lies in its strength of knowledge and mastery of the social, economic, political and religious fields of these countries and not in any strategic policy of direct offensive.

The sole beneficiaries of a military conflict between Washington and Tehran would be the forces of radical anti-Americanism in the Islamic world. For these reasons, many of America’s closest regional allies (Gulf States) have long viewed the consequences of an attack on Iran as more threatening than the obvious dangers of a nuclear Iran¹⁶.

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14 Interviews (phone), Dr. Mohamed Marandi, 09-13 April 2021.

15 Ibid.

16 Suzanne Maloney (2008). U.S Policy toward Iran: Missed Opportunities and Paths Forwards. *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 32(2), 25-48.

Iran is far from considering any of the GCC countries as a rival, but the political and military rivalry is probably with the United States. The same goes for Israel, which is waging a shadow war with Iran. The two states are far from being rivals, according to the Iranian conception, since Israeli power is defined in relation to its main ally the United States and the support of European countries. Finally, the policy of regional rivalry in search of power and claim to be an unavoidable actor in international relations for Iran is valued in relation to its weight as an independent power. It certainly considers that the GCC countries and Israel are not really the powers with which it competes in practice, since their powers are misleading and depend only on the goodwill of an ally.

6. Iranian views on the western vision

When the US walked away from the nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action - JCPOA) with Trump's arrival in power, the Iranian public opinion shifted. This view has given rise to a feeling of injustice and contempt for their country on the part of the West. They find themselves helpless in the face of this shadow war, especially the American one, against the "mullahs' regime". These policies of economic embargo and maximum pressure as well as the offensive policies of eliminating military leaders such as General Qasem Suleimani, as well as the targeted attacks against scientists, have only strengthened the Iranians' national allegiance to their country. More concretely, these Western political and military policies have allowed a massive adhesion of the popular mass to support their government, although differences of opinion in the country's management of affairs divide the different political clans, which then directly or indirectly influence public opinion. Several testimonies collected from Iranian citizens of different political persuasions, believe that their country is in a situation of unconventional war; rightly so as Western citizens are targeted by transnational terrorism. That is, they are also at war and live in not only economic but also security anxiety.

Not only are we caught up in the great economic challenge, but also in this health crisis of Covid-19. The Iranian vaccine is being tested. I would rather wait for our vaccine than be vaccinated by a Western vaccine. I don't trust their products¹⁷.

This perception of Iran since 1979 by the West to the East is far from being simplistic. This view is certainly biased as the policies implemented by the West, and more specifically by the United States, have failed to halt Iran's assertion as an emerging power and as a player in the region. Iran has proven its resilience and has become a force to be reckoned with. The Islamic Republic, after 43 years of existence, has established a model of Islamic society in practice and quite independently, without any Western influence. The country has not only established its own complex, rich and intriguing education system, but also as a nation is armed with the capacity to acquire, produce and transfer military technology, and above all to be self-sufficient through a policy of *resilient economy*¹⁸, such as domestic production, especially food production.

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¹⁷ Interview conducted with anonymous Iranian citizen, May 2021.

¹⁸ Economy of resistance is a politico-religious project to counteract economic sanctions, as an alternative to the survival of the Islamic Republic while maintaining its independence from the West.

Iran's objectives are still being sought, but it has succeeded in creating its own model of Islamic society, independent of Western imperialist hegemony¹⁹.

Iran uses its *Imamate* vision to set the stage for regional operational security and defence policies. These mechanisms are still poorly understood and meaningless to the Western world; given its failure in recent decades to stop the emergence of Iranian power and bring it under its control. It has been mostly a shadow war with offensive in military escalations, and counter-offensives on third fields and even in Iran by targeted assassination of Iranian scientists. The *Imamate* understanding of the Islamic Republic is identified as being religious and political, while forgetting that *the secrets of the Imamate*²⁰ although rooted in religious value also bring a warrior's lesson so there is certainly strategic and military value not to be overlooked in any geostrategic and tactical thinking.

Let us not forget that the faithful warriors of the Islamic Revolution carry out their struggle with determination, lucidity, without expecting any return for their actions. But above all, they are ready to die in their mission to transmit *the Imamate thought*²¹. This Iranian reality is misunderstood and even often neglected by the West in its understanding and evaluation of the scope of *Wilayat e-Fagih* and its role as a messenger of a certain divine justice beyond Iranian borders. The Imamate has gone beyond its roles (political-economic, theological and social) and carries within it a purely strategic and military background dimension referring to the warriors of Karbala and the sacrifice of the grandson of the Prophet 'Hussein'. Indeed, the value of sacrifice for the *Jus ad bellum* or the "right cause" is a catalyst that is still misunderstood or even unjustified according to the codes of Western thought. Thus, the notion of belief in a divine entity remains an irrational approach, which the Western world has detached itself from with the advance of modernity. Yet another secret of the imamate initiated by Ayatollah Khomeini is this philosophy of waiting with the absence of *the hidden imam* (Imam Mahdi)²². It is completely neglected, although it is more than necessary to grasp contemporary Iran.

This notion of the absence of *Imam Mahdi* concedes with this philosophy of waiting for the return of the *Hidden Imam*, a spiritual conception and the rational imperative initiated by Ayatollah Khomeini that is to introduce a solution in the present time. This rational imperative will put an end to the injustice that the imperialist regimes are inflicting on the impoverished population. To this end, the religious leadership proper to the imams as well as that presupposed to the *hidden imam* is transferred to those closest to the imam in religious terms, awaiting his arrival. This philosophy is a revolutionary concept in the Shi'a clerical thought²³.

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19 Interview (phone), Dr. Mohamed Marandi, 09-13 April 2021

20 *The Secrets of the Imamate* is the "know-how" of the theological, spiritual teachings and political, military thinking of Ayatollah Khomeini in his function as a spiritual & political leader; which enabled the institutionalisation of the Islamic revolution as an Islamic Republic, as well as giving it a long life.

21 Interviews with religious intellectuals, women Mujtahidates Ayatollahs in Qom, Mashhad, Tehran between: 2006-2011.

22 *Imam Mahdi*, also known among Shiia community as the *Hidden Imam* or the twelfth imam; will return one day to install justice on earth.

23 Greg Bruno, 'Backgrounder: religion and politics in Iran', New York Times, 19 June 2008, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/cfr/world/slot3_20080619.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print

Imamate is an exception in the world and above all it continues to function in spite of attempts to defeat it, and the reason is its legitimate character to seek justice between individuals and peoples²⁴.

*The secrets of the imamate*²⁵ have consolidated this double position of autonomy and power projection of Iran, acquired after 43 years of existence, seems to be a gift of destiny, rather than a real political agenda predefined in advance, as if their belief, rightly or wrongly, in the imamate has ended up giving a reason for their faith to exist. This political and military “success” in an asymmetric irregular war is cyclical and above all a result of the failure of Western policies and those of the Arab countries of the Gulf to grasp the Islamic Republic in its paradoxes, its real ambitions and its mindset. More precisely, the fact that the Iranian popular majority is united behind its government is consolidated by the scope of Western policies against Iran. Unity is only achieved in the face of a common danger and this is one of the reasons that have also allowed the Islamic Republic to last over time, and also thanks to the American rivalry that has added fuel to its fire. The US policies towards Iran for more than 30 years have been a catalyst to reinforce their Imamate message and legitimise it. Since not only the perception and actions against Iran have reinforced the Iranian nationalist vision and motivated the population to apply a policy of *resistance economy*²⁶ initiated by the supreme leader, to invest in local industry such as food production but also to create a parallel economy via foreign channels and neighbouring countries. Moreover, an important technological and military production, while conducting empowerment actions among the neglected populations in their countries thus forming the “axis of resistance” seem to offer a legitimacy allowing to enlarge the circle of sympathizers, and especially to strengthen the circle of supporters, which goes far beyond the Iranian borders, hence the ability to create alliances far from being of Shiite values:

Civil society supports the steps of the Iranian state in its support for the Axis of Resistance²⁷.

Our legitimacy as a sovereign state lies in our political, economic, military and technological independence from the West²⁸.

Indeed, the question of legitimacy has been one of the crucial issues in the implementation of strategies to circumvent Western policies. This same philosophy of legitimacy cannot be achieved without a real coherence between the discourses of the Islamic Republic and its actions on the ground. Whether, it is in relation to its domestic policy or in relation to its foreign policy and its engagement with armed and unarmed pro-Iranian actors. This balance, which is committed and quite successful so far, seems advantageous for Iran. It draws a coherent political line between the objectives of resistance in relation to its domestic political context and its vision of fighting to preserve its national security. Iran has succeeded in repositioning

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26 *Resistance economy* is a politico-religious project to counteract economic sanctions, as an alternative to the survival of the Islamic Republic, while maintaining its independence from the West.

27 Interview (phone), Dr. Mohamed Marandi, 09-13 April 2021.

28 Interview (phone), IRGC Military Officer, 16 May 2021.

itself from a situation of weakness to one of resilience thanks to the Iranian collective public consciousness and above all as a reaction to Western policies against it.

7. The return of the principalists to power

Iran shows a strong nationalism by the acquisition of military technology and the legitimisation of regional expansion with the transfer not only of arms but also of “military knowledge” to regional armed actors; Iran has also strengthened economic and military alliance with China and Russia. Besides, the return of the principalists to power with the candidate Ebrahim Raisi, head of justice, will have far reaching consequences.

He is an important figure in the Iranian political landscape. He is a lawyer and has held very important positions in the state institution and among jurisdictional system. In addition, he has made a reputation for himself by leading a witch-hunt against corruption in state institutions. He is also a religious man and close to the supreme leader. I think he will be the future president of Iran²⁹.

Ebrahim Raisi is seen as spearheading the current anti-corruption campaigns that have led to the arrest of leading Iranian figures, including President Rouhani’s brother.

Several observers of Iranian politics agree to point out the heavy failure of the administration of Hassan Rouhani and his inability to find solutions and mechanisms to get the country out of this economic crisis, due to Western sanctions and especially because of the American policy of maximum pressure during Donald Trump’s administration. These observers have also accused Rouhani’s administration of having given too much credit to Europeans and to Westerners in general.

The reformist supporters of the administration of the outgoing President Hassan Rouhani have not been able to keep the promises they made during their last presidential campaigns, as they exaggerated their promises especially the ones concerning the negotiation with the West, the promise to put an end to the economic sanctions and above all to bring in foreign investors without having any other alternative if this political choice does not come to pass. At a time when the leading figures from the principalists were criticising them for having faith and trust in the negotiations with the West, they advocated another way of dealing with them, by making the sanctions ineffective, bearing the pressure because it is impossible to trust the West³⁰.

Indeed, the reformists failed to pull the country out of the financial crisis, but the situation only got worse with the Covid-19 pandemic. To date, the return to the negotiating table for the JCPOA has not led to a way out of the crisis.

The reformists have failed to deliver on their promises to the Iranian people, as Rouhani’s administration has relied solely on the nuclear deal that has not been signed so far. He

Ebrahim Raisi is seen as spearheading the current anti-corruption campaigns that have led to the arrest of leading Iranian figures, including President Rouhani’s brother

29 Interview, (phone) Mostefa Khoshcheshm, Public Diplomacy Strategist, Senior Analyst of FP and Strategic Affairs, Tehran, Ramadan 2021.

30 Interview, (phone) Abbas Aslani, Senior Researcher at Strategic Middle East Centre Tehran, May 2021.

had not put a plan B or C to remedy the failure of this agreement with the West. They have very little chance of winning this time³¹.

Although other Iranian intellectuals think that it is difficult to make an assessment of Hassan Rouhani's presidency for several reasons:

The Iranian politics goes beyond the conception of cleavages that Westerners understand by conservative, ultra-conservative, reformers or centrists. Iranian domestic politics is subject to a sophisticated political culture unique to Iranian understanding, and the cleavages are not as obvious to determine. I would say that it is a pragmatic policy responding to a specific context, and it changes as soon as the data on the ground changes³².

This observation about reformist policies provides leverage for the rise of the principalists' discourse. Civil society is angry with an administration that has failed to fulfil its promises and to negotiate with a West that is against them. This context certainly gives weight to political opponents³³. As for the principalists, they advocate a different policy, one that is harder on the West and less conducive to negotiation, but based on a form of resilience; its perspectives and projects are mainly oriented towards the East.

Concerning the dialogue with the United States, the principalists are also in a kind of deal resistance in a completely different approach, since they assume that negotiations are already a sign of weakness³⁴. Today, the strength of the principalists lies not only in the political failure of the reformists but also in their approaches to launching this new notion of an economy of resistance³⁵. The economy of resistance is an approach with the objective of turning things around by creating means for survival, based on a reversal of the situation and finding economic alternatives such as self-sufficiency in food production³⁶.

Mostefa Khoshcheshm believes that the principalists work differently and in his opinion, as they do not wait to sign agreements with the US and consequently are not able to implement an economic policy. They will work to put in place mechanisms for economic and technological development and internal military knowledge in the long term. Of course, diplomacy is a battle-horse, but they will not be satisfied with Western goodwill alone to move the Iranian nation forward as the reformists believed was the salvation.

The hostilities between the two powers (Iran/U.S.) briefly subsided when the JCPOA emerged, but the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal rekindled Iranian anger towards the United States. As Iranian conservative forces reinforce their anti-Western sentiments, only 37% believe the US would live up to its nuclear deal³⁷. Furthermore, the principalists not only rely

Today, the strength of the principalists lies not only in the political failure of the reformists but also in their approaches to launching this new notion of an economy of resistance

31 Interview, (phone) Mostefa Khoshcheshm, Public Diplomacy Strategist, Senior Analyst of FP and Strategic Affairs, Tehran, Ramadan 2021.

32 Interviews (phone) Dr. Mohamed Marandi, 09-13 April 2021.

33 Interview, (phone) Abbas Aslani, Senior Researcher at Strategic Middle East Centre Tehran, May 2021.

34 Ibid.

35 *Economy of resistance* is a politico-religious project to counteract economic sanctions, as an alternative to the survival of the Islamic Republic, while maintaining its independence from the West.

36 Interview, (phone) Abbas Aslani, Senior Researcher at Strategic Middle East Centre Tehran, May 2021.

37 Iranian Public Opinion at the Start of the Biden Administration: Report, Center for International & Security Studies in Maryland U.S., 24 February 2021, <https://cisssm.umd.edu/research-impact/publications/iranian-public-opinion-start-biden-administration-report>

on this policy of economic resistance but also take a close interest in the future of the youth in its evolution, and especially in creating opportunities for them to work, study, and start families in their turn. The equal sharing of wealth is a crucial issue in pro-poor mainstream policies:

They will certainly address social inequalities, reduce the gap between rich and poor and emphasise the participation of the younger generation. The Supreme Leader has already announced several times that they should give way to the young, and we are seeing a new succession, which is taking place between now and the next ten years³⁸.

Iranian youth has always been thirsty for expression, political, social and cultural engagement and has been very active in every election campaign. Going back in time, the 2009 presidential elections marked the Iranian political scene with the re-election of former president Ahmadinejad and the uprisings that followed under the leadership of the green movement led by the reformists. The following year, the “Arab Spring” made its entrance and attempts at revolt also followed in Iran, but they were brought under control. These events are a strong indicator of a youthful desire for change and represent a dynamic that should not be neglected and, above all, must be listened to and dealt with.

It is clear that this reality is shared with the case of several countries in the Arab-Muslim world during the last decade following the “Arab Spring” revolts, which were part of the rhetoric of the regime change policy. The latter has been able to see the success of this demand for change on the part of the youth within these states. These same states are failing to see and address this gap in demand for change, which is on the one hand justified and on the other hand co-opted by external forces. The results of these revolts throughout the MENA region have brought no prospects to envy. The counterrevolutions were installed and produced a great failure resulting in deaths, serious injuries, torn families, orphans and above all created the biggest immigration and humanitarian crisis of the 21st century and further widened the gap to allow sectarian conflicts to take hold, becoming more pronounced.

That said, the demands of these rising Y generations are so palpable that they must not be neglected or underestimated. In this perspective, contemporary Iran is by no means spared, although its system of governance is very complex and its mindset still remains incomprehensible to the West. It is important to note that this disenchanted youth in search of change is rather influenced by the West. Like all generations Y, young people in the Arab-Muslim world, and even in the Muslim world, including Iran, are expressing their needs and echoing the aspirations of *regime change*. The impact of Daesh on shaping this new Arab thinking through its millennial youth is not to be overlooked. The propaganda and intimidation policies of Daesh have undoubtedly created an unconscious rejection on the part of these young people who no longer see continuity between cultural Islam and the need to construct their own identities and their future as citizens.

The impact of Daesh on Arab youth has experienced two levels of rupture with Islamic reality. The first, concerns those who believed in the sirens of Daesh and joined their camps; the second level brings together a large majority of young Muslims, who have completely rejected this doctrine and who have found themselves faced with a cultural and political vacuum to fill. This

Iranian youth has always been thirsty for expression, political, social and cultural engagement and has been very active in every election campaign

³⁸ Interview, (phone) Mostefa Khoshcheshm, Public Diplomacy Strategist, Senior Analyst of FP and Strategic Affairs, Tehran, Ramadan 2021.

rupture, in other words, this gap, is certainly what we can identify as a *Generational split*³⁹. It is today's reality what is shaping the new Muslim world. The difference between Iranian youth and those of the Arab-Muslim world certainly lies in the mindset of the Iranians, who are confronted every day with a form of war with Western economic sanctions. This reality reinforces their nationalist unconscious, and they are inclined to change, but remain attached to the unity of their country, since the examples of regime changes in the Arab-Muslim world have not brought anything enviable.

The experiments with Iran's *regime change* have not been successful. There have been many disturbing protests in recent years. The most recent protests are not only directed against economic hardship, deteriorating living conditions, high inflation, youth unemployment and economic mismanagement, but they are also a reflection of the frustration of the population with the hard-line ideology of the ruling establishment. That said, the government has always known how to contain these uprisings, and no current youth movement can match the strength of the regime⁴⁰.

The Iranian youth is evolving, and the Islamic Republic is aware of this reality. This same youth is also aware of the stakes of a revolt, on the one hand the regime knows how to contain it and has proved it on several occasions and it remains really a minority, which does not really have support or a charismatic leader, and then, even if the youth will play a role in the evolution of the political situation for the years to come, it will certainly be in the framework of the Islamic Republic and not outside of it⁴¹. The whole MENA region seems to be caught in a vice of change, a fortiori as a consequence of *regime change's* policies. Comparing this reality of Arab-Muslim youth with the Iranian context seems legitimate since Iranian youth are also on the move and certainly have one thing in common with those of the Arab countries, as they are a millennial generation. These generations Y, Z are enamoured by the world of networks and social media, representing a direct consequence of globalisation illustrated with the end of virtual borders. That said, Iranian experts do not necessarily see any similarities or commonalities between Iranian and Arab youth, although they are aware that if change comes, it will certainly be done through the new rising generations, but the question remains which one.

I don't think that young people in Arab countries should be compared to young people in Iran. Since the Iranian model remains unique in the way it manages its politics and is not subject to foreign interference, this can affect the analysis. I would say that the economic sanctions and the western and more precisely American policies have only strengthened the national unity without really wanting to. There has been a reverse effect. In this regard, the primary concern of young people is economic condition and to have a standard of living that allows them to have a quality of life, and demands on the socio-cultural level remain low. There are certainly some politically motivated clans seeking to end the Iranian regime, but they remain a minority compared to the popular base supporting the values of the Islamic Republic, which is not necessarily 100% religious⁴².

The Iranian youth is evolving, and the Islamic Republic is aware of this reality

39 Y Generation in the Arab-Muslim world after the 2019 uprisings, brainstorming with O. Charnoz, November 2020.

40 Mohammad Pervez Bilgrami (2021). Change Is Inevitable in Iran: How the Four-Decade-Old System Has Become Outdated. *Politics Today*. <https://politicstoday.org/iran-islamic-republic-regime-change-is-inevitable/>

41 Interview, (phone) Abbas Aslani, Senior Researcher at Strategic Middle East Centre Tehran, May 2021.

42 Interview, (phone) Mostefa Khoshcheshm, Public Diplomacy Strategist, Senior Analyst of FP and Strategic Affairs, Tehran, Ramadan 2021.

The government has always given importance to the issue of youth, as it is and will always be a crucial issue in the spirit of the different presidential terms, and it has been particularly different from one term to another. There is certainly a change, and it will always be a priority in the Iranian policies⁴³.

8. Foreign policy with the principalists in power

Iranian Foreign policy with the control of the principalists will not be very different in substance, since this foreign policy is not a matter of political parties but rather of the Iranian state. The dialogue of the nuclear deal will certainly be conducted differently by the principalists in a more complex and difficult way. The policy of deterrence with its military advance in the region will not really change as the concept is rather linked to its national security. Then, there will certainly be more rapprochement and concretisation of mutual commitments with China and Russia. Possibly also better relations with the Gulf States, given that negotiations have already begun. There may be an American desire to de-escalate the tension in the region because of the awakening of China⁴⁴.

A survey conducted in December 2020 by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and IranPoll, based in Toronto, provides some important elements and percentages that helps understand the evolution of the Iranian public opinion. Regarding Iran-China relations, it was found that a solid 83% thought that relations with China were “important” to Iran, yet a far smaller majority of 53% could say the same about their country’s ties to the U.S.⁴⁵.

The China-Iran deal represents a willingness of both countries to continue their cooperation and specially to stabilize part of Central Asia and mark their territories of influence. China chose Iran because the decisions are taken in Tehran instead of Washington. These steps will allow a stronger progress and rapprochement of the two states and will certainly influence the regional balance of power⁴⁶. According to the Chicago survey, a majority (53%) of Iranians said that China today is “more respected than ten years ago”, as opposed to 20% who felt it was less respected and 21% who saw no change. Only 12% of Iranians felt the U.S was more respected, compared to 64% who said it was less respected and 21% who believed its image had not significantly shifted⁴⁷.

China’s economic partnership policy is based on a win-win exchange, hence the need for Iran to accelerate its relationship with China. So, the deal with China is a strategic alliance for both parties. China can gain access to the Middle East market through Iranian assistance, since Iran can help the country through its own networks and alliances and above all, protect its interests. In return, China helps Iran in terms of construction, technological and military partnership.

The policy of deterrence with its military advance in the region will not really change as the concept is rather linked to its national security

43 Interview, (phone), Dr. Mohamed Marandi, 09-13 April 2021.

44 Interview, (phone) Abbas Aslani, Senior Researcher at Strategic Middle East Centre Tehran, May 2021.

45 Tom O’Connor (2021). Most Iranians Now Support Nuclear Deal, But Say Keep Missiles Out Of It, Poll Shows. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/most-iranians-support-nuclear-deal-keep-missiles-out-1580555>

46 Interview, (phone), Dr. Mohamed Marandi, 09-13 April 2021.

47 Tom O’Connor (2021). Most Iranians Now Support Nuclear Deal, But Say Keep Missiles Out Of It, Poll Shows. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/most-iranians-support-nuclear-deal-keep-missiles-out-1580555>

Iran has understood that the future will be in this part of Central Asia, which will play an important role in the next two decades by certainly tipping the current balance of power⁴⁸.

Concerning the activities of the Revolutionary Guard Corps abroad, a very large majority view the Revolutionary Guard's regional military activities favourably and three in five say that Iran should increase its support of groups fighting terrorist groups like ISIS; these two majorities have grown since 2019. A majority thinks that even if Iran could stop the Guard's activities, this would only lead the United States to push for more concessions in other areas. Over three in five support IRGC playing a role in Iran's economy⁴⁹.

This new Iranian reality and its view of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards is not only based on a reversal of the situation but it is also due to the involvement of the Guards in the country's economy while creating parallel markets as part of the *resistance economy* strategy.

Iran's engagement abroad with armed non-state actors is more about deterrence, as the country is aware that it must bring balance to the region, otherwise it will be crushed by its enemies. This policy is not only an Iran's policy but of all countries on the international scene. It is no longer a question of the expansion of the imamate in neighbouring countries, but above all, a necessity for Iranian national security⁵⁰. It appears that Iran-US competition will continue in Iraq even if the nuclear deal is signed. This competition will disappear with the departure of US military troops from the region⁵¹. This U.S.-Iran rivalry is certainly worrying for the whole Middle East region and for the Gulf States, as they are the first to be concerned by the consequences of a direct offensive war or in logic of irregular warfare by proxies. The agreements of recognition of the State of Israel by the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Bahrain and Sudan seem to be a political alliance to reinforce the Israeli presence in the region in front of what seems to be an expanding Iranian danger. The Iranian vision seems completely different:

The Arab countries signing the deal of the century with Israel are putting themselves at odds. The transfer of the Israeli presence from the occupied territories to those of the GCC endangers the territories of our neighbours. If there is a direct war with Israel tomorrow, they will not be spared. The strikes will be aimed at Israeli interests in the GCC but it is these countries that will be the most damaged⁵².

Furthermore, at the time of writing, negotiations between the Islamic Republic and the Kingdom of Al Saud seem to be taking a new direction and may provide a way out of the crisis in Yemen. On the State of Israel, Iran stands by its position pointing the finger at Israel's apartheid policy. "The Islamic Republic is clear about its position on the Palestinian question. It cannot conclude an agreement with Israel until there is a just solution for the Palestinian people"⁵³.

Iran's engagement abroad with armed non-state actors is more about deterrence, as the country is aware that it must bring balance to the region, otherwise it will be crushed by its enemies

48 Interview, (phone) Mostefa Khoshcheshm, Public Diplomacy Strategist, Senior Analyst of FP and Strategic Affairs, Tehran, Ramadan 2021.

49 Iranian Public Opinion at the Start of the Biden Administration: Report, (Center for International & Security Studies in Maryland U.S., 2021): <https://cisism.umd.edu/research-impact/publications/iranian-public-opinion-start-biden-administration-report>

50 Interview, (phone) Abbas Aslani, Senior Researcher at Strategic Middle East Centre Tehran, May 2021.

51 Ibid.

52 Interview, (phone) Mostefa Khoshcheshm, Public Diplomacy Strategist, Senior Analyst of FP and Strategic Affairs, Tehran, Ramadan 2021.

53 Ibid.

The reality of Iranian politics today seems to be influenced by economic sanctions, sabotages, targeted assassinations, maximum pressure, political and diplomatic isolation of Iran, although this situation remains essentially the reason why Iran has developed economic, political and military resilience says Abbas Aslani⁵⁴. These oppressive Western policies have only strengthened Iran's ability to see no other way out of the financial crisis than by relying on itself in preparation for the years ahead. Iranian policy is a reactive policy rather than a pre-defined one as it adjusts quickly to the context.

9. From Imamate Revolutionary Expansion to Asymmetric Hybrid Warfare for National Security

“If the IRGC didn't exist, the country would also not exist”.

IRGC Instagram account, May 12, 2018

Iranian influence is steadily increasing in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, although the expansion of Imamate as a revolutionary doctrine has found its limits, and has been replaced by security and defence policies properly linked to its national security. Many US foreign policy experts⁵⁵ agree that the long and tumultuous history of the United States with the “mullah's regime” is based on a real equation of rivalry that we can hardly put on a pedestal. The context is clear, Iran cannot compete with the United States in a conventional warfare. Iran is not only diplomatically isolated, i. e. in case of a serious crisis it cannot benefit from any powerful relay, and economically it has been under embargo for more than a decade and thus largely dependent on its oil exports, because of the particularly strict sanctions, especially since the American withdrawal from the nuclear agreement. Moreover, militarily Iran is weak in a conventional war⁵⁶, since its armed forces are equipped with generally obsolete material due to the arms embargo that the country has undergone. Its offensive capabilities are much reduced and its command and control capabilities are outdated. The navy and air force are in a state that would not allow for real operations in a frontal war.

The complexity of Iran's politico-religious functioning is based on data that are essential to understand its asymmetrical defence strategies in logic of irregular warfare - the weak against the strong. The concept of asymmetry which is defined as the pursuit of strategic advantage by circumventing: the technological and political superiority of an adversary through the use of alternative means and solutions. Asymmetric warfare is clearly distinct from interstate warfare. In addition, the three levels of analysis in the Iranian strategic doctrine of influence — the discourse, the export of the Islamic revolution and the operations with universal value — should be specified in its strategic functioning for the implementation of a reactionary foreign policy in the reactive sense of the word, adapting and readjusting quickly to the context.

The context is clear, Iran cannot compete with the United States in a conventional warfare

54 Interview, (phone) Abbas Aslani, Senior Researcher at Strategic Middle East Centre Tehran, May 2021.

55 Anthony H. Cordesman (2010). Strategic Competition with Iran: The Military Dimension. *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/strategic-competition-iran-military-dimension>

56 Matthieu Anquez (2020). La stratégie de l'Iran, la politique d'une puissance faible. *AREION* 24. <https://www.areion24.news/2020/06/12/la-strategie-de-liran-la-politique-dune-puissance-faible/>

For various reasons however, there was hostility to Iran's export strategy of the revolution in the region, and as the American presence in the Middle East grew stronger, it contributed to the revolution's loss of momentum. From this perspective, it is generally agreed that the Islamic Republic of Iran was not able to export its revolutionary model to other countries in the region. Resistance and shows of solidarity of Middle Eastern states in the face of Iranian strategies were mitigated by the greater receptivity of non-state actors to the appearance of the Khomeini model, particularly within Shiite communities. Thus, Iran was successful in imposing the military-ideological model of the Legion (Sepah) formed by the Revolutionary Guard Corps in several countries of the Middle East through organisations such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq and Ansar-Allah in Yemen.

10. In an Alternative Irregular / Hybrid War

Doesn't Iran rather invest in a form of asymmetric deterrence to circumvent any desire to resort to a frontal war?

The two main answers to this question are to develop asymmetric means and capabilities on the one hand, and to develop a regional strategy of reversal on the other. Asymmetric means and capabilities are the response of the weak to the strong, designed to make the cost of an attack on Iran very expensive in human, material and political terms. It is thus akin to a form of deterrence. These asymmetrical capabilities are of several types and are sometimes combined. The aim is to convince the adversary that the price to be paid for victory is disproportionate to the damage that will be inflicted⁵⁷.

Another asymmetric capability is the so-called anti-access/denial means. The objective here is to repel an enemy attack or to prevent the adversary from acting as he wishes. They are essentially of two types: anti-aircraft means intended to protect Iranian airspace as well as the most sensitive sites (a systems essentially acquired from Russia, such as the S 300), and anti-ship means, above all to block the Strait of Hormuz through which an important oil flow passes. The means here consist of mines and anti-ship missiles, mainly supplied by China.

It is also important to mention that guerrilla tactics have been exhausted and have defeated great powers throughout history, demonstrating time and again that certain equipment, the fruit of much research and at exorbitant cost, can be overtaken by the use of a more rustic tactic. What matters to Iran is not sinking as many ships as possible, but hitting them. In this day and age, the image of a warship on fire or hit has a strong media impact. A military intervention against Iran will necessarily have to be concerned with the economic repercussions in the Gulf, a strategic area for all the world's major and middle powers.

Like the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Mandeb is another key waterway of interest to Iran in its asymmetric warfare strategy. It lies off the coast of Yemen and serves as a shipping lane between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, via the Suez Canal and the Arabian Sea. More than twenty thousand ships pass through this twenty-mile passage every year. If Iran were to take control of the Mandeb Strait in addition to the Strait of Hormuz, it would be able

Doesn't Iran rather invest in a form of asymmetric deterrence to circumvent any desire to resort to a frontal war?

⁵⁷ Hossein Aryan. (2009, January). 'A new line of defence'. Jane's defense weekly, p. 28.

to paralyse shipping in the Eastern Hemisphere⁵⁸. With this in mind, the Quds Force trained and armed the Houthis, providing them with its most advanced ASCMs, explosive boats and floating mines. The Quds Force leadership equipped the Houthis with these weapons so that they would take control of the Mandeb Strait, and transferring it to Iranian control⁵⁹.

Indeed, the role of the IRGC and its military background through its ideological-military doctrine fits into this Game of competition between Iran and the United States by: "Its deterrence based on a multi-layered asymmetric approach including missile systems, irregular naval warfare and proxy's networks capable of spreading terror"⁶⁰. This mutual competition is a survival of the fittest concept in the region, where each needs the other to achieve its objectives.

A majority of 85% of Iranians believe the IRGC activities across the Middle East have made their nation more secure, with most agreeing it made Iran "a lot more secure"⁶¹. The reality of the Iranian political scene attests that Iran, although very weak economically and also facing the Covid-19 pandemic, is politically resilient in the face of US policies of maximum pressure. The arrival of the principalists to power and the return of Iranian nationalism to the social scene mark with a red line the failure of American policies to tame the "mullahs' regime". Indeed, this policy of maximum pressure did not lead to a popular uprising against the government in place.

Western policies, though repressive towards the Islamic Republic, have served us better than they have destroyed us. Without the economic sanctions we would not have been able to think, to work on strengthening our local industry and especially to invest in an "economy of resistance". Certainly, the West understands us but it does not know how to fight us⁶².

There is certainly a biased understanding of Iranian society on the part of American and Western policymakers in general, who on the one hand are banking on the overthrow of the "mullahs' regime" by its own population and on the other hand, the strategy of strengthening an alternative market economy under the command of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. This strategy has led to a rise in power and has strengthened the financial capacity of the IRGC. The latter is the main economic channel in times of Western sanction. This new position of power can be seen as a position of vulnerability in the American view. It is interesting to raise the analysis of the authors of the book, Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads, who argue that if the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is dedicated to the economic power to be established, bureaucratic, less flexible, it would make it more exposed to risk. This logic of focusing the IRGC on business and profit will lead them to reduce tensions with the US and the West in general. This thinking seems fair and rational when put in relation to human nature and the relationship to money and material. The authors overlook an important element of the reality of the IRGC and their relationship to the Imamate. "The Americans don't understand that the groups we support are

A majority of 85% of Iranians believe the IRGC activities across the Middle East have made their nation more secure, with most agreeing it made Iran "a lot more secure"

58 Nader Uskowi. *Temperature Rising, Iran's Revolutionary Guards & War in the Middle East*. Roman & Littlefield, pp. 8-9.

59 Ibid.

60 Farhad Rezai. (2020, August 14). The Strategic consequence of ending the arms embargo on Iran. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. <https://thebulletin.org/2020/08/the-strategic-consequences-of-ending-the-arms-embargo-on-iran/>

61 Tom O'Connor. (2021). Most Iranians Now Support Nuclear Deal, But Say Keep Missiles Out of It, Poll Shows. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/most-iranians-support-nuclear-deal-keep-missiles-out-1580555>

62 Interview (phone), IRGC Military Officer, 16 May 2021.

not our mercenaries [...]. The Americans think that everything is about money. They think they can buy loyalty in the region, because their method is to buy"⁶³. This young Guardian's reflection on the relationship that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has had with its allies in the Middle East region, a relationship that has gone beyond the material.

11. Conclusion

The US economic sanctions against Iran are primarily intended to cut off Iranian expansion in the region, and also to stop its nuclear programme. The US is well aware of the rise of the IRGC and this is part of its strategy. Their objective seems to be to weaken Iran, make it vulnerable and succeed in taming it. At the same time, they are banking on a fracture within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps which has the opportunity to develop its own parallel economy taking advantage of the context created by the US sanctions. This doctrine is based on one of the aspects of capitalism: the power of money. It is clear that these US policies are biased and have not achieved their objectives, and worse, they have produced the opposite effect. The introduction of the notion of American policies being biased against the reality of Iranian politics and society is the most appropriate. Certainly, omitting the vision of the Imamate doctrine that is very essential to the evolution of the Iranian revolutionary Islamic framework, and its interaction and evolution with its society, which is not necessarily a 100% religious but rather nationalist, remains problematic for policy makers. Both levels of understanding have been completely omitted or misunderstood.

Moreover, it is important to note that these Iranian expansion policies are now part of a new logic far from this ambition of revolutionary Imamate expansion. Although the latter is unconsciously real with a nostalgia for the return of the Persian Empire. Given the evolution of the field, the legitimacy of an expansionist policy resides in a strategy of security and defence linked to its national security; hence the adherence of the Iranian popular mass legitimises the reinforcement of Iranian policies vis-à-vis the "Axis of Resistance". This new shift is very important and is at the very heart of the reverse effect of US policy objectives.

History has taught us that these Iranian aspirations in a power projection dynamic are not a matter specific to the "mullah regime" but a reality of the composition of the Persian DNA and its nostalgia for its former greatness. The Shah of Iran was the initiator of the nuclear programme in the 1950s and his willingness to be a regional expansionist was very strong, he was even very strategic. One of these techniques was the encouragement of massive immigration of Iranians to the UAE, as the demographic composition was and is very low, and his intention was to change this demography to his advantage for regional domination plans. Today, the UAE is the country with the largest Iranian community under its wing in all the GCC.

In his book, *The Persian Puzzle*, Kenneth Pollack describes Persia (which in 1935 became the state of Iran): "In its days, the Persian Empire was a super power like nothing the world had ever seen — with a monotheistic religion, a vast army, a rich civilization, a new and remarkable efficient method of administration, and territory stretching from Egypt to Central Asia". Pollack stresses that the seven-millennial glorious Persian his-

It is clear that these US policies are biased and have not achieved their objectives, and worse, they have produced the opposite effect

63 Narges Bajoghli (2019, May 15). The Hidden Sources of Iranian Strength. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/15/the-hidden-sources-of-iranian-strength/>

tory is a major source of national pride for Iranians. The Iranian people, as well as their leaders, know their history well. In every stage of their education, from primary school to university, they constantly learn Persian history. Art, poetry and folklore persistently emphasize ancient Persian greatness. This historical awareness of the Iranian people forms a corresponding belief that Iran is historically superior to other nations in the region. As such, Iran should become the dominant actor in its neighbourhood. In the same vein, Iranians also reject the hegemonic tendencies of other nations, especially while conducting state-to-state relations⁶⁴.

Contemporary Iran has its roots in its History, not only religious but cultural and political, and above all in a true understanding of its emerging power. The latter certainly lies in a more adequate reading of the reality on the field, far from fantasies to serve political agendas that are completely out of step with the local economic and socio-political context.

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Interviews

Interviews conducted with religious intellectuals, women Mujtahidates, Ayatollahs in Qom, Mashhad, Tehran between 2006-2010.

Interviews conducted with Iranian families, who participated in the overthrow of Reza Shah in 1979 (as part of the coverage of the 2009 presidential elections in Tehran).

Interview (phone) conducted with Mostefa Khoshcheshm, Public Diplomacy Strategist, Senior Analyst of FP and Strategic Affairs, Tehran, Ramadan 2021.

Interviews (phone) conducted with Dr. Mohamed Marandi, 09-13 April 2021.

Interview (phone) conducted with IRGC Military Officer, 16 May 2021.

Interview, (phone) conducted Abbas Aslani, Senior Researcher at Strategic Middle East Centre Tehran, May 2021.