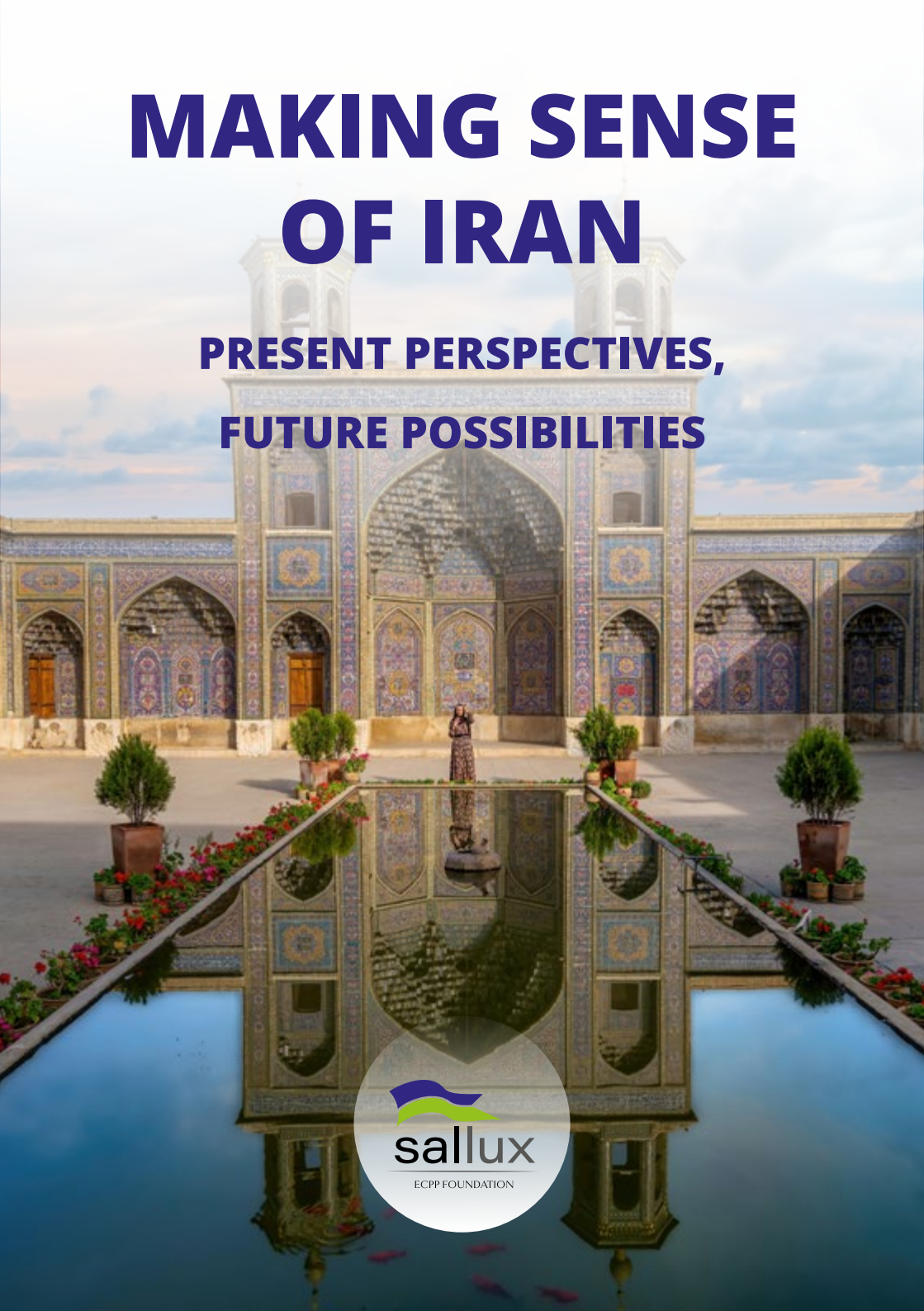
MAKING SENSE OF IRAN

PRESENT PERSPECTIVES, FUTURE POSSIBILITIES



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Sallux is the political foundation for the European Christian Political Party (ECPP). Sallux means “Salt and Light” and we want to spark a salted debate where needed and shed light on the issues we face. We present solutions by organising events and distributing relevant publications and will not stay on the safe side of the status quo.

Oxford House Research Ltd
Oxford House Research Ltd is a UK-based international consultancy that provides bespoke advice and creative solutions for complex cultural, ethical, and religious issues in contemporary geopolitics. The final version of this report was prepared by Professor Christopher Hancock, Director of Oxford House, in light of substantial contributions from, and close collaboration with, Oxford House Associates Dr. Sean Oliver Dee and Paul Golf, and other well-positioned experts. The contributors wish to stress that the report is written for the EU and not at the EU; indeed, it hopes its findings, perspectives and proposals are of value to non-member states. The authors also wish to put on record their sincere thanks for commissioning this report, and to express their appreciation of the lessons learned during in its preparation.

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Preface

This report is for EU policymakers, their aides, and all who are concerned to find a wise way to respond to the profile, and persisting problem, Iran presents the Western Alliance. The triple aims of the report are exposition, education and encouragement. By making sense of Iran, we reduce the threat of war.

At the time of writing, the Middle East[1] is (once again) politically fluid and militarily volatile. Iran's role in creating and sustaining this situation, both in the present and recent past, has been the subject of much media speculation, political commentary, and not always well-informed analysis and criticism. Throughout, the Iranian regime has demonstrated a remarkable ability to cloak its intentions behind a veil of passivity, activity, deception, and protest, often leaving observers unsure if obfuscation is by accident or design, and whether its threats are a smokescreen or to be taken seriously. How Iran responds to perceived weakening by Israel's targeting of the leaders and led in Hamas, Hezbollah and the Yemeni Houthis, remains to be seen. We set an unknown future here in a known, explicable, past.

Sound understanding shapes good decisions. The need for a clear, balanced, strategic, account of Iran, as a proud ancient empire and belligerent modern theocracy, has rarely been more urgent. Striking a balance between education, explanation, and endorsement of Iran's attitudes and actions, is difficult but essential. Resourcing diplomatic and political decisions on how and when to engage or isolate Iran, is imperative. In doing this, avoidance of institutional myopia, diplomatic short-termism, easy binary solutions, and a tough zero-sum strategy, are at a premium. Identifying 'signposts' *of* change and *towards* change in and about Iran, is crucial. New fault lines, internally and externally, must be registered, evaluated, and tracked. This is a challenging task, claims to definitive interpretation risky.

The authors of this report have sought to avoid naivety, projection, cognitive bias, and pessimism, to provide an informed overview and set of accessible insights into a country and regime that directly impact the world today.[2] Their intention is practical guidance for *real politik,* not theoretical diplomacy. Misinterpreting Iran through a literalized reading is,

1 The term 'Middle East' is not used in this report to suggest eurocentrism, nor a lack of awareness that 'West Asia' (which is also used) is preferred by some nationals and regional experts.

2 For a valuable counterpart to this report, see the November 2024 European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) Country Report on Afghanistan. In addition to providing information on the humanitarian, political, and security situation in Afghanistan, the report helpfully identifies obstacles on the ground for coordinated EU action and urges EU missions in Kabul to focus on realistic goals for tangible improvement within the next reporting period. This tallies with the aims of this report. See https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/afghanistan-country-focus: accessed 21 January 2025.

they believe, as dangerous as underestimating Iran's current strengths and weaknesses. Others have written, and will write, in greater depth about Iran's military capability and the security threat it poses. In keeping with Oxford House's distinctive emphasis, this report seeks to ensure the cultural, ethical, and religious dimension to understanding and engaging Iran is clearly articulated.[3] The aim is elucidatory more than condemnatory, believing a better understanding of Iran (and her political and ideological allies) will help outsiders avoid the cultural and religious misinterpretation that risks exacerbating an already dangerous situation. New geopolitical challenges from East and West make for difficult navigation and interpretation of the way forward. However, we sincerely hope this necessarily time-limited report will have an enduring value and provide lasting resources to promote and perpetuate global peace.

Sallux & Oxford House
February 2025

3 NB. substantial footnoting is intended to cite sources, provide supporting evidence, and, where appropriate, dialogue with the body of the text.

Executive Summary

The Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, the fall of Bashar al-Assad on 8 December 2024, and the return of Donald Trump to the White House on 20 January 2025, could not have been imagined when the authors of this report began their work. The events confirm the unpredictability of history and the vagaries of power, policy and diplomacy.[4] Reporting events in an evolving situation is hard: informed historiography and interpretative provisionalty compete. Taking good decisions without insight and a degree of foresight is impossible. In what follows, the authors deliberately stand back from the immediate to set recent events, as they implicate and illuminate Iran and impact the EU, in the proximate context of history with the ultimate aim of advancing peaceful human co-existence.

Much is said and written about Iran; too little with empathy, understanding, and a will to 'speak truth to power' either *about Iran* or, as importantly, *to Iran and her allies*. If this report does its job, it will be as hard to read in Brussels, London and Washington, as in Tehran, Moscow, Jerusalem, or Beijing. Without avoiding the pressing issues of Iran's use of regional proxies, its on-going nuclear programme, its supplying of military hardware for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its deepening ties to Beijing, and its Shiite[5] regional imperialism, the report seeks a larger historical, political and cultural context.

Like a finely woven rug, contemporary Iran is a complex system of interlaced ideas, ideals, individuals, and communities. To some it will always be a place clouded in mystery and rich in Oriental history, to others the host of revolutionary religious radicalism and harbinger of Western cultural decay. The aim of this report is to provide European policymakers with an accessible road map to the tortuous terrain of contemporary Iranian culture, religion, politics, and diplomacy. In particular, the report focuses on the 'soul', psyche, motivation, and intention of modern Iran, more than on the 'body' of its military, security, and nuclear capability. It looks at the ethos and stability of the present regime, at the nature and direction of Iranian foreign policy, at pressure points in Iran's domestic life, and at the adequacy of the EU's response. Mindful of recent events, it seeks to explain Iran's response to Israel's military action in Gaza, Lebanon and Yemen.

If the report appears more respectful in its analysis and conclusions than some might expect or want, this is not because the authors do not see Iran as a 'clear and present danger' to the Western Alliance, but because Sallux and Oxford House see inter-cultural

4 NB. The authors believe there is sufficient stability in the Iranian regime at the present time, that focussing on the character, origin, aims and vulnerabilities of that regime is as, if not more, important than tracking the latest events.

5 NB. We have adopted the spelling 'Shiite' (not 'Shīʾite') throughout. Likewise, 'Hezbollah' rather than 'Hizbollah'.

understanding as essential to global harmony. Misunderstanding and misinformation, the authors believe, are as great a threat to world peace as ballistic missiles and cyber warfare. As such, the report holds up a two-sided mirror, believing that in studying the face of Iran (or any other country) we see ourselves and our own more clearly. As critics of the West point out, hubris and hypocrisy haunt its history and colonial legacy in the Middle East.

After an overview of Iran's history and post-Revolutionary identity, the report addresses eight key questions. The aim of these questions is to explain the mystery and complexity which is modern Iran:

1. What challenges does an outsider face understanding and engaging Iran today? In short, how does an outsider breach the high cultural, intellectual, and political-ideological wall that surrounds Iran?

2. How does the history of Iran, especially after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, impact its life in the early 21st century?

As an ancient civilization in a postmodern world, balanced analysis must set the current regime in its historical and 21st-century context.

3. What light do demography and ethnic diversity shed on contemporary Iranian politics and the country's future?

Accurate information on 'opposition' groups in Iran is hard to find and assess.[6] The report does not attempt a comprehensive review of 'opposition' groups, but it does provide data that may correct misperception and wishful thinking. The stability of the current regime and the possibility of regime change are also discussed here.

4. Why and how does Iran relate to the US in the way that it does?

We chart here 'highs' and 'lows' in US-Iranian relations over the last 70 years with a view to explaining the animosity and suspicion that exists between the two countries today.

5. What issues shape Iran's relationship to the EU and UK?

Similarities and dissimilarities with US-Iranian relations are considered here; likewise, distinctive responses by member states and government representatives over the JCPOA, trade, and engagement with Iran *per se*.

6. What is the history and motivation for Iran's relationship to China and Russia? This crucial issue directly impacts the way the US, EU and UK view Iran. Information on Iran's support for Putin's war in Ukraine and its increasingly close relationship to China shed new light on the intentions of the Iranian regime and its new President Masoud Pezeshkian.

6 For a useful introduction, A. Hoodashtian, 'The Fractured Opposition to the Islamic Regime', *Washington Institute: Fikra Forum* (7 February 2023): https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fractured-opposition-islamic-regime; accessed 21 January 2024.

7. What drives Iran's relationship to Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Egypt, ISIS and Al-Qaeda?

The last two chapters look at Iran's relationship to its regional neighbours. In the first, we consider the evolving nature of its relationship to Turkey, its established animosity to Israel and support for Hamas, its impact on Lebanon through its other proxy, Hezbollah, and its attitude and actions towards ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

***8. What is the nature of Iran's relationship to other Arab neighbours and regional proxies*?**

Iran stands mid-stream in swirling crosscurrents of Arab politics, Muslim rivalry and the pressure of its proxy dependents. Recent events have changed the ecology of MENA.[7] We look in this last chapter how this has impacted Iran's profile and ambition in the region.

In addressing these questions, the report is also asking about the strengths and weaknesses of current EU policies on Iran, about its corporate strategy to strengthen – or, better, rebuild – its profile in Iran and MENA, and thus ensure it understands and engages more effectively with both going forward.

In conclusion, the report offers a 'toolkit' of ideas and strategies to strengthen EU-Iranian policy and diplomacy. Central to the report's recommendations is the formation of an 'EU-Iran Study Group' to provide up-to-the-minute news, commentary and advice on Iran's internal affairs and international relations. As indicated, the overall aim is to help policymakers steer wisely, judiciously, and peaceably through the troubled waters of EU-Iranian relations.

7 MENA (Middle East and N Africa) is usually (but not normatively) taken to include Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the UAE and Yemen (note differences with 'West Asia', bottom p. 129). Other designations covering a similar area include WANA (W Asia and N Africa) and SWANA (SW Asia and N Africa). MENA is commonly used by (Western) analysts, academics, the media, military strategists, businesses and NGOs.

Introduction

To *really* understand and relate to Iran, we need to locate it geographically, historically and culturally. We begin that process here: it isn't easy. Evidence is compromised and contentious. Clarity is elusive. Many outsiders – both intentionally and unintentionally – misinterpret the data. It isn't much easier for Iranians. Their country has a complex history and composite, conflicted, identity. In recent times, it has been subject to sustained pressure of every kind both internally and externally. Feelings run high around Iran. Keeping a cool head, seeing and saying things as they *really* are, is at a premium. The world needs interpreters of Iran to do better. Much is at stake. Many will suffer if Iran is misread.

Fig 1. The Iranian flag

In bald terms, Iran covers an area of 1,648,195 km^2 (636,372 sq mi), has a population of ca. 91.5m. (2025), a total GDP of $1.698 trillion and *per capita* (regionally adjusted) income of $19,607 *p.a.* In other words, it has the 17th largest landmass and population in the world, is the 23rd richest country, but its average income is only 95th on IMF and World Bank rankings, i.e., far lower than most Gulf States (see p. 222).

These statistics hide the fact that Iran suffers from 'water bankruptcy',[8] its population is getting older (see below p. 28) and its birth rate is declining (0.98% in 2022 est.). Leaving aside diplomatic and security issues, Iran's faces its own internal existential crisis. According to the American academic activist Noam Chomsky (b. 1928), 'Iran has little capacity to deploy force. Its strategic doctrines are defensive, designed to deter invasion long enough for diplomacy to set it.' If this is even partially true, it makes the diplomatic option worth considering, particularly in the face of Iran's physical vulnerability.

As indicated already, the aim of this report is to provide an accessible, up-to-date, guide to Iran, its culture, *mores* and religious ethos, its regional and global profile, its socio-political strengths and weaknesses and the challenge it poses EU policymakers, their aides and allies. Much could be written. For reasons of brevity and caution much must be omitted or intentionally implied.

Before addressing the eight questions that shape this report, two important preliminary ones:
1. *What makes understanding and interpreting the mind and spirit of Iran today so difficult?*
2. *Why has Iran attracted the attention of scholars and aggression of outsiders for so many centuries?*
These questions help set the scene for what follows.

1. What makes understanding and interpreting the mind and spirit of Iran so difficult?

Iran – officially, the Islamic Republic of Iran (Persian: جمهوری اسلامی ایران) – lies E of Iraq and SE of Turkey.[9] Afghanistan and Pakistan are on its E and SE border. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan lie to the N and NW. South it accesses the sea *via* the Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf.[10] Iran's strategic location and natural resources shape its self-perception, impact on MENA and the Gulf, and its global profile.

8 NB. In 2015 only 1.63% of Iran had natural water supplies. Water problems are most acute in Central and S Iran. Nationally, there are dwindling water supplies caused by poor infrastructure, over-reliance on groundwater, heavy agricultural usage and climate change. In the face of public protests and educational campaigns, the government has worked to improve water infrastructure and management, build new irrigation systems, strengthen regulation and conservation protocols, and change agricultural practices. On Iran's water problems, see K. Madani, 'Explainer: Iran's "Water Bankruptcy"', *The Iran Primer*, US Institute of Peace (5 December 2021): https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/dec/05/explainer-irans-water-bankruptcy; accessed 12 February 2025; N. Kowsar, 'A thirsty reality: Iran's dire water situation', *Atlantic Council* (22 January 2024): https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-water-environment-us-policy; accessed 12 January 2025.

9 The modern name for Iran (ایران) traces its roots to the 3rd century Sasanian Middle Persian word *ērān* (Lit. 'Of the Aryans'; viz. 'noble, free').

10 Almost one third of Iran's 4,770-mile (7,680-km) border is coastal. It also has twelve islands in the Persian Gulf.

Understanding and interpreting the mind and spirit of this ancient 'Persian'[11] land has never been easy; never more so, perhaps, than in the first quarter of the 21st century.

Fig. 2. The Gate of All Nations in Persepolis

The World Heritage Site (from 1979) of the ancient city of Persepolis (Lit. 'City of the Persians', ca. 70km. NE of Shiraz)[12] stands as lasting testimony to the power and vulnerability of Iran. Begun in 517 BCE by the Archaemenid King Darius I, 'The Great' (ca. 550-486 BCE; r. 522-486), and completed by his son Xerxes I (519-465 BCE; r. 486-465 BCE) and grandson Artaxerxes I (d.424; r. 465-424 BCE), the glory of this former Persian capital (at the foot of a mountain range in SE Iran) has faded, its buildings scarred by Alexander the Great's (365-323 BCE) warriors in 331 BCE. Stones and a system set for millennia felled in a night. The pride and beauty they exude flawed and fallible. The finely carved but now broken pillars and bas-reliefs, the bull busts on the Ionic columns of Apadana (Throne Room) and tombs of Kings Artaxerxes I and II (d. 358; r. 405/4-358) symbols of political transience and cultural decay, tangible icons of a nation's identity past and present. Here, as today, solidity masking fragility, shallow confidence built on the shifting sands of power, preference, popularity and conviction.

11 The name Persia (Gk. *Persis*; Lat. deriv. *Persia*) is linked in Hellenic etymology and mythology to Perseus, a foreign royal son devised by the historian and geographer Herodotus (ca. 484-ca. 425 BCE). In time, the name was adopted (deliberately) by first one, and then all, of the inhabitants and regions of the Persian Empire. In Western usage, Persia and Persian have been, and continue to be, applied interchangeably with Iran and Iranians.

12 Shiraz is Iran's 5th largest city with a population of ca. 1.57m.

What makes Iran hard to understand? The layers of history and succession of rulers who have claimed to define the country … and failed. After Alexander's short-lived victory over Darius III at the Battle of Issus (334 BCE), Persia was successively ruled by the Hellenistic Seleucids (from 312 BCE), the Parthians and Sasanians (241-651 CE), and by a succession of Arab Caliphates (viz. the Rashidun, Umayyad, Abbasid) from 632-1258 CE.

Persian socio-political cohesion, linguistic conformity, and cultural coherence were elusive until Arab rule gave way to regional dynasties of Tahirids, Saffarids, Sajids, Samanids, Ziyarids, Buyids, Sallarids, Rawadids, Marwanids, Shaddadids, Kakuyids, Annazids and Hasawayhids. In their wake came a flowering of language, science, and culture in the 10th and 11th century, a 'Persian Golden Age'. Thereafter, migration, invasion and dominance by Seljuk Turks, Mongol marauders and Mamluk (slave) warriors and officials, saw Persia ruled from the 14th to the 18th centuries by Timurid, Safavid, Afsharid and Zand imperial dynasties, by the weak pro-Russian Qajars (r. 1789-1925) and, from 1925 to 1979, by the modernizing Pahlavi clan, with the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919-1980; r. 1941-1979) finally ousted and exiled in 1979 by the 'Iranian/Islamic Revolution' (January 1978 to February 1979).[13]

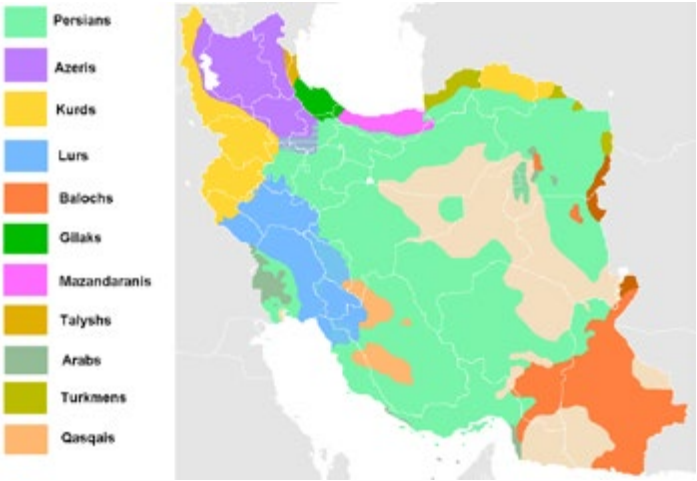
Fig. 3. Iran and its regional neighbours

The ancient city of Persepolis is a symbol of Iran's fractured historic identity, its unity contingent on centralised ideological power and on forces sufficient to counter internal and external threats. The authoritarianism of the present regime, and its imposition of a restrictive Islamic worldview, aren't new – nor, indeed, is its on-going attempt to suppress dissent and enforce national unity. Iran today is, like many modern states, a composite construct on a restless quest for national coherence.

13 The Shah quit Iran and his 'Peacock Throne' on 16 January 1979.

Geography and history contribute to the conflicted, composite nature of Iranian culture and society. Vast geographically, Iran is home to multiple cultures and languages, its central desert plateau ringed by (often) snow-clad peaks,[14] its new cities[15] and ancient monuments evoking its Persian roots and modern aspirations in a cacophonous 'culture war'. In the early 21st century, 80% of Iranians have an Indo-European ethno-linguistic identity, with two-thirds having Persian as their first language and a third as their second. Many belong to the country's (often regionally defined) minority communities. Among these are Persians who are ethnically Mazenderanis, Gilaks or Talys, and Azerbaijanis (16-24%), Kurds (7-10%), Lurs (6%), Baluchs (2%), Turkic tribals (1%; incl. Qashqai and Turkmen), or from a (<3%) non-Turkic group (viz. Armenian, Georgian, Assyrian, Circassian and Arab). In addition, there are between 6-8m. Ahwazi Arabs in al-Ahwaz (viz. Khuzestan) (p. 81), with a further 2m. dispersed across Iran. Approximately 10% of Iranians are Arabs.[16] We will return to the political significance of Iran's diverse populace in Chapter 6. For now, we note the risk such diversity poses.

Fig. 4. Iran's ethnic distribution



14 Cf. the main mountain ranges in Iran are the Alborz (central N.), Zagros (NW to SE) and Kopet Dagh (NE).

15 Iran has 20 cities with more than 430k residents. Tehran (8.7m.), Mashhad (3m.) and Isfahan (1.9m.) are its three largest cities. In 2022, 76.81% of Iranians were urbanites.

16 NB. An important underlying theme in discussion of Iran's Arab population is their varied links to other Arab communities and majority Arab states. Pan-Arabism is a potent, but often elusive, reality in modern Middle Eastern politics.

Religion is (once again) a potent factor in contemporary geopolitics. In contrast to most Arab and Muslim countries, religion defines the Iranian state and its socio-political terms of reference. In a 2011 government census, 99.98% of Iranians are listed as Muslims. Behind this predictable statistic, history, Shiite ideology,[17] and Westernized diaspora Iranians, tell a somewhat different story.

The 2020 World Values Survey saw 96.6% of Iranians self-identify as Muslims, with 85% of the overall population Shia and 11% Sunni.[18] On-line surveys by GAMAAN since 2020 indicate a significant – probably increasing – disparity between Iranians' public religious profile and their private opinions.[19] Some recent studies reveal that in private only 32.2% of Iranians self-identify now as Shia,[20] with 22% calling themselves 'non-religious, atheist, agnostic, spiritual or secular humanist'. Care needs to be exercised in accepting and/or interpreting these figures. However, they indicate that (despite external perception and internal political pressure) <50% of Iranians are religiously uncommitted, intellectually unpersuaded, or politically opposed to the style or content of the government's directives on religion. With Christianity, Judaism,[21] and Zoroastrianism officially recognized and protected (with seats in the Iranian Parliament), Iran's leaders know they can no longer assume popular support for their Islamist political ideology.[22] Tough countermeasures against religious dissent are, we might conclude, as likely now to be an admission of vulnerability as an assertion of authority by the regime.

Iranian diversity finds expression today in the country's globalized youth and socio-intellectual elite who are as culturally, religiously, and morally 'inclusive' as their Western counterparts; albeit lacking their freedom, mobility, and socio-economic opportunities … and increasingly vocal about that!

If geography, history, and ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity, combine to make understanding and interpreting the mind and spirit of Iran difficult, so does its political Islamist culture.

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17 'NB. Shiite means in Arabic 'follower' or 'partisan'. Shiite Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib (559-661 CE), and his descendants, was the Prophet's rightful successor. See further p. 38.

18 The attention given to the Shia majority in Iran risks deafness to the voice of the historically significant Sunni minority. The precise number of Iranian Sunnis is disputed, with government figures predictably underestimating their number. Many are Larestani (or Khodmooni) from Larestan County in the vast Fars Province in the SW of the country, others are Kurds in the NW, Arabs from the SW, or Baluch from the SE. 6% of Iranian MPs (121 of 1996) have been Sunni in post-Revolutionary Iran. On this, and Sunni discontent, see M. Boroujerdi, 'Sunnis in Iran: Protesting Against Decades of Discrimination and Repression', *Washington Institute: Fikra Forum* (21 November 2022): https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sunnis-iran-protesting-against-decades-discrimination-and-repression: accessed 16 January 2025.

19 Cf. with some variation due to different questions being asked 33% of Iranians said they were Shia in 2020, 56% (*sic*) in February 2022, 38% in December 2022 and 38% in July 2023.

20 NB. Plus an additional 5% Sunni and 3.2% Sufi.

21 NB. Iran is home to the second largest Jewish community in the Muslim world.

22 NB. Bahá'is in Iran are not accorded these privileges and are frequently the object of censure and persecution.

On 1 February 1979, the exiled cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1900-1989; r.1979-1989), leader of one the country's rebel factions, returned in triumph to Tehran.[23] After months of uncertainty, the country adopted a new Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (قانون اساسی جمهوری اسلامی ایران), which was approved in a referendum on 2/3 December 1979.[24] On 7 December 1979, Khomeini was declared the 'Supreme Leader' of a new, Shiite theocracy with a supporting parliamentary democracy.

As 'Rahbar' (رهبر معظم ایران; Lit. Leader of the Revolution), the Supreme Leader is the foremost spiritual figure and political voice in Iran. He is also Commander-in-Chief of the army and head of the Iran security services.[25] He alone can declare war. The Rahbar's powers include the selection of ministers, appointment of judges and heads of the police and media, shaping of international affairs, naming of ambassadors (through the Quds Corps),[26] shaping of domestic policy (alongside the President, the Rahbar's Chief Executive, and parliament),[27] amending of laws, oversight of the nation's finances and selection of six of the twelve-member powerful 'Guardian Council' (نگهبان شورای).[28] Technically, the Rahbar is appointed by, and answerable to, the 88-member 'Assembly of Experts' (مجلس خبرگان رهبری).[29] In practice the Rahbar's actions and decisions are rarely questioned, with the Assembly of Experts now an essentially ceremonial body, which is subject to criticism and correction by the Rahbar.

23 Cf. an estimated 5m. Iranians gathered to celebrate his arrival.

24 The new Constitution replaced one authorised in 1906. Articles 1 and 2 of the new 175 Article Constitution ascribe all power to God. In the Article that follow, democratic powers and procedures are subject to the authority of the Supreme Leader and Guardian Council, with Article 6 mandating 'popular elections for the presidency and the Majlis, or parliament'.

25 Despite heavy casualties in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), it is estimated Iran now has 960,000 military personnel. This number excludes the paramilitary militia or *Basij* (Law Enforcement Command), founded in 1979 (and still existing) to protect the spirit and forms of the Iranian Revolution at a grass-roots level.

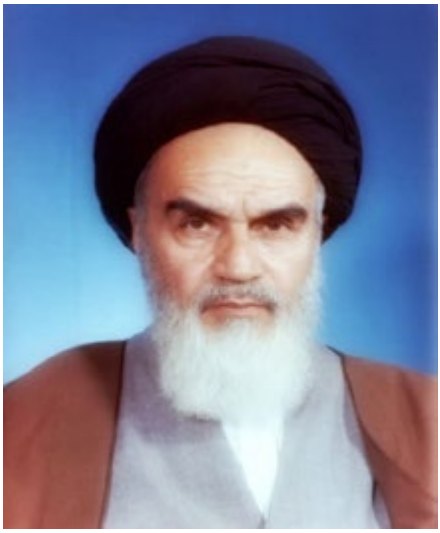
26 Like the *Basij*, the 'Quds Corps/Force' is part of, and answerable to, the IRGC. In contrast to the *Basij*, the Quds Corps specializes in military intelligence and non-conventional military activities.

27 The President implements the decrees and wishes of the Supreme Leader. As such, he signs treaties and agreements, oversees national programmes (including the budget) and other affairs of state. The office has been held by the Conservative Muslim jurist (and former member of the infamous 1988 'death committee') Ebrahim Raisi (b. 1960) since the elections in August 2021. Tipped by many to succeed Ali Khamenei, Raisi replaced the more moderate 7th President Hassan Rouhani (b. 1948; Pres. 2-13-21), who defeated him in 2017 (57% to 38.3%).

28 The Guardian Council is composed entirely of Islamic clerics and lawyers, who serve for six-year terms.

29 Cf. These 88 *Mujtahids* (Lit. diligent; دِجْتَهِدْ) are trained in, and deemed competent to exercise, *ijtihad*, viz. the evaluation of Islamic law. As Article 107 of the Constitution states: '[T]he task of appointing the Leader shall be vested with the experts elected by the people. The experts will review and consult among themselves concerning all the *fuqaha'* (viz. lawyers and legal opinions) possessing the qualifications specified in Articles 5 and 109.'

Fig. 5. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1900-1989; r.1979-1989)



The life and work of Ayatollah Khomeini (now accorded the honorific title 'Imam') have been much studied, his deeds and decisions praised or castigated by devotees and critics. The cult of a man who to some was – and, indeed for many still is – 'the virtual face of Shia Islam in Western popular culture', remains strong. Khomeini's readiness to confront and name the 'Great Satan' of America in the 444-day US Embassy siege in Tehran (4 November 1979 to 20 January 1981), his life-threatening 'fatwa' in 1988 on Indian-born American-British author Salman Rushdie (b. 1947) for his novel *Satanic Verses*, and his leadership of Shia[30] militants during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88),[31] have secured for him a lasting place in the pantheon of Iran's spiritual luminaries and anti-Western prophets.

30 NB. We use the simplified forms of Shia (not Shia, or Shīʿa), and Shiism (not Shīʿism) in this report.

31 Cf. The war followed Iraq's invasion of Iran, seemingly to prevent Khomeini exporting his militant Shia ideology into a Shia majority country that was led by Iraqi President Saddam Hussain's (1937-2006) secular, Sunni, Ba'athist government.

Ayatollah Khomenei's successor, the former 3rd President (1981-89), and 2nd 'Supreme Leader', Seyyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei (b. 1939), is also a 'Twelver Shia'[32] *marja*' (Lit. 'source to follow'). Khamenei has continued both in style and content the March 1979 Islamic Revolution, in which 98% of Iranian voters backed a radical shift from the pro-Western/pro-US orientation of the last Shah to a new, ultra-conservative Islamic Republic. Though many in Iran today chafe at its radical Islamism few question the rationale for the Revolution. Monarchists are few and far between.

Fig. 6. Seyyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei (b. 1939)

The theocratic values and vision of the Iranian regime enshrine so-called *Velâyat-e Faqih*, literally 'Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist'. *Velâyat-e Faqih* blends Shia authoritarianism with a militant, expansionist, vision to dominate the Arab world, destroy the State of Israel, and confront Western idolatry and corruption.

To outsiders – including many Muslims – the oppressive theological and socio-political ethos of the Iranian regime remains an opaque, elitist, dangerous ideology intolerant of dissent and confident of its own rectitude. Critics condemn themselves for heresy.

32 Cf. 'Twelver Shiism' or Ithnā ʿAshariyyah (اَلْاِثْنَا عَشَرِيَّة; also known as Imāmiyya [اِمَامِيَّة]) or is the largest branch of Shia (85%). Its name derives from its core conviction that the last of twelve divinely ordained leaders, the Twelve Imams', will appear as the promised Mahdi (the final leader in Islamic eschatology). On the origins of Shiism, see Daftary, F. and J. Esots, eds (2022), *The Renaissance of Shiʿi Islam: Facets of Thought and Practice*, Shi'i Heritage Series. London: I. B. Tauris.

Mapping the mind and spirit of Iran is made more difficult by powerful crosscurrents in its on-going internal 'Culture War'.[33] The country's ethnically diverse, globalized youth present the country's ageing, authoritarian, clerical leadership with a significant challenge. Strict controls on the media and access to the internet by the country's hardline Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC; also known as Sepah and Pasdaran)[34] and attentive 'Morality Police' fight an uphill battle against populist aversion to religio-ideological diktats and domestic intrusion.

Fig. 7. Evin Prison (*Source: The Guardian*)

33 Cf. the notion of a 'Culture War' (Germ. *Kulturkampf*) traces its roots to the 1870s conflict between Pius IX (1792-1878; r. 1846-78) and the Catholic Church, and the Prussian government led by Chancellor Otto von Bismark (1815-98; Chancellor 1871-90). More recently, the term has been linked to the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington's (1927-2008) 1996 account of a 'clash of civilizations' in 'East-West' relations and with Virginia University Professor James Davison Hunter's (b. 1955) view of late-20th century socio-political, moral, and religious divisions in the USA as a 'Culture War'.

34 NB. the multi-service IRGC was formed by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 to protect the vision and values of the Islamic Revolution. Working closely today with the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the IRGC tracks dissent and opposition of every kind at home and abroad. As part of Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran, at a grass roots level the 'Guidance Patrol' (گشت ارشاد) or 'Morality Police' enforce Sharia law with respect to dress (i.e., women wearing the hijab) and other religious observances.

With an estimated ca. 200,000 inmates in Iran's 250+ prisons (including the infamous Evin Prison in the foothills of the Elburz Mountains north of Tehran),[35] a system commonly associated with fear, torture, intimidation, mutilation, and execution, assumes it can bend or bludgeon the mind, body and will of even the most resilient dissidents. The significant civil unrest after the death in police custody of Mahsa (or Jina) Amini (8 October 2000 – 16 September 2022), who publicly opposed the mandatory hijab, had dwindled by the Spring of 2023. Does this mean youthful opposition to the regime ended? Certainly not, but it does show that anyone wanting to map Iranian politics, diplomacy, culture, and society, has his or her work cut out; especially when, as we will chart in Chapters 4 and 5, Iran's international relations are played out in the over-crowded square of public opinion and world affairs.

In short, the 'magnetic north' of modern Iran and Iranian popular culture is not easily read.

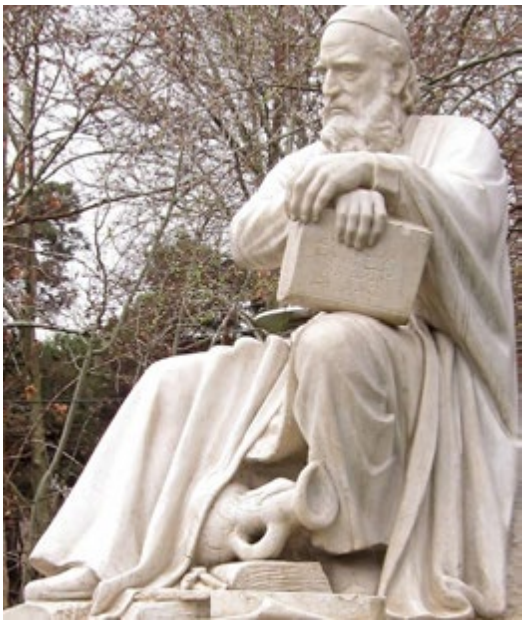
2. Why has the beautiful, ancient land that is modern Iran attracted for centuries the attention of scholars and the aggression of outsiders?

Three things stand out for comment before looking next at deeper issues confronting outsiders who engage with Iran today.

First, as noted already, Iran has a long and distinguished history of intellectual activity and cultural creativity. The 'Persian Golden Age' set the tone and direction for centuries of scholarly labour and artistic refinement. This foundation continues to provide some sense of antiquity, stability, and accountability in Iran today. Those inside and outside the country who wilfully ignore this rich seam of cultural history deny a story that has shaped, and still shapes, our world.

35 Precise statistics on Iran's prisons are hard to acquire. 2020 statistics from a World Prison Brief to the UN Human Rights Council list 189,000 inmates (including pre-trial detainees and remand prisoners) of whom ca. 25% were pre-trial detainees and remand prisoners, 3.1% women, 0.5% juveniles and 2.9% foreign nationals. The high-profile release of five US citizens in September 2023 (in exchange for $6bn of Iranian assets frozen in South Korea) was a small sign of Iran's desire to address negative international PR and an acute financial crisis.

Fig. 8. Statue of Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) by Abolhassan Sadighi (1895-1995)



Iranians are proud of their cultural and intellectual heritage. Theirs is the land of the pre-Archaemenid Indo-European Zoroastrian *Avestan* texts, and 6th-century BCE 'Cyrus Cylinder' in which scholars find an early form of 'human rights'. Theirs, too, great literature[36] in the exquisite script and writing[37] of philosophers, poets and mystics such as Ferdowsi (940-1019/25), Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), Nizami Ganjavi (ca. 1141-1209), Rumi (1207-73), Sa'adi (1210-91/2) and Hafez (1325-97), who inspired Western authors like Goethe (1749-1832), S. T. Coleridge (1772-1834), David Thoreau (1817-62), Matthew Arnold (1822-88) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82).[38] Theirs, too, Persia's formative role in architecture and science, music and dance, and in the Sasanian centers at Ctesiphon and Ras al-Ayn and the Academy at Gundeshapur (روپاشیدنگ نانتسگنەرف), the world's first university.

36 Cf. Prof. P. Elwell-Sutton (1912-84) of Edinburgh University called Persian literature 'one of the richest poetic literatures of the world' (*In Search of Omar Khayyam*, tr. A. Dashti. NY: Columbia UP, 1971, 11).

37 NB. Persian language and literature left a deep impression on Ottoman Turkey, Mughal/Islamic India, and the Turkic lands of Central Asia.

38 On the history and transmission of Persian Literature, see Browne, E. G. (1956-59), *Literary History of Persia*, 4 Vols. Cambridge: CUP. Also, Javadi, H. (1983), *Persian Literary Influence on English Literature, with special reference to the Nineteenth Century*. Calcutta: Iran Society.

Alongside the giants of Persian philosophy, Avicenna (980-1030), al-Farabi, Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi (1154-91), and Mulla Sadra (1572-1641), and affirmation of monotheism, scholars point to the country's invention of irrigation and refrigeration, of landscaped gardens, 'Paradise', birthday parties with special food, dessert, guitars, illuminated animation, elite soldiers with distinctive uniforms and armoured cavalry, windmills, air conditioning, and postal and highway systems.

Fig. 9. Mirza Taghi Khan-e Farahani (better known as Amir Kabir) 1807-1852, often called 'Iran's first reformer'

The Iranian Enlightenment (روشنگری ایران) from the mid-19th to the early-20th centuries, which saw Western ideas penetrate Persian culture and a modernizing spirit capture Iran's socio-political and intellectual elite, resonated with the country's tradition of enquiry and capacity for creativity. But then, as now, cultural and religious conservatism resisted change, defended the *status quo* and limited intellectual enquiry. Iranian progress has never been unidirectional.

Outsider interest in, and aggression towards, Iran is hard to explain. We focus on two key points.

1. As we have seen, Iran has been invaded many times. Greeks, Arabs, Turks, Mongols, Russians (in a series of Russo-Persian wars from 1651 and 1828), British and their allies (in August 1941)[39] and Iraq (in the 8-year Iraq-Iran war of 1980-88) have successively, but rarely successfully, sought to occupy and subdue her. Encircled by mountains and sea, with rugged, arid terrain, [40] extremes of temperature, strong seasonal winds, frequent earthquakes[41] and less than 10% of the land suitable for cultivation,[42] Iran offers few obvious incentives to invaders. But that has not prevented outside forces from trying their luck. Although Anglo-Russian forces overran Iran's army in three weeks in 'Operation Countenance' (August 1941), Saddam Hussain's hasty invasion on 22 September 1980 – believing Iran to be both vulnerable *and* dangerous after the recent Iranian Revolution – led to eight years of bitter fighting and an uneasy truce.[43]

Fig. 10. The topography of Iran

39 The invasion (in response to German and Ottoman aggression in the region) saw the deposing and exile of the modernizing, but domineering, Reza Khan Pahlavi (1878-1944), and his replacement by his 21-year-old son Mohammed Reza, the last Shah. Tehran was occupied by an invading army for the first time in its history.

40 10% of Iran is forested. The most fertile region is close to the Caspian Sea.

41 Cf. During the 20th century, Iran experienced seven earthquakes of 7.0 or higher on the Richter Scale, with more than 50,000 people killed in a 1990 earthquake in the Qazvīn-Zanjān region and another 20,000 in 2003 in the ancient city of Bam.

42 NB. poor soil and limited irrigation mean the 30% of Iran suitable for arable farming is underutilised.

43 The brutal 'World War I' tactics employed by both sides during the conflict (including the use of chemical weapons) led to more than 500,000 deaths. After early advances by Iraq, the last five years were largely on Iraqi soil. Abortive attempts to end the war led finally to both sides accepting – and implementing – UNSCR 598 on 8 August 1988. On 11 December 1991, UNSC named Iraq the aggressor in the conflict.

For more than 150 years Russia fought for control over Iran and the wider Caucasus region, while Saddam pressed for the border regions of Zain al-Qaws and Saïf Saad,[44] full control of the strategic Shatt al-Arab waterway (cf. also p. 196), and a greater share of Iran's landmass to the south.

Fig. 11. The Shatt al-Arab waterway

The prize Iran represents has lured many to their deaths: the threat it has posed, and still poses, endangers far more. Like the earthquake-stricken region it is – and its fractured history confirms – it is unwise to assume the walls of this ancient citadel will not once again come tumbling down.

2. If post-Revolution Iran is a greater threat to outsiders than previously, the lure of her natural resources for an industrialised world has increased. This prize is a rose amid thorns. Prior to the 1950s, Iran's life and economy were predominantly agrarian. Since then, agricultural production has declined, imports have increased and the country's dependence on *and* vulnerability to pressure from, outsiders has grown.[45]

44 NB. Iraq claimed this had been promised in the 1975 Algiers Agreement.

45 Statistics on Iran's imports and exports are revealing with changes reflecting shifts in Iran's international profile. Cf. its leading import sources in 2010 and 2021: UAE 32.9%/31.2%; China 9%/24.1%; Germany 7.1%/3.6%; Turkey 6.2%/10.0%; other 38.9%/28.0%. Its leading export destinations in 2010 and 2021: China 17.2%/26.5%; Iraq 17.1%/11.9%; UAE 12.6%/6.6%; India 6.9%/now absorbed in 44% of 'other' destinations (44.4% in 2021); Afghanistan 5.2%/2.4%. Note the significant increase in imports from China and Turkey and decrease in exports to Iraq, UAE, India and Afghanistan. This underlines Iran's new politico-economic orientation, diplomatic isolation and rentierism (viz. dependence on a single natural resource). On the use of the terms 'rentier' and 'rentierism' in a Middle Eastern context, see Ulrichsen, K. C. (2018), 'Rentierism', in *A Dictionary of Politics in the Middle East*. Oxford: OUP.

In the face of high of unemployment and inflation (ca. 20% p.a.),[46] petroleum and natural gas extraction, processing and export, have emerged as the country's major industries,[47] economic lifeline, and (with its hardline Shia identity) international *causes célèbres.* The country's reserves of wood (near the Caspian Sea), fish (and other marine products), textiles, manufacturing, coal, uranium, copper, and gold, are dwarfed economically by natural gas (10% of world output) and petroleum (60% of Iran's GDP).[48]

As we will see later, despite generous subsidies and subsidy reforms (from 2015), tough sanctions and international isolation have left Iran's economy weak and its ability to capitalise on its natural assets compromised. Though the second largest OPEC producer[49] – and with new reserves being discovered – NIOC (National Iranian Oil Company) has not been the success it could and should have been.

Fig. 12. Iran's Oil and Gas fields

Conflict, competition, fluctuating commodities markets, and widely recognised technical

46 Since 1979, Iran's economy has been seriously impacted by international sanctions and the imposition of Islamic/Sharia Law (قعيرشن), which restricts interest on loans and limits financial speculation. These have compromised Iran's economic performance and engagement with the international community. Though differences exist in Iran's leadership between 'Leftists' (who seek nationalization and a strong welfare state) and 'Conservatives' (who promote private enterprise and property rights), both sides support Sharia economics.

47 Post-Revolution Iran has failed to match the 6bn barrels of oil a day seen in the last years of the Shah, with yields falling to 1.5bn in 1980 and averaging ca. 3.5bn barrels *per* day thereafter.

48 Oil was discovered in Iran in 1908 (NB. the first country in the Persian Gulf). Since the 1920s, petroleum has been the country's primary industry. Iran's income from oil and petroleum fell to 47% in 2015 because of a steep decline in global prices. This forced the government to adjust its economic policies and projections with oil now only 10% of the country's GDP.

49 Cf. the fifth largest in the world after Russia, Saudi Arabia, USA and China.

and entrepreneurial weaknesses, have militated against Iran realising its economic, manufacturing and production potential. Its decision to invest in nuclear power in the 1970s has been reversed, reinstated, and clouded by widespread fear of its nefarious military
use.[50]

Paradoxically, ideology rarely nurtures consistency in policy or morals. Cultural expectations and economic requirements encourage compromise. As we will see later the gulf between the current regime's words and deeds are best explained by forces the leadership would prefer not to admit demand compliance. Money, power and material needs divert even the most pious.

Conclusion

We will return to many issues touched on in this Introduction in what follows. As we have hoped to show, locating Iran geographically, historically and culturally is vital. The reality and complexity of modern Iran warrant study and respect. Hasty conclusions and false assumptions rarely make for effective diplomacy. We cannot afford to get Iran wrong. However, as we will see in Chapter 1, outsider engagement with Iran is fraught with intellectual, cultural, political and ideological challenges. To these we now turn.

50 Iran's Atomic Energy Organization (AEO) was founded in 1973 with a plan to build more than 20 nuclear power plants. Two 1200 megawatt reactors were near completion at the Persian Gulf site in Būshehr. Work was halted by the leaders of the 1979 Revolution. One of the reactors was completed (with Russian help) in 2011. Iran's nuclear programme – including discovery in 2002 of a uranium enrichment plant – has been a major cause of international suspicion and a focus of Iran's proactive, hostile, diplomacy. NB. In October 2003, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei issued an oral fatwa forbidding the production and use of WMDs as contrary to Sharia. In August 2005, this was cited by the Iranian government at a meeting of the IAEA as evidence of Iran's position on nuclear weapons. Significant doubts have been cast on the abiding status of this fatwa: cf. K. S. Isfahani, 'The nuclear fatwa that wasn't—how Iran sold the world a false narrative', *Atlantic Council* (9 May 2024): https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-nuclear-weapons-fatwa-khamenei/; accessed 17 January 2025.

Part I

Iran on the inside

In Part I our focus is on the character of Iranian life, society, politics and religion. We look at issues that make it hard for outsiders to understand and engage with Iran today. We trace the history of Iran from before the 1979 Islamic Revolution through to the present and give an overview of the origins, culture, structure and vulnerabilities of the present regime. In the third section, we map Iran's ethnic minorities and the status and character of opposition movements inside and outside the country. This material is intended to resource assessment of the stability and vulnerability of the present regime and shed light on Iran's external relations, which are the substance of Part II.

Question I

What challenges does an outsider face in understanding and engaging with Iran today?

Introduction

As indicated already, the aim of this report is to provide officials in the EU with a road map to navigate post-Revolutionary Iran. The map must track Iran's self-understanding and internal structure, and trace fault lines and inconsistencies in both. It must delineate the apparently solid but infinitely fluid landscape of Iranian politics. Above all, it must portray an Iran recognisable to Iranians and explain how and why outsider perception differs. Throughout the aim is descriptive more than evaluative to ensure the conclusions and recommendations in Part III are plausible and serviceable. The authors are clear: policy and perception built on self-deception, hubris, or caricature, are doomed to fail. If the regime controls truth inside Iran, prejudice, ignorance and fear must not be allowed to pervert perception outside. Both are unacceptable if Iran is to play a positive role in 21st century geopolitics.

Cartographers of Iran face many challenges, not least themselves. Presumption and projection blur vision. Like compromised jurors, too many studies of Iran have passed sentence with little evidence. Yes, it is hard to understand Iran: that is no excuse for not trying.

Wise diplomacy combines factual understanding and emotional empathy. Harmony needs clarity of mind and honesty of purpose. Cultural, religious and political prejudice is as blind as racism and sexism: it dishonours identity and stifles freedom. More worrying for elected officials, second-hand impressions and ideological mantras, erode public confidence and political cooperation. Without care, artificial imaging of Iran by the West inflates its ego by overstating its power.

A realistic account of Iran, its place in MENA and the Gulf, and its threat to the Western Alliance, requires patience, open-mindedness, courage and skill. Breaching the cultural, intellectual, and ideological wall around Iran cannot be left to soldiers and spooks. We need a psychologist and cleric, the light of reason and lamp of faith. Penetrating the depths of Iranian motivation is a dark, dangerous business, revealing as much about the hunter as their quarry. We may not like what we find.

We begin our search with four discoveries by most outsiders.

1. The opacity of Iranian culture

As we said at the start, modern Iran is a complex country with a deep-rooted culture. It is built on traditions of faith and excellence, etiquette and subservience, that are virtually unintelligible to the West. The demographics, history, religion and political structures that shape Iran are hard for Jews, Christians, atheists, cynics and sceptics to comprehend, let alone respect. What's more, there is no *one* Iranian culture that commands internal allegiance nor *one* worldview for all Iranians. Here is a country with cultural colours woven into it like threads in a Persian carpet.

Skilful Iranian leaders have turned this cultural diversity to their advantage, exploiting ethnic suspicion and division to weaken and demean opposition. Factional fractures in opposition groups are endemic, differences over peaceful and violent change substantial, and, to a degree, inevitable. The absence of coherent and consistent leadership and focus, compromise protest movements in Iran.[51] Though not racist, Iranian Persians often act as a chauvinist elite who impose their language, learning and legacy of wealth on ethnic minorities they view as poor, credulous, and uneducated. Outsiders are similarly belittled by a language few speak, a culture fewer understand, and a type of religion very few find attractive. Like China, Iran and her leaders hide meaning in strange words and weaponize tradition to wrong foot the unwary. Lacing political declarations in obtuse religious metaphors helps seal the 'otherness' Iran has always sought … but many young Iranians see things rather differently.[52]

51 NB. Despite widely reported crackdowns on opposition parties and protest groups, control of public dissent is carefully managed. Though tough, some toleration of protest is evident in the government's response to the public gatherings in August and September 2024 (to honour the 2nd anniversary of Amini Mahsa's death in police custody). For a subsequent incident, see J. Howard, 'Iran says woman detained after undressing released without charge', *BBC News* (19 November 2024): https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwy42vxd99po; accessed 17 January 2025.

52 NB. Government statistics indicated the average age of the Iranian population in 2025 is 32. For concerns about the decline and ageing of the population, see M. V. Dastjerdi, 'Average age of Iranian population risen to 32 years: Official', *Islamic Republic News Agency* (1 January 2025): https://en.irna.ir/news/85707655/Average-age-of-Iranian-population-risen-to-32-years-Official; accessed 12 February 2025.

Fig. 13. 'Inclusion' and 'exclusion' are both contested in Iran (*Photo credit: Alisdare Hickson / flickr*)

On closer examination, the current regime chooses at times to hide meaning and intention in pious metaphors and angry denunciations. Designed to disconcert the ungodly, it also enables the powers that be to 'control the message' by putting ideological pressure on dissent and by massaging truth to be what they say. Weaponizing words in this way is a well-known strategy to protect a weak system and prolong whoever is in power.

The need for the Iranian leadership to invest time, money and effort in a particular style and form of communication is clear. Analysts identify five phases in the (on-going) Iranian Revolution[53] and no less than 200 political parties. Internal division and external misperception are both fuelled by uncertainty about the real nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran. As is said wryly in Tehran, 'Where there are five Iranian Shiites, there are six political factions.' There are still many Irans and types of Iranians.

53 Cf. i. 1979-89, the original revolutionary phase under Ayatollah Khomeini; ii. 1989-1997, the two terms of the realist cleric President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1934-2017), when religious idealism bowed before political pragmatism at home and abroad; iii. 1997-2005, the two-term reformist era of President Mohammad Khatami (b. 1943), which ended in a rift between the Supreme Leader and more progressive factions; iv. 2005-13, the two tumultuous terms of the former Mayor of Tehran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (b. 1956), during which frustration over corruption and repression intensified tension between hard-line clerics and the (esp. younger) population; v. 2013-present, the era of President Hassan Rouhani, who promised 'hope and prudence' at his election and, to many, still represents the realist, centrist, ground in Iranian public life.

Opacity also occurs when Iran struggles to free itself from its past and forge an identity that its people and near neighbours can believe in. If outsiders find it hard to understand Iran, this is in no small measure because Iran is struggles to understand itself. Post-revolutionary Iran is still comparatively young. Like an awkward adolescent, this new, young, Iran tries on different clothes, imagines different roles, fears criticism and doubts itself. Suspicion externally and dissent internally feed off this uncertainty. Brutality and control are a defence against exposure.

Fig. 14. Protests following the death in custody of Amini Mahsa (*Human Rights Watch*)

Accurate, culturally attuned, analysis of Iran is therefore essential. Writing of the reduction of Iran to sound bites in the West, the American scholar Annie Tracy Samuel bemoans the 'mischaracterization of Iranian positions and policies that regularly appear in Western media', especially when they then '… gain traction among policymakers and the public'.[54] Samuel appeals for closer attention to 'Iranian sources and perspectives' rather than relying on 'a literalized interpretation of the regime's rhetoric'. This is particularly evident, Samuel argues, in accounts of the Iran-Iraq War, when internal IRGC reports cast a quite different light on Iran's hopes, fears and failures. Were this data absorbed in the West, Samuel argues, it would help to counter 'essentialized … sound-bite-driven renderings of Iran' which too often 'promote and are predicated on fear'. Specialists characteristically decry ignorance: Samuel makes a good point when she suggests that in this case ignorance may not lead to bliss.

Mindful of the 'otherness' to which Iran aspires and which outsiders encounter, interpreters need tools forged by experts in cross-cultural dialogue. They remind us that

54 Quoted in https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/understanding-iran-sources-not-sound-bites; accessed 27 November 2023. Cf. Samuel, A. T. (2021), *The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War: Faith, Firepower and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*. Cambridge: CUP.

effective communication requires respect for local etiquette, choice of the right words said in the right way at the right time, simplicity of concept, attention to detail, avoidance of offense, a good memory and time. Like many non-Western cultures, Iran's is both traditional and relational. Summarising her experience as an expert on Iran, Nina Evason offers six tips for effective communication with modern Iran, writing in the *Cultural Atlas* –

1. acknowledge Iran's achievements and cultural heritage.
2. avoid giving the impression the West is always best.
3. respect an Iranian's education.
4. be consistent in word and deed.
5. be humble about your own success and achievements.
6. respect privacy.

Evason also warns of confusing 'Arab' and 'Persian', assuming all Iranians are Muslims, intimating Islam is behind all restrictions, belittling poor English (and/or obviously simplifying your own), telling coarse jokes, and believing all self-deprecation is authentic (cf. it may be merely *taarof* [Lit. politeness]). In short, like drilling into a hard wall, penetrating Iran's opaque culture requires focus, persistence, research, open mindedness, sound commonsense and a teachable spirit.

Fig. 15. Iranian domestic life (*Source: Slate.com*)[55]

55 Cf. https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/09/iranian-living-room-a-photographic-tour-of-iran-s-domestic-interiors.html; accessed 12 February 2025.

There is another important element in this. Fear dominates the lives of many Iranian citizens. Finding what they *really* think is therefore hard. Polls and surveys are imperfect instruments, especially when oppression prevails. Iran will remain hard to read while its citizens are not free to speak and cautious about self-disclosure.[56] Historically, Iranians distinguish between the public sphere (*zaher*) where conformity is expected and a person's private life (*batin*) where family (a clear Iranian priority), friends, honesty and openness are esteemed.[57] Few outsiders penetrate the hard meniscus of Iranian domestic life.

2. The vulnerability of media reports

Two of the greatest obstacles to understanding Iran are *internal controls on media activity* and *external distortion of data and/or a disregard for balanced reporting*. The net effect is, as noted above, a risky 'mischaracterization of Iranian positions and policies' through fear-based soundbites. Neither obstacle is insurmountable, but both need to be studied carefully and explained clearly.

Discerning truth in any situation is difficult; especially so when state power decides what can or cannot/should or should not be said or reported. The Iranian regime is not unique, nor are the challenges – and associated risks – of extracting truth from falsehood and disseminating this.

Social media has in many respects made totalitarianism more difficult. Messages may still be closely monitored and restricted, but the sharing of news, plans and possibilities, is far easier. Local, national and international news spreads like wildfire by phone, tablet or computer. Tragedies and triumphs make and shape social media. News is as swiftly countered as it is reported, so few believe what they hear or read. Social media contribute to a sense of turmoil, fear, and vulnerability across the country. Cat and mouse tactics pollute Iranian media. Thankfully, what rogues abuse conscience often refutes.

56 Cf. this illuminating article on surveying Iranian opinion, D. Nayeri, 'Why is Iran's secular shift so hard to believe? (21 October 2022): https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/iran-secular-shift-gamaan.html; accessed 27 November 2023. Also, Kuran, T. (1995), *Private Truths: Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*. Boston: Harvard UP.

57 For a useful guide to Iranian culture and family life, see https://www.commisceo-global.com/resources/country-guides/iran-guide.

Fig. 16. Social media and Iranian life

As this may suggest, news is a complex, conflicted reality in Iran. Official news is from a network of outlets (radio, TV and on-line)[58] that disseminate government papers, statements and reports. The time, energy and resources this information requires testifies to its perceived importance. The government's message and messaging reinforce Iran's Islamist ideology and the absolute power of the 'Supreme Leader'.
With so many media outlets, controlling dissent becomes harder. *Vox populi* can be stirred by the sheer volume of provocative – to many, unreliable – official news.

The Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) and Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) use Farsi to convey policy at a national and a provincial level. Other government agencies (also) use English; for example, Iranian Students News (ISNA), Fars News (affiliated to the IRGC), Mehr News (linked to the Islamic Propagation Organisation), the nationalist Tasnim News (linked to the IRGC) and Nour News (from the Supreme National Security Council). The coverage is comprehensive, the content closely monitored, the government's fear of losing control palpable.

58 The 1979 Revolution determined that all broadcasting must be government controlled. Despite a ban on satellite TV in 1994, it is estimated 30% of Iranians still access satellite channels.

Fig. 17. Logo of the Islamic Republic News Agency

Newspapers are also tightly controlled. They include *Iran* (the organ of government policy), *Iran Daily* (its IRNA English equivalent), *Javan* (an IRGC paper) and *Tehran Times* (another state-run English-language paper). Daily papers include *Hamshahri*, the 'reformist' *Sharq* (*The East*) and *E'temad*, the 'conservative' *Kayhan* (*Universe*), *Resalat* (*Message*) and *Jomhuri-ye-Eslami* (*Islamic Republic*), and the IRIB's own widely circulated *Jaam-e Jam* (*Jam's* Cup).[59]

The IRIB also runs Iran's TV network (with national, provincial, and international coverage), the English-language satellite channel *Press TV*, and Arabic network *Al-Alam*. IRIB's radio broadcasts go to eight national networks, various provincial services, and an external outlet.[60]

There is clearly no lack of news from the government in Iran. It is much less clear how effective its communication strategy is. Suspicion feeds off over-used spin. Loyalty dwindles with lies.

Pressure on Iranian news takes many forms. We have noted already outsider misreporting. The international NGO 'Reporters without Borders' claims journalists in Iran are 'constantly subjected to intimidation, arbitrary arrest and long jail sentences imposed by revolutionary courts at the end of unfair trials.' Totalitarian regimes characteristically tell lies and hate truth-telling.[61] Iran is no exception: its censorship, which extends to digital sources, is neither new nor subtle.

By July 2022, 91% of Iranians (78 m.) had internet access. This is now the major source of national and international news for many Iranians. Controlling this torrential information flow is arguably the regime's greatest challenge. But if news is corrupted internally, internet sources are similarly compromised. Steering through this informational uncertainty is as difficult for most Iranians as it is for policymakers in Europe.

59 Cf. *Financial Tribune* is the leading online English-language economic resource.
60 These include Radio Koran and a multilingual external service.
61 Cf. a data leak revealed >42,000 Iranians died during COVID: the official figure was 14,400: see 'Coronavirus: Iran cover-up of deaths revealed by data leak', *BBC News* (3 August 2020): https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-53598965; accessed 12 January 2025.

As an illustration, protests[62] following Jina Amini's death in custody in September 2022 led to what Freedom House described as a 'disproportionate and violent' crackdown on the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' (*Jin, Jîyan, Azadî)* (زن، زندگی، آزادی; *Zan, Zendegi, Âzâdi*) movement. The internet was shut down, WhatsApp and Instagram blocked, and surveillance increased.[63] Since then, 'digital curfews', blocks on 1000s of websites, bans on VPNs, and new restrictive legislation by the Supreme Council on Cyberspace (SCC), continue to suppress public intelligence.[64] Accessing data on the current state of government pressure and popular protest is as difficult for Iranians as it is outsiders. As in the West, news in Iran is all too often what individuals, groups, or the authorities make it to be, or for various reasons want it to be.

Fig. 18. 'Woman, Life, Freedom' protesters in Iran after the death in custody of Mahsa Amini in September 2022

Closely related to the suppression of news is disinformation. The regime uses fake news and fake websites to tell its story. Fake Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts capture the unwary. Dr Allan Hassaniyan, of Exeter University's Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, points out in *Fikra Forum* how the IRI inflates the threat to Iran from the West and from separatists and minorities. The September 2022 protests were, he argues,

62 An estimated 22,000 people were arrested during the protests. Seven people are reported as having been executed.

63 Cf. the Freedom House report 'Freedom on The Net 2023': https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net; accessed 28 November 2024.

64 Evidence suggests the Iranian government was fearful that protests would resurface on the anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death. VPNs (virtual private networks) have been a popular way to circumvent government control of the news and social interaction. According to the digital privacy research group TOP10VPN, shutting down the internet cost Iran ca. $773m last year. The IRGC is seen by many as exerting more and more control over Iranian media, internet access and the use of VPNs. On the surveillance work of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), see Article 19's report (23 July 2024): https://www.article19.org/resources/tightening-the-net-irans-new-phase-of-digital-repression; accessed 28 November 2023.

predictably misrepresented. He writes,

State media and some Persian media platforms around the globe have been falsely representing the current mass protests in peripheral regions such as Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Baluchistan as 'separatist' in nature. This narrative has allowed the regime to discredit and divide the protesters and to justify its use of extreme violence in suppressing them … As has been the case in the past, spreading such fake news about internal protests – and labelling them as 'separatist activities' – represents an attempt by the regime to destroy any manifestations of nascent unity or solidarity among protestors and the Iranian public at large. The regime hopes to sway public opinion with the argument that Iran's territorial integrity is endangered.[65]

Far from bolstering its position, the Iranian government's heavy dependence on security forces, 'cyber battalions', and abuse of minorities (esp. Iran's Arabs, Azeris, Bahá'i, Baluchis, Kurds, and Turkmens), increases the impression of a regime under pressure, rather than showing its strength.[66] Traditional democracies tolerate – if not encourage – dissent to stress test checks and balances on wise inclusive government. Political disagreement in Iran is rarely permitted to act in that way.

Fig. 19. A lone voice for the victory of freedom in Iran (*Human Rights Watch*)

Nevertheless, distortion is not the exclusive preserve of Iranian news agencies. Facts and events are reframed in international reporting. VPN and satellite TV (despite official bans),[67] foreign TV channels and English and Persian radio programmes, are avidly watched and listened to inside Iran. BBC's Persian TV and radio stations worldwide (esp. from the USA, Europe, and Dubai) provide Iranians with world news and with an

65 Cf. https://phys.org/news/2022-11-iranian-regime-media-response-protests.html; accessed 1 December 2023.

66 NB. Iran's regional minorities (esp. the Kurds?) have become adept at 'throwing up dust' on issues to disorientate opponents, divide opinion, and attract attention.

67 NB. the most popular domestic network is probably Network Three, which includes entertainment and ever-popular sporting coverage.

alternative, often critical, view of national life. Irresponsible international coverage of Iran exacerbates the problem of discerning what is 'true' in/about Iran.

Much of this international coverage of Iran is subject to pre-determined criteria and exaggeration. Human Rights agencies (including women's organizations) exist to profile abuse, violence, imprisonment, execution, kidnapping and government oppression. This valuable material is sadly often compromised by political bias and factual inaccuracy. Balanced reporting is hard to find. Funders, lobbyists, protest groups, governments and agencies, have agendas. They know what they wish to be told. Media moguls know well that moderation doesn't sell.[68]

Fig. 20. Iranian prisoners (*Source: Reporters Without Borders*).

However justified contemporary Western condemnation of Iran overall, bludgeoning and inaccurate criticism are not good ways to win friends and influence people inside the country. This proud nation and particular regime take justifiable offense at ill-informed opinion. Simply trumpeting Iran's shortcomings risks provoking paranoia, persecution, and anger. Saving a prisoner or dissident becomes that much harder. High profile and largely negative media coverage – as in the September 2023 exchange of five US citizens

68 For detailed analysis of bias in international reporting during the volatile period from December 2017 to early January 2018, see O. Adegbola, S. Gearhart and J. Cho (2020), 'Reporting Bias in Coverage of Iran Protests by Global News Agencies', *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 27.1: 138-157: https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220966948; accessed 15 January 2025. For accusations of BBC bias reporting Iran, see M. Thomson, 'BBC bias and the Iranian Revolution', *BBC News* (23 March 2009): https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00j6lfk; accessed 15 January 2025. Also, *Al Jazeera* (9 March 2024): https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/9/iran-condemns-un-experts-report-on-protest-crackdown-as-false-biased: accessed 15 January 2025.

for five Iranians (and the unfreezing of $6bn of Iranian assets held in South Korea),[69] and the release in March 2022 of long-term Iranian-British internee Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe (after repayment of a £393.8m. debt to Iran) – does not appear to have aided diplomatic efforts to secure the release of hostages. Biased coverage does not breed mutual trust.

Outside observers can never know the full story of Iran's brutality towards, and preoccupation with, those from inside and outside the country who are deemed a threat to the regime and its religious-political ideology. Hard evidence, contradictory narratives, swirling public opinion, make definite news and conclusions hard.[70] For now, conflict, doubt, and suppression lie ahead for all who promote fact-based news inside *and* outside Iran.[71] Only courageous policymakers will dissent from this norm.

3. The non-negotiability of Iranian ideology

For many analysts, Iran's political-religious ideology is the greatest hindrance to understanding and engaging effectively with the country. Under this heading, four things deserve comment.

First, *Iran's revolutionary ideology was, and remains, a composite phenomenon*. Politics, power, culture, faith and tradition vie for ascendancy in its complex DNA. The American Iranian historian Ervand Abrahamian (b. 1940) is right to call the 1979 Revolution and its aftermath a 'complex combination'. From the outset, the Revolution defined itself (as ideologies characteristically do) in Marxist, confrontational, terms *against* a named enemy (viz. pagan, Western [especially American] culture and imperialism)[72] and *for* a new Pan-Islamist, populist, radical Shiite Iran.[73] But the nature of the relationship between politics and faith in this revolutionary ideology is still disputed.

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69 NB. three of the five granted clemency by US President Joe Biden opted to stay in the US. $6bn that had been frozen in S. Korea was released through accounts in Qatar. President Raisi described the exchange as a 'purely humanitarian action'.

70 Cf. Though for Sunni Muslims the July Ashura Festival (on the 10th of Muharram, the 1st month of the Islamic calendar) is a celebration of Moses's crossing of the Red Sea and Noah's exit from the Ark to Shia Muslims the festival remembers – and mourns the death of – Husayn ibn Ali (626-80 CE), grandson of the Prophet and the third Shia imam (On this, see e.g., https://gulfif.org/from-devotion-to-dissent-irans-shifting-ashura-narrative; accessed 5 December 2023). The festival, with its association with resistance and suffering, became (once again) a focus for Shiite protest against the hard-line regime in the run-up to the 2024 national elections.

71 For an interesting overview of Iranian intentions and motivation, see the JSOU 2012 report, 'Iran: Illusion, Reality and Interests': https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA574059.pdf; accessed 12 December 2023.

72 Cf. on criticism of Western paganism, oppression, and visions of Empire, see, e.g., Ghanoonparvar, M.R. (2014), 'Through Tinted Lenses: Iranian and Western Perceptions and Reconstructions of the Other', in M. Eid and K.H. Karim (eds), *Re-Imagining the Other*. New York. Palgrave Macmillan: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137403667_4; accessed 12 December 202. Note here, too, the mutuality in misperception.

73 Cf. Abrahamian, E. (2008), *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge: CUP, 143.

Autocratic leaders have suppressed dissent because the case for the coherence of Iran's revolutionary ideology is still to be proven. To many, claims by leaders and led ring hollow.

Division persists inside Iran. In 1979, various groups with different visions and agendas coalesced in a temporary alliance to oust the Shah; although, in the end, the Shah and his ruling entourage were overthrown for a combination of reasons.[74] This composite revolutionary force united the hard-line cleric Khomeini, the Socialist Shiite academic Ali Shariati Mazinani (1933-77), the democratic, liberal (interim) Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan (1907-95; PM February to November 1979), and a range of small, nationalist, secular and religious groups.[75] Pluriformity of ideas and ideology remains the norm underneath the surface. Nationalist unity, such as it is, is the artificial product of ideological control, fear of internal unrest, and endless pious rhetoric against the evils of the West.

Second, Westerners encounter in Iran *a regime which fundamentally despises the values and lifestyle of others*. Non-negotiability here is not born of cross-cultural misunderstanding: it is conscious refutation of another's world view and denial that good relations depend on mutual respect. It is not just that Iran's leaders may not understand the West: they doubt western values deserve any respect. However, though frequently vociferous in self-justification and accusation, Iran's leaders sometimes condemn by cold indifference. More often, its religious elite use an awkward type of unidirectional communication that dismisses disagreement as a futile distraction. Dictatorships often act like this. Outsiders who are used to being heard can find this institutional, ideological condescension offensive. Diplomatic decisions have to be made about the value of speaking without a readiness to be heard.

74 Cf. the regime was increasingly known, and despised, for its lavish, pro-Western, lifestyle and autocratic abuse of power. It was also rejected for its mismanagement of the country's economy and squandering of its natural resources, for its cruel disregard of social need, Human Rights violations, and unpopular international alliances (including with Israel that offended the country's Muslim majority despised).

75 NB. these included the influential author, ethnographer and socio-political critic Seyyed Jalāl Āl-e-Ahmad (1923-69), who coined the term *gharbzadegi* (Lit. western-struck, westoxification, 'Occidentosis') to describe the pathology Iranians must conquer.

Fig. 21. The State Emblem of the Islamic Republic of Iran, with a stylized form of Allah blended with a sword

Third, *the rigid ideology of Iran's clerical elite leaves little room for negotiation*. The West is not only seen as defective culturally, morally and politically, it is deemed to breed idolaters and blasphemers and has a perverted view of faith, life, family, justice, and authority. Rejection of cross-cultural engagement is intensified in Iran's case by international sanctions and its own self-imposed isolationism.[76]

Outsider hopes to understand or be understood are often dashed. Unlike experiential Western spirituality and 'identity politics' that privilege privacy, diversity and individual rights, Iran's *fiqh*[77] system tests orthodoxy by conformity to Sharia law. As Forough Jahanbakhsh points out, this requires 'a class of interpreters to offer official interpretation and judge the correctness of peoples' behavior.'[78] So, religion is regularized *and* clericalized. What pertains inside Iran is applied outside. So, this 'dominant religious discourse ... is by its very nature militant, exclusivist and populist', demanding 'unquestioning obedience and conformity to its ideological elite – the clergy.'[79] This is not to deny tension between

76 On the evolution of Iranian political and religious discourse both before and especially after the landslide Presidential election victory of Mohammad Khatami (b. 1943; Pres. 1997-2005) in 1997, see Jahanbakhsh, F. (2003), 'Religious and Political Discourse in Iran: Moving Toward Post-Fundamentalism', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 9.2: 243-254.

77 The Arabic term *fiqh* (فقه ; Lit. deep understanding, full comprehension) is that form of human understanding of Islamic law, *Sharia* – as found in the *Quran* and *sunnah* (viz. teaching and practice of the prophet Mohammed and his disciples) – that trained jurists (*ulama*) teach and expand (*ijtihad*).

78 Cf. Jahanbakhsh, 'Religious and Political Discourse in Iran', 248.

79 Jahanbakhsh, 245.

Iran's politicians and clerics: it is to register that Iran's religious language and behaviour often needs as much 'translation' as Persian itself.[80]

Fourth, *Iran's non-negotiable ideology comes in both religious* and *military garb*.[81] The condemnatory tone of its political and diplomatic discourse is matched by the belligerence and hostility of its strong-arm tactics and military investment. Revelation is harnessed to crusading zeal. In Twelver Shīʿism idolatrous nations (viz. the West and Israel) must be destroyed before the saving victor (or Hidden Imam), the Mahdi, appears at the end of time. Eschatology and militarism are united in radical Shīʿite religious ideology. Global conquest is not a doubted or debatable issue.

Fig. 22. Iran projects itself as a militant religious regime

Lastly, *Iran's non-negotiable* persona *stands in stark, deliberate, contrast to the fluid pragmatism of Western real politik*. In the language of modern physics, 'solid state' Iranian nationalism is the antithesis of, and antithetical to, 'fluid state' global relativism. Inflexibility is not the preserve of Iran, of course. Misunderstanding is as often intentional as inevitable even in liberal democracies.

80 For a recent Iraqi paper on this, see K. M. M. K. H. Al-Zarkani, (2022), 'Addressing the Problem of Extremist Religious Discourse', *Res Militaris* 12.2: 6749-63.

81 For an overview of the complexity of Iranian motivation in the face of the stalled 2015 JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) on Iran's nuclear programme, see the Institut Montaigne's 2021 study by the influential Syrian academic Dr Bassma Kodmani (1958-2023), 'What does Iran Really Want?': https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/what-does-iran-really-want; accessed 12 December 2023.

II. Three further issues that affect an outsider's view of Iran.

First, *Iran's attitude to women*. Progressive, inclusive, egalitarian attitudes to women outside Iran are at odds with their cultural and legal position inside the country. The social profile of men and women in Iran fuels critical commentary from outside, but this criticism is not always as accurate as it could be.[82] Despite Iran's oppressive religious ideology, it remains a complex, composite, country culturally.

To many Westerners, it is self-evident that Iran oppresses politically, religiously and socially through its positions on a woman's dress, economic and professional identity, and domestic life.[83] Critics point to Article 18 of the Passport Law (1973) which says a wife cannot travel inside or outside Iran (or get a passport) without her husband's say-so. A November 2018 regional directive (from Khorasan Razavi) is cited to show a husband or father's consent is needed for a woman to hike. Critics quickly extrapolate from such examples that Iranian women lack all the legal safeguards of their Western sisters, particularly in relation to job security, maternity leave, divorce,[84] equal pay, and sexual abuse. However, the status and situation of women in Iran remains contentious, with critics at risk of denying the achievement of feminist activists inside Iran.

82 Cf. in 2017, the Institute for Women, Peace and Security (WPS) at Georgetown University placed Iran 116th out of 153 countries in relation to legal discrimination against women. In the same year, the World Economic Forum ranked Iran 140th (out of 144) countries for gender parity.

83 Cf. Human Rights Watch reported in October 2015, 'Women's rights are severely restricted in Iran'. A disproportionate number of Iranian women are widely believed to be pro-Western in their political outlook. Western agencies that support their calls from greater freedom earn respect. Hence, in December 2024, the UN called for repeal of the strict laws against not wearing the hijab (with penalties that include execution and up to 15 years in prison). On this, see 'Iran: UN experts call for strict new hijab law to be repealed', *UN News* (13 December 2024): https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1158171; accessed 21 January 2025.

84 NB. Some adjustment to the rights of women in relation to divorce and a husband marrying a second wife were introduced in 'Family Protection Laws' during the last Shah's 'White Revolution' (1963-79).

Fig. 23. Iranian women in a clash of cultures (*Source: BBC; Creator: EPA*)

The position of women in Iran is fluid, inconsistent and, at times, unexpected: this does they have not, and do not, play a key role in national life.[85]

They were prominent in the 1979 Revolution, and praised at the time by Ayatollah Khomeini; even if later he imposed restrictions on their dress, breadth of work and place in society.[86] In the last three years, the courage of Iranian women has been remarkable: they have protested openly, shedding the headscarf, resisting intimidation, and wearing Western clothes under their hijab. Victimised Iranian women may at times have been, victims many have refused to become.

Women's rights movements in Iran have deep historic roots.[87] Despite the imposition of Sharia, World Bank reports since 1979 show more women working outside the home (19.8%),[88] almost 60% in Higher Education and 90% (according to WPS) with access to

85 Cf. Four phases can be discerned in post-Revolution Iran's treatment of women: 1979-1997, increased restriction and limitation of women economically and socially; 1997-2005, measured liberalisation under President Khatami (esp. re. the voice of women in public); 2005-13, reversion to more conservative Islamic values and attitudes towards women under the nationalist President Ahmadinejad; 2013-present, cautious liberalising under pressure from mass protests.
86 NB. there are only 16 women from 13 constituencies in the Iranian Parliament. Despite being a small % (ca. 3%), women have been prominent in promoting bills (35) relating to women's issues.
87 In the early 19th century, the poet, and progressive female spiritual figure (and martyr), Táhirih Qurrat al-'Ayn (1814/17-1852) scandalised her family and many others by refusing to wear a veil. A century later, the wife of the prominent cleric Muhammad Husain Yazdi, Safiya Yazdi, founded Iffatiyah Girls School (1910) and campaigned on various women's issues. Many in Iran continue to venerate the legacy of these two women.
88 According to the UN's Gender Inequality Index, Iran ranks alongside Egypt, Syria and Iraq in its lack of economic parity between the sexes.

a mobile phone and bank account. Travel restrictions (particularly overseas) have not stopped Iranian women's rights activists following global trends, appealing to UN legislation (i.e., the 1979 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women' [CEDAW]), and campaigning openly – often courageously – for greater freedom, protection,[89] equality and empowerment of women. Beginning in a peaceful protest in 2006, the high-profile, and often heavily censured, women's movement 'One Million Signatures for the Repeal of Discriminatory Laws' (Persian: **وغل یارب اضما نویلیم کي زیمآ ضیعبت نیناوق**, also known as 'Change for Equality') has catalysed action across Iran.

The cultural, religious and political complexity of Iranian women's lives is a key issue in outsider understanding and commentary. Neither the power nor the vulnerability of women's voices in Iran should be underestimated.

Second, Iran's *perception of justice*. This issue is again hard for non-Iranians to understand. It deserves to be studied, even if/when it denies what the West reckons adequate legal protection.

Iran's judicial system was conceived and established by the influential statesman Abdolhossein Teymurtash (1883-1933) during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878-1944).

Significant changes were introduced during the second Pahlavi dynasty and after the 1979 Revolution, when Sharia law (Persian: ةعیرِشَ) was adopted[90]

There are a number of different courts in Iran:

1. Revolutionary Courts (with 70 branches);
2. Public Courts, divided into Civil (205), Special Civil (99), First Class Criminal (86) and Second Class Criminal (156);
3. Courts of Peace, differentiated as Ordinary (124) and Independent (125);
4. Supreme Courts of Cassation[91] and the Supreme Judicial Council of Iran (22).
5. A Clerical Court independent of the judicial system, of which the Supreme Leader is the ultimate arbiter and authority. This court mainly tries clerical cases.

89 Violence against women remains an acute problem. Widespread honour killings, FGM, rape and, as reported in 2022-3, the deliberate poisoning of girls to prevent them attending school, ruin the lives of women and girls in Iran and, thereby, the country's global reputation.

90 Cf. some elements of 'civil law' were retained. This remains the case today. Iran's Civil Code was first promulgated in 1928. It was amended in 1982. It continues to address issues of property (Title I), the status of individuals (Title II: on marriage, divorce, capacity and inheritance) and the law of evidence (Title III).

91 The Court of Cassation has powers to interpret contested laws and cases.

Unlike the 'adversarial' system in the UK and US (where inquiry takes place in court), Iran (like France) has an 'inquisitorial' system (with the court both finding and assessing evidence). Except in serious cases, where there are two secondary judges (four in the case of a capital offence), the judge[92] has an absolute right to pass sentence without reference to another judge or jury.[93]

Fig. 24. The Supreme Court of Iran

Perceptions of justice in Iran are coloured by the draconian powers, denials of defence lawyers, swift decisions, and summary executions[94] of the mostly clergy-led Revolutionary Courts set up after 1979. Revolutionary Courts have existed beside the judicial system since the 1990s. Famed for the death penalties they passed, a lull between 2015 and ended in 2024 when a record number were executed.[95] State security and drug-related offenses are the most frequent reasons. Though Sharia tends more towards punishment

92 NB. all are trained in Islamic and Iranian law.
93 NB. Juries tend to be used in cases where media coverage has been involved.
94 It is estimated that between 1979-1989, at least 10,000 people were executed for political and religious offenses against the state. Their crimes included generally 'sowing corruption on earth', by opposing the Revolution, remaining loyal to the Pahlavis, compromising Iran's independence, insulting Islam or Islamic clerics, trafficking drugs, disrupting public order, kidnapping, or committing adultery and sodomy.
95 Commenting on the global hike in executions in 2024, Amnesty International's Secretary General Agnès Callamard stated, 'The huge spike in recorded executions was primarily down to Iran. The Iranian authorities showed complete disregard for human life and ramped up executions for drug-related offences, further highlighting the discriminatory impact of the death penalty on Iran's most marginalized and impoverished communities' (29 May 2024): https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/global-executions-soar-highest-number-in-decade; accessed 15 January 2025. On the 853 people executed in Iran in 2024, see also: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/04/iran-executes-853-people-in-eight-year-high-amid-relentless-repression-and-renewed-war-on-drugs; accessed 15 January 2025.

than incarceration,[96] Iran's brutal, overcrowded, prison system fuels justifiable outsider criticism of its attitude towards justice *per se*.[97]

The greatest area of misunderstanding surrounds the theological and moral basis for justice in the Qur'an and thence in Islamic law.[98] In contrast to contemporary Western legal systems that allow courts to define and enact justice, Islamic tradition places the onus for just actions on an individual, and thence on clerics who teach what it is to do, will, or act 'justly'. Justice is seen as a primarily inward, spiritual quality expressed in an outward moral virtue.

Viewed in this light, 'righteous humans' not 'Human Rights' are the first concern of Iranian justice. Sharia imposes harsh penalties on moral failures Western courts would not presume to assess. Qur'anic emphasis on personal responsibility is clear, 'No burdened soul shall bear the burden of another, and every person will be accountable on the Day of Judgment for himself' (Q. 13:89; 31:32). As such, a person is to will and 'live justly' more than 'appeal for justice'. This perception of law, justice and responsibility is different from, and undoubtedly disturbing to, Western minds.

96 Widely reported physical punishments under Sharia (viz. execution, amputation, crucifixion, *et al*) tend to obscure the conflict within Islamic tradition over the legitimacy of imprisonment. On this, see A. A. Zulfiqar (2022), 'The Immorality of Incarceration: Between Jāvēd A□mad Ghāmidī and Angela Y. Davis', *Journal of Islamic Law (at Harvard Law School)* 3.1: n.p.: https://journalofislamiclaw.com/current/article/view/zulfiqar2; accessed 15 January 2025.

97 NB. Iran's 253 prisons have become increasingly crowded. With an estimate capacity for 80,000 inmates in 2005 (when there were 160,000 prisoners), prison number have increased from 210,000 in 2014, to 228,000 in 2016, to 240,000 in 2018. It is currently estimated that for every 100,000 Iranians 294 are in prison.

98 On this, e.g., Y. Mohamed (2020), 'More Than Just Law: The Idea of Justice in the Qur'an', *Yaqeen Institute*: https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/the-idea-of-justice-in-the-quran; accessed 7 February 2024; T. A. Qureshi (1982), 'Justice in Islam', *Islamic Studies* 21.2: 35-51; K. B. Ismail (2010), 'Islam and the concept of justice': *UiTM*, Malaysia: https://ir.uitm.edu.my/id/eprint/32047/1/32047.pdf; accessed 7 February 2024. Also, this insightful comment by Lawrence Rosen, 'Central to the prophetic conception of justice are three features: relationships among men and toward God are reciprocal in nature, and justice exists where this reciprocity guides all interaction; justice is both a process and a result of equating otherwise dissimilar entities; and because relationships are highly contextual, justice is to be grasped through its multifarious enactments rather than as a single abstract principle' (Art. 'Justice', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. Oxford Islamic Studies Online; accessed 7 February 2024).

Third, *Iran's attitude to non-Iranians*. International perception of Iran is largely negative.[99] A 2013 Pew Center report[100] found that in the 39 countries surveyed the median perception was 59% negative and 20% positive, with 7 in 10 Americans and 8 in 10 Europeans viewing Iran negatively; in contrast, for example, to Pakistan (69% pos.) and Indonesia (55% pos.). More significantly, negative attitudes were also recorded in the Middle East, viz. Jordan (81%), Egypt (78.8%), Turkey (68%), Lebanon (60%), the Palestinian territories (55%).[101]

Fig. 25. Iranians protest against Israel, the US and the UK (*Source: Al Jazeera*)

The reaction of many Iranians to finding outsiders dislike and distrust their country is increased anger and hostility. Officials from the US, EU, and UK (and their allies), will often meet antipathy as agents of nations who have imposed harsh and impoverishing economic and political sanctions on Iran.

Iran has also developed its own cultural defences. Iranians with dual citizenship, and members of ethnic minorities (notably, Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds and Turkmen), are susceptible to intimidation, imprisonment, and discrimination (especially in education and employment). This fractures communal cohesion and breeds social tension (see below, p. 76).

99 On Iran's relationship to its allies, see p. 103.
100 Cf. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2013/06/11/global-views-of-iran-overwhelmingly-negative; accessed 8 February 2024. NB. though dated, and subject to necessary revision in light of the changing profile of Iran and her allies, they provide a useful, general sense of the PR challenge Iran faces.
101 NB. on whether Iran respects personal freedoms, at the time 57% of people in Pakistan, and only 24% in Russia and 33% in China said they did.

Persian cultural hubris and the current regime's reputation for vindictiveness combine to make engagement with the country unattractive to many outsiders. International mutual respect is hard to attain and preserve in this context. That said – and this is important when assessing the potential for strengthening EU-Iran relations – most visitors to Iran will be warmly welcomed and generously treated:[102] such is the historic tradition of Persian hospitality a majority still honour.

Conclusion

Iran is unquestionably one of the most complex, volatile and dangerous countries in the world. But it is also one of the most influential, not so much for the resources it possesses – although, if these include threshold nuclear weapon status, oil, and support for anti-Western states and militias, these are significant – but for its readiness to stare down Western threats and forge its own counter-narrative and religious-political ideological identity. Taken together, difficulties in understanding are worth the effort, with diplomacy and dialogue potentially least worse options.

In the following section, we drill down into the history, politics, and spirituality of post-Revolutionary Iran to quarry materials to build a clearer picture of the problem Iran presents to the EU and her allies.

102 NB. terrorism from inside and outside Iran remains a significant risk for visitors. As a UK government website advises: 'Terrorist attacks could be indiscriminate, including in places frequented by foreigners. Stay aware of your surroundings, keep up to date with local media reports and follow the advice of local authorities': https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/iran/safety-and-security; accessed 8 February 2024.

Question 2

How does the history of post-Revolutionary Iran shape the country today?

Introduction

As indicated before, we do not, and cannot, understand or appreciate Iran apart from its history. Our focus here is on how much the story of pre- and post-Revolutionary Iran explains Iran today.

Countries and cultures change and evolve. In Iran's case, transformation has been the result of internal and external forces, with its leaders proactive in their politics and reactive in their diplomacy. Iran's history is crucial to understanding modern Iran. The country and regime we see today is the fruit of ideological revolution, organic social evolution, and the changing ecology of global affairs. The West has played a role in this process as the foil to Iranian ideology. As in life, the Western Alliance helped make a problem (viz. Iran), it must now solve. European policy makers should remember this: Iranian politics, ideology and psychology are in part their creation.

So, what of the causes and inner dynamics of the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath? And what light do these shed on diplomatic engagement with Iran today?

I. The Road to Revolution

Seeds of discontent
Resentment of the last Shah grew slowly towards the end of his reign, but the fate of the Pahlavis was almost certainly sealed decades earlier. Opposition coalesced around two issues, the character and culture of Iran, and the country's form of government and socio-economic development. The Shah had supporters, many of whom believed (and still believe) the country best served by a pro-Western orientation. To some of his supporters, the Shah failed to maximize on access to US power, money, and military hardware. Others took a very different view, seeing the Shah's self-aggrandisement and exotic lifestyle as prostituting Iran's ancient Islamic culture to a decadent imperialist West. Disquiet spread. Suppressed anger turned into public outrage.

As darkness descended on the Pahlavi dynasty, hopes to recover Iranian identity and independence burned brighter. Nationalists dreamed of a revival of Persian culture and a government shaped once again by Sharia law. But Iranian nationalism and Shiite fundamentalism were always going to be awkward bedfellows, their principles and priorities only intermittently aligned. As subsequent events have confirmed, political realism and theological idealism vie for the body and soul of Iran. Discord still attends every Iranian decision, especially when lives and livelihoods are at stake.

Though veiled in pomp, secrecy and flattery, every action of the corrupt and imperious Shah and his courtiers served to justify the growing criticism he faced. By the early 1970s, Iran was a tense, fractious country. Counter to his original aim, the Savak (or 'Bureau for Intelligence and Security of the State'), which the Shah formed in 1957, had become for many Iranians symbolic of the threat the Shah himself (and a hereditary monarchy) posed to the state.[103] Traditional methods of pruning and purging non-compliance, would not suffice. Iran needed a comprehensive societal make-over. The idea of religious-political-cultural revolution, with a new clergy-led Islamic constitution, was born.

Fig. 26. Demonstrations on 5 June 1963 with protesters carrying picture of Ruhollah Khomeini.

103 NB. Hoping to appease the populace, the Shah's last PM Shapour Bakhtiar (1914-1991; PM January-February 1979) abolished the Savak. It was finally shut down by Ayatollah Khomeini (see p. 59).

Drilling down into popular perception of the Shah's rule in the 1970s, two issues stand out.

First, *the Shah was seen as misjudging America*. US-Iranian relations had soured in the early 1950s when the popular, democratically elected, PM Muhammad Mosaddegh (1882-1967; PM 1951-3) was ousted. Declassified documents now confirm what many Iranians believed at the time; namely, US backing for the coup in order to protect their regional influence.[104] Iranians have long memories. Their country's brief experience of democracy (1941-53) for ever tarnished in the minds of many by the duplicity of its primary global advocate and by the UK's complicity in its subversive action.

The 1953 coup catalysed opposition to the Shah, his advocacy of close ties with the US and its allies (for economic and strategic reasons) rejected as self-interested and weak. And we should not doubt US influence at the time; as Dilip Hiro has shown, the US Embassy in Tehran had become 'as important a centre of power as the Shah's court'.[105] The Shah had a 2-hour briefing by the CIA every Saturday morning.[106] To his opponents, regional allies had become more plausible and reliable.[107] A new axis of cultural and regional affinity was born to which Iran's modern day proxies are heirs.[108]

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104 Cf. On this, R. Alvandi and M. J. Gasiorowksi, 'The United States Overthrew Iran's Last Democratic Leader', *Foreign Policy* (30 October 2019): https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/30/the-united-states-overthrew-irans-last-democratic-leader; accessed 12 February 2024; Gasiorowski, M. J. and M. Byrne eds. (2004), *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran.* Syracuse: Syracuse UP. NB. The UK is now widely assumed by many Iranians to have had a hand in Mosaddegh's overthrow; indeed, in many actions injurious to Iranian interests.

105 Cf. Hiro, D. (2018), *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy.* London: Hurst, 62; - (1985), *Iran under the Ayatollahs*. London: Routledge; - (2006), *Iran Today*.London: Methuen.

106 Cf. Hiro (2013), *Iran under the Ayatollahs*, 166-7.

107 Cf. On this, see above p. 59.

108 NB. It is unclear whether Iran's proxies act on orders from Tehran or merely draw confidence and resources from Iran's ideology and military elites. In its quest to protect its interests and influence regional politics, there is evidence the Iranian regime will at times arm both sides in conflict situations. On Iran's use of proxies, below p. 111; also, A. Lane, 'Iran's Islamist Proxies in the Middle East', *Wilson Center* (12 September 2023): https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies; accessed 21 January 2024; B. H. Hook, 'The Iranian Regime's Transfer of Arms to Proxy Groups and Ongoing Missile Development', *US Department of State: Special Briefing* (29 November 2018): https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-iranian-regimes-transfer-of-arms-to-proxy-groups-and-ongoing-missile-development; accessed 21 January 2025.

Fig 27. President Carter and Shah Reza Pahlavi meeting in Tehran on 31 December 1977 (*Source: AP Photo*).

Second, *the Shah's efforts to bolster his position backfired*. Central to the Shah's political PR campaign was the 1963 'White Revolution', or 'Shah and People Revolution'. This impacted the lives of most Iranians more than international affairs. In short, what was intended to enhance the Shah's standing ultimately undermined it.

'The White Revolution'

The 'White Revolution' was a bold initiative to redistribute land, wealth, and national resources through infra-structure development, economic investment, and urbanization. It promised and indeed appeared to deliver, much in the short term. In the process, however, it loosened the ties of Iran's ancient, oppressive but cohesive, feudal system, while bringing few lasting economic benefits.

The 'White Revolution' was the Shah's vision for national renewal. His credibility and future were on the line. His agenda for change had 19 parts. Six appeared on 9 January 1963 and were put to a referendum on 23 January: land reform and the abolition of 'Feudalism', nationalisation of forests and pastureland, privatization of government owned enterprises, profit sharing, extending the franchise to women, the formation of a new educational 'Literacy Corps'.

Fig. 28. Shah Reza Pahlavi distributes land titles during the 1963 'White Revolution' (*Source: Wikipedia*).

This promised much to many. Purchasing land from feudal lords and re-selling it at a reduced cost freed ca. 40% of the population (1.5m. est.) from indentured servitude. Plans to develop cultivable land saw 9m. trees planted and urban 'green belts' created across the country. Privatization, and public ownership of factories and industrial plants, recycled historic wealth. A new professional middle class emerged, often linked to profit sharing (@ 20%) and bonuses. Enfranchisement of women, though opposed by traditionalists (clerical and lay), revolutionised their self-perception, social profile and economic potential. Directing gifted conscripts to education reduced illiteracy, which stood at the time at ca. 60%.[109]

Over time, change also came to healthcare (including eradicating malaria), farming, infra-structure, education,[110] maternity support, pensions, corruption protocols, and the country's economy, water system and construction industry. To some, Iran was set for a prosperous and peaceful entry into the modern world, the pillars of its economy, industry, cities and professions, looking strong.[111]

109 NB. this figure now stands at nearer 90%, with women accounting for most of the remaining 10%.

110 NB. The 'White Revolution' saw kindergarten numbers rise from (est. figs.) 13,000 to 220,000, elementary schools from 1.6m. to 4m., secondary schools from 370,000 to 740,000, and colleges from 25,000 to 145,000.

111 Cf. by the mid-1970s Iran's GNP was rising by ca. 8% pa, while *per capita* income increased from ca. $211 in 1963 to $2,429 in 1979. At its height in 2020, Iran's GNP was $833 bn, as against an all-time low of $3.75bn in 1959. Skyrocketing oil prices during the 1973 Arab Israeli War filled Iranian coffers.

But change was costly and controversial. Land reform failed to fundamentally redistribute rural wealth and power. Old families resented the loss of land and the rise of the *nouveaux riches*. Glitzy 'Western' values, imports and investment, divided opinion,[112] with Shiite clergy – many from privileged backgrounds – hating the new materialism and evisceration of their position.[113] Vested interest fuelled criticism. Among the most vocal critics was 60-year-old cleric Ruhollah Khomeini.[114]

The end of the monarchy

Symbolic actions brand nations. On the morning of his 48th birthday (26 October 1967), in the 26th year of his reign, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi crowned himself and his wife in the Gulistan Palace, 'Emperor of all Iran and King of Kings'. The title evoked Iran's greatest king, Cyrus (d. 530 BCE).[115] Monarchists made the deliberate connection. To one, 'No king of Iran, not even Cyrus or Shah Abbas' had done more to give Iranians 'a sense of purpose and a stake in the future of their fatherland'.[116] To another, the Shah was 'one of the most brilliant people in the history of the contemporary world'.

112 On this, Menashri, D. (2019), *The Iranian Revolution and The Muslim World.* London: Routledge.

113 NB. Reforms that allowed non-Muslims to stand for public office were a sore point. As Khomeini stated: '[T]he government has evil intentions and is opposed to the ordinances of Islam. … The Ministry of Justice has made clear its opposition to the ordinances of Islam by various measures like the abolition of the requirement that judges be Muslim and male; henceforth, Jews, Christians, and the enemies of Islam and the Muslims are to decide on affairs concerning the honour and person of the Muslims' (cf. R. Khomeini [1981], *Islam and Revolution: Writing and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, H. Algar ed., Berkeley: Mizan, 175).

114 For insight into the Shah's mind in the early 1970s, see the (now declassified) conversation he had in Tehran on 31 May 1972 with President Nixon (1913-94; Pres. 1969-74) and his Assistant for National Security Affairs, Dr Henry Kissinger (1923-2023): https://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/70743.pdf; accessed 13 February 2024.

115 Cf. he took the honorific title 'Shahanshah' (lit. King of Kings) that had been accorded Cyrus the Great.

116 Cf. Sanghvi, R. and D. Missen (1969), *Shahanshah: A Pictorial Biography of His Imperial Majesty Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Aryamehr.* London: Transorient. Also, R. Steele (2021), 'Crowning the "Sun of the Aryans": Mohammad Reza Shah's Coronation and Monarchical Spectacle in Pahlavi Iran', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53: 175-193.

Fig. 29. Imperial splendour: Shah Reza Pahlavi and his wife at their coronation in 1967 (*Source: 972mag.com*).

In other ill-judged ceremonies in October 1971, the Shah celebrated his pivotal role in Iran's 2500-year-old monarchy. To many, royalty had now come to trump nation, and vainglorious deeds become emblems of dynastic decay. Inequalities of wealth and opportunity were targeted. Clerics decried the country's moral drift and appealed for a religious renaissance.[117] Appeals for modesty, humility, and honesty were an easy sell against the backcloth of the Shah's decadence. Parallels can be seen in the way Shiite virtues are lauded today at the expense of Western culture.

In 1977, the Shah dealt his influence a last, lethal blow. To pacify protest, he again proposed reform. The power of the despised censorship bureau would be curbed.[118] But with fear lifted, opposition grew, and protest spread. Radical change was now overtly on the agenda. Clerics sought to recover their power. The Shah's hope to appear amenable had failed. Few believed his intentions honourable. In anger and despair, he reasserted his authority and reverted to brutality. Many suffered.

117 On this, see Keddie, N. and R. Yann (2006), *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution.* New Haven: Yale UP.

118 For background on the 1979 Revolution, Wagner, H. L. (2010, 2021), *The Iranian Revolution, Updated Edition.* New York: Infobase Publishing/Perlego.

Fig. 30. Mass protests at College Bridge, Tehran, on 11 December 1978 (Ashura Day) against the Shah and Pahlavi government (*Source: GFDL* and sajed.ir).

At the worst possible time, the Shah hosted US President Jimmy Carter (b. 1924; Pres. 1977-81). The visit (31 December 1977 to 1 January 1978) was intended to bolster the Shah's position: in reality, it turned hatred into violence.[119] Protesters killed in Qom became the first 'martyrs' of the cause.[120] In Tabriz soon after, another hundred joined them. Violence spread. By August 1978, the country was engulfed in criticism, chaos and conflict.[121] Overtures for peace were spurned. A day after the Shah's government imposed Martial Law, Tehran suffered its infamous 'Black Friday' (8 September 1978), when hundreds were killed by police shooting indiscriminately into the crowd.

119 NB. The Shah had made a widely reported visit to the US in October 1977. During his visit, President Carter praised Iran, with retrospectively dreadful timing, as 'An island of stability in a turbulent corner of the world.'

120 Cf. the protests in Qom, which began on 7 January 1978, were inspired by an article in the pan-Iranian newspaper *Ettela'at* entitled 'Iran and Red and Black Colonization'. The article defamed Khomeini. Offended seminary students and others took to the streets (as in June 1975). The security forces intervened. More than 50 were shot (some say ca. 300). 9 January remains a Black Day in Qom.

121 On this spreading violence, Buchan, J. (2013), *Days of God: The Revolution in Iran and Its Consequences.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Political and religious opposition had reached a point of no return. Strikes paralyzed the country. Calls grew for the Shah to quit or face execution. Into this crisis, the now well-known voice of the dour, imposing figure of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini spoke from exile with passion and authority.[122] A new day was dawning. Allah had a better plan for Iran.

Fig. 31. Khomeini arriving at Mehrabad International Airport, Tehran on 1 February 1979.

II. Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution

Khomeini's anti-Western, anti-Pahlavi, utterances from Turkey, Iraq, and Paris (where he was in exile from November 1964) had been circulating illegally in Iran for some time. Scion of an ancient family, Khomeini became an icon of conservative religious dissent. His denunciations of alcohol, immorality and Western music, and his reactionary views on Islam, women, and society, offered a compelling alternative to the Shah. Michael Axworthy's *Revolutionary Iran* (2016) speaks of an aura of mystery and authority hanging over the long-term exile.

122 Cf. the perspective of Iran's former Ambassador to the UN (1971-1979), Hoveyda, F. (2003), *The Shah and the Ayatollah: Iranian Mythology and Islamic Revolution.* Westport: Praeger.

Men and women revered him;[123] in some, as Keddie and Hoogland argue, admiration was tinged with doubt about his political competence and ability to deliver on his vision.[124] With few alternatives, he emerged as the focus for faith and opposition. Shiite orthodoxy was Iran's salvation from turmoil: that, too, is rarely forgotten today.

Khomeini's power in exile was limited. He resisted calls for his return while the Shah remained. Protests and strikes in the holy month of Muharram (December) 1978 spread. A new cadre of zealous 'Mujahideen' (Lit. holy fighters), ready to die for the cause, embodied popular feeling. Officials were assassinated offices ransacked. When the Shah went 'on vacation' on 16 January 1979, suspicion turned to relief. The US had offered sanctuary, the Shah had accepted. On 1 February 1979, Khomeini flew home, his Messiah-like journey from Tehran airport to the city centre awash with tear-filled joy. Unlike today, vast crowds were not forced to attend. The Shah's men disappeared. A new government was sworn in. Within a year, the new Islamic Republic was formed. Today, few Iranians fundamentally question the direction their country took in 1979 and the tough decisions that lay behind it.

Abbas Amanat's *Iran: A Modern History* (2017), summarises the causes of the Revolution thus:

The tumultuous events that led to the revolution of 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran were a classic example of modern popular revolution. A momentary confluence of forces of discontent, which mostly relied on mobilizing urban lower middle classes and the grassroots bazaar, succeeded in bringing down the Pahlavi regime and dismantling its power structure. Out of a broad alliance of Islamic tendencies there emerged a militant clerical leadership, led by Ayatollah Khomeini.[125]

Anti-monarchism was undoubtedly a major factor in ousting the Shah. Khomeini's anti-Western ideology was also important. The 444-day siege of the US Embassy in Tehran (4 November 1979 to 20 January 1981) remains for many inside and outside Iran a symbol of the East-West 'culture war' that began when the Shah fled. Present day relations between Iran and the West perpetuate this conflict. American (and to a lesser extent British) cultural and political imperialism still rankles in the mind, soul, and memories of many Iranians; however much they may resist the oppression and religious ethos of the country's new leadership.

123 Cf. also on Khomeini's popularity, Menashri, D. (2019), *The Iranian Revolution and The Muslim World.* London: Routledge; Daneshvar, P. (1996), *Revolution in Iran.* London: Macmillan.
124 Cf. Keddie, N. and E. Hoogland, eds (1986), *Introduction to the Iranian Revolution & the Islamic Republic.* Syracuse: Syracuse UP.
125 Cf. Amanat. A (2017), *Iran: A Modern history*. New Haven: Yale UP, 701.

It is hard for outsiders today to understand Khomeini's appeal. Generations later we see a new readiness – particularly among women and the young – to criticise his legacy. In his day, hatred of the Shah and anti-Western sentiment – despite the allure of freedom, internationalism and prosperity – ensured Khomeini's star remained high when chaos engulfed Iran in the decade after the Revolution. Khomeini's righteous appeal to Iran to chart its own path and create a network of affinity with regimes that share its anti-Western outlook, still carries weight. Critics of Iran's leadership today gain little traction from calls to reverse the Revolution and orientate Iran once again Westwards, even if many educated members of Iran's liberal elite are still drawn to aspects of a Western lifestyle.

Fig. 32. Iranian students scaling the US Embassy gates in Tehran on 4 November 1979.

III. The Aftermath of Revolution: 1979-2019

1979 brought Iran to the world's attention in alarming new ways. As Suzanne Maloney wrote in essays forty years after the Islamic Revolution, 'Few events in the modern era have proven as powerfully transformative as the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and the legacy of those epic developments continues to resonate forty years later within Iran, the broader Middle East, and America's engagement in that region.'[126] Five years on, her words remain apposite.

126 Cf. Maloney, S. ed. (2020), *The Iranian Revolution at Forty.* Washington, DC: Brookings, xiii.

Khomeini gathered loyal clergy and laity around him. The Savak[127] was shut down. Pahlavi wealth was redistributed through *bonyads* (Lit. Islamic foundations) to fund social programmes.[128] New moral and religious enforcement agencies were created, the now infamous Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and elite Quds Force (QF). Support and threat were used to pacify the country then as now.

The new 'Supreme Leader's' rhetoric inspired some but irritated many; not least his ambitious new Iraqi neighbour President Saddam Hussein (1937-2006; Pres. 1979-2003). On 22 September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran. On the surface, an escalation of long-standing border disputes – in which Iraq sought to reclaim the eastern bank of the Shatt al-Arab, which it had lost in the 1975 Algiers Agreement – this catastrophic eight-year war[129] was Saddam Hussein's (1937-2006; Pres. 1979-2003) miscalculated bid to dominate the region. Though Khomeini had no experience of or desire for war, it came to dominate and define his life and legacy.[130] MENA and the Gulf have never been the same.

Fig. 33. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard on parade 40 years after the 1979 Revolution (*Source: Britannica*).

127 The SAVAK, the Imperial State's secret police and intelligence agency, was established in 1957 with the help of the CIA.
128 Cf. on this, Marusek, S. (2018), *Faith and Resistance.* London: Pluto.
129 An est. 1-2m. were killed or wounded in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88).
130 On this, see the IGC's Middle East report #184 (April 2018), 'Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East': https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east; accessed 12 February 2025.

National security became a preoccupation of the new regime. Provoked into conflict, Iran found itself caricatured as narrow-minded and militaristic, a profile it has chosen not to shed. Popular perception of Khomeini leading a new, righteous, *jihad* (Lit. holy war against infidels) galvanized opponents. Iran felt vulnerable. Only Syria remained loyal. Survival displaced security as a national priority.

The war – arguably one of the most destructive in the 20th century – cost Iran and Iraq dear. Though precise figures remain unknown, both countries saw 500,000+ people killed and far more injured.[131] Oil revenues plummeted. The socio-economic impact was vast. After years of attritional conflict, and a series of failed Iranian offensives, in the face of an Iraqi advance Iran finally sued for peace. The UN brokered a fragile ceasefire (SC Resolution #598). The war ended officially on 20 August 1988.

The US, UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Arab states, backed Saddam.[132] Russia was Iraq's main source of weapons. Bolstered by success and international support, Saddam sought to enhance his position. On 2 August 1990, his troops invaded and occupied Kuwait. Outrage gripped the Western Alliance. In January 1991, the US and her allies (including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UK, Australia and Poland) engaged in a 100-hour joint offensive, 'Operation Desert Storm', to liberate Kuwait.

By the end of February 1991 (after 12 UNSC resolutions), peace was proposed to Iraq. Under UNSC Resolution #687 on 3 April 1991, a ceasefire was declared, and on 10 April officially implemented. For its part, Iran was more observer than participant in the Gulf War; however, it was also an unintended beneficiary both of the Gulf War and subsequent allied invasion of Iraq (March 2003).[133]

131 10s of 1000s of Iranian Kurds were killed in the conflict. Their animosity to Iraq and the Iranian regime persists.

132 Cf. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait gave financial support. Though publicly neutral, the US provided arms, military advisors, money, satellite intelligence, and dual use licensed (chemical and biological) materials. The UK and France, as long-term commercial partners of Iraq (including oil exports) provided weapons and military hardware.

133 Cf. Ansari, A. (2013), *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran.* Cambridge, CUP.

Fig. 34. Saddam Hussein making a point at his trial in July 2004.

With the Taliban deposed in Afghanistan (November 2001) and Saddam ousted in Iraq (May 2003), Iran saw its chance to control and convert MENA. Through threat, intimidation, financial inducement, diplomacy, and skilful manipulation of religious sentiment (especially, guilt and grief), it consolidated its position. But, as Ali Ansari argues, success bred division in Iran. While the wily, pragmatic, Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani (1934-2017; Pres. 1989-1997) sought to optimise America's presence in Iraq, hardliners (elected in 2004) wanted confrontation. Both benefitted from soaring oil prices after the war. Funding flowed to the Quds Force *and* radicalised Shia militia inside and outside Iran.[134]

When Iranian-backed Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon killed three Israeli soldiers in a rocket attack on N Israel on 12 July 2006, a new chapter in the history of Iran and MENA began. Present conflict in the region is a (more dangerous) reprise of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon/ Hezbollah war. To allies and critics of Israel, its severe, but ultimately unsuccessful, response to the Hezbollah attack emboldened Iran and her allies. Memories of that conflict motivate all sides today (see further p. 175).

134 Cf. on this, C. Smith and M. Knights, 'Remaking Iraq: How Iranian-Backed Militias Captured the Country', *Just Security* (20 March *2023):* https://ctc.westpoint.edu/iraqs-new-regime-change-how-tehran-backed-terrorist-organizations-and-militias-captured-the-iraqi-state*; accessed 22 February 2024.*

Stronger in spirit, but weakened economically by sanctions, mismanagement, and the pervasive regional fragility and religious friction of the 'Arab Spring' (December 2010 to December 2012), hopes to extend the Islamic Revolution geographically were halted.[135] If Iran failed to capitalise on Israel's weakness in 2006, Israel missed strategic opportunities in the 'Arab Spring'. We do not understand the present conflict, if a desire in Iran and Israel to make amends for past failures is not factored in.

One final point. American involvement in Iraq and its incentivizing of local leaders before, during, and after the 'Arab Spring', helped initially to stabilise Iraq and encourage Sunni-majority states to unite against Iran and the 'Shia Crescent'.[136] But instability and insurrection returned and Iran's profile in the region rose. Forty years on from the Islamic Revolution, Iran's profile in the Levant continues to threaten regional coherence and stability. As we will see later, its denunciations of Israel and solidarity (in an 'axis of resistance') with proxy terrorist groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis in Yemen, have eviscerated good will and increased the sense of existential threat Iran poses the West. This may not have been Khomeini's intention in 1979, but it is certainly his legacy in Iran and to the world.

IV. The Politics of post-Revolutionary Iran[137]

Iran's current cultural, political, social, and religious identity is a complex, layered, phenomenon. We understand more of its often-contradictory modern identity through the life, ideology, and legacy of its nine Presidents.

Abolhassan Banisadr (Pres. 4 February 1980 to 22 June 1981) **and Mohammed-Ali Rajai** (Pres. 2 August 1981 to 30 August 1981). The new Islamic State of Iran got off to a sticky start politically. The first President, a dissident writer and ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs in the interim government, Abolhassan Banisadr (1933-2021), was a political Independent.[138]

135 Cf. S. Chubin, 'Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated', *GRC Gulf Papers* (September 2012): https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Iran_and_Arab_Spring_2873.pdf; accessed 26 February 2024.

136 NB. this was evident in Bahrain from 2011 where Saudi forces helped crush Shia opposition. See also, 'Hamas in 2017: The document in full': https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full; accessed 26 February 2024.

137 For a review of literature on post-Revolutionary Iran, see H. Vaez (2004), 'Review Article: Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Continuity and Change', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 31.2: 235-241.

138 NB. The fact Banisadr was an Independent partly explains his attractiveness to be President, and his vulnerability in office. Multiple political parties exist in Iran: they both define and protect members.

Within months, he was impeached, fled to France and co-founded the National Council of Resistance of Iran. His even more short-lived successor and ex-Prime Minister, Mohammed-Ali Rajai (1933-1981), was assassinated within a month, killed by a bomb along with the hard-line Shia theologian Prime Minister (and ex-prisoner under the Shah), Mohammad-Javad Bahonar (1933-1981). Rajai was a member of the Islamic Coalition Party. The assassin Masoud Keshmiri was Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council with access to the country's leaders.[139] He was also a member of the Iraqi-backed MEK (People's Mujahedin of Iran). The assassination (or '*Hashteh-Shahrivar* bombing') sent shockwaves through the country. Support for the security, and ideological clarity, Khomeini offered grew. Fragmentation and suspicion were baked into Iranian political identity.

Fig. 35. Presidents Abolhassan Banisadr (1980-1) and Mohammed-Ali Rajai (1981)

Ali Khamenei (Pres. 9 October 1981 to 16 August 1989) and **Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani** (16 August 1989 to 3 August 1997). The Supreme Leader and Twelver Shia *marja*' Ali Khamenei, (b. 1939) Iran's first clerical President, fostered his country's conservative Islamic identity.[140] In his inaugural address he proscribed 'deviation, liberalism, and American-influenced leftists'. His two terms in office[141] saw a crackdown on dissent, with thousands of political opponents arraigned in revolutionary courts or summarily executed.

139 NB. It was assumed at the time that Keshmiri had been killed in the blast. He was not, being finally tracked down and killed in Paris by Iranian agents on 11 June 2023.
140 Khamenei became an Independent in 1989. Previously, he was a member of the Islamic Republican Party (1979-1987) and Combatant Clergy Association (1977-1989).
141 Following the assassination of Ali Rajai, four candidates were named by the Council of Guardians. Khamenei got 97% of the votes. In 1985, three candidates were proposed: Khamenei again returned a sizeable majority (87%).

The memory of those years still deters internal dissent and inspires international outrage. Khamenei's leadership during the Iran-Iraq war, together with his historic ties to the IRGC and army,[142] have solidified for friend and foe the linkage of Islamism and militarism.[143]

Fig. 36. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (1981-1989) and President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997)

When the 86-year-old founding father of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, died on 3 June 1989, Iran's identity and ideology faced unprecedented pressure. Swift action was needed. On June 4, Khamenei was appointed 'Supreme Leader'.[144] Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected President.[145] Rafsanjani's background, style and ethos were new: Iran's ability to change without seeming to, all too clear. Rafsanjani shifted boundaries culturally, politically and religiously. Unlike his predecessor (and many of his peers), his personal agenda and ambition were clear. A ruthless politician – a 'veteran kingmaker'

142 NB. There has been historic tension between the IRGC and IRIA (Islamic Republic of Iran Army). Competition for limited resources, overlapping jurisdictions, doctrinal differences, the higher pay and profile of the IRGC, and the regime's aim to control and monitor both through parallel institutions, have all fed into this tension. Tension persisted during the Syrian Civil War and spiked in 2018 when the US imposed sanctions on the IRGC. Animosity and mutual accusation have followed the fall of Assad. On this, see R. Oliphant, 'Iran's armed forces "at war with themselves" over fall of Assad', *Telegraph* (9 December 2024): https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/12/09/iran-armed-forces-at-war-with-themselves-fall-assad-syria; accessed 21 January 2025.

143 Khamenei's front-line experience in the Iran-Iraq War, and permanent injury from an attempted assassination, have given his leadership an aura of indestructibility and plausibility in the eyes of the IRGC and IRIA.

144 NB. some adjustment had to be made to the Constitution to allow Khamenei, who was not technically a *marja'* or Ayatollah, to succeed Khomeini.

145 Politically, Rafsanjani is a member of the Combatant Clergy Association.

to some – he set his face early on to hold, keep and use *his* power.[146] As entrepreneur,[147] he advocated a free market in Iran, privatization of state industries and a pragmatic approach to US-Iranian relations. Often controversial, Rafsanjani did what he believed could and should be done. Re-elected in 1993 and (narrowly) defeated in 2005, he (and his family) fell afoul of authority in 2009 for perceived disloyalty. His standing rebuilt, he hoped for the Presidency again in 2013, but was thwarted by the Guardian Council. Some say Rafsanjani died a suspicious death in January 2017. His character and career testify to the power of individuals and potential for dissent in a regime that can look to outsiders unimaginative, monolithic and piously harmonious.

Mohammad Khatami (Pres. 3 August 1997 to 3 August 2005) and **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** (Pres. 3 August 2005 to 3 August 2013). The next sixteen years saw Iran embroiled in conflict. Elected in 1997, Mohammad Khatami (b. 1943), a former Minister of Culture (1982-1992), was, and remains, an enigma.[148] Scion of an Iranian dynasty,[149] he perpetuated Rafsanjani's reformist agenda. Little known to outsiders, Khatami secured 70% of the vote in 1997, in part because he proposed a new 'Dialogue of Civilizations'.[150] In line with this, during his two terms as President he sought to liberalize Iran and leverage its assets against its global standing. Freedom of speech, a bigger 'civil society', and freedom to express views on politics, culture and religion, were touted. Like Rafsanjani, Khatami also wanted a dynamic 'free market' and a profitable programme of socio-economic and diplomatic engagement with Asia, America and the EU. Many in Iran see Khatami's presidency as the last time their country had constructive diplomatic and economic relations with the West. This view is reinforced by memories of the isolation and intimidation under Khatami's right-wing, nationalist successor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (b. 1956). Tempted to stand again in 2009, Khatami's candidacy floundered in the anti-reformist turmoil that enabled Ahmadinejad's re-election.

146 Paradoxically, Iran saw emigration rise in the 1990s, with est. 150,000 leaving each year. Another large exodus came after the 2009 election. Emigration is integral to the regime's widely reported 'brain drain' and growth of a wealthy, educated, Iranian diaspora (esp. in the UK, US and Europe). In 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs knew (disconcertingly to many) 4,037,258 Iranians were living abroad.

147 NB. His personal wealth is ca. $1bn est.

148 Politically, he belongs to the Association of Combatant Clerics.

149 Tracing patrilineal descent to the prophet Muhammad, Mohammad Khatami carries the honorific title, *Sayyid*.

150 He conceived the eirenic concept of a 'dialogue of civilizations' (cf. adopted in the UN's 2001 *Year of Dialogue among Civilizations*) to counter Harvard political theorist Samuel P. Huntington's (1927-2008) controversial book *The Clash of Civilizations* (1992).

Fig. 37. Presidents Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013)

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is for many (alongside Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei), the political face and fiery soul of modern Iran.[151] Unlike predecessors and associates, Ahmadinejad was from a poor, devout Shia home and worked his way up[152] to become Governor of Ardabil Province (1993-7) and Mayor of Tehran (2003-5). Famed for hard-line nationalism and rejection of reform, he gained 62% in the second round of the presidential vote in August 2005 (NB. many at the time boycotted the process).[153] For the next eight years Ahmadinejad worked to create and defend a conservative Islamic state with full nuclear capability. Allies rejoiced and enemies trembled as he militarized and globalized Ayatollah's Khamenei's vision and rhetoric.[154] During Ahmadinejad's presidency, Iran assumed the menacing, military mantle it wears today.

151 Politically, he belongs to the Society of Devotees (1999-2011) and Islamic Society of Engineers (1988-present; inactive from 2005).

152 Early in his career he joined the influential Office for Strengthening Unity, which promoted (esp. among the young) non-militant loyalty to the Republic.

153 NB. he had backing from the Tehran-based Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran (from ca. 2003), a conservative federation of parties and organizations of (mostly) laity under fifty. To the electorate, he was as a grassroots populist and 'principilist' Islamic politician (i.e. guided by Islamic teaching).

154 NB. he gave vocal support to the volatile Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez (1954-2013; Pres. 1999-2013),

Ahmadinejad remains controversial. Besides his widely reported human rights violations[155] and suppression of opposition, he backed Iran's nascent nuclear programme, rationed fuel, freed bank interest rates, scrapped birth control policies and relaxed laws on polygamy.[156] In his second term he clashed with Khamenei and the IRGC[157] and faced censure by the Islamic Consultancy Assembly (14 March 2012). Internationally, he supported 'free elections' in Palestine and its withdrawal from peace negotiations.[158] He condemned Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UN,[159] UK, US,[160] and their allies for frustrating Iran's industrial, commercial, and technological development. In his quest for support and protection, Ahmadinejad pursued closer ties with China and Russia (see p. 139), drawn by their power and 'securocratic' ethos. Ahmadinejad taught Iran much about building bridges and bullying enemies. He still sits on its Expediency Discernment Council.

155 In 2007, Human Rights Watch reported: 'Since President Ahmadinejad came to power, treatment of detainees has worsened in Evin Prison as well as in detention centers operated clandestinely by the Judiciary, the Ministry of Information, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (*World Report 2007: Events of 2006.* New York: Seven Stories, 2007, 464). Following a prisoner swap between the US and Iran on 19 August 2023 (Exec. Order #14078), the Treasury sanctioned Ahmadinejad for wrongly detaining US citizens. In keeping with his opposition to the government in 2017-18, and in stark contrast to his anti-Western rhetoric when President, on 2 March 2022 Ahmadinejad voiced support for Ukraine against Russia, claiming 'the resistance uncovered the Satanic plots of enemies of mankind'.

156 In the short term, tighter fiscal controls, a 'middle of the road' approach to capitalism and socialism, and tough domestic policies, helped improve Iran's GDP and economy. But damaging low interest rates and high spending caused a majority to turn against him when he sought re-election.

157 The presenting issue was his sacking of the conservative cleric and intelligence minister Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eie'I (b. 1956; currently Iran's Chief Justice) and continuing support for his loyal Chief of Staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei (b. 1960, who failed to succeed Ahmadinejad as President in 2013).

158 He publicly criticized Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas (b. 1935; Pres. 2005-present) and denounced his 'soft' stance on Israel.

159 NB. on one occasion dismissing the UN as 'one-sided', and 'stacked against the world of Islam'.

160 At the 65th UN General Assembly (September 2010), Ahmadinejad blamed the US for 9/11. He later repeated the claim.

Hassan Rouhani (Pres. 3 August 2013 to 3 August 2021), **Ebrahim Raisi** (also known as Sayyid Ebrahim Raisolsadati; Pres. 5 August 2021 to May 2024) and **Masoud Pezeschkian** (July 2024 to the present). The past decade has seen Iran's global profile acquire disturbing new features. Significant change began during the presidency of the Sharia lawyer (Arab. *Wakil*), and long-serving government cleric, Hassan Rouhani (b. 1948).[161] An activist and ally in exile of Ayatollah Khomeini, Rouhani was elected to the Iranian Parliament in 1980. As a member of the Supreme Defence Council (1982-8), he played a leading role in the Iran-Iraq War, after which he joined the newly formed Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) with close ties to Ayatollah Khamenei.

Fig. 38. Presidents Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021) and Ebrahim Raisi (2021-2024).

161 Before his election in August 2013, Rouhani had served as Secretary to the Supreme National Security Council (1989-2021) and Expediency Council (1991-2021), and been Deputy Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, or Iranian Parliament (Arab. *Majlis)*, in its 4th and 5th terms. See further on Rouhani, p. 70 and 161.

Rouhani's profile as a tough pragmatist[162] and skilled educator, led to his appointment to the Assembly of Experts who protect *Velayat-e Faqih* (Twelver Shia principles and practices). Prior to his election as President, Rouhani helped shape and defend Iran's nuclear programme. In 2013, *Time* called him one of the 'One Hundred Most Influential People in the World'. Perceived by many as a centrist figure in Iranian politics, Rouhani offered a new style of leadership and set of policies. To a fragile, fragmented, embattled nation, he promised economic prudence and stability, the bones of a 'civil rights charter', respect for ethnic and religious minorities, and improved international relations. He also proposed enhancing personal freedom and the rights and profile of women.[163] Rouhani's open-minded pragmatism secured him 57.1% of the vote when he stood for re-election in May 2017.[164] As time passed and Rouhani's star rose, his relationship to Ayatollah Khamenei soured, the latter seeing him as too soft in the protracted Nuclear Arms negotiations (JCPOA).[165] Rouhani's legacy is about change,[166] making reform without another revolution a possibility.[167] Many Iranians remain unpersuaded.

162 His views on Israel are symptomatic of his principled realism. He is quoted as accusing Israel of 'warmongering' and bringing instability to the region. But, unlike his predecessor, he is not a Holocaust denier, stating in a CNN interview, '... in general, I can tell you that any crime that happens in history against humanity, including the crime the Nazis created towards the Jews as well as non-Jews, is reprehensible and condemnable. Whatever criminality they committed against the Jews, we condemn'.

163 NB. Women were appointed by Rouhani as spokespeople in Iran's international engagements.

164 His rival in this election, and erstwhile successor, Ebrahim Raisi, secured only 38.3% of the vote on this occasion.

165 Under the terms of the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) on Iran's nuclear programme, signed in Vienna on 14 July 2015 with the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the UK, US + Germany) and the European Union, Iran agreed to end its accumulated medium-enriched uranium, reduce its stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98%, and for 13 years reduce its gas centrifuges by ca. 65%. In addition, Iran agreed it would limit the enrichment of Uranium to 3.67% (i.e. below weapons' level) for the next 15 years. During these long negotiations Rouhani acquired the nickname 'Diplomat Sheikh'.

166 NB. he was realistic about controlling the internet, distributing wealth, keeping inflation down, and raising the profile of women. Some data suggests he approved more executions in his first year than Ahmadinejad in his last.

167 Despite deteriorating relations, he made official visits to, and agreements with, the UK (incl. meeting PM David Cameron and opening the new Iranian Embassy in August 2015) and US (incl. a visit to New York and supporting a meeting between the US and Iranian Foreign Ministers). When President Biden was elected in 2020, Rouhani said this gave the US a chance to 'compensate for previous mistakes'.

The 8th President, Ebrahim Raisi (1960-2024), was like his predecessor a 'Principilist' lawyer and cleric, but cut from tougher conservative cloth.[168] Prior to his election (securing 62.9% of the vote in what many reckon a rigged election), Raisi had a high-profile career in the 1980s and 1990s as Tehran's Prosecutor and Deputy Prosecutor. He moved on to become Deputy Chief Justice (2004-14), Attorney General (2014-2016) and finally Chief Justice (2019-21). From here he joined the four-member 'death committee' that sanctioned the execution of 1000s of dissidents.[169]

A devout 'hard-liner', Raisi stalled the JCPOA process – while accusing America of 'delaying and dragging their feet' – and authorised the violent suppression of protest following Mahsa Amini's death in September 2022. At his inauguration, Raisi predicted an end to US sanctions and thereby its economic power over Iran.[170] His country conflicted and impoverished, Raisi turned to Russia, China, Turkey, other totalitarian states, and Shiite allies, for support and trade. He surrounded himself with ex-military personnel and others unacceptable to the West.[171] He worked to expand Iran's influence in the Islamic world, offering support to President Assad, to the Taliban (after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021), and to the Houthis in their fight against Saudi-backed forces inside and outside Yemen. Raisi's vitriol towards Israel was constant: he denied the Holocaust, advocated Israel's annihilation, and castigated the 'Abraham Accords' (September 2020) to normalize Arab Israeli relations. Before his death in a helicopter crash on 19 May 2024, Raisi actively supported Putin's war with Ukraine and strengthened Iran's ties with China. In this, he laid the groundwork for the hostile re-alignment ofBRICS[172] against the Western Alliance.

168 Politically, he belongs to the Combatant Clergy Association. As a conservative backed by the Popular Front of Islamic Revolution Forces and Front of Islamic Revolution Stability, he lost to Rouhani in 2017. Conscious of his academic and religious profile, Raisi has titled himself 'Ayatollah' (Lit. reflection of God). When elected, however, the Supreme Leader downgraded him to *hojat-ol-eslam* (Lit. authority on Islam).

169 A wave of political executions of esp. the People's Mujahedin and leftist Fedaian and Communist Tudeh parties began in July 1988. For his part, and other 'crimes against humanity', Raisi has been sanctioned by the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (Executive Order 13876) and named by the UN Special Rapporteur on Iran.

170 EU sanctions against Iran (because of its nuclear programme) began in early 2010 (confirmed in EU Council Regulation 423/2007, 27 July 2010). Sanctions were tightened in October 2012. The sanctions imposed a levy on Iranian exports (the EU accounted for 20% of Iran's oil exports), froze Iranian assets held by the Central Bank of Iran, limited foreign trade, and placed restrictions on legal, financial and insurance services. As ever, sanctions are a blunt instrument that risks adding to the vulnerability of the weak and strengthening the resolve of the privileged. For a recent review of sanctions against Iran, see Z. Kalb, 'Who Benefits From Sanctions?', *Phenomenal World* (15 August 2024): https://www.phenomenalworld.org/reviews/how-sanctions-work; accessed 21 January 2025. Also, on Raisi and the JCPOA, p. 110.

171 18 of 19 members of his Cabinet were approved by the Islamic Consultative Assembly. On sanctions p. 24.

172 Historically, BRICS designated intergovernmental cooperation between Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. BRICS now defines states that consciously coordinate their actions to redistribute power globally, at the expense of the US and her allies.

Fig. 39. President Mahoud Pezeshkian (July 2024-present)

President Raisi's sudden death sent shockwaves through Iran and the Shiite world. Ayatollah Khamenei and his inner circle acted swiftly to suppress dissent and appoint a successor. Reports suggest the path to Mahoud Pezeshkian's election on 28 July 2024 was rocky.[173] Political loyalties and family ties littered the way. In the minds of many electors and elite he represented 'Iran post-Khamenei', but his words and actions have increasingly confirmed his alignment with the Supreme Leader. Cabinet appointments were agreed jointly. Iran's historic support for Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, in their on-going conflict with Israel (particularly after the horrific 7 October attack by Hamas operatives in S. Israel) is a legacy Pezeshkian has not rushed to curtail.[174] Like President Assad, Pezeshkian's medical training does not equate to political moderation or humanitarian government. Known to be tough, Pezeshkian has a mountain to climb to improve Iran's economy, calm domestic dissent, leverage improved international

173 Elections to the Iranian legislature (1 March and 10 May) and Presidency (28 June and 5 May) were both held in 2024. With most moderates banned from standing for the legislature, the turnout was 41% with 5% of ballot papers recorded as 'invalid'. The first round of the Presidential election saw a record low turnout of 39.93%. This increased to 49.68%, when Pezeshkian defeated his rival Saeed Jalili. For illuminating statistics on Iranian elections since the 1979 Revolution, see https://www.statista.com/statistics/692094/iran-voter-turnout-rate; accessed 21 January 2025.

174 The extent to which Tehran was caught out by the 7 October attack by Hamas is much debated. For an early report, see Z. Cohen, K. B. Lillis, N. Betrand and Jeremy Herb, 'Initial US intelligence suggests Iran was surprised by the Hamas attack on Israel', *CNN* (11 October 2023): https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/11/politics/us-intelligence-iran-hamas-doubt/index.html; accessed 21 January 2025. Also, A. Ragad, R. Irvine-Brown, B. Garman and S. Seddon, 'How Hamas built a force to attack Israel on 7 October', *BBC News* (27 November 2023): https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-67480680; accessed 21 January 2025. It is unlikely the Lebanese Shiite cleric and leader of Islamist Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah (1960-2024), was entirely unaware of what was being planned, as Israel's assassination of him on 27 September 2024 would seem to suggest.

relations and deliver the 'better life' Iranians want.[175]

Conclusion

We will revert to present day Iran later. For now, some takeaways from the history of Iran before and after the 1979 Revolution.

Though frequently pressurised, post-Revolutionary Iran has shown itself to be remarkably adept at side-stepping catastrophe and believing its own rhetoric. Early enthusiastic popular support has given way to a mixture of eager compliance, grudging acceptance, and entrenched resistance. But for a majority the security of the *status quo* is, at least for now, more alluring than risky alternatives.

The Iranian regime draws power from opposition. Internal critics and external enemies fuel the pious fire of Shiite indignation and Iranian nationalism. Little is gained by pillorying Iran; except, perhaps, fanning the regime's self-righteous zeal and the 'Supreme Leader's' prophetic ardour.

There is little internal evidence to suggest many Iranians want a return to monarchy and a Westernised society; albeit liberals might welcome it and many benefit economically from it. For now, Iran remains a highly controlled, fragmented nation. Change would come at a high price. What some outsiders might want many Iranians fear. However there is likely a serious difference between Persians and non-Persians where the non-Persians are much more in favor of deposing the Iranian regime. In this it remains important that the non-Persians are around 50% of the population of Iran.

For all its apparent functioning as a Shiite oligarchy with a single Supreme Leader, Iran is in fact a many-headed Hydra, with political and social power dispersed, contested, fragmented and patchy. Economic pressure, cultural dissent, youth energy, and ubiquitous grumbling, render Iran an awkward country to govern. Where power can be exercised it is, where it can't officialdom has to settle for what it can get, calling on religious ideology and the security forces to make up the shortfall.

175 For all the anti-American official rhetoric, evidence suggests a majority of Iranian (particularly younger citizens) would still prefer to live in the US or a.n.other Western country. According to the 2020 US census, there were 568,564 Iranians (mostly highly educated professionals) living in the US (down from 169k in 2011, according to the Iranian Studies Group at MIT), compared with 37k in the UK in 2021 (down from 44k between 2011-15). In 2021-22, there were 9200 Iranian students in the US (https://ir.usembassy.gov/u-s-life-for-iranian-students).

Question 3

What light do Iran's demography and ethnic diversity shed on its political character and future?

Introduction

We explore further here the complexity, volatility and fragmentation of Iranian society by mapping the ethnic, religious and political profile of the country. This will provide resources to answer two crucial questions: *How stable is the current regime?* and, *Is regime change a real possibility?* Both issues are of vital importance to politicians and diplomats who are looking to chart a wise course in their dealings with Iran.

Parliamentarians from every party and political position in Europe (and beyond) have expressed views on Iran. Iran's support for Putin's war in Ukraine and proxy attacks on Israel have left few people in MENA unaffected. Debate inside and outside the European Parliament has intensified. Attitudes have hardened; views expressed sharpened. Understanding the mindset of the Iranian leadership is vital, as does having a strong grasp of the complex demography of their country.

As with all relationships, the EU's response to Iran will be as much a reflection of the EU as of Iran. Healthy cross-cultural relations require self-awareness … on both sides. Projections of strength or weakness on Iran may be less about Iran and more about the agenda and attitude of those projecting those views; likewise, the assumption that Iranian politics, religion and culture are homogeneous when they are clearly not. To some, diversity signals division and disloyalty; to others, history, tradition and freedom. There are many Irans and many Iranians and their character and opinions are as varied as Europe and Europeans.

The sharp end of Iranian diversity for European politicians is felt when approaches are made by the media for commentary or by opposition groups for endorsement. Observers may legitimately ask, Which version of Iran is true? Which party should I support? What will be the consequence of my position for others? In Iran's case, answers to these questions have particular weight and significance.

We map Iranian culture, ethnicity, religion and politics to give EU policymakers resources to help when talking to the media, advising leaders, and considering which opposition groups (if any) to back. This may not make such decisions easier, but acting with knowledge is better than relying on ignorance.

Three features of the social and political landscape of Iran in the early-21st century stand out:

1. Lack of unity in the agendas and aims of opposition groups.
Each has its own story, leaders, character, and ambitions. Politicians in the West who are drawn to, or pursued by, one group may find themselves unwittingly suspect to another. Competition and communication are the stuff of lobbying worldwide. Partial knowledge produces biased programmes. Quality policy and policymakers go the extra mile.

2. Lack of consistency in the way Iran is described and its leaders' actions represented.
As in life, the same evidence can have multiple interpreters and interpretations. Plotting a wise course for policy through a mountain of conflicting data is incredibly hard. Offers of help are often as unreliable as the data itself. Identifying reliable sources and resources is at a premium when studying and engaging with Iran and Iranians.

3. Lack of clarity and consistency in EU responses to opposition groups in Iran offends, divides and discourages.
Pressures from party, diary, and personality all have a role to play here; as do managing expectation, careful communication and avoidance of overreach. In light of what we said of cross-cultural encounters with Iranians (p. 23), integrity and reserve are better than promises and predictions. Divisions habitually divide. Iran needs unity and healing more than wounding and dividing by Western politics and politicians. This is why the information in the following chapter on ethnicity and political opposition is crucial for policy makers in the EU and EU Member States.

In short, poor communication between Iran and Iranians and Western governments and individuals, risks exacerbating an already difficult situation. Strained relationships – even with people of good will in Iran – do not make for productive dialogue. Politicians in the West who meet opposition groups from Iran can be dangerously unaware of the impact of their words and choices and the topical 'talking points' they focus on. Loud voices of lobbyists may have ample funding, but little legitimacy. Hasty response may harm individuals, relationships and the respondent's reputation. Protecting good policy decisions *and* the safety of Iranian nationals and Western agents (and NGOs), must be a priority. In this delicate diplomatic context, risk management and good understanding are immensely important. In what follows, our aim is to provide European policymakers with tools and a toolkit to build good policies *and* good relations with Iran. Central to this is a detailed map of Iran's people and politics.

1. Ethnicity and diversity in modern day Iran

This section maps the ethnic and political composition of Iran.[176] It introduces Iran's ethnic groups and identifies points of correlation with opposition parties and their distinctive political agendas.

Four introductory points:

a. Ethnicity largely determines policy and political affiliation in Iran.
This is very often forgotten by Western policymakers. Iran has been a complex, composite phenomenon for centuries. Outsiders tend to see Iran through the eyes and faith of its Persian (Farsi) majority, rather than through the diversity of its ethnic minorities. This necessarily distorts perception and impacts clear communication with Iran and with contemporary Iranian politics.

b. Ethnic diversity is a major factor in Iranian politics.
Accurate statistics are hard to get, but informed estimates suggest non-Persian minorities make up ca. 50% of Iran's population. Day-to-day the regime cannot ignore, corporately privilege, or individually favour its ethnic minorities. As a result, its relationship with this large disparate group is by turns edgy, condescending, bullish and unclear.

c. Ethnic and religious identity matters to Iran's minorities.
Simply put, Iran's larger ethnic groups (i.e., Azeris [Turkmen], Kurds, Arabs, Lurs and Baloch), smaller minorities (i.e., Armenians, Mazandarani, Gilak, Poles) and non-Muslim communities (viz. Christian [Protestant and Catholic],[177] Bahá'i, Zoroastrian, etc.) are self-consciously distinct.[178] Their identity is defined *positively* in terms of their past history, cultural norms, and religious practices, and *negatively* (often) against the religious-political and cultural ideology of the ruling Shiite elite. Among many of Iran's minorities, political self-differentiation is a tool of ethnic self-assertion.

176 This chapter is partially based on first-hand evidence acquired by its lead author over the last 8 years.

177 Accurate figures for minorities are in Iran are hard to procure. In addition, to various Muslim traditions, it is estimated there are between 300-370,000 Christians, of whom 7-15,000 are Protestants. In addition, the 2011 Census indicated there were 25,271 Zoroastrians in Iran.

178 Historically, Bahá'ís are the second largest religious group in Iran with an estimated 300,000 members. Many trace their origin to their family's conversion from Islam in the 19th century. Under the last Shah, the Bahá'is were marginalized and persecuted. This has continued since the 1979 Revolution, leading to a significant exodus of Baha's from Iran. On the Bahá'is and their plight, see Adamson, H. (2007), *Historical Dictionary of the Bahá'í Faith*. Oxford: Scarecrow Press; F. W. Affolter (2005), 'The Specter of Ideological Genocide: The Bahá'is of Iran', *War Crimes, Genocide, & Crimes Against Humanity* 1.1: 59-89. Also, the report by the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 'A Faith Denied. The Persecution of The Persecution of the Baha'is of Iran' (2011): https://iranhrdc.org/a-faith-denied-the-persecution-of-the-bahais-of-iran; accessed 13 February 2025.

d. Ethnic identity blurs Iran's borders.

Though some minorities are found exclusively in Iran, others have a transnational history, culture and identity, i.e., the Azeris are also in Azerbaijan, the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, the Baloch in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Arabs are found in Iraq and across MENA. Political loyalty reflects the diversity of ethnic identity in Iran. To most members of minority communities – as the regime sees but denies – 'nation' is subservient to 'tribe'; that is, unless safety, convenience or habit say otherwise. The spread of ethnic 'conscientization', that sociologists and anthropologists tracked in the 20th century, has increased Iran's fragmentation.

Fig. 40. Iran's regions and ethnic groupings (Source; CIA, 2004)

If 50% of Iran is Persian (Farsi), what of the size numerically of its individual ethnic minorities? And, as important, which of these carry the greatest weight socially and politically? The reality is, as politicians know, groups with the loudest voice may not be the biggest or most deserving of support! In what follows, we use the mean average size, cited by respected sources, of Iran's minorities.[179]

179 For further information, Shaffer, B. (2021), *Iran Is More Than Persia: Ethnic Politics in the Islamic Republic*. Berlin: De Gruyter; R. Hamid, 'Iran's Ethnic Minorities Are Finding Their Own Voices', *Washington Institute/Fikra Forum* (22 March 2019): https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-ethnic-minorities-are-finding-their-own-voices-america-can-help; accessed 13 February 2025; L. Beehner, 'Iran's Ethnic Groups', *Council on Foreign Relations* (29 November 2006); 'Iran', Minority Rights Group (2017): https://minorityrights.org/country/iran; accessed 10 October 2024.

Five groups stand out for particular comment in terms of their population and political weight.

a. Azeri

The Azeri (otherwise known as Azerbaijani) are an ancient Turkic people (pop. today 20-30m.) from NW Iran and neighbouring Azerbaijan. In addition to being the largest ethnic group in Azerbaijan (and second largest in Iran; ca. 16-24% of the population, i.e., 15-16m.), they are also the second largest in Georgia. They speak Azeri/Azerbaijani, from the Oghuz branch of Turkic languages.

The numerical size and geographic reach of the Azeris (and the significant oil and gas reserves in Azerbaijan) are historically, politically, and economically significant. Independence movements in 1918, 1946 and 1979 have never been forgotten. However, as Open Democracy noted on the 25th anniversary of Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union in 2016, the country has shown little inclination to develop politically, and even less to encourage democracy and Human Rights. This lacklustre political instinct extends to the Azeri in Iran.

Fig. 41. Azeri in traditional dress

Evidence for the Azeri contribution to Iran's opposition movements is limited and inconsistent. Azeri, who are mostly non-radical Shia Muslims, have held high rank in the Iranian military. They have settled in large numbers in Tehran and assimilated well. Of all

the ethnic minorities in Iran, the Azeri have been least troubled by the regime.

Despite the lack of a strong, distinct, coherent tradition of political activity among Iranian Azeri, some analysts[180] and Iranian nationals we have spoken to speak of early signs of new Azeri conscientization and politicization.[181] Though the Azeri are fragmented politically (and therefore weak), protests in Azeri majority regions against the regime have increased. The assertion of Azeri identity and interests has been a significant new feature of these protests. More research and monitoring are needed to provide a fuller picture of Azeri opposition to the regime. For now, it is worth noting the neutralizing impact of political inaction by this sizeable minority. If European politicians are approached by representatives of the Azeri community, this should be treated as both distinct *and* noteworthy.

b. Kurds or Kurdish people

The Kurds are geographically and historically native to Kurdistan, a vast mountainous region spanning SE Turkey, N Iraq, N Syria and NW Iran. Dispersed globally, there are between 30-45m. Kurds of whom between 8-12m. (i.e., 7-10% of the Iranian population) are in Iran, particularly in Rojhilat (Iranian Kurdistan). Unlike the Azeri, Kurds have a long history of independence movements and militant resistance; most notably, establishing the short-lived Republic of Mahabad (January-December 1946). Some Kurdish politics has been, and continues to be, associated more with the gun than the ballot box.[182]

180 Cf. J. Kraus and E. Souleimanov (2013), 'The Rise of Nationalism Among Iranian Azerbaijanis', (2013) Middle East Review of International Affairs, 17.1: 71-91: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283075722_The_Rise_of_Nationalism_Among_Iranian_Azerbaijanis/citation; accessed 10 October 2024; - 'Iran's Azerbaijani Question in Evolution: Identity, Society, and Regional Security', *Silk Road Paper* (2017): https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2017-souleimanov-kraus-irans-azerbaijan-question-in-evolution.pdf; accessed 10 October 2024;

181 G. Golkarian (2017), 'The Prospect of Ethnic Nationalism in Iranian Azerbaijan', *International Journal of Political Science* 3.1: 14-22.

182 For a longer study of the Kurds, C. Hancock, ed. (2022), 'Syria, the Kurds, and "enculturated" engagement', in *Engaging Ethnic Minorities* (Brussels: Sallux & Oxford House Research Ltd), 75f.

Fig. 42. Kurdish separatists in Iran (*Source: Wikipedia/Voice of America)*

Iranian Kurdish militants fought the imperialism of the Pahlavi. Their successors now war against the religious totalitarianism of Iran's 'Supreme Leader' and seek to throw off the yolk of oppression wherever it is laid upon them (i.e., in Turkey, Syria and Iran). Tens of thousands of Kurds have died for the dual cause of Kurdish independence and Kurdish identity. Frequently betrayed by friends and lured into (ultimately) disadvantageous treaties, the Kurds have much to resent and little to lose.[183] Wherever Kurds settle, as a numerical ethnic minority or majority presence, they will always be 'a community of interest'. The transnational nature of the Kurds provokes coordinated international action. Hence, Iran and Turkey unite in their quest to control – ideally, to suppress – Kurdish resistance and political dissent.[184]

Again, unlike the Azeri, the Kurds have a sophisticated political machine with military backing. The main groups are the **KDPI**, or Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, an armed movement of leftist separatists now exiled to N Iraq; **Komalah**, or The Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, a social-democratic party of ethnic Kurds inside Iran; **PAK**, or the Kurdistan Freedom Party, a nationalist, separatist, militant group based again in N Iraq;;

183 On this, S. Akbarzadeh, Z. S. Ahmed, C. Laoutides and W. Gourlay (2019), 'The Kurds in Iran: balancing national and ethnic identity in a securitised environment', *Third World Quarterly* 40.6: 1145-1162. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1592671

184 Historically, the Kurds unite militarily in the Pershmerga, the internal security force in Kurdistan, first formed in the 18th century to resist Ottoman rule.

and, **PJAK**, or Kurdistan Free Life Party, a leftist militant group whose ideas are aligned with the PKK s in armed opposition to – and, ideally, the overthrow of – the Islamic Republic. Within these groups alliances exist; notably, between PAK and Komalah in Iraqi Kurdistan (Başûr), and occasionally the PAK. . The aims of these groups, though distinct, represent a clear and present danger to the Iranian regime – as it knows all too well.

c. Arabs

Ahwazi, or Khuzestani, Arabs are native to Khuzestan Province in SW Iran. Covering an area of 63,238km² (24,416mi².) Khuzestan borders Iraq and the Persian Gulf. The strategic location of Khuzestan (NB. it produces ca. 80% of Iran's oil and gas) and its distinctive Arab culture, have led to the region being closely monitored and its indigenous population being consistently pressurised. Some accounts call the Ahwazi 'the forgotten Arabs'.[185]

Analysts estimate between 6-8m. Ahwazi Arabs live in al-Ahwaz (viz. Khuzestan) today. A further 2m. are dispersed across Iran. Overall, Arabs constitute, therefore, only ca. 10% of the Iranian population. For strategic reasons, the regime tends to deflate these figures to reduce Arab influence on its politics and culture, and particularly on its oil and gas industry.[186]

Unlike some Iranian minorities, there is much public sympathy for the Ahwazi in Iran. In the minds of many, their plight is bound up with the government's failure to control the polluting effects (through poor management) of the country's oil and gas industry and its correlates. Economic benefits from oil and gas are not recycled to Khuzestan. Low unemployment, poor education and lack of opportunity, blight the province. With water frequently polluted and in short supply – two of the most contentious issues in Iran[187] – the Ahwazi find calls for protection of their culture, language, literature and living conditions, resonate with a wider audience[188] – but rarely with the Iranian government.

185 On the plight of the Ahwazi, S. Quitaz, 'The Forgotten Arabs of Al Ahwaz: A Century-Old Struggle for Liberation from Iran', *Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs* (21 August 2023): https://jcpa.org/the-forgotten-arabs-of-al-ahwaz; accessed 11 October 2024.
186 Cf. according to the IRNA, '82% of the country's oil and gas reserves are in Khuzestan' (8 November 2022). On Khuzestan's natural resources, see 'Iran', *U.S. Energy Information Administration* (20 July 2021): https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/irn; accessed 13 February 2025; 'Iran's Khuzestan: Thirst and Turmoil', Report #241, *ICG* (21 August 2023): https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/241-irans-khuzestan-thirst-and-turmoil; accessed 13 February 2025; C. Hein and M. Sedighi (2016), 'Iran's Global Petroleumscape: The Role of Oil in Shaping Khuzestan and Tehran', *Architectural Theory Review* 21.3: 349-374; https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2018.1379110; accessed 13 February 2025.
187 Cf. 'Iran's Khuzestan: Thirst and Turmoil', *ICG* (2023).
188 Cf. on this, M. Hemamsi, 'The Ahwazis' struggle is also cultural', *Arab Weekly* (26 May 2019): https://thearabweekly.com/ahwazis-struggle-also-cultural; accessed 13 February 2025.

Fig. 43. Oil and gas in Khuzestan (*Sources: Map, Al Jazeera*; *Oil Refinery, Iran International.com*)

The Ahwazi are politically active and vocal . There is a plethora of Ahwazi political groups, who do not always share the same agenda or *modus operandi*. Some advocate direct (militant) action, others more subtle regional subversion. In the last few years, Khuzestan has seen a rise in mass protests and stiff government countermeasures. The Ahwazi Arabs long, painful, history of persecution persists. They deserve a hearing in the corridors of power; not least, for the same strategic reasons the regime keeps a close eye on Khuzestan.

d. Lurs

The Lurs (Persian: لر), historically from Iran's Lurestan, Chaharmahal, Bakhtiari, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad provinces in W Iran, are an ancient, largely nomadic, agricultural tribe[189] with four branches (Bakhtiari, Mamasani, Kohgiluyeh and Lur) that are linked primarily by language (Luri) and by some cultural similarities.[190] There are 4-5m. Lurs, who constitute ca. 6% of the Iranian population. Most Lurs are Shia, with a minority Sunni or Yarshani.[191]

Despite their size, fragmentation of Lurs identity is reflected in their lack of political cohesiveness. Their attitudes (and opposition) to government policy and action are siphoned through different political groups. Links between the Lurs and Kurdish protest movements suggest awareness of historic cultural ties. A key point to register from study of the Lurs is their mobility and essentially tribal character. They are a reminder that

189 Ethnically, the Lurs trace their roots to pre-Iranic tribes in W Iran (i.e., Kassites, Gutians) and aboriginal Iranian tribes from Central Asia.
190 Some studies note diversity among the Lurs, with some speaking of 'Persian Lurs' and others 'Kurdish Laki'.
191 Cf. Yarshanism is a mystical, dualist, syncretic faith developed in the 14th century by the Kurdish Sultan Ishaq Barzancî (*aka* Sultan Sahak). Like other religious minorities in Iran, the Yarsani fear persecution and are private about their beliefs. It is estimated there are ca. 1m. Yarsani, a majority in W Iran.

to some in Iran urban life and Persian culture are both recent and intrusive. As we will see later, Iranian tribalism is one contributor to the multi-ethnic nature of its protest movements.[192] Tribal identities will always make government by the Persian majority difficult.

Fig. 44. Traditional S Luri clothing

e. Baluch (or Baloch)

The Baluch are little known in the West and have often been overlooked by western politicians and media. However more recently, some attention has begun to focus on the Baluch, with increased awareness of the 'Insurgency in Balochistan' in Pakistan,[193] and violent suppression of protesters after the death in police custody of Jina (Mahsa) Amini , in the Jina protests in late-2022. The origin and location of the Baluch have meant they have developed and preserved a distinct, spirited culture. Since 2022, their voice has become louder and concerns clearer.

Like the Kurds, the Baluch are a large, cross-border ethnic minority with a deep sense of their history and identity. Mostly Sunni, they are nomadic, pastoral people. Historically from Baluchistan, a tough, mountainous, arid region covering 347,190km² of modern-day

192 On this, see I. Mortensen, 'Luristan, V: Religion, Rituals and Popular Beliefs', in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (from 1982): https://iranicaonline.org/articles/luristan-05-religion-beliefs; accessed 11 October 2024; V. Minorsky, 'Luristan', in *Encyclopedia of Islam New Edition Online* (1913, 2022): https://referenceworks.brill.com/display/db/eieo; accessed 11 October 2024; A. Sekander (2002), 'Reza Shah and the Lurs: The Impact of the Modern State On Luristan', *Iran and the Caucasus* 6: 193-218.

193 For a longer study of the Baluch, see 'Pakistan, the Baluch, and "ethical foreign policy"', in C. Hancock, ed. (2022), *Engaging Ethnic Minorities* (Brussels: Sallux & Oxford House Research Ltd).

Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan, there are ca. 2m. Baluch. Of those who haven't emigrated to Europe or the US, the majority live in Pakistan, with another ca. 600,000 in Afghanistan and the rest in Sistan and Baluchestan Provinces in Iran (i.e. 2-3% of Iran's pop.), where they are the dominant ethnic group.

The Baluch speak various forms of the Western Iranic Balochi language[194] and the dominant local language where they live. In Iran, there are two main branches of the Baluch, the Makrani and the Sarhadi, with the cities of Iranshahr, Chabahar, Nikshahr, Sarbaz and Saravan being Makrani, and Zahedan and Khash being Sarhadi. Linguistic and tribal variants testify to Baluch history and cultural sensitivity. As so often, central policies grind to a halt against such strong local realities.

Fig. 45. Sistan and Baluchistan Province, and Baluch in traditional attire (*Source: Wikipedia*)

Baluchestan Province is traditionally the poorest, least inhabited, and most underdeveloped part of Iran, with one of the highest rates of illiteracy and lowest levels of educational opportunity. Partly in response to this, the Iranian government established the Chabahar Free Trade-Industrial Zone in 1992.[195] Drawing on expertise from SE Asia, the aim was to expedite Iran's development, infrastructure, employment and global standing. The project has not been entirely successful. Local benefit was never a priority. Far from promoting growth, the project has provoked regional conflict and resentment.

Like the Ahwazi, many Baluch live in resource rich regions; the strategic ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas are on their doorstep. Their Baluch majority presence in the region was not factored into government calculations. As in Pakistan – and inspired by fellow Baluch in Pakistan – Iranian Baluch have become a self-aware community of popular protest and armed resistance.

194 In Iran, Baluch speak the Rakhshani and Sarawani dialects of Balochi.
195 Free Trade zones were also created in Qeshm and Kish Island.

Their hope to secure independence and financial benefit from development of their region is clear.

Baluch interests have been fostered in recent times by the Free Baluchistan Movement (FBM, which has recently expanded its activity in Iran), the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA),[196] and by the Iranian Baluchistan People's Party (BPP). These nationalist-separatist parties unite in condemnation of 'colonial oppression' but adopt different strategies to secure Baluch freedom. Armed separatists in Pakistan and Iran have attacked and kidnapped government forces, officials, key individuals and institutions, and sometimes turned against other ethnic groups and fellow Baluch. More moderate political activity has led to street protests and collaboration with multi-ethnic groups.

Like other ethnic protest groups, the Baluch have frequently been targeted by the Iranian security forces and military. Protests in Zahedan following the death of Jina Amini were led by the influential Sunni leader among the Baluch, Imam Molavi Abdolhamid Esmaeelzehi (b. 1947) head of the Makki Mosque[197] and Director of Jamiah Darul Uloom Zahedan Seminary. Despite the Imam's profile and position, protests and protesters in Zahedan were violently suppressed.[198]

As this overview of five of Iran's major ethnic groups shows, projection of uniformity onto Iran by outsiders *or* insiders, is a mistake. Iran is – and always has been – a composite ethnic phenomenon. A fuller socio-political account of the implications of this diversity is therefore worthwhile.

196 The BLA has been designated a terrorist organisation by Pakistan, the UK and US.
197 Cf. B. Makooi, 'Iran's Baloch population leads anti-regime protests six months after Mahsa Amini's death', *France 24* (16 March 2023): https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20230316-iran-s-baloch-population-lead-anti-regime-protests-six-months-after-mahsa-amini-s-death; accessed 13 October 2024.
198 Cf. D. Eltahawy, 'Iran: New wave of brutal attacks against Baluchi protesters and worshippers', *Amnesty International* (26 October 2023): https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/iran-new-wave-of-brutal-attacks-against-baluchi-protesters-and-worshippers; accessed 13 October 2024.

2. Politics, diversity and Farsi chauvinism

Recognition of Iran's ethnic diversity prompts a number of important questions: How well do Iran's ethnic groups relate to one another? How much political cooperation is there between them? How are they viewed by the government and Farsi majority? How significant are Iran's social, cultural, and political ethnic divisions for the future of the country? Will failure to deal properly with ethnic diversity ultimately be a factor in the fall of the current regime? We begin to answer these questions here and revert to them in the Conclusion (see below p. 101).

Three misperceptions

We begin to answer the preceding questions by cautioning against three misperceptions of Iranian politics.

1. Ethnic diversity and political division are NOT direct correlates in Iran.

It would be easy – indeed, to some attractive – to assume ethnicity always defines political allegiance in Iran. It does not. Minority ethnic political parties exist, but so do multi-ethnic affiliations. Likewise, opposition to the regime may be non-Farsi (ethnic minorities), Farsi (the Persian majority), or a combination of the two. Care is needed to present accurately Iran's diverse, fragmented, fluid political landscape. The non-Farsi movements cooperate across ethnic lines in several common umbrella's.

2. 'Opposition' is not a consistent, uniform, or necessarily unifying factor in Iranianpolitics.

The manner and motivation for, 'opposition' in Iran take many forms (as they do worldwide). For some, the cause of opposition is the ruling Shiite regime *per se* or its specific policies and actions. Others are provoked to oppose the power and prominence of the Persian (Farsi) majority or the marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities. Economics, unemployment, cultural identity, the rights of women, freedom of speech and/or religion, travel restrictions – and a host of other issues – may stir an individual or group to oppose whatever or whomever is seen to be somehow against them. Multiple motivations produce a fluid, fractious, opposition, expressed in every way from disloyal inactivity and silent, sullen, protest to mobilization of masses, the media and militia. And, of course, denials of wrongdoing by offenders and the offended are bold and self-justifying!

3. Nationalism is a predictably unpredictable feature of Iranian politics.

The ruling regime is as likely to charge its internal opponents with unpatriotic sentiment and activity as the Persian (Farsi) majority their ethnic minority neighbours. To some commentators, Farsi nationalism and ethnic chauvinism have a consistently unifying effect on non-Farsi communities. But the topography of Iranian politics is as varied as the country. Minorities are as likely to claim to be reliable stewards of Iran's future as the majority Farsi community to see the regime as best able to safeguard it.

That said, a. nationalism *per se* is a potent force in the definition of Iranian political parties; b. opposition to the regime does NOT mean uncritical openness to every outside body.

Four further points

If we drill into the sub-structure of Iranian politics, in light of the mapping of ethnic groups in Section I above, four trends emerge deserving of note:

1. Ethnic minorities agree and cooperate in seeking freedom and in opposing the regime.[199] Opposition groups more often than not fracture over issues of statehood and self-determination.[200] Multi-ethnic fora help support collaboration and demonstration of a united front against the regime. Three umbrella organizations unite non-Farsi political groups in a quest for an inclusive, 'federal' Iran, viz. The Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran,[201] the Council of Iranian Democrats,[202] and the less formal 'Solidarity for Freedom and Equality in Iran'. This cluster of umbrella organizations represents 19 ethnic political groups of Arabs, Kurds, Baloch, Lur and Azeris. The Front of the Nations for Self-Determination (FNSD)[203] unites 8 other political groups of Arabs, Kurds, Baluch and Azeris (and other ethnicities) in their quest for independence. The Democratic Platform of the Peoples of Iran has four member-organizations, that seek 'democratic confederalism'.[204] In addition, there are a few non-Farsi opposition groups (i.e. Ahvazi and Azeri groups) that do not belong to any umbrella organization.[205] Nevertheless opposition in Iran is still riven by division, suspicion, personalities and turf wars. To some groups, cooperation is a commonsense way to gain a higher goal; to others, it is a sign of weakness, drift, indiscipline, poor leadership and a lack of vision.

199 For an illuminating survey of Iranian attitudes towards (and statistics on) regime change, and on creation of a more democratic and less religious style of government, see M. Sinaiee, 'Over 60% Of Iranians Want Transition From Islamic Republic', *Iran International* (1 April 2022): https://www.iranintl.com/en/202204015794; accessed 17 January 2025.

200 NB. There is substantial unity among opposition groups over making wearing the veil (*hijab*) in public optional. Once a sign of loyalty to the Islamic Revolution, the *hijab* has become to many Iranians a symbol of government oppression. In December 2024, a stricter law (cf. the 'Law on Protecting the Family through the Promotion of the Culture of Chastity and Hijab') on wearing the *hijab*, was introduced. As a further sign of the regime's susceptibility to pressure, later that month (17 December 2024) the popular Iranian singer Parastoo Ahmadi was released, following public protests, after performing in a virtual concert without a *hijab*.

201 On this, see https://pdki.org/english/congress-of-nationalities-for-a-federal-iran-held-a-conference-in-germany/; accessed 15 October 2024.

202 Cf. 'Political Groups Launch Council of Iranian Democrats', *Radio Farda* (21 November 2017): https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-new-opposition-group-is-formed/28866347.html; accessed 15 October 2024.

203 On this, https://fnfsd.com/: accessed 15 October 2024.

204 K. S. Raha, 'What is Democratic Confederalism?', *Humanistically Speaking* (30 April 2023): https://www.humanisticallyspeaking.org/post/what-is-democratic-confederalism; accessed 15 October 2024.

205 For a more comprehensive list of political groups and umbrella organisations in Iran, see Appendix 231.

Fig. 46. Women protesters unite in the aftermath of Mahsa Amini's death (*Source: Washington Institute/Fikra Forum*).

2. Minority ethnic groups cohere around opposition to Farsi nationalism.[206] Outsiders often fail to register the tension and suspicion that exists between ethnic minorities (as a disparate group) on the one hand and the Persian (Farsi) majority (as a coherent cultural entity) on the other. Failure to appreciate this social, cultural and political 'given' in Iran increases a sense of isolation and resentment among ethnic minorities. Patriotism, some minorities would protest, is not the preserve of the ruling elite or Farsi majority. Intentional or unintentional denial, by outsiders or Farsi nationalists, of patriotic motives in Iran's minorities fuels separatism *and* legitimises their suppression by the regime.

3. Ethnic minorities disagree about priorities, tactics, strategy and ultimate goals. To some, regional autonomy is subservient to interim acceptance of greater federal freedom. To others, cooperation with Farsi political parties short-term is a necessary step on the road to regime change; to others, such cooperation is doomed from the outset due to Farsi nationalism . To a majority, cooperation between non-Farsi groups is more likely to attract international support than the prospect of an increasingly divided, if not ethnically dismembered, Iran.

206 On this, R. Asadian (2023), 'The roots and evolution of Iranian nationalism and its historiography', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10, Art. 971: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-023-02317-2; accessed 15 October 2024.

Fig. 47. Ahwazi protest against Iranian government bias (*Source: Washington Institute/ FikraForum*)

4. Nationalism is a tough, controversial, and divisive feature of modern Iranian politics. Some Farsi nationalists support a return to monarchy,[207] and often the absorption of ethnic minorities into a new Farsi nation and national identity (which means political exclusion of non-Farsi opposition movements).[208] Farsi moderates see risks, however, in excluding non-Farsi from plans for Iran's future. Without ethnic minorities, and the regions they represent, the country would be a shadow of itself demographically and economically, resident *and* diaspora nationalists argue.[209] For their part, ethnic minorities are divided over whether ethnic and regional separatism will ultimately benefit or endanger them. A volatile, vulnerable Farsi Iran is deemed by some to be as great a risk as the uncertainties of regional independence.

207 Cf. on the Shah and Iranian identity, K. Soleimani and A. Mohammadpour, 'Can non-Persians speak? The sovereign's narration of "Iranian identity"', *Ethnicities* 19.5 (2019): 925-947: https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796819853059: accessed 15 October 2024.

208 Cf. M. Kia, 'Persian Nationalism and the Campaign for Language Purification', *Middle Eastern Studies* 34. 2 (1998): 9-36.

209 NB. The Ahwazi are aware the Shah used appeals to national economic interest to justify strict state control of industrial development in their native SW provinces. On nationalism and monarchism among the Iranian diaspora, see A. Azizi, 'Opposition politics of the Iranian diaspora: Out of many, one - but not just yet', *Clingendael* (27 Oct 2023): https://www.clingendael.org/publication/opposition-politics-iranian-diaspora-out-many-one-not-just-yet; accessed 15 October 2024.

In this maelstrom of different opinions, we find Farsi denying minorities equal rights (in theory and in practice)[210] and minorities doubting they will ever really be accorded them as Iranians. Farsi nationalism fears the fracturing of Iran but by excluding the ethnic opposition movements, it forces non-Farsi movements towards separatism. Farsi nationalism therefore creates the very opposite it wants to achieve. If Farsi majority movements indeed respect democracy (as professed to western audiences), they cannot exclude the political representation of the non-Farsi ethnic groups. However if they do, they might be able to maintain the unity of Iran.

Fig. 48. Pro-government protests after the death of Jina Amini

The result of political, social and cultural tension in and between opposition parties and the Farsi majority in Iran, is that Western/European policy makers not only have to understand the nature and rationale of Iran's internal political divisions but also to consider which party or parties to support *and* whether a divided (but free) Iran is more, or less, dangerous than a united (but totalitarian) Iran. Another option is to explain the Farsi-majority movements that decentralization is not the same as fragmentation and that including the non-Farsi political demands in a decentralized Iran is a viable choice. We explore these issues further in what follows.

210 NB. Farsi protesters are found condemning their Kurdish counterparts for separatist intentions in the aftermath of the death of the young Kurdish (*sic*) woman Mahsa Amini in 2022. On this, S. Bradost, 'The Kurdish struggle in Iran: Power dynamics and the quest for autonomy', *Clingendae*l (3 July 2024): https://www.clingendael.org/publication/kurdish-struggle-iran-power-dynamics-and-quest-autonomy; accessed 15 October 2024.

3. Iranian opposition movements and options for international engagement

We have considered already (above p. 27) some of the challenges facing Western understanding and engagement with Iran. The complexity of Iran's ethnic and political life makes this task even harder. The result is that many Western policymakers fail to engage in a meaningful or consistent way either with the regime or with Iran's many opposition groups.[211] The Iranian regime presents its own set of challenges: this should not deflect the West from seeking wise, supportive, strategic interaction with other Iranians. Much more could be done than has been done to-date to relate effectively with Iran's Farsi and non-Farsi political groups.

a. Interaction with ethnic/non-Farsi minorities.

The failure of Western policymakers to engage in a consistent and effective way with Iran's ethnic minorities has discernible causes and consequences. In addition to the understandably dissuasive quantity and variety of ethnic groups and their agendas, a number of other motives for minimal engagement may be discerned.

Uncertainty about the strategic and optical benefits of engagement. Faced by an array of seemingly discordant ethnic groups, Western policymakers find grounds for inaction in appeals to diplomatic wisdom. The strategic benefits of supporting one group over another, or identifying with one separatist cause, are not (made) clear to them. The risk of being seen to 'back the wrong horse', is (as always) implicit in (this) self-interested politics. The better approach is to include both Farsi and non-Farsi movements.

Fear that a divided Iran is probably more dangerous than the present united one. If this position is merely an excuse for inaction, it is reprehensible; if it is a carefully considered reason not to engage with opposition groups, it deserves attention. Assuming the latter, it leaves the proponent open to the charge of,

- ignoring the present plight of non-Farsi minorities in Iran,
- denying legitimacy to all calls for regional and ethnic autonomy,
- demeaning the opinions and ability of locals,
- dividing and inspiring dissidents through studied deafness to their appeals,
- permitting abuses to persist while an incremental approach to change is, or is supposed by ethnic groups to have been, adopted (effectively by default).

211 A. Hoodashtian, 'The Fractured Opposition to the Islamic Regime', *Washington Institute/ FikraForum* (7 February 2023): https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fractured-opposition-islamic-regime; accessed 16 October 2024.

Fig. 49. French President Emmanuel Macron meeting Masih Alinejad in November 2022 (*Source: Le Monde*)[212]

Accidental ambiguity or deliberate drift in Western/EU attitudes and decisions in relation to ethnic minorities in Iran. Lack of understanding, preoccupation with what are reckoned to be 'more pressing' matters, and culpable indecision, have not only meant Western policy makers have been poor communicators with ethnic groups but have also failed to offer them a potential forum for collaboration. As part of this, EU members states have failed to register their hope/s for the future governance of Iran and the role of ethnic minorities within it.

Willful denial of the size, significance and future potential of Iran's ethnic minorities. When the EU fails to register and engage with multi-ethnic Iran (viz. 50% of the total population) or its 8-12m. Kurds, say,[213] it denies to Iran what it officially takes pride in; namely, its embrace of ethnic diversity and of smaller nations as partners and equals. Human Rights legislation and common humanity do not allow a colonial view of Iran's ethnic minorities as subordinate individuals or entities; however much this may worsen the West's already poor relations with the current regime. As indicated before, neglect of the identity and interests of Iran's ethnic minorities plays into the hands of both those who seek to preserve the *status quo* and those who see no future without regional, or ethnic, independence.

212 For the full article, see G. Golshiri, 'Dissidents ask Macron to 'recognize the voice of the Iranian people' in meeting', *Le Monde* (13 November 2022): https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2022/11/13/president-emmanuel-macron-meets-with-several-iranian-dissidents_6004087_5.html; accessed 13 February 2025.

213 NB. this is a greater number than in many EU member states.

The authors of this report do not underestimate the difficulties EU/Western policymakers face in interpreting and aligning with one or more of Iran's ethnic minorities. Greater care and attention to this issue will, they believe, suggest new strategies for engagement with the Iranian realities.

e. International engagement with Iran's Farsi opposition.
Lack of depth and subtlety in EU/Western understanding of Iran's ethnic minorities extends to its Farsi citizens and opposition groups. There are depths and shades in Iranian society that challenge cohesion and easy exposition. Tracking and explaining groups is hard.[214] We have looked at Farsi identity before (p. 94). We turn here to the character and composition of its opposition groups. We restrict our focus to groups that can, and do, interact with Western culture, politics and media.

Unlike many in Iran's ethnic minorities, Iran's Farsi communities are mostly educated, urban, religious (though not uniformly Shiite) and politically aware. Mindful of their cultural heritage, Iran's Farsi majority is as likely to resent dictates by the 'Supreme Leader' as denunciations of their country by the West. Their quest for identity and independence is characteristically marked by tradition and individuality more than tribe and geography. Here are additional complexities to be absorbed by EU/Western policymakers and diplomats.

214 NB. Some parallels can be drawn with the Turkish government's attempt to impose national identity on Anatolia and the Kurds. Social and economic differences compound ethnic hostility towards Ankara and the country's ruling elite.

Fig. 50. Iranian Middle Class keep their heads down but may hold the future in their hands (*Source: Atlantic Council*)[215]

Before looking at the make-up of Farsi opposition groups in detail, three initial points.

1. Farsi are nationalists to a degree not seen among ethnic minorities.
Persian history, culture, language and ethnicity assume an unrivalled primacy in Farsi minds; albeit, to many professionals especially this co-exists with a highly developed sense 'for' or 'against' the West. Nation trumps party allegiance in Farsi circles.

2. Farsi nationalism has strong historical and political ties to the Pahlavi dynasty among some groups.
Many Farsi who fled Iran after the 1979 Revolution carried with them the memory of, and an emotional association, with the last Shah. The current regime still uses this to besmirch and threaten the Iranian *diaspora* and to curry favour with dissident republicans and anti-monarchists.

215 Cf. on the important issue of how increasingly poor middle class Iranians think and act, see B. Daragahi, 'Middle class Iranians sought to remake their nation. Here's how they were betrayed', Atlantic Council (9 March 2021): https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/middle-class-iranians-sought-to-remake-their-nation-heres-how-they-were-betrayed; accessed 13 February 2025; also, J. Heiran-Nia, 'How Iran's Middle Class Shapes Its Foreign Policy', *Manara Magazine* (12 April 2022): https://manaramagazine.org/2022/04/how-irans-middle-class-shapes-its-foreign-policy; accessed 13 February 2025.

3. Farsi opposition groups tend to be preoccupied with their own problems.
Introspection in the Farsi majority leads many to assume Iran's ethnic minorities share their nationalist sympathies or to believe Western powers will always support their view of a united Iran over the separatism and regionalism of minorities. However, we define this mindset, evidence suggests (above p. 86) that Iran's ethnic minorities are also self-interested and able to develop their own strategy and timing for their relationship to the Islamic Republic and their Farsi neighbours.

Turning now to Farsi political movements, there are four main types, viz. republican, monarchist, Mojahedin-e-Khalq, and Human Rights groups. Though divided on specifics, all these groups long to see Iran change from being a theocracy (as now) to become an inclusive, secular nation.[216] These groups are also united in being closely monitored by the regime and largely ignored by the West. We take them briefly here in turn.

a. Republicans
Republican groups, be they leftist, liberal, or nationalist, are united in their opposition to a return to monarchy and to the restrictive culture and controls of the Shiite regime. Among the larger republican parties, most of which are headquartered in exile, are the National Front,[217] the (Communist) Organization of Iranian People's Fadaian (Majority),[218] the Left Party of Iran,[219] the (historically pro-Soviet) Tudeh Party,[220] the leftist United Republicans of Iran (or the Union of Iranian Republicans),[221] and the Iran Transition Council (composed of the main pro-democracy groups and key individuals).[222] Though a majority of Iranians inside and outside the country would probably support replacement of the current regime by a secular republic government, Shiite culture and piety run deep

216 For recent discussion of, and evidence related to, the 'secularizing' shift in Iran, see A. Alfoneh, 'Iran: Republic of God in an Increasingly Secular Society', *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington* (26 February 2024): https://agsiw.org/iran-republic-of-god-in-an-increasingly-secular-society; accessed 21 January 2025. Also, A. Kazemipur, *Sacred as Secular: Secularization under Theocracy in Iran,* Advancing Studies in Religion 11 (Montreal: McGill/Queen's University Press, 2022).
217 Founded by Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1949, the NFI is the oldest pro-democracy party in Iran.
218 NB. Founded in June 1980, the OIPF's Iranian name means, Organization of self-sacrificers of the people of Iran'. See http://fadai.org/index.html. Accessed 15 October 2024.
219 For the Left Party in Iran and its views on current international affairs, see https://www.bepish.org/fa/english: accessed 16 October 2024. The current regime is deemed by many to be 'leftist'. For a study of Left-Wing politics in Iran, see S. Cronin, 'The Left in Iran: Illusion and Disillusion: Review Article', *Middle Eastern Studies* 36.3 (2000): 231-243.
220 Cf. on the Tudeh Party, which was founded in 1941 and exerted considerably influence in its early years, see https://www.tudehpartyiran.org/: accessed 16 October 2024.
221 The URI/UIR, founded in exile in 2004, advocates a secular, left-wing Iran. See https://www.jomhouri.com/en/
222 https://iran-tc.com/en/home/

and pro-democracy activists at home and abroad risk much.[223] But Iranian republicanism is as divided and inscrutable to outsiders as ethnic minority politics. Communication between republican groups in the West is hampered by monitoring, suspicion, division, and partisan politics. Support for those who protest publicly is characteristically muted and temporary, even if continuing respect for their courage moves many.

Fig. 51. The flag of the leftist group United Republicans in Iran, founded in exile in 2004

b. Monarchists.

An indeterminate number of Iranians favour a return to some form of hereditary monarchy. With an eye to stability, continuity, Persian tradition and the new style of monarchs in Western Europe, some see the Pahlavi returning as a succession of Constitutional monarchs. But monarchism is a deeply divisive issue among both resident and diaspora Iranians. Western support for a return to Pahlavi rule is as likely to hinder it

223 As with many oppressive regimes, the *status quo* has beneficiaries and therefore defenders. Sanctions have also benefitted some. See A. Alfoneh, 'Who in Iran Benefits from Sanctions?' *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington* [9 September 2022]: https://agsiw.org/who-in-iran-benefits-from-sanctions; accessed 21 January 2025. UNHCR recently listed Iran as having, alongside Turkey, the joint highest number of refugees (3.4m., with ca. 750,000 Afghans and 12,000 Iraqi). Iran's refugees come mostly from South Asia and other parts of the Middle East, drawn by Iran's demographics, ideology and economic opportunities (see https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-iran: accessed 21 January 2025).

as the present regime and/or the plurality of monarchist parties.[224] Significant differences exist between, for example, the exiled pro-Pahlavi Constitutionalist Party of Iran(Liberal Democrat), founded in 1994,[225] the pro-democracy Farashgard (founded after the 2017-18 protests),[226] which advocates change but wants the nation to vote on republicanism or monarchy,[227] and the new Iran Novin Party (Lit. 'Party of New Iran', formed in 2023), which traces its roots to the dominant, royalist party from 1964 to 1975.[228] Western support for a return to monarchy in Iran ranges from nostalgic amnesia (forgetting the brutality of Reza Shah) to scheming pragmatism (believing a puppet monarch would suit nicely). Careless pro-monarchist Western chatter is unwise internationally and probably the greatest threat to a new Pahlavi era.

c. The Mojahedin-e-Khalq

(MEK, or People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran [PMOI]). Founded in 1965, the MEK and PMOI represent historically a militant, dissident, Marxist group that sought to oust the Shah and then opposed the 1979 Revolution.[229] The support it gained among Islamists in the '60s and '70s, it lost when it rejected Shiite radicalism. MEK's core ideology is a 'democratic Islam'. Once arguably the largest and most powerful opposition group in Iran, the movement fell out of favour when it supported Iraq in its war with Iran and self-identified as militant. Now based in Albania, the MEK serves to coordinate some opposition groups (thereby bolstering its weakened public profile). In this role it parallels the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), founded in 1983. Though the MEK is an effective, self-publicizing, lobbyist in the corridors of EU/Western power, its powerbase does not justify its claims. In reality, it is one among many groups that oppose the present regime and is often cold-shouldered by EU officials and Western policymakers.

224 Cf. the last Shah's son Reza Pahlavi (b. 1960) has a significant profile in Washington, DC and among pro-monarchists world-wide (see https://www.rezapahlavi.org/). His own position (? for reasons of strategy and safety) is unclear. He does not lead a political party but does appear to see himself as potentially a figurehead to unite opposition parties. This idea was briefly realised in the 2023 'Mahsa Charter' (see https://adfiran.com/en/), but the initiative was short-lived (cf. A. Azizi, 'The Fiasco of Iranian Diaspora Politics', *New Lines Magazine* [22 April 2024]: https://newlinesmag.com/argument/the-fiasco-of-iranian-diaspora-politics; accessed 21 January 2025). Reza Pahlavi's invitation to, and presence at, the 2023 Munich Security Conference (in the aftermath of Amini Mahsa's death), provoked anger in Iran and disagreement among opposition parties. On this, J. Irish, 'Time to ramp up support for Iranian people, former Shah's son says', *Reuters* (18 February 2023): https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/time-ramp-up-support-iranian-people-former-shahs-son-says-2023-02-18; accessed 21 January 2025. Also, 'Iran Denounces Shah's Son Invitation To Munich Conference', *AFP* (20 February 2023): https://www.barrons.com/news/iran-denounces-shah-s-son-invitation-to-munich-conference-b8c3340b; accessed 21 January 2025.

225 On the CPI, see https://www.irancpi.net/: accessed 16 October 2024.

226 On Farashgard, see https://www.farashgardfoundation.com/: accessed 16 October 2024.

227 Cf. the movement's slogan is, 'We Will Reclaim Iran and Rebuild It'.

228 Cf. on the new Iran Novin Party: https://irannovin.party/ : accessed 16 October 2024.

229 On the MEK, see https://english.mojahedin.org/: accessed 16 October 2024.

Fig. 52. The Emblem of The Mojahedin-e-Khalq.

d. Human Rights groups

Many NGO's and CSO's address Human Rights violations of every kind in Iran. Organizations include the US Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI),[230] Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDG), founded by Roya Hakakian in 2004,[231] Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRAI), which was founded by activists in Iran in 2006 and moved to the US in 2009,[232] and the multi-ethnic/religious Abdorrahman Boroumand Centre (ABC), formed in 2002.[233] Each of these bodies is passionate about the sufferings of Iranians and the need to track and publicize their abuse. They provide invaluable insight into the concerns and plight of many Iranians. In addition to their focus on direct, physical, human rights abuse, NGOs also focus on collateral damage to human life caused by structural issues such as water shortage and pollution,[234] environmental spoliation, the oppression of women and minorities, and bias or blockage in the judiciary. Iran would be even less known than it is without the work of NGOs and Human Rights organizations. They deserve to be heeded and helped by EU/Western policymakers and Foreign Affairs officers.

230 On the work of ICHRI, which was founded in 2007, see https://iranhumanrights.org/: accessed 16 October 2024.
231 See further https://iranhrdc.org/: accessed 16 October 2024.
232 See further https://worldcoalition.org/membre/human-rights-activists-in-iran-hrai/: accessed 16 October 2024.
233 https://www.iranrights.org/center
234 NB. As noted (p. 10), water is a huge issue for Iran and the Iranian government. Protests increasingly fuse government failures with new views on money/the economy, religion, popular culture, and youth opportunities.

Under this heading three other points deserve mention:
Freedom of speech and religion are severely restricted by the Iranian regime. Violations are fiercely punished. Though Syriac-Assyrian and Armenian Christians can hold services and Jews meet in synagogues, proselytizing is proscribed. Despite this, diaspora Bahá'i are active in their support for fellow Bahá'i in Iran and Protestant groups continue to meet discreetly and grow in number (often through well-documented spiritual experiences). Religious minorities suffer much in Iran. While some embrace suffering as martyrs, all rely on practical and spiritual support from relatives and friends abroad. It is important policymakers heed these voices and recognize the pivotal place religious freedom should occupy in Iran's present and future political and social renewal.[235]

Fig. 53. Protest unites calls for freedom of speech and democracy in Iran (*Source: Human Rights House Foundation*)

High-profile individuals play an important role in promoting Iranian interests and confronting repression by the regime. Though over-reliance on individuals can be unwise, Iran's global profile is constructively impacted by figures such as Masih Alinejad (the anti-hijab feminist), Hamed Esmaeilion (a poet-activist), Ali Karimi (a midfielder for the Turkish soccer team Kayserispor), Shirin Ebadi (a lawyer, activist and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate) and by international actors such as Golshifteh Farahani, Nazanin Boniadi and Zar Amir Ebrahimi. However they do not represent and cannot replace political movements.

235 Cf. for issues and organizations focused on religious freedom and persecution see 'Article 18' (https://articleeighteen.com/) and Iran Press Watch (https://iranpresswatch.org/).

Self-destructive infighting

Prominent individuals can only do so much. As important is a readiness among others to cooperate. Protests in 2022 and 2023, after the death of Jina Amini, revealed the best and worst in Iranian opposition groups: remarkable courage to take to the streets and airwaves inside and outside Iran, reprehensible failure to support and trust other protesters, agree strategy, coordinate action and celebrate successes. Infighting and an inability to compromise and cooperate erode energy and loyalty and exasperate friends. Absent wise leadership, and traditions of democracy and inclusivity, opposition groups will continue to struggle to cohere and commend themselves to Western allies. Understanding and education are needed on all sides if Iranian protests are to influence effectively EU/Western policies.

Fig. 54. Iran's urban youth are very like their Western counterparts.

Conclusion and preliminary recommendations

EU/Western politicians cannot, and should not, shape or dictate to the Iranian opposition. They can and should, however, make clear their hopes and expectations for the direction and actions of groups and individuals they want to support. Politicians do not have blank cheques, unlimited resources, or absolute freedom to endorse who or what they want. Responsible expectations on both sides are the stuff of constructive diplomacy and greater social cohesion. We will return to this at the end of the report. For now, we suggest actions that may strengthen EU/Western interaction with Iran's diverse and divided opposition.

Investment in understanding Iran. Sanctions against Iran do not apply to Western minds, research, meals, smiles, or handshakes. Understanding, based on accurate intelligence and meaningful interaction with well-informed members of the Iranian diaspora, can go a long way to help shape policy. Errors in interpretation lead to mistakes in action. Both can be avoided by targeted investment of time, energy and resources. As we have seen, particular care and attention should be directed to ethnic minorities and those who speak for or against them.

Inclusion of groups who tend to be marginalized in meetings and in policy proposals. This particularly applies to formal discussions and conclusions of the EU's Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Untold damage to relations can be caused by excluding groups that already feel excluded and including only groups who think they should be included 'by right'. Habit and accident can serve to reinforce positions and prejudice. The EU's charter explicitly rejects a closed-shop closed-mind approach to life.

Insistence on opportunities to meet and speak to new groups and new individuals. A well-worn path can become threadbare like a carpet. Repetitive encounters weaken attention. With Iran centre-stage in world affairs, through its support for Russia in Ukraine and its strategic and deliberate use of regional proxies against Israel, neighbouring states, and (hard and soft) Western targets, every avenue to understanding, engagement, and de-escalation of conflict, matters. Weariness is a poor argument in the face of 'wars and the rumour of war'.

Investigation of the who, why, and what, of approaches from opposition groups

As we have seen, Iranian opposition groups are numerous, diverse, fluid and conflicted. Care and careful research should go into planning meetings and agreeing presentations. The unwary are likely to be the unlucky when it comes to committing support to one or more opposition parties: too many claim to be *the* party of opposition or *the* party to trust.

Identify exemplary individuals and invest time and energy in nurturing them

Change is often catalyzed by an individual more than by an institution or movement. Individuals can embody ideals and interpret events. A trusted source can illuminate, introduce, warn and interpose. Faced by myriad groups and multiple umbrella agencies, a trusted interpreter of Iran can save time and ultimately save lives. But trust is always a fragile commodity to be handled with care.

Imagine a new Iran with those whose country it is

The imposition of foreign ideals and agendas is unlikely ever to succeed in Iran. Prized Western principles of democracy and tolerance, inclusion and education, diversity and duty, may need to be reimagined in order to fit Iranian culture past, present and future. Constructive dialogue towards a new Iran with a cross-section of Iranians is the best EU policymakers can, and should, hope to promote.

Part II

Iran on the outside

In Part II, we examine Iran's external relations to its allies and 'enemies'. We explore the history and rationale for its hostility to the US and the Western Alliance, including the EU and UK. We then examine the background to, and current expression of, its strengthening ties to Russia and China, and the impact of the war in Ukraine and of deepening conflict in MENA on these relations. We follow this with a review of Iran's relationship to MENA and to its proxies in the region.

Key questions guiding Part II are:

1. ***How has Iran sought to impact contemporary geopolitics?***
2. ***What are the main features of Iran's relations with its international and regional allies?***

We believe answers to these two questions will help to explain Iran's response to the present crisis in the Middle East. But that response is also conditioned by Iran's difficult relationship to its Western 'enemies', its developed and developing ties to global superpower allies and regional 'friends', and its many-sided alliance to dependent 'proxies'. We study each of these here apportioning length to the degree to which we believe the subject of each chapter may, or may not, be adequately understood and integrated in the EU's strategic thought and diplomatic practice. Crucially, given the fluid nature of the situation in West Asia and Iran's complex role in that, we write trusting the core material in this report will provide durable resources to shape wise, productive, peaceable engagement between the EU/Western powers and Iran going forward.

Question 4

Why and how does Iran relate to the US and the Western Alliance in the way that it does?

The diplomatic and cultural relations between Iran and the US are among the most prolonged, and pointedly awkward, in the world. Rooted in a memory of major incidents[236] that have served to define their relationship, sensitivity and mutual suspicion prevail. Few in the US question the legitimacy of a hardline approach. Talk of the urgency and necessity of regime change is prominent, with critics of Tehran projecting weakness when stability is the (perhaps surprising) norm.[237] Skeptics, cynics, and some specialist analysts, see American politics, and Pentagon interests driving projection of Iran as a 'rogue nation' and useful 'bogey man'. This does little to improve US-Iranian relations.
Fig. 55. Is the damage irreparable? (*Source: Columbia Journal of Transnational Law, 2020*).

236 E.g. Suggestions of US (*and* UK) complicity in the fall of PM Mohammad Mossadeq (August 1953), President Nixon's visit to Iran (May 1972), President Carter's visit to Tehran (December 1977) shortly before the fall of the Shah, the US Embassy hostage crisis (4 November 1979 to 20 January 1981), the 'Contra Affair' and sale of arms to Iran (1981-86), President Trump's curtailing of JCPOA (May 2018), the assassination of Quds Commander Qasem Soleimani (January 2020), Iranian bombing of multiple US military sites in Syria, Iraq and Jordan (October 2023). Of these, the hostage crisis has arguably left the deepest impression on US-Iranian relations, with neither side finding comfort in recollection of the incident.
237 NB. Explicit discussion of regime change is less common within EU and UK circles. On this, see below p. 121.

Formal diplomatic ties between Iran and the US ended on 7 April 1980, during the US Embassy hostage crisis (4 November 1979 to 20 January 1981). Since then, official interaction has been mostly through silence, mutual denunciation,[238] or intermediaries.[239] Absent officialdom, the US and Iran engage as enemies, each explaining and justifying their actions in ideological and strategic/security terms.[240] Iran cites US aggression, oppression, and cultural, economic and political imperialism, its support for 'Zionist' Israel, and its Judeo-Christian rejection of Iran's Shiite ethos and praxis. The US, like other Western powers, condemns the Iranian regime for harbouring and training terrorists and criminals, ignoring UN Resolutions and directives (including development of nuclear weapons), subjecting its citizens to sustained 'human rights' abuse, threatening and attacking critics of the regime inside and outside Iran, and using misinformation to fuel anti-American sentiment to buttress its position. The stand-off and saber rattling between the two countries show little sign of diminishing; indeed, the opposite is the case, as tensions in the region and more widely continue to rise.
The crucial issue here is also, however, *what light do Iran's attitude and actions towards the US shed on its broader geopolitical ambitions?*

To summarise a vast body of information, two general points and four more specific issues.

Two general points
Iran sees itself as a lead actor in the evolving drama of geopolitical push-back against US (and, more broadly, Western) *cultural, political, religious and socio-economic hegemony*. Hence, more is at stake than ideological differences. Hostility and rhetoric reflect a broad desire for a new world order that is multi-polar, culturally and religiously diverse, and free of economic enslavement to Western ideas, agendas, banks, business and debt.

238 NB. Ayatollah Khamenei banned direct talks in August 2018. Whether directly or through intermediaries there have been few occasions since then when there has not been some kind of back-channel communication between Washington and Tehran. Tough public political rhetoric is apt to find softer expression in discrete diplomatic dialogue.
239 Cf. the Swiss Embassy in Tehran has a US Interests Section. The Pakistani Embassy in Washington, DC fulfils a similar role for Iranian interests in the US.
240 As with many hostile regimes, back-channel communication should not be ruled out or its importance under-estimated.

Fig. 56. The end of Western dominance? (*Source: Geopolitical Economy, 2024*).[241]

Leaving aside the truth and legitimacy of this narrative (and the economic colonialism many see in Iran's superpower allies China and Russia), Iran and other dissenting nations know they gain geopolitical traction by vilifying the 'Great Satan' of the US and her allies.

But we can refine this claim:

1. First, Iran's readiness to repudiate 'Western' cultural and political ideologies stands in stark contrast to its easy accommodation to Xi Jinping's new form of 'sinified' Communism and President Putin's 'Greater Russian' militaristic totalitarianism.[242] In other words, ideological differences *per se* only partly explain Iran's anti-US, anti-Western hostility: international and domestic *real politik* feed into Supreme Leader Khamenei's thought and speech.
2. Second, as an extension of this, Iran's anti-Western maneuvering wins friends in Beijing and Moscow *and* satisfies hard-liners in the Iranian regime. Interpretations that cite Tehran's use of the US to enhance its position globally and nationally find supporting evidence here.

241 For the EU's High Representative Borrell's open admission of this, see 'Western dominance has ended', EU foreign-policy chief admits, warning of "West against the Rest" geopolitics', *Geopolitical Economy* (26 February 2024): https://geopoliticaleconomy.com/2024/02/26/western-dominance-ended-eu-josep-borrell; accessed 14 February 2025.

242 Cf. China's expression of sympathy after the air crash that killed Iranian President Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian on 20 May 2024 was striking, *'China will continue to support the Iranian government and people in maintaining* independence, stability and development.' On Iranian Chinese proximation, see p. 141.

3. Third, hostile counter-narratives in the US – especially from inside the Pentagon – feed off the long history of Iran's hostile attitude towards and actions against the US and her allies (viz. the Embassy siege, the two Gulf Wars, sponsorship of terrorist actions,[243] and Iran's stance on Israel) to justify military expenditure and cohere American public opinion. This serves to validate criticism of Iran and confirm the entrenched, and seemingly intractable, nature of US-Iranian relations. Perception is both essential to, and inseparable from, modern politics *and* diplomacy. Iranian foreign policy now plays to a packed gallery of anti-US sympathisers.

Fig. 57. Two Iranian protesters tear an American flag after the US withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal (*Source: Wikipedia*).

The stormy relationship between Iran and the US shows no sign of improving. Frustratingly to Western agencies, Iran is not troubled by adverse international PR or much motivated to address this running sore in contemporary geopolitics. The grey light of dawn has appeared at times in US-Iranian relations, but daybreak is far off. President Trump's re-election, his (either intentionally or carelessly) inflammatory political rhetoric and style, and strong pro-Israel stance do not bode well for US-Iranian relations. Reformist leaders inside Iran have occasionally offered some hope of a new era of openness in Iranian

243 NB. Many US analysts believe Shiite Islamist Hezbollah acts in concert with Iran, and both are responsible for the April 1983 bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut (killing 63, including 14 US personnel), the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing (which killed 241 US Marines) and the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia. On Iran's relationship to Hezbollah, p. 175.

diplomacy,[244] but hardliners have habitually suffocated this in the name of safeguarding Iranian independence, identity, purity and security. If occasional prisoner releases and diplomatic exchanges[245] have offered optimists hope,[246] suspicion and self-interest (on both sides) have swiftly scotched this. Even the characteristically softer rhetoric from President Biden's (b. 1942; Pres. 2021-2025) White House did little to improve US-Iranian relations.

For its part, Iran's ever-closer ties with China, Russia, North Korea and other anti-US allies, have created a hyper-sensitive geopolitical context for already strained US-Iranian relations. When added to an upsurge in Iranian state-sponsored abductions, murders, imprisonments and intimidation of dissidents inside and outside the country, the lines of antipathy and distrust are clear; likewise, when Iran attacks US interests in MENA through regional proxies and defiantly supports opposition to the US and its allies. Tension around Iran's predictably strong, but ultimately opaque, response to the recent conflict in Gaza is further evidence of the seemingly intractable nature of US-Iranian hostility.

Fig. 58. To some commentators, the new 'axis of evil'? (*Source: Nikkei Asia*)[247]

244 Cf. When US Presidents George H. W. Bush (1924-2018; Pres. 1989-1993) and Barak Obama (b. 1961; 2009-2017) and Iranian Presidents Khatami (Pres. 1997-2005), Ahmadinejad (Pres. 2005-2013) and Rouhani (Pres. 2013-2021), held office there was some openness to dialogue. Since the 11 September 2001 attack on the Twin Towers in New York City relations between the US and Iran have rarely been cordial, with President George W. Bush's (b. 1946; Pres. 2001-2008) 'axis of evil' speech in January 2002 provoking anger among reformists and conservatives alike in Iran.

245 Notably, the release of US journalist Roxana Saberi in April 2009 and of 5 Iranian diplomats (Mohsen Bagheri, Mahmoud Farhadi, Majid Ghaemi, Majid Dagheri and Abbas Jami) in July 2009.

246 Cf. Attempts were made by, among others, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (1937-2022; Sec. of State 1997-2001) – including informal talks in August 2000 between members of the US Congress and Iranian Majlis – the 'Grand Bargain' proposals of 2003, President Rouhani's visit to New York to address the UN General Assembly in September 2013 and in 2014 by limited co-operation between the US and Iran over responding to ISIS.

247 Among articles that articulate this viewpoint, see https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/China-Russia-Iran-North-Korea-axis-heightens-the-risk-of-WWIII; https://mwi.westpoint.edu/rise-revisionists-russia-china-north-korea-iran.

Drilling down into US-Iranian relations for the light they shed on Iran's broader geopolitical ambitions, four issues deserve mention.

Complex diplomacy around the JCPOA (The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action).[248] The JCPOA was signed by Iran and the P5+1 (viz. China, Russia, France, the UK, US + Germany and the EU) on 14 July 2015.[249] In exchange for lifting sanctions that had stifled Iran's progress and crippled its economy, the JCPOA restricted Iran's nuclear development and required access to nuclear sites for UN/IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) agents.[250] However, if JCPOA also sought to isolate Iran it failed to do so. At the time, President Obama urged a reluctant US Senate and Congress to back the deal,[251] and the UNGA (20 July 2015) – over-optimistically, it appears – believed Iran when it said that it would 'under no circumstances ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons'. Meanwhile, in the background (although, surely, in the foreground of presidential advice), American public opinion was, and remains, divided, with popular attitudes towards the JCPOA a bellwether on US-Iranian relations. An effective new deal would require US support. Under President Trump this looks highly unlikely.[252]

Fig. 59. Trump's attitude to the JCPOA linked to US views on Iran (*Source: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 2018*)

248 Cf. This is part of UN Security Council Resolution #2231. The term of the original JCPOA was 15 years.

249 NB. This group is also often referred to in European circles as E3+3.

250 NB. Restrictions focused especially on Iran's nuclear development at the Arak 1R-40 reactor, the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant, the Gachin Uranium Mine, the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant, the Isfahan Uranium Conversion Plant, the Natanz Uranium Enrichment Plant and the Parchin Military Research complex.

251 NB. In an influential speech at American University on 5 August 2015, President Obama declared: 'Just because Iranian hard-liners chant "Death to America" does not mean that that's what all Iranians believe. In fact, it's those hard-liners who are most comfortable with the *status quo*. It's those hard-liners chanting "Death to America" who have been most opposed to the deal. They're making common cause with the Republican caucus.'

252 On the EU and UK's position on a revised nuclear deal, below p. 119.

Fluctuations in US policy have compromised their credibility. In October 2017, despite positive reports from the IAEA about Iran's compliance, President Trump rejected key features of legal certification. In May 2018, prompted by US and Israeli claims of a covert on-going Iranian nuclear programme, Trump withdrew US support for the JCPOA and reimposed sanctions (November 2018), promising he would formulate a better deal (NB. this did not materialize). Distrust on both sides has been fueled by such inconsistency. Supreme Leader Khamenei was characteristically caustic in reply, 'There will be no war, nor will we negotiate with the US … Even if we ever – impossible as it is—negotiated with the US, it would never ever be with the current US administration.'[253]

The US has remained ambivalent to the JCPOA since 2018. In contrast, in August 2018 the EU passed a 'blocking statute' on US sanctions on behalf of nations trading with Iran. This remains in force, dividing opposition and strengthening Iran's hand. Alongside this, Iran has continued to work with UN/IAEA monitors to record breaches and compliance in its stockpiles of low-enriched uranium. Despite a serious deterioration in US-Iranian relations following the 5 January 2020 assassination of General Qasem Soleimani (b. 1957) in a US drone strike on Baghdad Airport, Iran has continued to indicate publicly and privately an openness to re-engage with the JCPOA process *if sanctions are lifted*.

Despite unpredictability on both sides during President Trump's first term,[254] a more productive series of meetings on the JCPOA were initiated by President Biden (b. 1942; Pres. 2021-present) in 2021-2. However, US blacklisting of the IRGC and imposition of sanctions on Iran's petrochemical industries, a glitch in Iran's relations with the UN/IAEA, and uncertainty about the genuineness of Khamenei's desire for any kind of nuclear deal, have hampered progress. Disagreement and distrust are captured in two quotations. First, a 17 October 2022 Tweet by US diplomat Richard N. Haass (b. 1951): 'Iran's support for Russia and crackdown on protests has ended any chance the US will rejoin the JCPOA anytime soon, if ever, as it would throw an economic lifeline to a repressive and aggressive regime that could well be on the ropes.' The link Haass makes between compliance and finance is a recurrent theme in US diplomacy with Iran (and other 'rogue' nations). Second, President Raisi's 18 September 2023 speech to UNGA, in which he said Iran would never give up its right 'to have peaceful nuclear energy'. As critics and analysts often note, distinguishing Iran's peaceful nuclear development from its hostile intentions is almost impossible.

However, the contorted history of the JCPOA suggests Iran may be more susceptible to

253 Quoted in 'Iran's Khamenei: No war, no negotiations with Trump', *Al Jazeera* (13 August 2018): https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/8/13/irans-khamenei-no-war-no-negotiations-with-trump: accessed 22 July 2024.

254 Cf. In 2020, President Trump and former head of the CIA and Sec. of State Mike Pompeo (b. 1963; Sec. of State 2017-2021) claimed the US was still a 'participant' in the JCPOA despite having withdrawn in 2018. After the election of President Raisi in 2021, Iran reasserted its demand that sanctions be lifted, and the US not withdraw unilaterally from the JCPOA.

pressure and open to dialogue than its rhetoric sometimes suggests; *and*, we should add, perhaps more aware than it might admit of danger to itself of nuclear armament.[255]
The cohesive power of US-Iranian hostility. The mutual condemnation of the US and Iran has catalyzed accord among their allies. Like heavy weight boxers with cheering fans, the US and Iran have landed verbal (and sometimes military) punches on one another to rapturous applause.

In May 2017, President Trump declared, 'From Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen, Iran funds, arms, and trains terrorists, militias, and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region … For decades, Iran has fueled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror.' In response, smaller nations and radical militia have sought greater weight by giving their Iranian patron loudest praise.[256]
According to 2020 US State Department figures, Iran has for decades given Hezbollah

255 A statement ('My message to the new world') published in the *Tehran Times* on 13 July 2024 by newly elected President Pezeshkian is revealing: 'The United States … needs to recognise the reality and understand, once and for all, that Iran does not – and will not – respond to pressure (and) that Iran's defence doctrine does not include nuclear weapons.' Time will tell if this is true and Pezeshkian can deliver on his reformist agenda (including a more pragmatic, open approach to diplomacy, nuclear discussions, liberalization of society and pluralizing of Iranian politics). Many inside and outside Iran are sceptical.

256 Arab nations in MENA with strong relations with Iran include Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Algeria and Tunisia (+ to a lesser extent Qatar). Iran has had difficult relations historically with Egypt, Sudan, Jordan and Morocco and other old monarchical states in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), viz. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. On Iran's present relations with neighbouring states, see p. 192. NB. Between 1995 and 2022, five US administrations (Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump and Biden) proscribed 11 Iranian proxies in 5 countries (+ 89 leaders from 13 Tehran-sponsored groups). These include militia in Bahrain (Al Ashtar Brigades and Saraya al Muktar), Iraq (Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al Haq, Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, Badr Organization, Kataib Sayyad al Shuhada), Lebanon (Hezbollah), the Palestinian Territories (Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad) Syria (Zaynabiyoun Brigades, Fatemiyoun Division) and Yemen (Ansar Allah or Houthis). On Iran's proxies, see A. Lane, 'Iran's Islamist Proxies in the Middle East', *Wilson Center* (12 September 2023): https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies; accessed 15 July 2024. As instances of Iran's allies praising its actions, see N. Al-Mughrabi, 'Iran's attack on Israel stirs admiration among Gaza Palestinians', *Reuters* (14 April 2024): https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-attack-israel-stirs-admiration-among-gaza-palestinians-2024-04-14; accessed 16 July 2024. Also, on praise for Iran's 18 April 2024 attack on Israel from inside Yemen, Syria and Hezbollah, see https://www.brecorder.com/news/40299078/iran-deserves-a-lot-of-praise; accessed 16 July 2024.

ca. $700m. and Palestinian groups ca. $100m.[257] *p.a.* Cultivating and maintaining allies through financial inducements, a time-honoured tactic in US diplomacy, is a potent form of political patronage in the Middle East. Beneficiaries are intended to unite with one another and their patron in both gratitude and attitude. Paradoxically, an already volatile West Asia would be less coherent and cohesive without this strategic financial investment. But the cost of discreet alliances is high relationally *and* reputationally: it feeds distrust, starves integrity, and produces obese, demanding offspring. Neither the US nor Iran come out well from their famed animosity and finance-driven diplomacy.

Fig. 60. Iran and its proxy Hezbollah mourn the death of a Hezbollah fighter (*Source: Council on Foreign Relations*).[258]

257 Precise figures are hard to procure. Iran is not Hezbollah's only source of funding. It benefits from taxes, donations, and commercial activity inside and outside Lebanon, including from diamond mines in W Africa and from cigarette and drug smuggling on the Triple Frontier of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil in S America. That said, Iran's *heavy* investment in indirect activity across the region is beyond dispute. Iran has also provided Hezbollah with weapons and military training. As Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah declared starkly in 2016, 'The budget of Hezbollah, its salaries, its expenses, its food, its drink, its weapons, and its missiles come from the Islamic Republic of Iran. … As long as Iran has money, we have money … Just as we receive the rockets that we use to threaten Israel, we are receiving our money' (Quoted in. M. Rafizadeh, 'In first, Hezbollah confirms all financial support comes from Iran', *Al Arabiya* (25 June 2016): https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2016/06/25/In-first-Hezbollah-s-Nasrallah-confirms-all-financial-support-comes-from-Iran; accessed 21 January 2025.

258 Cf. K. Robinson and W. Merrow, 'Iran's Regional Armed Network', *Council on Foreign Relations* (15 April 2024): https://www.cfr.org/article/irans-regional-armed-network; accessed 14 February 2025.

The nature of anti-US Iranian rhetoric. If we justifiably question Iran's nuclear intentions and support for regional proxies, we should also consider the character and sincerity of its leaders' anti-US diatribes.[259] Secondary studies have questioned the intentionality of speakers and listeners in this complex arena. The possibility of multiple meanings is an old political and diplomatic ruse. In Iran's case, the issue is *not* how deeply its Shiite ethos and ideology contradict a US/Western worldview, but which of Iran's threats and tirades will be turned into hostile actions.[260]

Closer ties with China and Russia provide Iran with a new level of diplomatic and military cover were it to decide enough was enough over, say, US support for Israel or EU sanctions. In other words, more weight should probably be given now to the Supreme Leader's denunciations and declarations than at any point in the last forty years. Hopes of a new era of reform under President Pezeshkian are yet to be proven. Russia and China will watch carefully – and, if necessary, make their concerns known – to see if, or how, US interests are benefitted by policy adjustments. Iran's deepening international partnerships require historic talk of its isolationism and independence to be nuanced: it knows it now has China and Russia (and regional allies) in its corner when it spars with the US and/or Europe.

259 For an interesting study of this issue, see (Maj.) S. R. Kelley (2011), 'Making sense of Iran: rhetoric, ideology, and behavior', MA Thesis, SASS (Maxwell Air Force Base). As Major Kelley says of her thesis, it 'compares the Iranian regime's radical statements with its actual foreign policy to determine if their external behavior is consistent with their rhetoric'. She also, 'advocates a more sophisticated appreciation of the Islamic Republic's worldview and interests in order to aid US policy makers in devising strategies that are more likely to serve American security interests'. Cf. also, O. Trinder (2004), 'Rhetoric versus Reality: Iranian Threat Perception and The International Community', *Cambridge Journal of Political Affairs*: https://www.cambridgepoliticalaffairs.co.uk/articles/rhetoric-versus-reality-iranian-threat-perception-and-the-international-community; accessed 17 July 2024; Z. Ladha, 'How mistranslations of Iranian political rhetoric into English have increased the likelihood of war,' *American Iranian Council* (23 January 2020): https://www.us-iran.org/news/2020/1/21/how-mistranslations-of-iranian-political-rhetoric-into-english-have-increased-the-likelihood-of-war; accessed 17 July 2024.

260 Cf. for a useful historical perspective on this, see F. Jahanbakhsh (2003), 'Religious and Political Discourse in Iran: Moving Toward Post-Fundamentalism', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 9.2: 243-254.

Fig. 61. Supreme Leader Khamenei 'leaves the door ajar', but says talks with the US 'unwise' (*Source: NY Times, 2025*)[261]

Pro-democracy movements in Iran. The US is constitutionally predisposed to defend individual rights and 'freedom of speech' and, as an extension of this, consciously and (to some) controversially promotes these core democratic principles on the world stage. Iran's religio-political Shiite ideology, and its allies' totalitarian predispositions, offend American cultural, political and legal sensibilities. As a result, pro-democracy initiatives in Iran arouse as much (positive and negative) attention externally as they do internally. The strength of a democratic impulse inside Iran is much disputed (see further p. 97). Pro-democracy voices inside and outside the country are apt to overstate the desire for change (in light of government oppression) or the extent of the will for it (to shape the narrative on Iran's prevailing political culture).

But the roots of democracy do run deep in Iran. The pro-democracy Freedom Movement of Iran (FMI) – otherwise known as the Liberation Movement of Iran (LMI; Pers. □□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□, [*Nahżat-e āzādi-e Irān*]) – which was founded in 1961 by supporters of the ousted Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq (PM 1951-53), is the oldest political party in Iran, although its participation in government has been restricted since 1980

261 Cf. E. Solomon and L. Nikounazar, 'Iran's Supreme Leader Denounces Talk With U.S. but Seems to Leave Door Ajar', *NY Times* (7 February 2025): https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/07/world/europe/khamenei-iran-us-negotiations.html; accessed 14 February 2025.

and it continues to be denied membership of Iran's House of Parties.[262] FMI members are religious nationalists, who uphold the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran; but they seek a separation of religion and the state and reject the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (see p. 17). Reflecting mainstream democratic ideals in an Iranian context (viz. freedom of expression and political association, the UNDHR and Charter of the UN, and respect for the constitution and Iranian Islamic rule of law), FMI remains a quiet catalyst for democratic reform in Iran.

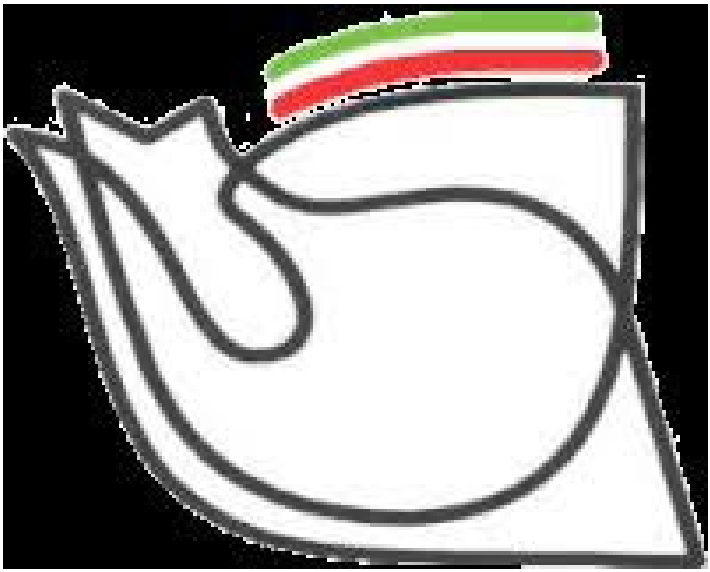
Fig. 62. Iranian pro-democracy activists have a global following (*Source: Euroactiv, 2019*)

21st-century Iran has also seen a burgeoning of Western style pro-democracy movements. The death in custody of the 22-year-old protester Jina Amini (1999-2022) was the most famous incident in a series of protests ('Bloody Aban') across Iran in 2021-22. Water problems and the country's economic plight are often cited by protesters.

262 Mossadegh's legacy was briefly institutionalized by his grandson Hedayatollah Matin-Daftari in the National Democratic Front (NDF: Pers. جبهه دموکراتیک ملی [*Jebhe-ye demokrātīk-e mellī*]), which was formed in 1979 to promote individual and political freedom and decentralized government. Its agenda was framed as opposition to Khomeini's Islamist political-religious ideology, the power of the IRGC and Islamic revolutionary courts. In 1981, the NDF joined the National Council of Resistance of Iran, led by Bani Sadr (1933-2021; Pres. February 1980 - June 1981) and the People's Mujahedin of Iran (MEK).

The brutality of the regime's suppression of dissent fans hostility to the regime and its restrictive ideology into flame.[263] In the background, America's active pro-democracy ethos and numerous NGOs worldwide promoting Human Rights[264] have served to sharpen the regime's self-justifying criticism of a godless, meddling West. Theories of a 'clash of civilizations' run aground on the rocks of *real politik* and entrenched bitterness in US-Iranian relations.[265]

Fig. 63. Symbol of the pro-democracy Freedom Movement of Iran (FMI) (*Source: Wikipedia*).



263 Following the deaths of ca. 1500 protesters in 2019-20, a peaceful 3-day strike in Ghazvin (over workers' rights and high unemployment) spread. By February 2021 a nationwide series of demonstrations against low pensions, high inflation (45%), and the government's economic ineptitude (the Iranian Stock Market crashed in January 2020) were crushed by the police and security forces. The regime's actions, and attitude towards dissent, played into the hands of pro-democracy activists.

264 Cf. Amnesty International's assessment of the treatment of protesters: 'Iran: Security forces use ruthless force, mass arrests and torture to crush peaceful protests' (11 August 2021): https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/08/iran-security-forces-use-ruthless-force-mass-arrests-and-torture-to-crush-peaceful-protests; accessed 19 July 2024.

265 Cf. celebration of the theoretical accuracy of Harvard Professor Samuel P. Huntington's prediction of a cultural 'clash of civilizations' after the end of Cold War has given way to scepticism and cynicism about the West's ability to change itself or instrumentalize reconciliation.

What light, then, do Iran's attitude and actions towards the US shed on its broader geopolitical ambitions? To a unique degree Iran's strained relationship to the US confirms the regime's confidence in its divine vocation and the rightness of its cause. In and through its relationship with its US nemesis we also see, however, the regime's vulnerable psyche and ability to be defensive, elusive, abusive and insensitive. Though new superpower friends probably bolster Iran's will to prevail, growing domestic disquiet suggests the regime is increasingly building on, and with, ideological and political sand.[266]

266 Evidence suggests a rising tide of (secular) opposition to State-sponsored Islamism and embrace of other faiths or none. On this, see the US State Department's 2022 report on religious freedom in Iran: https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran; accessed 19 July 2024.

Question 5

What issues shape Iran's relationship to the EU and UK?

Introduction

Much that we have said of Iran's relation to the US applies to its attitude and actions towards the EU and UK. Historic partners in the Western Alliance are assumed to be complicit in US initiatives *viz-à-viz* Iran and in step with White House policy. This is mistaken. The EU and UK's dealings with Iran since the Islamic Revolution – to say nothing of Iran's relationship with individual EU members states[267] – shed important and distinctive light on the style, history and content of Iran's international profile and global strategy.

To understand Iran's relationship to the UK and EU over the last forty or so years, we focus on four key aspects of that relationship as disclosed, particularly, in the last few years. These are the dynamics of Iranian diplomacy, the distinctive features in EU-Iranian policy, the impact of influential individuals, and the current state of EU/UK relations.
Until Brexit, considerable commonality was evident in EU and UK policy; perhaps especially when the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy was the UK peer Baroness Catherine Ashton (2009-2014). Since 2016, there has been no official structure to ensure the UK and EU remain in step over Iran, but much that follows applies to Iran's relations with the UK and Europe as a whole.

Four key aspects of the EU/UK's relationship to Iran
We focus on these four aspects of Iran's relationship to the EU and UK mindful of the question driving Q4 and Q5 above; namely, what light does this shed on Iran's geopolitical ambitions and agenda? There is much here for European policy makers to consider very carefully.

267 NB. It is impossible in this brief report to provide a detailed picture of Iran's bi-lateral relationships with individual EU member states, in which differences in emphasis, style, investment (of every kind) and personality, can be seen. That said, the EU Constitution and central parliamentary processes continue to ensure coordinated actions and statements on many key issues relating to Iran.

1. The Dynamics of Iranian diplomacy

Comparing and contrasting Iran's relationship to the US with its approach to the EU (and, to a lesser extent the UK) is revealing.[268] Though the EU and UK are part of the Western Alliance Iran consistently vilifies, there is significant light and shade in the way Iran responds to individual member states – and, indeed, they to Iran. Evidence suggests Iran – either accidentally or intentionally – rarely relates to, or conceives of, the EU as coherent political bloc, preferring instead to engage individual states, and then primarily for economic reasons.[269] With changing policies and personnel in Brussels, Iran prefers to play EU countries off against another, as it does more generally Europe against the US. When it has benefitted Iran, it has found ways to divert EU officials and member states to block US actions and decision.[270] To critics, this evidences Iran's low view of the EU as political system and viable entity *and* confirms that fact that the EU's approach to Iran is not, and has never really been, 'fit for purpose'. The refugee crisis in Europe, for which Iran is reckoned at least partly responsible,[271] underlines the urgency, some argue, of member states overhauling EU-Iranian relations individually and severally.[272]

268 For a historic assessment of EU-Iranian relations, see H. Azhar, 'Iran and the European Union: Prospects and Challenges', *CGSRS* (20 April 2016): https://cgsrs.org/publications/55; accessed 21 January 2025. For an informed, up-beat assessment (including policy proposals) prepared prior to Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA, see D. R. Jalilvand, 'EU-Iran Relations: Iranian Perceptions and European Policy', *PODEM* (2018): http://podem.org.tr/en/researches/eu-iran-relations-iranian-perceptions-and-european-policy; accessed 21 January 2025. For more sober commentary, see C. Adebahr, 'Iran Is a Geopolitical Challenge for Europe', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (5 September 2023): https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2023/09/iran-is-a-geopolitical-challenge-for-europe?lang=en; accessed 21 January 2025; also, C. Adebahr and B. Mittelhammer, 'Making an Inclusive EU Strategy on Iran a Reality', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (23 July 2024): https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/making-an-inclusive-eu-strategy-on-iran-a-reality?lang=en&center=europe; accessed 21 January 2025.

269 By politically flattening its perception of Europe, Iran projects an almost 19th century view of European nation states.

270 NB. This has been prominent in the JCPOA process. For recent criticism of the EU's handling of Iran, see H. Azizi and E. van Veen, 'Hurtling towards irrelevance: Iran-EU relations in 2024', *Clingendael* (28 November 2024): https://www.clingendael.org/publication/hurtling-towards-irrelevance-iran-eu-relations-2024; accessed 21 January 2025. An ECFR article by Iranian scholar H. Ahmadian points the finger at the EU's inability to rescue the JCPOA after President Trump pulled out in May 2018, stating, 'Most Iranians see Europe as a weakened global player that can neither incentivise nor penalise Iran in a meaningful way' (https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_eu_leverage_mena/iran).

271 NB. Iran's role in backing militia that drive people from their homes and countries adds to the refugee crisis in Europe and to EU member state's exasperation with, it not animosity towards, the Iranian leadership. Syria remains a key issue.

272 NB. In 2020 there were 512,303 Iranian nationals living in Europe, a majority in Germany (266,000 in 2021), France (118,300 in 2021) and the UK (where 7776 had claimed asylum in the year ending June 2023). It is estimated 50% of refugees to the Netherlands are from Iran (NB. 52,000 in 2021).

Fig. 64. *Foreign Minister Zarif and High Representative Borrell met in Tehran, February 2020 (Credit: Tasnim News Agency*).

The degree to which Iran's actions and reactions are *intentional* is a matter of dispute. That Iranian diplomacy includes duplicity, opportunism, evasion, empty rhetoric, and self-righteous indignation, few doubt. Likewise, its readiness for, and aptitude in, exploiting divisions, flattering diplomatic overtures and stroking the egos of EU and UK operatives. Though the Western Alliance may aspire to a united front in its dealings with Iran, Iran is content to play parties off against one another, to isolate the US by engaging Europe, to resist multi-lateral agreements if bi-lateral conversations are more promising, to sit on their hands for a more opportune time, and to enjoy the constant and inevitable changing of personnel, policy, mood, and governments, among its enemies.

Though the Iranian leadership may huff and puff, its front-line operatives have shown themselves to be loyal patriots *and* realistic diplomats. Iran's relationship to the EU and UK over the last forty years is often but wrongly viewed as consistently difficult and unproductive. Why? For three reasons: i. wooing and flattering the UK and EU has been a useful way of irritating and isolating the US; ii. Iran's leaders have used charm and unpredictability to veil vulnerability; and, c. individual Iranians have chosen, and been able, to give Shiite ideology a friendly face. More than many might imagine, relations between Iran and the EU and UK have over the last forty years reflected the hopes, fears, and character not only of institutions but also, crucially, of individuals (see further p. 128).

2. Distinctives in EU-Iranian policy

The EU does not presently have a delegation based in Iran.[273] Oversight of EU-Iranian affairs falls to the President of the European Council. With the ending of the JCPOA process in 2015, the EU's relations with Iran passed to a division of the European External Action Service (EEAS), which reports directly to the EEAS Deputy Secretary-General for Political Affairs. Following the IAEA's confirmation that Iran had fulfilled its nuclear obligations under the terms of the JCPOA, in January 2016 all the EU's existing economic and financial sanctions were lifted.

There are four areas where EU/UK-Iranian relations differ from those of the US and Iran. Crucially, these differences are clear and intentional.

a. Trade[274]

Contrary to popular perception (and the hostility noted previously), the EU is Iran's largest trading partner alongside China and the UAE. In 2022, Iran was 64th on the EU's list of trading partners with €5.2 bn trade in goods (€4.2 bn exports from the EU, €1 bn imports from Iran). The main items the EU imported were plastics and rubber (€0.2 bn, 26%) and vegetable products (€0.25 bn, 25%). EU exports were mostly machinery and transport equipment (€1.2 bn, 28.6%), and chemicals (€1.0 bn, 23.8%). In addition, in 2021 there was a €1.3 bn trade in services (EU imports €0.7 bn, exports €0.6 bn), and a €2.9 bn trade in EU FDI stocks (inward €2.4 bn).[275] The EU's trade relations to Iran continue to be shaped by the Joint Statement signed on 16 April 2016 in which areas of cooperation included 'in principle' economic cooperation, trade and investment, agriculture, transport, energy and climate change, together with science, research and innovation, education, culture, the environment, drugs and migration.

273 NB. Internally, the EEAS, which often provides the EU with strategies to engage violent regimes, has consistently pressed to be allowed to open an office in Tehran. The diplomatic leadership this would afford the EEAS has been resisted by the EU Parliament and its executive officers. As High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, VP of the European Commission (2014-19) to 2019), and Chair of the Joint Commission of the JCPOA, the Italian politician Federica Mogherini visited Tehran in August 2017 for the inauguration ceremony of President Rouhani. She was strong advocate for an EEAS presence in Iran to strengthen ties with the EU.

274 On this in general, see https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/iran_en. Critics of the EU and member states' actions with regard to Iran point to double standards being applied, sanctions bi-passed, and the weakness of, and culpable denial that infects, the whole EU Foreign Affairs apparatus.

275 Though there was a slight reduction in EU imports from and exports to Iran in 2023, the percentage difference remained essentially constant (see https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/iran_en; accessed 16 September 2024.)

As we will see, this Joint Statement also named the more difficult questions of civil nuclear cooperation, and humanitarian and regional issues. Despite tensions between the EU and Iran over the years, the EU still supports Iran's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and treats Iran as it would other trade partners within.

b. Its general import regime

[276] The EU's historic openness to trade with Iran, despite sanctions (see below), stands in marked contrast to US-Iranian trade relations, which involve limited exports to Iran of food, spare parts and medical products and imports from Iran of carpets and food.

Fig. 65. The Tehran times was happy to report an 8% increase in trade with the EU in Q1 2024 (*Source: Tehran Times*).[277]

276 Iran's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine led to the EU imposing new sanctions on Iran in November 2024. For Sweden's response to this, see https://www.government.se/press-releases/2024/11/eu-imposes-new-sanctions-against-iran; accessed 15 January 2025.

277 cf. 'Iran-EU trade rises 8% in Q1 2024', *Tehran Times* (27 May 2024): https://www.tehran-times.com/news/499105/Iran-EU-trade-rises-8-in-Q1-2024; accessed 14 February 2025. The article states: 'Based on the Eurostat data, the trade between the two sides stood at €1.18 billion in the previous year's first three months. As reported, the EU's exports to Iran from January to March 2024 stood at €1.06 billion, registering an increase of 10 percent compared to the same period of the previous year when the EU exports to Iran were reported to be €958 million. The European Union's imports from Iran also reached €216 million in the first quarter of 2024 with a three percent decrease compared to the same period last year. In the same quarter of the previous year, €220 million of goods were imported from Iran. As previously announced by Eurostat, the value of trade between Iran and the European Union (EU)'s member states reached €4.732 billion in 2023.'

c. Sanctions

The unilateral withdrawal of the US from JCPOA in 2019 threatened to undermine EU-Iranian trade relations. However, to some controversially, the EU created an 'Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges' with Iran which by-passed US sanctions. Critics interpreted this as the EU indirectly 'urging Chinese and Russian counterparts to do more to support bilateral economic ties with Iran'.[278]

Though economic sanctions were lifted in 2016, Iran was still subject to a strict EU arms embargo and to restrictions on missile technology, nuclear transfers (and other activities) and to trade in certain metals and software.

Despite the special 'Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges', EU-Iranian trade relations have been subject to increasingly severe sanctions since 2019, prompted by Iran's deteriorating Human Rights record and increase in arms sales to Russia for its war with Ukraine. Despite this, trade remains part of the EU's political and economic strategy towards Iran.

Since October 2022, the EU has targeted individuals and entities in Iran with links to serious human rights abuses or terrorist activity (including armed groups in the Middle East and Red Sea region). The EU has also consistently condemned the sale of Iranian drones to Russia. In May 2024 it extended this restriction to missile exports.[279] As the EU made clear, it will 'continue to respond to all such actions that support Russian aggression'.[280] In line with this, it imposed an 8th package of sanctions in 2023 against individuals and institutions, including those helping Russia develop Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs).[281] In light of deteriorating EU-Iranian relations caused by Putin's war in Ukraine and Iran's sponsorship of proxy terrorists in MENA, there are presently no EU-Iran trade committee meetings.[282]

278 Cf. E. Batmanghelidj, 'China Restarts Purchases of Iranian Oil, Bucking Trump's Sanctions', *Bourse & Bazaar Foundation* (17 May 2019): https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2019/5/17/china-restarts-purchases-of-iranian-oil-bucking-trumps-sanctions; accessed 16 September 2024.

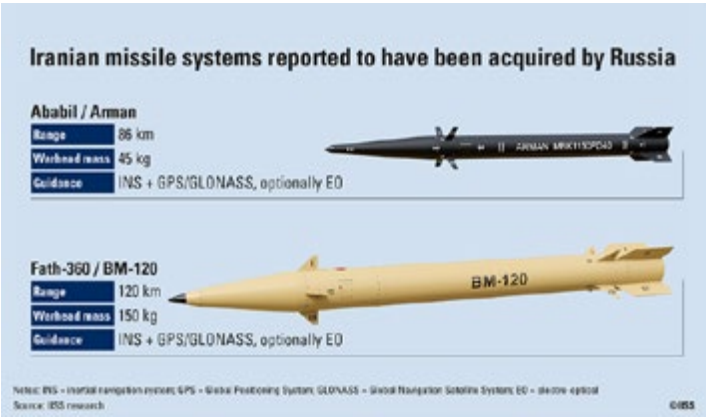
279 Cf. For mapping of the EU's restrictive measures against Iran, see https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/#/main/details/17,18,56/?search=%7B%22value%22:%22%22,%22searchType%22:%7B%7D%7D; accessed 17 September 2024.

280 Cf. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/iran_en; accessed 17 September 2024.

281 On restrictions on the import of arms from Iran, see https://tron.trade.ec.europa.eu/investigations/ongoing. On the export of arms from the EU to Iran, see https://tron.trade.ec.europa.eu/investigations/cases; accessed 17 September 2024. In light of the war in Ukraine and Iranian weapons sale to Russia, the EU has blacklisted eight drone makers and a number of Iranian Air Force (IRIAF) officers.

282 For information on previous trade committee meetings, see https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/09242a36-a438-40fd-a7af-fe32e36cbd0e/library/be5be10c-b63e-4144-a0c1-a3f8de5be2a0; accessed 17 September 2024.

Fig. 66. Iranian missiles reportedly sold to Russia (*Source: IISS*).[283]



d. Security

Iran's support for proxies in the Middle East and for Russia in its invasion of Ukraine have set in sharp relief the degree to which Iran is a direct security threat to Europe and its allies. Recent statements by the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell[284] Fontelles (2019-present) condemning Iran's drone and missile attacks on Israel (14 April 2024) and transfer of Iranian-made ballistic missiles to Russia (13 September 2024), have confirmed perception of Iran as 'a direct threat to European security' militarily. He cited 'a substantive material escalation' of arms sales to Russia, its control of strategic oil and gas supplies, and its attempts to hijack ships in the Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman.[285] Recent analysis endorses the security threat Iran poses to Europe,[286] its nuclear programme being named the 'most urgent' threat the EU faces.[287]

283 Cf. F. Hinz, 'Iranian missile deliveries to Russia: escalating military cooperation in Ukraine', *IISS* (18 September 2024): https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/missile-dialogue-initiative/2024/09/iranian-missile-deliveries-to-russia-escalating-military-cooperation-in-ukraine; accessed 14 February 2025.

284 NB. Borrell has been frequently criticised for trying to keep Iran in play during the JCPOA negotiations. For recent commentary on this, see 'Borrell's Failing Diplomacy: EU's Troubled Relationship with Iran', *Iran International Newsroom* (21 March 2024): https://www.iranintl.com/en/202403218303; accessed 20 January 2025.

285 Cf. https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/09/10/eu-weighs-strong-response-to-iranian-deliveries-of-ballistic-missiles-to-russia; accessed 17 September 2024.

286 Cf. https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2023/09/iran-is-a-geopolitical-challenge-for-europe?lang=en; accessed 17 September 2024.

287 Cf. https://www.cer.eu/insights/europe-and-iran-nuclear-threat; accessed 17 September 2024.

Fig. 67. Uk joins in naming the threat Iran poses (*Source: National Security News*)[288]

Iran is also a security threat to the EU in less visible ways. If its ally Turkey ever joins the EU, Iran will have a direct border with Europe. As Giulio Terzi, a former Italian Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the UN and US, wrote in *The Brussels Times* on 11 August 2022, having witnessed first-hand the security threat Iran poses on the streets of Europe, 'Iranian regime's hostage-taking and blackmailing has become a serious impediment to international justice. As citizens of the European Union, which is ostensibly the global stronghold of freedom, democracy, and human rights, we cannot ignore the treaty's origins or its potential impact.'[289] With a ruthless team of undercover operatives at its service, the Iranian regime threatens, intimidates, hijacks, kills and takes hostages to defend its ideological standing, impress its allies and disrupt European life, politics and culture.[290] As Guilio Terzi argues in his article, accommodation and appeasement merely encourage Iran to continue its war against the West. The geographic immediacy of the Iranian threat to Europe distinguishes it from that of its more distant American enemy.

288 Cf. S. Rayment, 'The threat Iran poses to British society requires urgent action – Policy Exchange' *National Security News* (17 April 2024): https://nationalsecuritynews.com/2024/04/the-threat-iran-poses-to-british-society-requires-urgent-action-policy-exchange; accessed 14 February 2025.

289 Cf. https://www.brusselstimes.com/270781/time-for-a-european-response-to-irans-hostage-taking-and-blackmailing-of-europeans; accessed 17 September 2024. On Iran's taking of Europeans as hostages, see the recent reports in https://www.euronews.com/2023/05/16/european-hostages-in-iran-used-as-political-bargaining-chips; and, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/05/07/france-denounces-iran-s-policy-of-state-hostage-taking_6670705_4.html; both accessed 17 September 2024.

290 On hostage taking of Europeans by Iran, see also https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/hostages-iran; accessed 19 September 2024.

e. Human Rights

Human Rights have been a pillar of EU policy on Iran since sanctions were imposed in 2011. Thereafter, restrictions have been renewed (and expanded) in response to the regime's on-going violence and discrimination against its citizens in general and dissident groups in particular.

Fig. 68. The EU condemns Human Rights violations in Iran (*Source: European Parliament, 2024*)

The death in police custody of Jina Amini in September 2022 and the violent suppression of protest that followed, provoked outrage within the EU. Statements by the European Council and the EU's High Representative at the time were very clear:'[T]he EU supports the fundamental aspirations of the people of Iran for a future where their universal human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected, protected and fulfilled'. It 'condemns the widespread, brutal and disproportionate use of force by the Iranian authorities against peaceful protesters, arbitrary detentions as a means of silencing critical voices, the use of torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of detainees in Iranian prisons, the practice of imposing and carrying out death sentences against protesters, and restrictions on communications, including internet shutdowns'. And, it affirms 'the right to peaceful assembly and the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and share information and ideas, online and offline, must be ensured' and 'calls on Iran to eliminate, in law and in practice, all forms of systemic discrimination against women and girls in public and private life and to take gender-responsive measures to prevent sexual and gender-based violence in all its forms against women and girls and to ensure protection against such violence.' With an eye to the EU's broader international relations, it calls on the Iranian authorities 'to uphold their obligations under international law' and demands that the 'perpetrators of violence and human rights violations be held accountable' both inside and outside Iran.

High Representative Borrell also reiterated the EU's position on, and their support for the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement on the second anniversary of Jina Amini's death (16 September 2024) declaring,

The EU takes the occasion to reiterate its strong and unequivocal opposition to the death penalty at all times, in all places and in all circumstances, especially taking into account the worrying increase in executions recorded in Iran over the past years. The EU also recalls that under international law the prohibition of torture is absolute. There are no reasons, circumstances or exceptions … that could be invoked as a justification for its use.[291]

The strength of EU commitment to the defense of Human Rights in Iran stands in stark contrast for some to their perceived readiness to continue to trade with the regime, despite the appearance of enforcing sanctions.

Fig. 69. ina Jina Amini [21 September 1999 to 16 September 2022] (*Source: Wikipedia*)

291 Cf. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/09/16/iran-statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union; accessed 17 September 2024. On this, see also: https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2024/04/toward-accountability-for-irans-un-recognized-crimes-against-humanity?lang=en; https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/eu-lists-more-iranian-individuals-entities-over-human-rights-violations/2993109; https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-targeted-human-rights-sanctions-series-people-entities-abuses; all accessed 17 September 24. For Iran's counter-claims, see: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/24/iran-slams-eu-sanctions-calls-out-human-rights-violations; accessed 17 September 2024. To many observers, the EU's lifting of sanctions against the Iranian tech company Abr Arvan (also known as ArvanCloud) in May 2024 was surprising; pointing out Abr Arvan has close ties to the regime and its human rights abuses. On this, see https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/05/hard-questions-about-the-eu-lifting-sanctions-on-an-iranian-tech-company?lang=en; accessed 17 September 2024.

3. National distinctives and influential individuals

A lack of coherence in EU attitudes towards Iran – which Iran has exploited – should not be allowed to divert attention from significant, and often productive, content of individual EU states' approach to Iran. In general, Central European countries are less actively engaged with Iran, believing perhaps they have more to lose than gain by such engagement. In contrast, Poland and Italy have notably positive relations with the regime, while Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands are proactive in pressurizing Iran over its Human Rights violations and nuclear programme. France, characteristically, pursues its own agenda, sensitive to Iran's pro-China policies and the security threat it poses. For its part, Greece was the only EU country to support the US assassination of IRGC leader Qasem Soleimani.

Fig. 70. General Qasem Soleimani (*Source: Tehran Times*).

Relationships are essential for effective diplomacy. As noted, EU/UK-Iranian relations have been, and are, affected by the personalities and activities of individuals. The direct involvement of the Iranian diplomat Assadollah Assadi (and three Iranian co-conspirators) in a failed attempt to bomb a rally organized by the National Council of Resistance of Iran in 2018 is a striking example of this. Assadi was caught, tried and charged[292] with 'attempted terrorist murder and participation in the activities of a terrorist group'. Iranian officialdom itself was caught red-handed. But Assadi is one among many officials inside and outside Iran whose actions (and inaction) have directly and indirectly impacted diplomatic relations.

292 NB. he was the first Iranian official to be charged and convicted by the EU.

Successive EU High Representatives have condemned Iran for authorizing hostage-taking and violence: Iran Foreign Ministers have more and less effectively represented their country's interests internationally. From low-level staff in Iran to EU leaders, Iran and the EU/UK have been represented by people shaped by culture, personality, authority and expectation.[293] Simply put, the gulf between Iran and the West – and the policies and ideology that enshrine it – is created and perpetuated not by machines or committees, but by responsible *and* irresponsible people who take difficult decisions and sanction nefarious actions. Integrity and culpability are ultimately personal.

The EU's High Representative and officials from members states who are charged with monitoring and engaging with Iran, face a significant, multifaceted, challenge. Recent EU High Representatives for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Javier Solana Madariaga (1999-2009), Baroness Catherine Ashton (2009-2014), Federica Mogherini (2014-2019) and most recently Josep Borrell Fontelles (2019-present) have each left their mark on the EU's relationship with Iran, with Baroness Ashton and Federica Mogherini tireless in their quest to engage positively with Iran, and in the latter's case to prolong JCPOA prior to and after President Trump's withdrawal of the US from it.[294] Significantly, the former Estonian PM Kaya Kallas, who was appointed the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security in December 2024, has called for a new approach to Iran. Under early pressure to list the IRGC as a terrorist organization, Kallas has voiced concerns about the hostile alliances threatening European Security, stating, 'We see Iran, North Korea, China, and Russia aligning in ways that support Russia in Ukraine and extend to destabilizing actions by Iran in the Middle East and even in Europe, like Sweden.' Her swift call for the 'elimination of the Russian and Iranian influence in Syria's future' in the aftermath of Assad's fall, prompted a strong response from Iran. As Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmaeil Baghaei observed: 'It is better for the EU to reconsider its weight and position in and behavior towards the West Asia region.[295] The union's performance in the formation of many crises in the region, including in Syria, is worth considering.'[296] Seen to be making early overtures to the new Trump administration in her comments on Russia

293 Cf. On 4 February 2021, Assadi was sentenced to 20 years in jail, his associates Amir Saadouni, Mehrdad Arefani and Nassimeh Naami to 15, 17 and 18 years respectively.
294 On this, https://www.politico.eu/article/federica-mogherini-iran-donald-trump-hassan-rouhani-nuclear-deal-will-hold; https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/17/mogherini-keeping-iran-nuclear-deal-alive-is-not-easy; https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/open-letter-to-frederica-mogherini-and-european-imper; all accessed 17 September 2024.
295 NB. The use of 'West Asia' is noteworthy. The term 'Western Asia' is traceable to the early 19th century. Over time, 'Near East' and 'Middle East' displaced it in Western geographical and geopolitical discourse. With the expression 'Middle East' perceived as Eurocentric, the term 'West Asia' has, from the 1960s, been more frequently invoked. Though the boundaries of 'West Asia' are debated, the Asia Society lists within it: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cyprus, Georgia, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Iran is not included.
296 Quoted in *Xinhua* (17 December 2024): https://english.news.cn/20241217/aa9dc0e-306f44294a51e2a824f1d7c45/c.html; accessed 21 January 2024.

(and indirectly China) and defence of a rules-based world order High Representative Kallas has already left her mark on her new job and on EU-Iranian relations.

Fig. 71. Baroness Catherine Ashton (2009-2014) and Federica Mogherini (2014-2019). (*Source: Wikipedia*).

For their part, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Java Zarif (b. 1960; For. Min. 2013-2021) and new Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (b. 1962; For. Min. August 2024-present) have served quite different Iranian Presidents, the conservative Ebrahim Raisi (d. 19 May 2024) and moderate Masoud Pezeshkian (b. 1954; Pres. 28 July 2024-present). Since the introduction of sanctions in 2011, Iranian officials have created their own style and level of relationship with EU counterparts. As the 'Conclusions on Iran', adopted by the EU in December 2022, stated, 'The EU supports a balanced, comprehensive approach with Iran, including dialogue, with a view to addressing all issues of concern, critical when there are divergences and cooperative when there is mutual interest.' This included a readiness to 'engage to bring the [JCPOA] agreement back to its full implementation', recognizing Iran is 'central to security in the region' and the EU must therefore seek 'to de-escalate regional tensions as affirmed in the EU Joint Communication on the Partnership with the Gulf'. But implementation of this *depends on people*.

Fig. 72. Iranian Foreign Ministers Mohammad Java Zarif (2013-2021) and Abbas Araghchi (August 2024-present).

Though ultimately determined by policy (EU/UK) and ideology (Iran), character and chemistry impact EU/UK-Iranian diplomacy. In recent times, formal statements by the EU's High Representative on Iran's failure to honor fundamental human freedoms and the rights of women,[297] and the Iranian Foreign Minister's claim that Iran is open to diplomacy to solve disputes but not 'threats and pressure' from the US and West,[298] must be interpreted contextually. Meetings on the margins and chance remarks are often as significant: such as, contact between the EU's High Representative and Iran's then Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian (b. 1964; d. also on 19 May 2024)[299] at the UN in September 2023, and talk of the EU's 'readiness to engage' with the new Iranian President Pezeshkian after his election (6 July 2024)[300] and his expressed hope at the time for 'constructive relations' with the West.

If, as we have noted, Iran's changing leadership has determined their country's character and direction, the same can be said of EU/UK attitudes and actions towards Iran. For good and ill, politics, policy and personality cannot be easily disentangled.

297 Cf. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/09/16/iran-statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union; accessed 18 September 2024.
298 Cf. https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-says-it-is-open-to-talks-but-rejects-pressure-from-us-eu/7784405.html; accessed 18 September 2024.
299 Cf. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/iran-high-representative-borrell-meets-iranian-foreign-minister-amir-abdollahian_en; accessed 18 September 2024.
300 https://www.rferl.org/a/pezeshkian-eu-nuclearmassrali/33024989.html; accessed 18 September 2024.

4. The present state of EU and UK relations with Iran

We conclude this section with a brief review of the current state of EU/UK relations with Iran and take this opportunity to note policy differences between the EU and UK. The evolving crisis in the Middle East at the time makes assessments difficult and conclusions impossible. The urgent need for a clear, comprehensive, coordinated approach to Iran is clear.[301] Five themes related to this warrant attention:

a. The war in Ukraine

As we have seen, the EU – and the UK – have been consistent in their opposition to President Putin's war in Ukraine. We have also noted their open criticism of Iran's sale of arms (esp. drones and missiles) to Russia. In September 2024, the EU and UK condemned Russia's use of Iranian ballistic missiles, calling it 'a substantive material escalation from the provision of Iranian UAVs and ammunition'.[302] The EU was clear: 'The European Union will respond swiftly and in coordination with international partners, including with new and significant restrictive measures against Iran, including the designation of individuals and entities involved with Iran's ballistic missile and drone programmes, and in this regard is considering restrictive measures in Iran's aviation sector as well.'[303]

The actions of Russia and Iran are rightly viewed as interconnected and 'a direct threat to European security'.[304] Before the EU's latest sanctions against individuals and institutions associated with Iran's ballistic missile and drone supply chain and aviation sector, the US, UK, France and Germany acted in consort against Iran's airline, Iran Air, and imposed further travel bans and asset freezes on individuals and entities involved in the production and supply of ballistic missiles and drones (and in Russian shipping).[305] Multilateral actions against Iran pile on the pressure and ensure responsibility is shared.

Two ancillary points from this. First, Iran is used to – indeed, appears to savour – its isolated, victimized status; particularly, now it is shielded by the economic and military armory of superpower allies. The fact that the EU and UK must now read Iran's actions through the lens of those alliances make the task of their Foreign Ministries that much harder. Second, the denunciation of Iran by governments adds to the burden of responsibility on their officials to maintain whatever official and unofficial channels are available to them.

301 Cf. on the need for the EU to develop a new strategy, see C. Adebahr and B. Mittelhammer, 'Making an Inclusive EU Strategy on Iran a Reality', *Carnegie Endowment* (23 July 2024): https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/making-an-inclusive-eu-strategy-on-iran-a-reality?lang=en&center=europe; accessed 15 January 2025.
302 Cf. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/iran-statement-high-representative-behalf-european-union_en; accessed 19 September 2024.
303 Ibid.
304 Ibid.
305 On this, see https://sanctionsnews.bakermckenzie.com/us-uk-and-eu-announce-new-measures-against-iran-and-russia/; accessed 19 September 2024.

Willingness to ignore media criticism and the protests of diaspora Iranians must remain the stock in trade of responsible EU diplomacy with Iran. If 'visible' Iran is consistently and effectively supported by 'invisible' Iran, the same should be true of her erstwhile 'enemies'.

Fig. 73. Food for thought for Iranian President Pezeshkian? (*Source: Iran International, 2025*).

b. Conflict between Israel and Hamas and Iran's other regional proxies
(see further p. 164). As we write, the current conflict in MENA makes balanced assessment of Iran particularly hard. Most Western analysts believe Iranian-backed militia in MENA and the Gulf, together with Iran's (covert and overt) military activity in the region, represent an existential threat to global security. Throughout the recent conflict, the EU and UK's response has been independent and in agreement.

Like the US, the EU and UK have been supportive, but not uncritical, of Israel's retaliatory action against the 7 October attack by Hamas. Expansion of Israel's operation beyond Hamas, Gaza and the West Bank into a broadscale attack on Iranian-backed militia (Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen) has increased the likelihood all-out war in the region. Support for Israel is in no small measure fueled by fears of an increased security threat from Iran and her proxies.[306] Repeated calls for restraint after Iran's coordinated firing of 300 drones and missiles into Israel on 13 and 14 April (from Iran, Syria, Yemen and Iraq) – in retaliation for Israel's 1 April 2024 bombing of its consulate in Syria (in which 13 people were killed) – are heard alongside EU Council President Charles

306 For a counter narrative on the IRGC and Iran generally, see this 2023 article by the former Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian: https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/1/23/348; accessed 19 September 2024.

Michel's (b. 1975; Belgium PM 2014-19; Pres of EU Council 2019-present) provocative statement at the time. It is, he stressed, 'very important to do everything to isolate Iran'.[307]

A year on from the 7 October attack, the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza and expansion of the conflict into cross-border missile and drone attacks in N. Israel and deadly pager and handheld radio detonations against Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, suggest an all-out war between Israel and allies of Iran will be hard to avoid. Diplomatic efforts by the EU and UK to de-escalate the conflict – whilst being seen, note, to support Israel (to avoid the charge of antisemitism) and condemn Iran (while cooling tempers) – have failed; not least, because an already weakened Western Alliance *must* appear united (despite widespread Human Rights concerns about Israel's actions). As matters stand, the authors of this report hope the new Iranian President may with time try to redefine his agenda and distance himself from the narrative of inevitable and on-going conflict in MENA, even if the early signs in this regard are not positive. Peacemakers must hope he will come to see that Iran's new superpower allies in reality wish neither Iran nor the West well.

Fig. 74. Iran's retaliatory attack on Israel on 13 and 14 April 2024 (*Source: Reuters*).[308]

307 On this, and the EU leaders summit in mid-April 2024, after these events: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-leaders-discuss-iran-sanctions-following-attack-israel-2024-04-17/; accessed 19 September 2024.

308 Cf. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-launches-drone-attack-israel-expected-unfold-over-hours-2024-04-13; accessed 14 February 2025.

c. The new Iranian President

Masoud Pezeshkian has been subjected to close scrutiny and critical commentary since his election following the deaths of President Raisi and his Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. Pezeshkian's path to power was not straightforward, with well-connected political rivals touted as heirs apparent (*via* the Presidency) to the visibly ageing Ayatollah Khamenei.

Pezeshkian has a medical background (he is a cardiologist) like Syrian President Assad (although many pray that he will not emulate his neighbour's brutality). Rising tension in MENA, and Iran's role in that, suggest the new President has had little impact to date on the direction set by his predecessor and the Supreme Leader. On his election, and particularly after his defeat of the hardline conservative academic diplomat (and chief Iranian nuclear negotiator) Saeed Jalili (b. 1965), EU and UK dignitaries were, like many other world leaders, quick to send their congratulations. Western leaders expressed their hope for a peaceful and constructive era in Iranian-Western relations.

Whatever their reason, Iran's allies and enemies have pressured President Pezeshkian from the outset. Claims that he is a 'reformist' – or at least a 'centrist' – are still to be proven. Three things are clear:
i. *He is not a free agent*. Checks and balances within the Iranian political system, and the dominant influence of the Supreme Leader and his coterie, make the Iranian President's role, and external interpretation of it, unusually difficulty at the best of times; ii. *He does have power*. As the history of Iran since the Revolution confirms, Presidents can leave a mark on their country. But brutality, bias, favoritism, floundering, indecision, internationalism and corruption fill most of their biographies.

To leave a positive legacy for Iran (and the world) President Pezeshkian will have to rise above the low expectations many Iranians (inside and outside Iran) have of him; not because he lacks ability or support, but because Iran today stifles success and favours political lightweights; iii. *He has friends and professional colleagues outside Iran*. Though necessarily a political insider, President Pezeshkian is also as a medical professional an outsider. He is more internationalized than most of his political peers. However, being of Azeri-Kurdish[309] descent, to some Farsi he will always be an inferior outsider.

309 As noted above (p. 78), the Azeris make up ca. 7% of the population, the Kurds ca. 16% (est. 12-23m.). A majority of Azeris live in NW Iran, esp. in the Azerbaijan provinces of Zanjan, and parts of Hamadan, Qazvin, Markazi, Kordestan, Gilan, and Kermanshah. Kurds tend to congregate the cities of W. Azerbaijan Province.

Fig. 75. The new Iranian President's inaugural speech (*Source: Amwaj Media, July 2024*).

President Pezeshkian's personal, professional and political credentials reinforce the hope that he may be equipped to navigate Iran's complex ethnic rapids *and* contemporary geopolitics in a different way from most of his predecessors. People of goodwill wish him well and hope for the day he can lead his country to an unambivalent openness to countries and cultures very different from his own.

d. The profile of EU and UK interlocutors with Iran

As we have seen, Iran's relationship to the West, specifically here the UK and EU, is conditional upon effective two-way diplomacy. It would be churlish (and probably inaccurate) to say all misunderstanding, misrepresentation and fault lie with Iranian delegates to international dialogue. Commentary from within Iran berates its enemies for deliberately falsifying data and misreading Iran's intentions.

In answering Questions 1-3, we have seen the critical importance of cultural understanding, sensitivity, courage and tenacity in front-line encounters with Iran. EU and UK Ambassadors and Chargé d'affaires face danger, disrespect, duplicity, intimidation and deliberate obfuscation; albeit, sometimes behind a handshake and a smile. Theirs is no easy task. 'High Level Dialogues' between the EU and Iran in the recent past, achieved little to build trust and deescalate tension.[310] But the press statement following British PM Sir Keir Starmer's call (12 August 2024) to President Pezeshkian after his election tried to strike an optimistic note:

310 On these 'High Level Dialogues' led by the EEAS and the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (with support from representatives of the Iranian administration and European Commission), see: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/5th-european-union-%E2%80%93-iran-high-level-dialogue_en; accessed 19 September 2024.

The leaders agreed that a constructive dialogue between the UK and Iran was in both countries' interests. The Prime Minister added that could only be furthered if Iran ceased its destabilising actions including threats against individuals in the UK and did not further aid Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[311]
Likewise, Iran's new Foreign Minister called for 'dialogue with the EU' to resolve bilateral issues when he spoke to High Representative Josep Borrell in late-August 2024. But Foreign Minister Araghchi was clear, 'The Islamic Republic of Iran welcomes the development of relations with the European Union in an environment based on mutual respect.'[312] *Mutual* respect?[313] That has not often been a characteristic of the relationship and is particularly difficult to imagine at the present time.

Fig. 76. Early conversations between Presidents Macron and Pezeshkian, 25 September 2024. (*Source: France 24*).

311 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-call-with-president-pezeshkian-of-iran-12-august-2024#:~:text=The%20leaders%20agreed%20that%20a,aid%20Russia's%20invasion%20of%20Ukraine; accessed 19 September 2024. During UK PM Rishi Sunak's (b. 1980; PM. 2022-2024) premiership there was a marked decline in UK-Iranian relations, despite the release on 16 March 2023 of the long-term, and high-profile, British Iranian detainee Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. The detention of British and British Iranian citizens, and the execution on 14 January 2023 of the British Iranian citizen Alireza Akbari, increased criticism of Iran even before its recent support for Hamas in its fight against Israel.
312 Cf. https://www.timesofisrael.com/irans-new-fm-calls-for-engagement-with-eu-based-on-mutual-respect; accessed 19 September 2024.
313 Cf. For insight into the Iranian regime's view of regional peace and security, see the article by the seasoned diplomat, and new Vice President for Strategic Affairs (from August 2024), Mohammad Javad Zarif (b. 1960), 'Iranian approach to regional security and prosperity', *The Economist* (23 December 2024): https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2024/12/23/a-new-iranian-approach-to-regional-security-and-prosperity-by-m-javad-zarif; accessed 20 January 2024.

e. The resumption of nuclear talks

Following low-level talks in December 2024, as of 13 January 2025, France, Germany and the UK (E3, viz. the remaining signatories to the 2015 nuclear deal) embarked on two days of talks with Iranian officials hoping to de-escalate tension and halt Iran's nuclear programme. Spurred by French concerns that Iran's on-going nuclear programme – including enrichment of uranium to 60% purity[314] – is, according to President Macron (speaking at a French foreign policy conference earlier in January), 'bringing us very close to the breaking point' and 'the point of no return', E3 representatives are keen to negotiate sanction reduction in exchange for Iranian compliance with IAEA directives. Claims Iran has hostile intentions have been roundly condemned by the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei as 'baseless' and 'deceitful', while indicating Iran's intentions are 'peaceful' and the 'primary objective' of the talks 'to remove the sanctions'. To observers, the timing of these talks, a weeks before President Trump re-enters the White House, is significant. Trump, some assume, will take a harder line on Iran than his predecessor. As significantly, perhaps, the talks occur at a time when Iran is more than usually isolated in the Middle East and the regime more susceptible to social unrest. As the Paris-based activist Nazila Golestan, said recently, 'The [Iranian] government faces a dual crisis: declining authority at home and diminishing power abroad. These pressures may force Iran to adopt a more conciliatory stance in international negotiations'.[315] As with so much relating to Iran, the future remains uncertain.

314 As reported by Rafael Grossi, head of the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). NB. this is nearing the 90% purity needed to create a nuclear weapon.

315 Quoted in W. Rahn, 'European powers resume nuclear talks with Iran', *DW* (13 January 2025): https://www.dw.com/en/european-powers-resume-nuclear-talks-with-iran/a-71286107; accessed 15 January 2025.

Question 6

What is the history, character, and motivation for Iran's relationship to China and Russia?

Introduction

We turn from Iran's relationship to its 'enemies' to its new, superpower 'friends'. Our focus is the 21st century, but recent developments are rightly read, and interpreted, against the backcloth of history, tradition, faith, and suspicion. Disentangling truth from fiction and distortion poses immense challenges.

Three preparatory points

Explanation of Iran's relations to its superpower allies must be set in a wider context, in particular:

1. *Iran's relations with states that do not share its Shiite ideology is self-interested*. Like China and Russia, Iran is not inherently altruistic. Its leaders act in what they believe to be their country's interests. Like Britain in the 19th century, Iran has 'no permanent allies, only permanent interests'. Self-interested pragmatism, political realism, and economic necessity are now global motives. Iran is not unique in its guile and guiltless acquisitiveness – and may justifiably assume its friends and enemies are the same. But, as intimated earlier, Iran's bold bluster may not be matched by its allies' nationalist self-confidence.
2. *Iranian diplomacy is agenda laden*. Intertwined with Iran's self-interest is its self-righteous ideology. The latter sets it apart: except, that is, from totalitarian allies who understand and embrace the political power of a controlling idea. Embodying 'My enemy's enemy is my friend', Iran's Shiite leadership has allied itself with states opposed to the Western Alliance, notably China and Russia.[316] To many inside and outside Iran, having allies who are Communist, atheist, or radicalised by another religion, makes little sense – apart from fear, mutual flattery, or the hope of political, economic and relational benefit.

316 States variously supportive of Iran (and probably its animus towards Western hegemony) including a number of African nations, were among the first to congratulate President Pezeshkian on his election. The *Tehran Times* listed the messages of good will Pezesehkian received. There were predictable calls from Putin and Xi, but also from the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Pakistan, India, S Korea, Malaysia, Syria, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Venezuela, Belarus, Serbia and the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization): https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/500794/Which-world-leaders-congratulated-Pezeshkian-on-his-election; accessed 18 October 2024.

Fig. 77. Iran with its new superpower allies (*Source: Global Taiwan Institute*)[317]

3. *Iranian diplomats are tough, experienced professionals.* As noted above, most of Iran's political elite have a history of government service, some as diplomats. Clericalism is a good cover for power politics. Iran's diplomats know money, power, position, posturing, threat and fear, shape global relations.

   They also know what political complexities, and economic, military, security, and domestic vulnerabilities, lie behind Tehran's abrasive rhetoric. Theirs is the thankless task of presenting unpalatable policies, interpreting obtuse declarations, and maximizing returns with minimal resources and conditional support. Their task is to project strength in weakness and convey 'an Iranian threat' when there is, or may be, none. Harder still, to dispel cynicism and resentment of the 'exceptionalism' Tehran projects.

So, what of Iran's relationship to China and Russia? Why does it make alliances with nations others fear?

317 Cf. M. Mazza, 'The Axis of Disorder: How Russia, Iran, and China Want to Remake the World', *Global Taiwan Institute* (13 December 2023): https://globaltaiwan.org/2023/12/the-axis-of-disorder-how-russia-iran-and-china-want-to-remake-the-world; accessed 14 February 2025. Also, M. A. Kuo, 'The China-Iran-Russia Triangle: Alternative World Order?', *The Diplomat* (July 2022): https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/the-china-iran-russia-triangle-alternative-world-order; accessed 14 February 2025.

1. China

Western commentary has tended to downplay the growing relationship between China and Iran as not strategically significant.[318] This is wrong: the current, and developing, relationship between China and Iran is no window-dressing: it has substance, direction and perceived mutual benefit. Prevailing wisdom has tended to use the filter of China-North Korea relations to portray Iran as a 'rogue state'[319] in which China shows *reluctant* interest. Why is this? Perhaps because it is politically expedient domestically and diplomatically convenient; especially, to erode belief in American hegemony. This interpretation makes sense. After all, wasn't it China who persecuted the Uyghur Muslims? And isn't China under Xi Jinping atheist again? Do these states share any common values? Or so the cynic or realist would ask. Whatever the motivation in Tehran and Beijing, in March 2021 Iran and China signed a 25-year cooperation pact, addressing 'political, strategic, and economic' issues.

But are there other, better, reasons why Iran and China have developed close ties in the last few years? China's economic power and colonialism are a factor, of course, as is its preference for colleagues over competitors where possible. Trade between the two countries is starkly asymmetrical. China accounts for about a third of Iranian trade against 1% in the other direction. But in car manufacturing they would be in direct regional competition, something China would prefer to avoid, so accommodation is allowed. Oil is, of course, predictably central to China's interest in Iran, black gold being a common denominator in much contemporary geopolitics. No small proportion of China's trade with Iran is in discounted oil with PRC interest in Iranian oil being part of its grand 'Belt and Road Initiative' across Asia and West Asia East to bolster its global profile as a bringer of blessing and puller of strings.

318 For typical analysis, see https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/china-iran-relations-the-myth-of-massive-investment/: accessed 07 May 2024.

319 US politicians characteristically (but not exclusively) use the term 'rogue state' of Iran, Syria, North Korea, Afghanistan, Cuba and Venezuela (some lists also include Sudan and Nicaragua). President G. W. Bush famously invoked the term in 1994, alongside 'axis of evil', to denote states that threaten US interests and world peace, that support terrorism and/or actively develop WMD. 'Rogue states' are also characterized by their radical ideological independence and disregard for international law. For an early study of the concept, see K. P. O'Reilly (2007), 'Perceiving Rogue States: The Use of the "Rogue State" Concept by U.S. Foreign Policy Elites', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3.4: 295-315.

Fig. 78. The Chinese Embassy in Tehran (*Source: Wikipedia*).

If we study Iranian Chinese relations more closely, we can track recent developments back to 2021 and the 25-year cooperation agreement. A draft leak sparked rumours of $400bn Chinese investment in the Iranian economy.[320] Since then, Iran has added much to the in-box of PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[321] In addition to finance, discussion has focused on diplomatic ties, military training and joint exercises, and planning President Raisi's state visit to China in February 2023. The mood music towards Iran in Beijing is now gently harmonious. For its part, Tehran appears surprisingly ready – some might say, unguarded and over eager – to hitch its wagon to the rising imperial star of communist China.

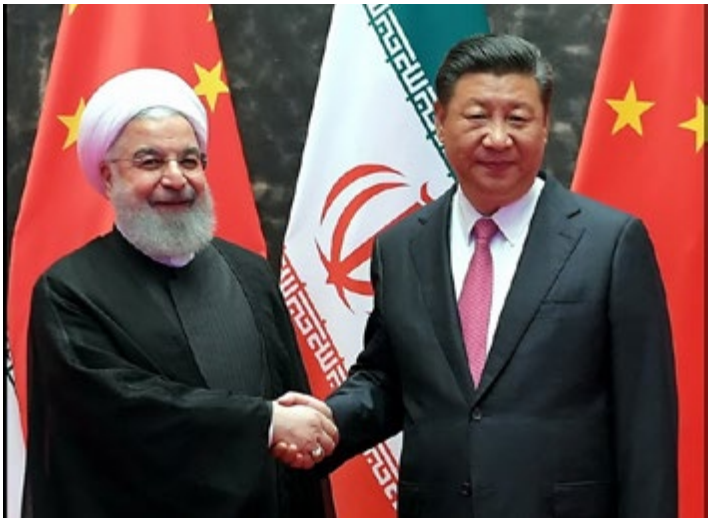
Iran was received as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in July 2023. This was followed by Iran's induction into the new BRICS in January 2024. Both admissions were vouched for and led by China. Through the SCO, China is flexing its mediatorial muscles in theatres of regional conflict. In the wake of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, China has convened a multilateral dialogue alongside the Russian-led Moscow Format of Consultations on Afghanistan. In April 2023, this meeting had

320 The foundation for this agreement can be seen in the January 2016 signing of a 'comprehensive strategic partnership'. This granted Iran the highest of a 5-tier grading system of Chinese strategic interests in the MENA region. The agreement was signed in the wake of the original JCPOA and bore little fruit short term: China carefully avoided naming and pledging specific financial help, preferring a looser commitment to future cooperation. As discussed in this chapter, the agreement has been overtaken and changed by significant regional and global events in the post-COVID era.

321 During the 12-month period of February 2022-2023 the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported 18 press releases in Chinese mentioning Iran '□□' in the title and 15 in English. Compare this with 124 Chinese and 21 English press releases in the subsequent 12-month period to February 2024.

four attendees: China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran. In March 2023, a Chinese-brokered deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia ended years of deadlock and re-normalized relations.[322] This accord between regional rivals and competing Islamic systems is highly significant. Months later, the Arab League surprised everyone by re-admitting Assad's Syria into the fold. In short, China and Iran have worked together to catalyse change in MENA – and are probably pondering together their response to Israel's renewed aggression.

Fig. 79. After a 14-year gap, in January 2016 Rouhani welcomed Xi and a trade delegation to Tehran (*Source: Iran Primer*).[323]



If China and Iran have found a mutually advantageous way to cooperate, despite differing ideological and regional agendas, what more does China want or hope to gain from this? After all, China knows Iran does not play a bit part in the tortuous epic of Middle Eastern politics. Four themes suggest themselves.

322 Some commentators suggest the 7 October attack – especially, if not sanctioned by Tehran – may have been a self-interested act of protest by Hamas (perhaps supported by a.n.other interested regional player) against the new China-brokered accord between Iran and Saudi Arabia. There can be little doubt the Iran-Saudi deal impacts the historic balance of power in the Middle East significantly.

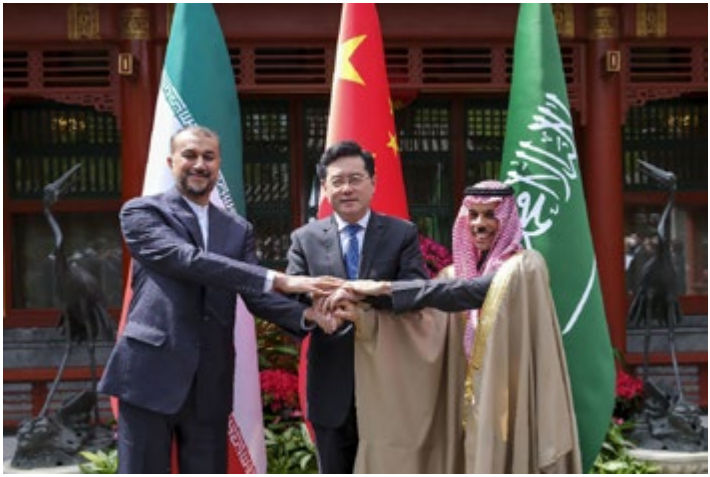
323 For a detailed review of Iranian Chinese trade from 2009, see 'Iran & China: A Trade Lifeline', *Iran Primer* (5 July 2023): https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jun/28/iran-china-trade-lifeline; accessed 15 February 2025. At their meeting in 2016, Rouhani was clear, 'China has always stood by the Iranian nation during hard times, and this amicable behavior is an asset that we should use to develop bilateral relations more than before.' Xi Jinping made PRC's position equally clear, 'Geographically, Iran has the capacity to become a hub for China's economic activities in the Middle East and Central Asia and Caucasus.'

a. China and Iran both want to counter the influence of the US and other pro-Western powers in MENA. To achieve this, a plausible replacement to a global dollar economy is needed. Offering the RMB as an alternative – which Putin's rogue, roller-coaster rouble could never be – China sees economic and strategic benefit in having Iran as a help not a hindrance (which it could be). The high level of global, and regional, buy-in to this vision (note SCO's embrace of Iran) suggests political pragmatism in Beijing and Tehran has prevailed. Though economically weakened by US sanctions, the ties are growing stronger.

b. China wants to market its style of government as a credible global alternative to Western Liberalism. Trade agreements and infrastructure development are the means, not the end of China's imperial vision. Hard-headedness and nuance (mighty weapons in China's armoury) are needed. Prior to brokering the Iran-Saudi rapprochement in March 2023, China suffered a series of embarrassing failures as a mediator. A China-styled and controlled *Pax Sinica* was not to everyone's taste or advantage. But China knows it holds two powerful cards, a policy of 'noninterference' and a predisposition to 'turn a blind eye'.[324] The US and her allies are not known for such, interference (*aka* meddling) and insistence on individual 'rights' (when convenient) being synonymous with the way liberal Western democracies have done their diplomacy in the eyes of many. China hopes to make itself look and sound squeaky clean by comparison. Xi's 'China Solution' (中国方案) offers fantastic development less *Dunkin Donuts and* finger-wagging. That Iran would sit down with Saudi Arabia, when major issues remain unresolved (e.g. Israel-Palestine), suggests surprising support among Iran's (more open-minded) leaders for a Chinese map of MENA that includes 'puny Satan Saudi Arabia'. For all its conservativism, Iranian politics can be as canny as China's.

324 NB. Though Chinese diplomacy may be legitimately charged (at times) with moral blindness, it reflects a surprising sensitivity to cultural diversity and local interest. Cynically dismissed as guile, this approach trumps hubristic intimidation.

Fig. 80. China as mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia (*Source: JK Policy Institute, 2023*)



c. China reckons Iran to be transformable into a sound option to safeguard stability (稳定) in MENA.[325] China's global strategy is built on the premise that too much instability hinders progress. 稳定 (*wěndìng*) is prized as control over socio-economic variables (i.e., unrest and inflation) and consistency in policy and philosophy (including suppressing dissent). 'Stability' does not mean preservation of the *status quo*, but creating optimal conditions for change, specifically remaking a country or region (viz. MENA) in PRC's image. Not that PRC wants to 'Marxify' or 'Maoize' MENA, but it does want to build a robust socio-economic sea wall against fluid markets and a tidal wave of protest. Within PRC itself, techno-surveillance, social credit and state-controlled companies suffocate threats, stifle competition and largely satisfy the citizenry. China sees in Iran, we would argue, the makings of an environment conducive to *their* kind of 'stability'. How much more than money and military backing Iran really wants from China remains a moot point.

But where do Iran's 'proxies'[326] fit into its relationship with PRC, particularly the latter's love of 'stability'? This is a complex issue: Iran needs its proxies (to infuriate and attack archenemies like Israel and the US) but China does not (Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, etc., threaten regional 'stability').

325 Given China's preference for stability and control, Iran's use of proxies will almost certainly have informed Sino-Iranian discussions. Indeed, if Tehran was aware of a possible Hamas attack, Beijing may (possibly) have sought to discourage it. Though a long-term supporter of Palestine at the UN, China has also consistently sought productive relations with Israel.

326 Cf. on Iran's relationship to its ideological and military regional 'proxies', see p. 111 and 193.

For its part, the Biden administration appears to have accepted China's stabilizing influence on Iran and the region – until when or if either superpower decides matters are getting out of hand. On one level, then, the US and her allies should not baulk at China's attempt to turn Iran into a more stable, peaceful presence in MENA; albeit, lured into its dependency on China by the promise of money, manpower, and military knowhow.

Fig. 81. China's avowed quest for global harmony and stability (*Source: China Daily, September 2024*)[327]

d. China's interest in, and influence upon, Iran is conditional; that is, conditional on the continuance of sufficient support for the connection inside Iran *and* of Chinese criteria for 'stability' being satisfied. Neither condition is certain or self-evident. China divides opinion in Iran (as elsewhere), with xenophobia and a pro-Western lobby ready to pounce. Significant scepticism exists among government supporters and others about close ties to China. What's more, with JCPOA dead, China is faced potentially with an Iranian version of its N Korean nuclear nightmare (and the negative PR links to DPRK already bring) *and* the possibility that were Iran to build nuclear weapons, it might become too hot to handle geopolitically. At present, Iran's vulnerabilities make it an attractive, containable, partner. Were that to change, China could see 'stability' and the chance to shape MENA evaporate. This is a risk China may not be willing to take. It will certainly not want to be caught in the crossfire between Iran (and her proxies) and Israel (and her allies). Meanwhile, the stand-off between the US and Iran gives China a chance to crow over its policy of 'noninterference' and threaten to veto what it doesn't like at the UN. But it will keep a very close eye on developments that may compromise the advantages it presently enjoys.

327 Cf. C. Desheng, 'China strives for global stability, prosperity', *China Daily* (30 September 2024): https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/594217.

Iran's relationship to China increases the threat the EU faces. Having a(nother) foothold in MENA gives China options for engagement, thereby maximizing its political and economic advantages. Policymaking looks very different if its focus is a China-Iranian axis. China may not help Iran solve all of its internal problems, but it certainly adds weight to its international profile with its friends and enemies.

2. Russia

We take Iran's relationship to Russia second, though it is of longer standing than that with China. We do this for two reasons. First, Iran's relationship with China is more straightforward. Despite some late-20th-century interaction, Iran's close relationship with China is of more recent origin. Geography, and shared and/or conflicting interests in Persia, the Middle East, and Central Asia over the centuries, have created levels of trust and mistrust in Russo-Iranian relations that China's more recent engagement cannot, and does not want to, match. Further, Iran is not above using the apparent (relative) straightforwardness of its relationship to China as political, economic, and military leverage in its dealings with Russia. Second, because of widely reported interaction over the war in Ukraine (see p. 108), Iran's relationship to Russia is in the foreground of global consciousness, that with China still (to many) in the hinterland of longer-term geopolitical realignment. But, it should be stressed, to those who monitor both relationships they contribute much to the threat Iran poses and the complexity of Western engagement with its leaders.

If we can see similarities in the way Iran has related to Russia and China: there are also key differences. For example, China's preferred attraction of states by economic and philanthropic inducements, stands in stark contrast to Russia's (especially President Putin's) blatant bullying, ruthless manoeuvring, and scorched earth militarism. Iranian diplomacy has of late been ready and able to accommodate both of these imperialist styles in its quest for prestige, recognition, finance and protection.

Fig. 82. Presidents Putin and Raisi finding common ground over the war in Ukraine (*Source: ECFR.eu*).[328]

Five features of Iran's relation to Russia (before that the USSR) warrant notice.
First, Iranian/Persian Russian relations have for centuries been directly impacted by *geography*. As noted previously (p. 19), Persia was always a country of interest to neighbours, with its ancient culture, natural resources, and access to the sea.[329] Formal relations between the Persian Safavid Empire and the Grand Duchy of Moscow began in 1521, with the Muscovy Company (founded 1553) trading across the Caspian Sea. Thereafter, the two countries came together in opposition to Ottoman rule. But the 500-year history of Russo-Iranian relations is complex, fractious, contradictory and violent. Geography and proximity have been key factors throughout.

When Emperor Peter the Great (1672-1725) sought to expand his empire across the Caucuses and the Caspian and Black Seas in 1720, he ignited 200 years of anger, fear and suspicion in Persia.[330] Through much of the 19th and 20th centuries – especially during the Soviet era (1922-1991) – Iran watched its 'big northern neighbour' like a hawk.[331]

328 Cf. E. Geranmayeh and N. Grajewski, 'Alone together: How the war in Ukraine shapes the Russian-Iranian relationship', https://ecfr.eu/publication/alone-together-how-the-war-in-ukraine-shapes-the-russian-iranian-relationship: accessed 17 February 2025.
329 On the early history of Persian-Russian relations, see 'Russia: i. Russo-Iranian relations up to the Bolshevik Revolution', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*: https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/russia-i-relations; accessed 23 April 2024.
330 Cf. Two Russo-Persian Wars (1804-1813, 1826-1828) saw a weakened Persia cede significant parts of its historic empire to the north. Through the crushing Treaty of Gulistan (1813) Iran lost Dagestan, Georgia and most of Azerbaijan. The later Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) stripped it of modern-day Armenia and the remainder of Azerbaijan.
331 In the 19th century, Russia adopted a condescending attitude towards what it saw as Persia's low-grade 'oriental' culture.

Military action in the region prior to WWI, led to the Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907. This divided Iran into three. Russia kept a vast area in the N (including Tabriz, Tehran, Mashad and Isfahan), Britain a smaller are in the SE and Persian Gulf, the third part was shared. Despite growing trade links (esp. *via* Baku), resentment of Russia grew. Following an influx of Russian refugees after the 1917 Revolution, Britain and the Bolshevik Government reversed the fragile 1907 Convention and returned Iran to its Qajar rulers in 1921.[332] Enough, it seems, was enough.

Fig. 83. The new geographical matrix shaping Iran. (*Source: The Iran Primer*)\

Soviet infiltration in Central Asia, Armenia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, and its clear nuclear threat to the West during the Cold War (1947-1991), spurred Iran to revisit its relationship to Moscow. In reality, Tehran had little choice: cooperate or countenance Russian advances in the region. It chose the former.

From Putin's first presidency in 2000, Tehran has built ever closer ties to Moscow.[333] To many observers, this strategic alliance is born of fear and need, more than respect and accord. Both countries, it is argued, need the other to shore up a weak flank in their geography, economy, diplomacy, or military strategy. Thus, in 2007 Iran was invited to join the Russia-led counterpart to NATO, the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Iran declined, perhaps because of old suspicions or Russia's new oligarchic 'secularism'.[334]

332 Qajar rule was brief. They were ousted in the 1925 military coup led by Reza Shah Pahlavi (see above p. 12).

333 Cf. Iran has an embassy in Moscow and consulates in Astrakan and Kazan. Russia has consulates in Rasht and Isfahan, and its embassy in Tehran.

334 NB. in a volatile region, CSTO's stipulation of the mutual defence of members may also have weighed on Tehran.

Second, Russo-Iranian relations have been catalyzed by *antipathy to others*.[335] This predates the 1979 Revolution. In the 1920s and 30s, Soviet agents pursued White Russians in Iran. During WWII, allies of Russia and Britain effectively ran neutral Iran, feeding its sense of being a pawn in another's game. When alliances against Nazi Germany ended, Russia emerged as a communist threat to a capitalist West. To many, the US invested in Pahlavi Iran as a bridgehead against the USSR. From this tortured background, Russia and Iran emerged as allies against their common enemy, the West. In 1979, the USSR was the first country to recognize the new Islamic Republic of Iran.

Fig. 84. Diaspora Russians in Iran. (*Source: Peripheral Histories, 2013*)[336]

Shared antipathy rarely creates lasting harmony. Since 1979, the tides of Russo-Iranian relations have ebbed and flowed. Ayatollah Khomeini explicitly rejected Russia's atheist ideology, while pragmatically forging closer ties during the Iran-Iraq War.[337] The end of Soviet Communism in 1989, and imposition of US sanctions against Iran for sponsoring Islamist violence, gave new grounds for Russia and Iran to unite. To anti-Americanism was now added a shared vision to create an effective nuclear alternative.[338]

335 For a study of light shed on Russo-Iranian relations by the Israel-Hamas conflict, see H. Azizi, 'Allied against the West', *Foreign and Security Policy* (12 March 2024): https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/allied-against-the-west-7384; accessed 24 April 2024. Dr Azizi quotes Iranian President Raisi as saying, after a meeting on 7 December 2023 with President Putin, 'What has caused humanity's suffering is unilateralism and an unjust global order, one manifestation of which can be seen in Gaza today.'

336 Cf. i. The Diatlov family in Mashhad, Iran, after crossing the border from Soviet Turkmenistan as refugees in 1932 (Personal Collection); ii. St Nicholas Church, Tehran in the late 1940s (Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia [ROCOR] Synod Archives, New York, Iran, Box II) in M. James, 'Exploring the Russian Refugee Diaspora in Iran, 1930-1955', *Peripheral Histories* (21 June 2023): https://www.peripheralhistories.co.uk/post/exploring-the-russian-refugee-diaspora-in-iran-1930-1955; accessed 17 February 2025.

337 Despite this, Russia covertly supplied weapons to Iran *via* DPRK after the US imposed an arms embargo during the war.

338 Cooperation included work to complete the stalled nuclear plant at Bushehr.

Despite on-going suspicion, diplomatic, economic and commercial ties (including the sale of arms) between Iran and Russia grew, but their relations were not easy. In 2010, for example, UN Resolution #1929 banned the sale of heavy weapons[339] to Iran for refusing to halt uranium production. President Medvedev (b. 1965; Pres. 2008-2012) concurred. President Ahmadinejad accused Russia of 'kowtowing to the US'. The issue reached a Swiss court where Russia threatened to end support for Iran's nuclear programme. The consistent thread in all of this is Iran and Russia's shared antipathy to the US and her allies.

Third, 21st-century Russo-Iranian relations are built on a notable *convergence in their regional interests and aspirations*,[340] although the data here is at times ambiguous.[341] We look at Iran's regional relations in the following chapters: for now, three observations. All of these are linked to the broader issues of Russia and West Asia *and* to deepening ties between Russia, China, North Korea and Iran (and states and actors they leverage to meet their political, military, industrial and physical needs).[342] The net effect of these is that Iran sits comfortably at the top table of nations hostile to the West. Assumptions that its religious-political profile hinders its geopolitical aspirations are misguided. Judicious Iranian diplomacy ensures its ideological ethos and its geopolitical agenda, co-exist purposefully and productively.

339 Cf. including the Soviet S-300 long-range surface-to-air missile system.

340 For an illuminating comment on contemporary Russo-Iranian relations, see G. Tazmini, 'Russia and Iran – a strategic alliance or something more?' *LSE: Politics* (18 January 2021): https://www.lse.ac.uk/research/research-for-the-world/politics/russia-and-iran-a-strategic-alliance-or-something-more; accessed 24 April 2024. NB. the article notes the breadth of terms used to describe the relationship between Iran and Russia. The article opts for 'alignment' over 'alliance', and concludes, '[My] research substantiates the case that Moscow-Tehran alignment is firmly anchored within a broader assemblage of shared principles and priorities.' For a more cautious account of collaboration, N. Smagin, 'United Against America: Russia-Iran Military Cooperation Is a Looming Threat', *Carnegie: Politika* (27 February 2024): https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/02/united-against-america-russia-iran-military-cooperation-is-a-looming-threat?lang=en; accessed 17 February 2025.

341 Iranian and Russian interests have not always aligned. In 1983, US intelligence guided Iran to expunge the significant influence within the Khomeini regime of the pro-Soviet/pro-Communist 'Tudeh' Party (Lit. 'Party of the Masses of Iran').

342 Viz. natural resources, mercenaries and military locations for operations.

Fig. 85. The 'axis of upheaval'? (*Source: Wikipedia*)

Russia and Iran find their interests align, first, in seeking *to curtail Israel's ability to call the shots in MENA*. A US-backed Israel infuriates and frustrates Russia and Iran, who aspire for different reasons to be the dominant force in the Middle East. To Iran, this is their divine vocation, to Russia, a temporal strategy to profile post-Soviet imperialism. US and Western intervention in MENA ask awkward questions of Iran and Russia, which they resent having to address. Second, Russia and Iran unite in wanting to *maximize returns on political and economic investment in the region*. Russia and Iran need one another. They form an axis in the Caucasus (with Armenia). As always, bills must be paid, and benefits sought. Coordination strengthens their political and diplomatic activity, *and* saves money (i.e., on shared security analyses, countersurveillance and the cost of diplomatic missions). There is added value – critics and supporters would concur – in Russia and Iran presenting a united front on the world stage: the sum of their collaboration being greater than the parts of their individual activity. Third, Russia and Iran converge *to promote a broad alliance against Western imperialism and secularism.* Here, differences between Russia and Iran are advantageous. States suspicious of Russian totalitarianism and Orthodox Christianity find reassurance in Iran's Islamist ideology: while socialist, secular, regimes take note of Tehran's ties to Putin's totalitarian nationalism. Russia's somewhat implausible involvement in the Syrian Civil War finds justification in its allegiance to Shiite Iran: Iran's use of regional proxies draws weight from Russia's approval. Complexity in Russo-Iranian relations? Absolutely!

Fig. 86. United to fight? (*Source: Nikkei Asia*)[343]

Fourth, as intimated before, Russia and Iran are *comfortably compatible in having dictatorial leaders.* The causes and consequences of totalitarianism are complex and noteworthy. History, fear, intimidation, a power vacuum, a cultural predilection for strong leaders, a compelling, enforceable ideology, all serve to catalyze autocracy. Globally, 'autocracy' is like a contagion that spreads and infects. Aspirant leaders see it, want it, and do what's needed to get it. Nationalism may inspire totalitarianism, but it is apt to give way to individual ambition and aggression. Preserving power is at a premium. Autocrats know this and bolster their position through promoting and publicizing flattering – *and* protective – alliances. Photo ops with world leaders may be loved in democracies; they are the lifeblood of dictatorships. We should not be surprised Presidents Xi and Putin, and Supreme Leaders Kim Jung-un and Ali Khamenei, find common cause – and do so despite seemingly irreconcilable worldviews. Why? They embrace the others' power and profile as an extension of their own. Such is the psyche of autocracy. Claiming to dismantle Atlanticist hegemony and create a multi-polar world, Iran and Russia justify totalitarianism as necessary to geopolitical revisionism. In so far as both will subordinate veracity to ideology, Iran and Russia will always be dangerous as enemies and even more dangerous as allies.

343 Cf. H. Akita, 'China-Russia-Iran-North Korea axis heightens the risk of WWIII', *Nikkei Asia* (11 June 2024: https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/China-Russia-Iran-North-Korea-axis-heightens-the-risk-of-WWIII: accessed 17 February 2025.

To many, the most troubling aspect of the recent proximity of Iran and Russia is, lastly, a *convergence in their military needs and aspirations*. Much has been written on this issue by Western experts. From a substantial body of information, four themes should be highlighted.

First, Iran and Russia are *self-consciously military regimes*. The Iran and Russia have acted in concert conflict in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and post-Soviet Central Asia. Over the last three years, Russia's military expenditure has risen from $75bn in 2022, to $84bn in 2023,[344] to $140bn (est.) in 2024 (i.e. 35% of government expenditure). This rise is directly linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its apparent expectation of a protracted war.[345] For its part, Iran's military budget over the same period was $6.85bn in 2022, $10.3bn in 2023, to $14.3bn in 2024 (a projected 38.5% increase), with the IRGC receiving more than one third of the country's total defense allocation.[346] Both countries justify their military spending as a response to threat.[347] Military issues dominate government policy and investment in Moscow and Tehran.

Second, Iran and Russia are *active military allies*. The Russian Federation remains chief supplier of arms and weaponry to Iran. However authentic, convenient, or complex, the relationship between Iran and Russia, their alignment as military powers is pivotal. For the fifth time earlier this year, Iran joined Russia and China in military exercises (this time in the Gulf of Oman).[348]

344 Cf. some internal documents suggest an anticipated expenditure in excess of $100bn.

345 Accurate information on military expenditure by Russia, China, Iran and DPRK is notoriously difficult. Claims and counter claims by enemies and friends produce widely different figures. For a useful overview of Russia's 2024 budget (including its military expenditure), and comparison with the Soviet era, see P. Luzin and A. Prokopenko, 'Russia's 2024 Budget Shows It's Planning for a Long War in Ukraine', *Carnegie: Politika* (10 November 2023); https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90753: accessed 1 May 2024. For a sobering assessment of the present state of military expenditure worldwide, see 'Global military spending surges amid war, rising tensions and insecurity', *SIPRI* (22 April 2024); https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/global-military-spending-surges-amid-war-rising-tensions-and-insecurity; accessed 1 May 2024.

346 NB. recent reports suggest Tehran has approved a $2.65bn investment on defense infrastructure. Direct and indirect financial support for this is highly likely; cf. https://iranfocus.com/intelligence-reports/50264-the-regime-in-iran-allocated-2-65-billion-to-enhancing-defense-infrastructure; accessed 1 May 2024. The privileging of the IRGC is indicative of its value to the regime, its establishment status, and its own political-economic interest (after 46 years) in preserving the *status quo.*

347 NB. They will be conscious that their enemies make the same argument. Downward spirals in diplomacy – as in all relationships – are notoriously hard to reverse.

348 On this, see the *Al Jazeera* report: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/12/china-iran-and-russia-stage-joint-naval-drills-in-gulf-of-oman; accessed 1 May 2024. The exercise involved more than 20 ships, combat boats and support vessels and covered an area of 17,000 km^2. According to Iranian Admiral Mostafa Tajjadini, the exercise aimed to improve economic cooperation and, among other things, to confront 'piracy and terrorism, support to humanitarian activities and the exchange of information in the field of rescue'. Few outside observers can fail to project other, darker, intentions.

Tough talking gains weight when matched by displays of military hardware. From 2015, when the Quds commander General Qasem Soleimani (1957-2020) visited Moscow to sell a coordinated response to ISIS and the Civil War in Syria – out of which grew the 'RSII Coalition' (between Russia, Syria, Iran and Iraq) to share military and security intelligence – Iran and Russia have engaged as allies in front-line military operations. Most recently, the conflict between Israel and Iran's proxies in MENA (esp. Hamas, Hezbollah and the Yemeni Houthis) has provided a forum for the tri-lateral 'Astana' group (Russia, Iran, and Turkey) to present themselves as an (implausible) alternative peace initiative that eschews Western hegemony and advances a multi-polar new world order.[349] The desire to seize new geopolitical initiatives is clear.

Fig. 87. (Former) Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu inspecting Iranian missiles in Tehran with IRGC Aerospace Force Commander Amir Ali Hajizadeh (*Source: Al Jazeera*, 2024)[350]

349 On this, see again Azizi, 'Allied against the West'.
350 Cf. M. Motamedi, 'Is Iran supplying ballistic missiles to Russia for the Ukraine war?' *Al Jazeera* (11 September 2024): https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/11/is-iran-supplying-ballistic-missiles-to-russia-for-the-ukraine-war; accessed 17 February 2025.

Third, Russia and Iran *sell each other arms and support the other's military ambitions*. Much has been written about Iran supplying drones for Russia's invasion of Ukraine[351] and Russia offering support to Iran's military resourcing of its regional proxies.[352] Both see tactical benefit in alignment. Both need what the other has. Money and weapons flow freely between the two countries. Following hard on the heels of Iran's purchase in 2016 of Russia's S-300 air defense system and subsequent procurement of Russian missiles and war planes, a leaked document reports a recent $1.75bn arms deal between Russia and Iran, prompted in part by the war in Ukraine and by the expiry in October 2023 of the UN's 2015 JCPOA Resolution #2231 (which prohibited the sale and export of missiles, drones, and certain types of military technology without UNSC permission). This would seem to confirm close military cooperation between the two countries, even if (as some analysts suggest) both countries track closely the impact of arms sales on the other's capability and their global reputation. Theodore Karasik at Gulf State Analytics is clear: 'This data reveals details of the Russia-Iran relationship regarding weapon systems, despite budget constraints. Despite differences, they collaborate closely, as evidenced by the recent meeting between Russian National Security Advisor Nikolai Patrushev and his counterpart Ali Akbar Ahmadian.'[353]

351 On this, see D. Citrinowicz, 'Iran is on its way to replacing Russia as a leading arms exporter', *Iran Source: Atlantic Council* (2 February 2024); https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iran-source/iran-drone-uavs-russia: accessed 1 May 2024. Particular attention has focused on the 1000s of Mohajer-6 UAVs and Shahed-136 drones that Iran has sold to Russian and other military (e.g., Sudan, Ethiopia, Bolivia, Venezuela and the 'Polisario Front' in W. Sahara). Citrinowicz also points to the economic and political benefits these sales accrue to Iran, viz. without the political or legal constraints imposed on Western powers, the competitively priced Shahed-136 (@ $20-40k each), Fateh-110 SRBM (@$100k each) and Zolfaghar SRMB (@$160k each) boost the Islamic Republic's coffers, while their sale also strengthens Iran's global profile and suite of dependent states.

352 On military cooperation and arms sales between Iran and Russia, and their impact on conflict in Ukraine (and, the present conflict in MENA) see, e.g., A. Cicurel and N. Nolan, 'First Drones, Then Missiles: the expanding Russia-Iran arms nexus', *JINSA NatSecBrief* (4 November 2022); https://jinsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/JINSA_20221104_Nexus_v1-1-1.pdf.: accessed 1 May 2024.

353 Quoted in U. Shokri, 'Iran-Russia Arms Trade: Geopolitics and Global Implications', *Iran International* (11 February 2024): https://www.iranintl.com/en/202402118761; accessed 6 May 2024.

Fig. 88. Iran joins China and Russia in joint military exercises in the Gulf of Oman (*Source: South China Daily, 2019*).

Last, and to many most troublingly, Russia and Iran *have an established relationship in the field of nuclear technology*. The extent to which this includes the development of Iranian nuclear weapons is disputed. This much is clear, as we have seen before, Russia assisted Iran in building its Bushehr reactor (see above p. 150) and at least used to be sensitive to the risks of Iran becoming a fully nuclearized military power.[354] Iran still insists its nuclear programme is peaceful and has no plans to develop nuclear weapons.[355]

354 On this complex issue, see e.g., J. W. Parker, 'Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program: Replay or Breakthrough?' *INSS* (1 March 2012): https://inss.ndu.edu/Publications/View-Publications/Article/693613/russia-and-the-iranian-nuclear-program-replay-or-breakthrough; accessed 6 May 2024; L. Dugit-Gros, A. Borshchevskaya, M. Eisenstadt, F. Nadimi, H. Rome, 'After Ukraine: Russia's Potential Military and Nuclear Compensation to Iran', *Washington Institute*, Policy Watch #3693 (20 January 2023): https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-ukraine-russias-potential-military-and-nuclear-compensation-iran; accessed 6 May 2024; P. Kerr, 'Iran, Russia Reach Nuclear Agreement', *Arms Control Association*: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2005-04/iran-nuclear-briefs/iran-russia-reach-nuclear-agreement (1 April 2005); accessed 6 May 2024; E. Avdaliani, 'Iran and Russia Enter A New Level of Military Cooperation', *Stimson Center* (6 March 2024): https://www.stimson.org/2024/iran-and-russia-enter-a-new-level-of-military-cooperation; accessed 6 May 2024; K. Liffey (ed. H. Goller), 'Russia says it need no longer obey UN restriction on missile technology for Iran', *Reuters* (17 October 2023): https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-says-it-need-no-longer-obey-un-restriction-missile-technology-iran-2023-10-17; accessed 6 May 2024.

355 Cf. House of Commons Library, 'What is the status of the Iran nuclear deal?', *Research Briefing* (24 April 2024): https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9870; accessed 6 May 2024.

To some analysts, this may indeed be the case, while others (including some Russian analysts) suggest the Iranian leadership is divided over the necessity and/or wisdom of a full, military nuclear option. In this, as in many other issues relating to Iran, perspective shapes conclusions.

Fig. 89. The Busher Nuclear Power Plant (*Source: Mehr News, 2023*)[356]

356 Cf. 'Iran's Bushehr power plant produces 3.5 m mw/h', *Mehr News Agency* (9 October 2023): https://en.mehrnews.com/news/206934/Iran-s-Bushehr-power-plant-produces-3-5-m-mw-h; accessed 17 February 2025.

Conclusion

The geopolitical and security implications of Iran's relationship to China and Russia deserve the closest attention. To policymakers in Europe and North America, the heart of the dilemma they face is the extent to which tension is best reduced (if this is indeed a preferred, or preferable, aim) by demonstrations of strength or embassies for peace. Reclaiming the initiative from China, Russia, and to a lesser degree DPRK, is going to be hard; especially when there is little will to dialogue and a deeply shared animosity towards the US and her allies. It is against this background that we examine in the next two chapters Iran's network of affinity and broader agenda in MENA.

Fig. 90. Presidents Pezeshkian and Putin meet (*Source: Nikkei Asia, 17 January 2025*)[357]

357 Cf. 'Russia, Iran sign strategic pact boosting trade and defense', *Nikkei Asia* (17 January 2025): https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Russia-Iran-sign-strategic-pact-boosting-trade-and-defense; accessed 17 February 2025.

Question 7

What drives Iran's relationship to Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Egypt, ISIS and Al-Qaeda?

American political commentator Thomas Friedman is right: 'You can't come to a hockey game and expect to play by the rules of touch football: Middle East politics is a contact sport.'[358] The truth of this will become clear in the last two chapters, when we focus on Iran's relationship to its Arab and non-Arab neighbours, its proxy regional militia, and other terrorist groups.[359] In this chapter, we consider the evolving nature of Iran's relationship to Turkey, its established animosity towards Israel and sponsorship of Hamas, its impact on Lebanon *via* Hezbollah, its courting of Egypt, and its attitude to ISIS and Al Qaeda.

States and non-state actors in MENA have a direct, and indirect, impact on the way Iran sees itself and is seen – or should be seen – by others both regionally and globally. In what follows, we look at Iran's engagement with state actors and non-state proxies. Our review is selective and thematic. The evolving nature of politics in the region, and the inevitable uncertainty that surrounds the new US President, the war in Ukraine, and the long term consequences of the recent Israeli military action in Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iran, render our analysis and conclusions necessarily provisional.[360] That Iran is directly and indirectly affected by the economic, political, cultural, ideological and military actions of its neighbours is clear: how it handles (or tries to handle), proactively and reactively, regional dynamics is more opaque. Though Iran projects (paradoxically) an 'isolationist' *and* an 'imperialist' ideological mindset, it rarely acts alone and rarely accomplishes all that it intends.

358 Friedman, T. (1995), *From Beirut to Jerusalem.* London: Harper Collins, 510.
359 For a valuable overview, see J. Chipman, 'Iran's Network of Influence in the Middle East', *IISS: Strategic Dossier* (2018): https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/publications---free-files/strategic-dossier/iran-dossier/irans-networks-of-influence-in-the-middle-east.pdf; accessed 1 February 2025.
360 NB. space prevents close study of all Iran's neighbours. We hope those studied shed light on the main characteristics of Iran's regional policies and actions.

By way of introduction, three general points:

We differentiate in what follows between Iran's relationship with 'states' and 'non-state' actors. This distinction artificially bisects what is, in Iran's eyes, one, unitary foreign policy. As indicated above (p. 139), Iranian foreign policy is shaped by what the ruling elite believe is 'good for Iran'; in particular, what propagates Shiite ideology, protects the *status quo*, and benefits Iran politically, economically, and militarily. As in many places, principle and pragmatism vie for ascendancy in Tehran's corridors of power. Conformity of word and deed, and consistency of principle and practice, are rare political commodities. Calculations based on short-term necessity and long-term advantage dominate Iranian diplomacy.

21st century Iranian foreign policy is rooted in history *and* in contemporary geopolitical realities. This is clear in its approach to its neighbours. Hence, the head of the Moshe Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies in Tel Aviv, Professor Uzi Raban, can rightly speak of Iran's on-going quest to reestablish the 16th century Shiite Safavid Empire while distancing themselves from Arabs who have controlled the region since the 7th century.[361] Elaborating on this theme, in their 2016 study of President Rouhani's foreign policy, *Iran in the World*, Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dr Dara Conduit (Deakin University, Melbourne) see three clear strands in Iranian political thought and life, namely, nationalism, Shiite radicalism and 'Third-Worldism'.[362] Each of these is evident in Iran's dealings with its neighbours. Context, conflict and wider considerations determine which of these strands dominates at any one time.

Iran's relations to the US, UK, EU, China and Russia, have an impact on how it sees and treats its neighbours. To some, anti-Western sentiment serves to cohere allegiance; to others, alliances with China and Russia (and their dependent states) provoke disquiet or fuel hatred. Iranian foreign policy is forged in a maelstrom of conflict and controversy to which its neighbours are both contributors and casualties. Central to this is Iran's regional nemesis, Israel. Few decisions are made in Tehran without considering their impact on Israel.

361 U. Rabi (2022), 'The "Proxy Wars" Strategy in Iranian Regional Foreign Policy', *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 13.4*: 385-405 (389*).

362 Cf. Akbarzadeh, S. and D. Conduit, eds. (2016), *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 'Third Worldism' replaces here the more usual IR term 'non-alignment' (pp. 19-23). See also, on rising power/s in the Middle East and Great Power influence (esp. China and Iran), Akbarzadeh, S. and D. Conduit, eds. (2018), *New Opposition in the Middle East*; - (2019), 'Great Power-Middle Power Dynamics: The Case of China and Iran', *Journal of Contemporary China* 28.117: 468-481.

Fig. 91. Iran and its geographic neighbours (*Source: ResearchGate*)

1. Turkey and Iran's imperial aspirations

The thawing in Iranian Turkish relations over the last decade or so has done much to the realign power in MENA and the Levant. Though far from being another Iranian proxy, Turkey is unquestionably a new ally of Tehran. Though history, culture, religion and geographic suspicion might suggest diplomatic difficulties between the two countries, Turkey's dictatorial President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (b. 1954; PM 2003-2014, Pres. 2014-present) and Iran's equally authoritarian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini have found common cause in their opposition to Israel, their (cautious) accord with Russia, and in their readiness to resist European pressure.

Drilling down into Iran's relationship with Turkey, anomalies and explanations abound. To some analysts, Israel's deepening ties to Azerbaijan are an unexpected element in Iran's relationship with Turkey; for, a culturally and religiously Shia Azerbaijan would seem to be a more likely ally than the historically secular 'Republic of Türkiye'. But, as we will see shortly, Azerbaijan offers Israel strategic benefits which Iran has had to look to counterbalance in a less likely partner Turkey.

More plausibly, the civil war in Syria (2011-2020 ceasefire) and the 5.4m. refugees who fled the country (and the 6.9m. who were displaced internally) contributed much to thawing the relationship between Iran and Turkey. Neither country wanted an unstable neighbour, let alone the burden of human fallout from the conflict.

The devastating earthquake in Northern Syria in February 2023 added to the urgency of close Turkish Iranian relations. Humanitarian realism, shared concerns about Kurdish nationalism, and, it seems, Russian diplomacy, inspired cooperation. Both countries see benefits in working together.

Fig. 92. President Erdogan and Supreme Leader Khamenei meeting in Tehran to discuss Yemen (*Source: Gandhara, 2015*)[363]

To confirm cooperation, President Erdoğan visited Tehran in July 2022. He met President Raisi again in September 2022 at the 22nd Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Uzbekistan (where they also met with President Putin). Erdoğan described the July meeting as 'a turning point' in their countries' relations. The leaders signed (8) memoranda of understanding on politics, economics, sport and culture. In March 2023, the two countries' Foreign Ministers met in Ankara to agree protocols for a state visit.

Though Iran's current relationship with Turkey may surprise some, it is symptomatic of Iran's diplomatic pragmatism in the face of threat, need, or self-interest.[364] Crucially, Iran's ties with Turkey mean Western powers cannot assume Turkey's membership of NATO (from 1952) and on-going quest to join the EU (from 2005) are not a security risk. Iran's friends may legitimately be assumed to be a threat to the West.

363 Cf. 'Turkey's Erdogan Visits Iran Amid Tensions Over Yemen', (7 April 2015): accessed 17 February 2025.
364 Cf. also Iran's will to cooperate with Israel in light of the proposed Azerbaijani 'Zangezour Corridor' plan.

2. Israel: Iran's regional nemesis

Iranian Israeli relations require more lengthy treatment. Entrenched international animosity has been addressed before (p. 105). Iran's view of Israel is almost certainly filtered through its hostility to Israel's superpower sponsor, America. To many in Iran, Israel is a US counterpart to their country's own regional proxies: to be used *and* to be feared, while capable of 'deniable' independence *and* commendable – guidable – ruthlessness. Politics, psychology and perceived threat cannot be disentangled on either side.

Israel's aggressive suspicion and ingrained anger towards Iran is captured in the popular Israeli TV series *Tehran*, first broadcast in 2020.[365] The series tracks the first mission of Tamar Rabinyan, a new Israeli Iranian Mossad agent, to her birthplace, Tehran.[366] Her mission is to destroy a nuclear reactor. When the mission fails, she is trapped in a false identity. Her family are at risk. Though fictional, *Tehran* conveys a sense of the animosity between Iran and Israel that has grown progressively from the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, through the Iranian Revolution in 1979, to what some call the 'Cold War' that now exists between the two countries. As the series reveals, Israel is seen by many in Iran (and the region) as the 'imposition' by an imperialist US of an international 'Zionist regime' on ancient Muslim people/s and their lands. If Iran exists in a nexus of international threats and alliances, so too does Israel.

Fig. 93. The threat Iran poses Israel (*Source: The Economist, 2024*)[367]

365 The series is available on Apple TV.
366 Tamar Rabinyan is played by Niv Sultan. The series also includes (somewhat controversially) a Farsi-speaking Glenn Close (Marjan Montazeri, a British psychologist and Mossad agent who runs Rabinyan) and Hugh Laurie (Peterson, a South African nuclear inspector).
367 Cf. the useful series of images in 'The Israel-Iran Standoff in Maps', *The Economist* (9 October 2024): https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2024/10/09/the-israel-iran-standoff-in-maps; accessed 17 February 2025.

Iranian Israeli hostility is anything but fictional. There is history, complexity and psychology in the way the two countries read, and relate to, one another. It was not always so bad. Prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution relations between Iran and Israel were largely respectful and peaceable.[368] Though Iran voted against the UN Partition Plan for the British Palestinian Mandate in 1947 (which paved the way for the creation of the State of Israel), when the State of Israel was formed in 1948, Iran swiftly recognized it.[369] Indeed, while the Shah ruled, Israel and Iran shared a dependence on the US for significance and support.

Iraq's defeat in the First Gulf War (1991-1992) and fall of its dictator Saddam Hussain (December 2003), shifted the balance of power in MENA. A US-backed Israel and increasingly pro-Russian Iran assumed a new, adversarial prominence. Suspicion intensified. Hatred hardened. Caustic rhetoric by the Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin (1922-1995; PM 1992-1995) was matched by inflammatory denunciations by the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (b. 1956; PM. 2005-2013). Relations spiralled downwards.[370] Israeli suspicion that Iran orchestrated attacks on its Embassy (in March 1992) and on a Jewish Community Centre (in July 1994) in Buenos Aires, poured oil on the fire of already inflamed passions. The threat of war became embedded in the psyche of both nations.

Prior to (and more clearly after) the 1979 Revolution, Israel suspected Iran of developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD), including nuclear weapons. In August 1962, Mossad agents targeted German scientists who were found helping Egypt develop rockets that could distribute nuclear waste. Though Mossad chief Isser Harel (1912-2003; Dir. 1952-1963) was sacked by Israeli PM David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973; PM 1955-1963) for masterminding this operation,[371] Israeli sensitivity to the military capability of its neighbours grew. Covert operations and diplomacy in the 1970s targeted Iraq's nuclear programme. In June 1981, Israeli PM Menachem Begin (1913-1992; PM 1977-1983) sanctioned 'Operation Opera', an attack on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor. He followed this with what became the so-called 'Begin Doctrine', viz. 'On no account shall we permit an enemy to develop weapons of mass destruction against the people of Israel. We shall defend the citizens of Israel in good time and with all the means at our disposal.'

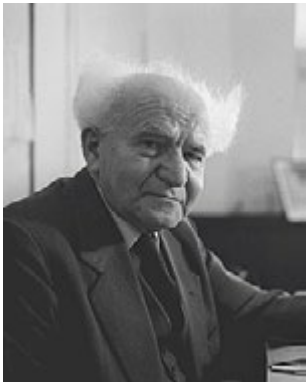
368 Historically, Jews were a presence in Iran from 586 CE and 722 CE, when Jerusalem and Judea, and then the Northern Kingdom of Israel, fell to Persian forces, who took 1000s of Jews back to Iran as captives. On this, Sashar, H. (2019), *The Jews of Iran: The History, Religion and Culture of a Community in the Islamic World*. London: Bloomsbury.

369 Iran was the second Muslim state after Turkey to recognise the new sovereign State of Israel in May 1948.

370 Cf. Beres, L. R. (2014), *Living with Iran: Israel's Strategic Imperative.* Ramat Gan: Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies.

371 Cf. known as 'Operation Damocles'.

Fig. 94. Mossad chief Isser Harel (1912-2003; Dir. 1952-1963) and Israeli PM David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973; PM 1955-1963) (*Source: Wkipedia*)



Application of the 'Begin Doctrine' (i.e. 'preventive action' and 'counter-proliferation' against an enemy's perceived military capability) is clear in Israel's 2006 invasion of Lebanon.[372] It also inspired Mossad's covert operation in Tehran in 2018, when it seized 100,000+ computer files and documents relating to Iran's nuclear programme.[373] The same philosophy also explains the ferocity of Israel's reaction to the 7 October 2023 attack by Hamas in S. Israel, its subsequent scaling up of military action in Lebanon against Hezbollah, and its aggressive response to the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen. Whether or not Iran is a constant 'real and present' danger to Israel, it is in the crosshairs of Israel's embrace of Begin's doctrine of proactive self-defense.[374] Mindful of this, Iran sits on military alert, its 'proxy war' with Israel a national state of mind.[375]

A key element in Iran's response to Israel is its long-term sponsorship of Hamas.[376] We have mentioned Hamas before.[377] In light of the preceding, we should address three possible misinterpretations of this violent militia movement.

372 NB. Then, as today, Israeli Defense Forces [IDF] fought Iranian backed Hezbollah militia.

373 J. A. Gross, 'Mossad's Stunning op in Iran Overshadows the Actual Intelligence it Stole', *Times of Israel* (1 May 2018): https://www.timesofisrael.com/mossads-stunning-op-in-iran-casts-giant-shadow-over-the-intelligence-it-stole; accessed 22 November 2024.

374 Cf. Cordesman, A. (2007), *Iran, Israel and Nuclear War.* Washington, DC: CSIS.

375 For context and history, Alavi, S. E. (2019), *Iran and Palestine: Past, Present, Future.* London: Routledge; Parsi, T. (2007), *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S*. New Haven: Yale UP. NB. The language of 'Proxy War' and 'Cold War' in this situation is questionable. Iranian Israeli relations are about more than 'proxy' issues and bare little similarity to the 'Cold War' between the West and USSR (1945-1991).

376 NB. As well as providing training and resources for terrorist groups, the IRGC and elite Quds Force also engage in hostile actions regionally. The IRGC is listed as a terrorist organisation in Bahrain, Canada, Saudi Arabia and the United States. The EU is currently reviewing this issue: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2023-002834_EN.html; accessed 1 February 2025.

377 Cf. p. 133.

1. Hamas is not officially an Iranian organisation[378]

It emerged from a section of the pan-national Muslim Brotherhood during the first Palestinian *intifada* (Lit. rebellion, uprising, resistance movement) against Israel (1987-1993). Initially a series of protests, and acts of civil disobedience, against Israel's occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, the *intifada* became increasingly disunited and violent, with Hamas emerging as the militant face of Palestinian resistance.[379] Conflict with Israel subsided after the Madrid Conference (1991)[380] and later Oslo Accords (1993),[381] but tension within the Palestinian community persisted. In the second elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council in January 2006, Hamas campaigned against corruption in government and Israel's continuing occupation. They gained a majority of seats, and in the brief Battle of Gaza (10 to 15 June 2007) seized control of the territory from their political rival Fatah.[382]

Though operating outside the Palestinian National Authority, and a terrorist organization to many,[383] Hamas has provided *de facto* government and leadership in Gaza since 2008. The sustained bombing of Gaza since the October 2023 attack by Hamas in S. Israel, has weakened Hamas militarily and politically. Though increasingly allied to, and dependent on Iran for funding, training and weighty optical support, Hamas is an independent organisation that makes its own decisions … and suffers the consequences.

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378 On ties between Hamas and Iran, see M. Srivastava, N. Zilber and R. Jalabi, 'What links Hamas to the "Axis of Resistance" and its patron Iran?' *Financial Times* (9 October 2023): https://www.ft.com/content/a06e7ea0-a7f8-4058-85b7-30549dd71443; accessed 29 January 2025. Also, 'Iran and the Palestinians in Gaza', *The Iran Primer* (2 November 2023), https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/nov/02/iran-and-palestinians-gaza; accessed 29 January 2025.

379 On Hamas's wider activities, especially in Syria, see G. Gambil (2002), 'Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and Hamas', *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 4.10: http://www.meib.org/articles/0202_11.htm; accessed 29 January 2025; D. Filkins, 'Hamas going strong in Syria some say', *International Herald Tribune* (14 July 2003), quoted in 'Tangled skein or Gordian knot': https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/book/zid01/zid01_08.pdf; accessed 17 February 2025.

380 The conference (from 30 November to 1 December) was hosted by Spain and supported by the US and Russia. It sought, with limited success, to revive Israeli Palestinian peace talks.

381 The Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995 were signed in Washington and Oslo by Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin (1922-1995; PM 1974-77, 1992-1995) and Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) Leader Yasser Arafat (1929-2004; Chairman PLO 1969-2004; President, Palestinian National Authority 1994-2004). The Accords helped launch the Oslo Peace process (based on UNSC Resolutions # 242 and # 338). The process saw the PLO recognized by Israel as officially representing the Palestinian people (and thus as their voice in negotiations) and the State of Israel formally recognized by the PLO.

382 Founded in 1957, Fatah (formerly the Palestinian National Liberation Movement) is the largest faction of the confederated multi-party Palestine Liberation Organization and the second-largest party in the Palestinian Legislative Council. Fatah is a nationalist, social democratic party committed to a political solution for Palestine and its people. The second largest, and more radical group within the PLO, is the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Formed in 1967, PFLP is a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary group that is committed to the destruction of Israel. It has been active alongside Hama in the Israel-Gaza War (2023-present).

383 Hamas is seen as a terrorist organization in Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, Paraguay, New Zealand, the UK, US and EU.

Fig. 95. Supreme Leader Khamenei greeting Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh (*Source: Washington Institute*)[384]

2. Hamas has its own ideology.

Though Hamas has adopted aspects of Iran's Shiite political and religious ideology, it retains its own political, religious and military identity. Co-founded by the quadriplegic Sunni Islamic scholar and Imam Ahmed Yassin (1936-2004) and the long-term political activist Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi (1947-2004), Hamas (or the Islamic Resistance Movement) is a political body and a military force (*aka* the Al-Qassam Brigades). Yassin and al-Rantisi were Co-Chairmen of the Hamas Shura Council and *de facto* leaders of Hamas, until they were both assassinated by Israeli troops in March and April 2004. After a lifetime of political protest, insurgency, imprisonment, threat, risk, denunciation and militancy, Yassin became the spiritual head of Hamas. His politico-religious philosophy is encapsulated in a speech he gave in 1997:

384 Cf. M. Levitt, 'The Hamas-Iran Relationship', *Washington Institute* (November 2023): https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamas-iran-relationship; accessed 17 February 2025.

I want to proclaim loudly to the world that we are not fighting Jews because they are Jews! We are fighting them because they assaulted us, they killed us, they took our land, our homes, our children, our women, they scattered us, we became scattered everywhere, a people without a homeland. We want our rights. We don't want more. We love peace, but they hate the peace, because people who take away the rights of others don't believe in peace. Why should we not fight? We have our right to defend ourselves.[385]

To this end, he advocated suicide bombings, martyrdom and random attacks on Israeli civilians. He also sought a negotiated peace, with Palestine returned to its people. To Israeli PM Ariel Sharon (1928-2014; PM 2001-6), Yassin was a 'mass murderer' and the 'mastermind of Palestinian terror'. Justifying Yassin's assassination, Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz (b. 1948), dubbed him 'the Palestinian bin Laden'. When they met in Tehran on 2 May 1998, Ayatollah Khamenei described Yassin and Hamas as 'the proper representatives for Muslims of Palestine'. Cousins in their Islamist faith, Iran and Hamas are now firmly united in their armed struggle against Israel.

Fig. 96. Imam Ahmed Yassin (1936-2004) meeting Supreme Leader Khamenei in 1998 (*Source: Wikipedia*)

385 Quoted in S. Schmemann, 'Sheikh vows to continue the Hamas Holy War against Israel', *New York Times* (23 October 1997): https://www.nytimes.com/1997/10/23/world/sheik-vows-to-continue-the-hamas-holy-war-against-israel.html; accessed 28 January 2025.

3. Hamas has a distributed view of authority

Despite the importance of its leaders – and thence the loss associated with the deaths of Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran and Yahya Sinwar (1962-2024)[386] in Gaza – like many terrorist organisations, for security reasons, Hamas distributes decision making to its rank and file. Its 1988 Charter was clear, 'The day that enemies usurp part of Muslim land, jihad becomes the individual duty of every Muslim.' Ownership of its cause by committed cells and individuals affords Hamas flexible strength whilst safeguarding its lines of communication.[387]

Fig. 97. Al-Qassam militants attract youth to their cause (*Source: Al Jazeera*)

386 Sinwar succeeded Ismail Haniyeh (1962-2024) as Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau (from August 2024) and head of Hamas in Gaza (from February 2017). He was killed in a chance encounter with the Israeli Defence Force on 17 October 2024. Haniyeh, who was based mostly in Qatar, was the political head of Hamas until he was assassinated on 31 July 2024 when he was staying in an IRGC Guest House in Tehran to attend the inauguration of President Pezeshkian. Security failures have led to arrests and recriminations. At the time of his death, Haniyeh was the most senior figure killed in the latest iteration of the war between Israel and Hamas. Ayatollah Khomeini led the prayers at Haniyeh's funeral at Tehran University. Holding Israel responsible for Haniyeh's death, the seasoned Chairman of the PLO (from 2004) and President of the State of Palestine and Palestinian National Authority (from 2005), Mahmoud Abbas (b. 1935) described the killing as 'a cowardly act and a serious escalation'. Violent reprisals followed in Israel. Iran cited the killing in justification of airstrikes against Israel in October 2024. The US deployed ships and troops to the region. Russia sent the head of its Security Council, Sergei Shoigu, with the Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, to steer Iran's thinking on retaliation. To date, there has been no major response from Hamas or Iran.

387 NB. Israel's attack on soft Hezbollah targets in Lebanon in October 2024 *via* pagers and walkie talkies is symptomatic of the power of social media *and* government sensitivity to this. 39 people were killed and more than 3,400 injured in the attack.

In the hours following Haniyeh's death, Al-Qassam Brigades targeted sites in the West Bank (near Hebron). On August 4, a lone Palestinian knife attacked two elderly Israelis in the Holon district of Tel Aviv. The will to respond may have been centrally nurtured, but it was locally owned and violently exercised. Israel is aware it cannot protect all its citizens all the time, as the violent incursion by Hamas on 7 October 2023 vividly confirmed.[388] The highly planned, and widely anticipated Hamas attack in October 2023, sheds light on another aspect of Iran's relationship to Hamas. Though Hamas militia may take on-the-ground decisions, Iranian military advisors provide detailed training and advice. Since imposition of the blockade on Gaza in 2007, Hamas and the (equally violent) Palestinian Islamic Jihad (formed in 1981) have constructed more than 350km of tunnels into Israel, as dynamic conduits for information, supplies, weapons and troops.[389] The assassinated Quds Commander Qasem Soleimani had a central role in advocating and organising the building of these tunnels.[390] In December 2023, the retired Quds Force General Mansour Haghighatpour made clear building these tunnels 'was an effort not only by the Palestinians but by the whole "Axis of Resistance"'.[391] Iran's proxies take their own decisions but with guidance from trained personnel. Iran and its enemies know the system works well. The *Washington Post* was right, the 7 October attack relied on 'key support from [Iran] who provided military training and logistical help as well as tens of millions of dollars for weapons'.[392] However, later evidence, reported in *The New York Times* and *The Telegraph*, indicates the attack was originally to be in 2022. For two years,

388 Beginning with paragliders and a barrage of 4000+ rockets, Hamas timed the attack to coincide with the Jewish holiday Simchat Torah. An estimated 6000 Hamas militants (including some elite Nukhba troops) breached the border in 119 places. Code named 'Operation Al-Aqsa Flood', Hamas targeted military bases and civilians in twenty-one communities (including Be'eri, Kfar Aza, Nir Oz, Netiv Haasara and Alumim). A total of 1,139 people were killed in the attack: 695 Israeli civilians (including 38 children), 71 foreign nationals, and 373 members of Israel's security forces. Of these, 364 were killed at the Nova music festival. 41,000 est. Palestinians (and others) have been killed in Gaza and the West Bank in the course of Israel's military response to the attack.

389 The tunnels were also used to ship parts for Hamas to build Iranian Fajr-5 missiles to launch into Israel.

390 As a senior advisor to Soleimani, Brigadier-General Abdolfattah Ahvazian, said of these tunnels in November 2023 (i.e. after Soleimani's death), 'These are not the kind of tunnels that only mice can use. These tunnels allow the passage of cars, mules with ammunition, and motorcycles. 700 kilometers with nothing but pickaxes and hoes' (https://www.memri.org/tv/abdolfattah-ahvazian-advisor-irgc-qods-force-commander-qasem-soleimani-hamas-gaza-dig-tunnels-prophet-slaying-jews; accessed 29 January 2025).

391 On this, and the threat the tunnels pose Israel, see https://trendswide.com/assistant-general-qassem-soleimani-to-al-jazeera-net-for-these-reasons-the-gaza-tunnels-will-remain-a-nightmare-for-israel-policy; accessed 29 January 2025.

392 Cf. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/10/09/iran-support-hamas-training-weapons-israel/; accessed 29 January 2025.

Hamas tried unsuccessfully to persuade Iran and Hezbollah to actively participate.[393] Like Iran's other proxies, Hamas may be a useful tool, but it has a mind and will of its own.

Fig. 98. Former Quds Force General and now MP Mansour Haghighatpour (b. 1959) (*Source: Iran Briefing, 2015*)

So, what of the future of Israeli Iranian relations? Two points briefly.

First, it would be unwise to speculate on how the November 2024 re-election of President Trump will ultimately impact West Asian politics, particularly the conflict and fragile cease-fire in Gaza and Lebanon. With Israel secure in US support[394] and determined to deal with the threat from Iran more decisively than in the past, and Iran implicated in direct military action, and proxy militia activities, against Israel, a swift improvement in Israeli Iranian relations is highly unlikely. President Trump's notorious (albeit at times powerful) unpredictability may cause Tehran to think twice before responding militarily to Israel's 'Operation Days of Repentance' (26 October 2024), when more than twenty airstrikes hit targets in Iran, Iraq and Syria.[395] Going forward Israel will almost certainly

393 Cf. R. Bergman, A. Ragson and P. Kingsley, 'Secret documents show Hamas tried to Persuade Iran to join its Oct 7 attack', *The New Tork Times* (12 October 2024): https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/12/world/middleeast/hamas-israel-war.html; accessed 29 January 2025; J. Crisp, 'Hamas wanted Iran to join in Oct 7 attack, secret minutes reveal', *The Telegraph* (12 October 2024): https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/10/12/hamas-iran-join-in-october-7-attack-secret-minutes-show; accessed 29 January 2025.

394 And with allies of the US who count it wise to keep in with the White House.

395 NB. Including, it has now emerged, a nuclear facility in Iran.

assume US support for action it takes against Iran (as it has for its brutal operation in Gaza), while Iran may reckon Israel at pains to overcome the new President's predilection for getting his own way and dominating the news.[396]

Fig. 99. 'Operation Days of Repentance (*Source: Sky News*)[397]

Second, Israeli Iranian relations do not exist in a diplomatic vacuum: they are part of a nexus of relations to which both countries are committed and accountable. Hence, Israel's multidimensional – to outsiders, perhaps, unexpected[398] – ties to Azerbaijan (including its Kurdish citizens) impact Tehran's response to its own Kurdish communities (see above p. 80) and those who cause its new ally Turkey and old enemy Syria such problems.

To explain this further: Israel's relationship to Azerbaijan is for Iran about oil, military hardware, and support for Kurdish independence, all of which impact the regional balance of power. Frustratingly for Tehran, more than 70% of Israel's oil is now securely sourced from Azerbaijan, whose oil and gas-based economy relies on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline, which was finished in 2005. Israel has traded military hardware (including drones) for oil.

This equipment has been used by Azerbaijan in its recent campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh

396 NB. Dwindling support for Israel over its Gaza operation has not led to increased support or sympathy for Iran and its proxies.
397 Cf. D. Haynes, 'Operation Days of Repentance' - How Israel's strike on Iran unfolded', *Sky News* (29 October 2024): https://news.sky.com/story/operation-days-of-repentance-how-israels-strike-on-iran-unfolded-13243562; accessed 17 February 2025.
398 On this, M. Alaca, 'Deep Dive: Iran, Israel, Turkey and the Growing Baku-Erbil Relationship', *Amwaj.Media* (4 August 2023): https://amwaj.media/article/deep-dive-iran-israel-turkey-and-the-growing-baku-erbil-relationship; accessed 22 November 2024.

(19-20 September 2023) and its ongoing backing for Kurdish independence.[399] Ties between Tel Aviv, Baku and Kurdish-Iraqi Erbil, are a political affront and security threat to both Tehran and Ankara. Iran's sponsorship of a failed attack on the Israeli embassy in Baku in July 2023[400] and of an airstrike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus in April 2024, confirm the lengthening frontline of Iranian Israeli hostility; indeed, some analysts believe, Israel's Azerbaijani ties may have sealed Iran's support for the 7 October 2023 attack by Hamas. True or not, the hardline leaders in Iran and Israel show little interest in peace and a growing taste for war.

Fig. 100. Azerbaijan, Iran's northerly neighbour (*Source: Wikipedia*)

399 NB. Nagorno-Karabakh is a sensitive issue for the EU. It represents the EU's corporate failure to influence the outcome of a complex situation impacting Iran. On the ineffectiveness of the EU as a peace maker in this conflict, see L. Panahova (2024), 'Recognition of the EU's Actorness in the Karabakh Peace Process by Azerbaijan', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 1-10: https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2024.2380329; accessed 22 January 2025. Also, the ECFR article: https://ecfr.eu/article/after-nagorno-karabakh-how-europeans-can-strengthen-armenias-resilience; and, L. Martirosyan and S. Sargsyan, 'Business as usual for EU and Azerbaijan amid Nagorno-Karabakh "ethnic cleansing"', *Open Democracy* (30 January 2024): https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/eu-armenia-refugee-war-azerbaijan-gas-energy-russia-security-rights; accessed 23 January 2025.

400 NB. the attack was thwarted by Azerbaijan's security forces. On this, L. Berman, 'Israel behind failed attack on Israeli embassy in Azerbaijan foreign minister says', *Times of Israel* (13 July 2023): https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-behind-failed-attack-on-israeli-embassy-in-azerbaijan-foreign-minister-says; accessed 22 November 2024.

3. Lebanon and state-sanctioned militia

Lebanon and Iran are tied by their shared Shiite identity. As a Shia majority state, bordering Israel to the south and Syria to the north and east, Lebanon has a strategic location for Iran. In the recent past, Tehran has invested heavily (politically, economically and relationally) to safeguard its profile and position, focussing especially on nurturing its established proxy, the Islamist militia Hezbollah (Lit. Party of God).[401]

To set this in context. Hezbollah was formed in 1982; that is, in the chaos of Lebanon's violent Civil War (1975-1990).[402] Inspired by the Iranian Revolution and nurtured by an IRGC cohort, Hezbollah's 1985 manifesto named the destruction of Israel and the expulsion of Western influence in the region. It also pledged its allegiance to Ayatollah Khomeini, its submission to Iran's radical Shiite political ideology, and its commitment to protect Lebanese independence. In fulfilment of this, in the 1980s and 1990s it fought to drive Israel from S. Lebanon, played a key role in the Lebanon War (2006), and supported President Assad in the Syrian civil war (from 2011).[403] Tehran sanctioned and financially supported these actions.

Hezbollah's presence and influence inside and outside Lebanon have grown exponentially over the years. With a paramilitary wing led by the Jihad Council and a political party (the 'Loyalty to Resistance Bloc') in the Lebanese Parliament, it draws grass roots support from a vast network of schools, clinics, youth programs, and other social services that it sponsors.[404] Despite its philanthropic face, most Western governments follow the US and UK in designating Hezbollah a 'terrorist' organisation.[405]

401 Cf. according to the US State Department's *Country Reports on Terrorism* (2022), Iran provides Hezbollah with 'most of its funding, training, weapons, and explosives, as well as political, diplomatic, monetary, and organizational aid'.

402 Cf. A. Norton (2018), *Hezbollah,* 3rd Ed. Princeton, NJ: De Gruyter, 17-35.

403 Cf. the 2024 *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (ATA) observes that, like its sponsor Iran, 'Hizballah (*sic*) seeks to limit U.S. influence in Lebanon and the broader Middle East'.

404 More troublingly than these (palpably attractive) social programmes, a 2022 Europol report identified a 'network of collaborators built by Hezbollah in the EU', which were suspected of 'managing the transportation and distribution of illegal drugs into the EU' as well as 'dealing with firearms trafficking and running professional money laundering operations'. Hezbollah is also linked to a trade in amphetamine-type stimulants (Captagon) on the Syrian border.

405 In 2016, its fighting force was estimated to be between 40-50,000. This number has been significantly reduced by targeted attacks by Israel in later-2024.

Fig. 101. Supreme Leader Khomeini, Hezbollah's Secretary General Hasrallah and Qasem Soleimani (*Source: Iran Primer*)[406]

Hezbollah put forward its first parliamentary candidates in the 1995 Lebanese General Election. In 2005, it secured its first seat in the Lebanese cabinet.[407] Since then, it has had the power to block policy and twice fell a government. While its political wing debates in parliament, its forces guard Lebanon's borders and its Shiite identity. Hezbollah is not uniformly welcomed in Lebanon: its sectarian, militarist, ethos troubles many peace-loving Lebanese nationalists. Targeted attacks on Hezbollah's leadership, following Hamas's 7 October 2024 operation in S. Israel, have left it substantially weakened. But, Iran's continuing support is clear, and *vital* for Hezbollah's continuing existence and on-going military operations.

It is impossible to understand Lebanon today without factoring in the explosion on 4 August 2020, which killed (at least) 218 people, injured ca. 7000 more, and left >300,000 homeless. The immediate cause of the blast was a large amount of ammonium nitrate[408] which had been carelessly stored (we now know) in warehouses at the Port of Beirut. The eye-watering scale of the repair bill (ca. $15bn) is overshadowed by the devastation the blast has caused to Lebanese society, its ruling elites and government institutions.
Of relevance here is its exposure of Iran's subversion of Lebanese culture, politics and economy.

406 Cf. 'Timeline: Iran and Hezbollah', *The Iran Primer* (30 July 2024): https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/oct/19/timeline-iran-and-hezbollah; accessed 17 February 2025.
407 NB. Since 2005, Hezbollah has consistently occupied 2 or 3 seats in the Lebanese cabinet.
408 A fire in a warehouse ignited 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate (equivalent to ca. 1.1 kilotons of TNT). The material, confiscated by Lebanese authorities from the abandoned ship *MV Rhosus* six years earlier, had not been properly stored.

Coming as it did during a period of prolonged political upheaval (2019-2021),[409] the Beirut explosion has become for many Lebanese a symbol of state chaos and a stimulant to national reconstruction. Support for Hezbollah has suffered. Iran is aware that its hold on Lebanon is weakening. Israel knows this, too.

Fig. 102. The aftermath of the Beirut explosion, 4 August 2020 (*Source: Wikipedia*)

Because of Iran's place in the political, cultural and economic ecology of Lebanon, and the potential for significant change in each area in the future, we highlight three themes from the aftermath of the Beirut blast of significance for EU policymakers.

409 Cf. on 17 October 2019, civil protests erupted in Lebanon following an announcement of tax hikes on petrol, tobacco, and VoIP calls. In days, simmering public anger at political corruption and the government's failure to manage basic public services (viz. water, electricity and sanitation), along with economic stagnation, sectarian discrimination, unemployment (in 2018 it had reached 46%), and a lack of accountability and integrity among office holders, plunged the country into a state of constitutional chaos. PM Saad Harir resigned, agreeing the country needed a panel of independent experts: his successor Hassan Diab also resigned following the Beirut explosion. Chaos continued until the General Election in 2022 when a new reformist block, standing on wholesale replacement of the ruling elite, secured 13% of the vote and 13 seats in parliament.

First, the official inquiry into the explosion exposed the extent of Lebanon's 'state capture' by Iran.[410] The legal process has not been straightforward. The first judge, Fadi Sawan, was a military investigator, (b. 1960). Many Lebanese expressed confidence that truth or justice would emerge from his inquiry. Sawan resigned in February 2021 after the process was denounced by two officials Sawan had described as 'negligent'.[411] Judge Tarek Bitar (b. 1974), head of Lebanon's criminal court, took over. Aya Majzoub of Human Rights Watch Lebanon noted at the time that Bitar's appointment filled many Lebanese with renewed hope in the judiciary and in justice and accountability emerging from the inquiry.[412] But the process was again subverted by Iranian-backed pressure groups keen to preserve the political and social *status quo*. Iran's proxies are not only militia: they are influential ideologues with funding From Tehran.

Second, Hezbollah exerts immense grassroots influence on Lebanese society. It has been directly linked to coordinated political, religious and social resistance to Bitar's work. Orchestrated opposition began in September 2021. On 14 October, large scale protests (instigated by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement) led to seven protesters being killed by snipers.[413] The investigation was halted again in December 2022, with Bitar himself now being accused of political bias and legal incompetence. Despite the weakening in Hezbollah's stranglehold on Lebanese politics evident in the May 2022 General Election,[414] in January 2023, all those charged with maladministration during Bitar's inquiry were acquitted by Lebanon's chief prosecutor Ghassan Oueidat. When Iranian pressure is brought to bear on an issue, truth and justice are to be what Tehran and its stooges determine.

410 K. Chehayeb, 'How Judge Bitar's Probe Shook Lebanon's Leaders', *Al Jazeera* (16 October 2012): https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/16/analysis-how-judge-bitar-probe-shook-lebanon-leaders; accessed 24 November 2024.

411 Cf. In December 2020, outgoing PM Diab and three former ministers were charged with negligence: namely, the former Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil, and two former Ministers of Public Works, Ghazi Zeiter and Youssef Fenianos. Khalil and Zeiter were both close to Speaker Nabih Berri's Hezbollah-linked Amal Movement. All rejected Sawan's findings.

412 Chehayeb, *ibid*.

413 AFP, 'Lebanon Protest Chaos Revives Civil War Ghost', *France 24* (14 October 2021): https://www.rfi.fr/en/lebanon-protest-chaos-revives-civil-war-ghost; accessed 24 November 2024

414 Cf. as predicted in early polls, increasing number of voters turned to new, or independent, parties; while Hezbollah, Shia and Amal Movement candidates lost ground.

Fig. 103. Hezbollah as a political force in Lebanese society (*Source: Britannica*)

Third, strong anti-government and anti-Hezbollah (*qua* anti-Iranian) sentiment still shapes Lebanese life. Economic chaos, a breakdown of healthcare during and after the COVID pandemic, and turmoil surrounding the inquiry into the Beirut blast, have made Lebanon look increasingly like a failed state. Israel's bombing of targets in Beirut in the autumn of 2024, that decapitated Hezbollah and destroyed much of its weaponry, has rendered Tehran's support both more visible and more essential. But efforts to restabilise Lebanon politically and economically continue. Judge Bitar reopened his inquiry in late-January 2023.[415] Many of Lebanon's political, social and religious elite continue to call for him to be replaced. Confidence in their position (and some, in Tehran's support) is clear.[416] Since the Beirut blast, ties between Hezbollah, Hamas, Lebanese officials and the IRGC, have almost certainly strengthened.[417] EU policy decisions on Iran will impact Lebanon, and *vice versa*: such is the interconnectedness of MENA.

415 NB. Against the will of prosecutor Oueidat, who Bitar accused of complicity in the cover-up after the Beirut explosion.
416 T. Fox, 'Lebanon Judge at the Centre of Beirut Blast Enquiry Showdown', *Al Jazeera* (26 January 2023): https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/26/beirut-port-blast-judge-will-face-challenges-and-risks-lawyers; accessed 24 November 2024.
417 Cf. Jawahar, 'Lebanon' (2022).

4. Egypt and ancient regional rivalries

We treat the last two issues more briefly. Iran's relationship to Egypt is a work in progress. Though not formally part of the 'axis of resistance', Egypt is clear about its historic antipathy to Israel and thence its resistance to imperial pressure from the US and the Western Alliance. Like Iran's proxy militia, Egypt knows its own mind. Two issues in contemporary Iranian Egyptian relations deserve brief mention.

Fig. 104. President Raisi meeting Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi at the November 2023 Joint Arab Islamic Extraordinary Summit in Riyadh to discuss the crisis in Gaza (*Source: Ahram Online, November 2023*)[418]

First, though Egypt and Iran have come down on opposite sides of many issues before and after the 1979 Revolution,[419] their relationship has been marked by a sense of their regional weight and responsibility, *and* by an eagerness not to appear weak. Political instability in Egypt, and regional tension between Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Western Alliance, have invariably impacted Iranian Egyptian diplomacy. After the Egyptian 'Arab Spring', hopes for closer ties saw Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi (b. 1951; Pres. 2012-3) visit Tehran (August 2012) and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visit Cairo (February 2013), where an Iranian Embassy was briefly opened. But Morsi's tough successor Abdel Fattah El-Sisi (b. 1954; Pres. 2013-present) dragged his heals on closer

418 Cf. 'UPDATE: Sisi, Raisi discuss Gaza situation, Egypt-Iran relations in first meeting', *Ahram Online* (11 November 2023): https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/512042.aspx; accessed 17 February 2025.

419 NB. Contentious issues have included Egypt's close ties to the US, its signing of the Camp David Accords, support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, Iran's lauding of President Assad's killer and mutual denunciation for failures during the 2008-9 Israel-Gaza war.

ties to Iran until the Chinese brokered Saudi-Iran deal in 2023 inspired a new round of (initially informal) bilateral conversations, beginning with a meeting in Riyadh in May 2023 between Ayatollah Khamenei and El-Sisi. Though Iran and Egypt have co-existed awkwardly over the years as members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), BRICS, and Developing 8,[420] on 17 December 2024 Foreign Minister Araghchi visited Cairo to garner Egyptian support to de-escalate rising tension in MENA. His visit signals an openness on both sides to normalize diplomatic relations.[421] A West Asia in which Iran and Egypt collaborate will see a significant change in the political ecology of the region *and*, surely, downgrade Western hopes to determine its direction.

Second, as in Iran, domestic issues have frequently claimed precedence over Egyptian diplomacy. Under the dictatorial former army officer Abdel El-Sisi, who led the July 2013 coup that ousted the short-lived, and increasingly unpopular, Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohamed Morsi, Egyptian foreign policy has been more about cooperation and containment than expansion and confrontation. In contrast to the thirty-year internationalism of Hosni Mubarak (1928-2020; Pres. 1981-2011), El-Sisi has prioritised Egyptian socio-economic health and security in his 'Egypt 30 Vision' and forged alliances that foster that. So, he has invested in economic development in urban and green projects,[422] cracked down on networks of jihadist terrorist groups located or trained in Egypt,[423] sought to broker peace and regional harmony – notably, in the conflict in Libya (2020) and Israel-Gaza (2021) – deepen historic ties to the US, Russia, EU, and neighbouring Arab states, and create a strong new bond with President Erdoğan in Turkey.[424]

Following its historic role in the Camp David Accords (1978),[425] which projected an

420 Cf. also D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, which includes Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkey and, from December 2024, Azerbaijan.

421 On this visit, see 'Iran's foreign minister visits Egypt as leaders try to contain regional war', *Financial Times* (17 December 2024): https://www.ft.com/content/f6ffa8c9-229a-4d9a-a54b-52397edac8ab; accessed 29 January 2025; also, 'Iranian FM makes rare visit to Egypt amid escalating regional tensions', *Egypt Today* (17 December 2024): https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/135433/Iranian-FM-makes-rare-visit-to-Egypt-amid-escalating-regional; accessed 29 January 2025.

422 Sustainable projects, including the blue ribbon Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which seeks to address Egypt's depleting water supplies, have drawn in international investment but provoked popular protests.

423 E.g., Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) in N. Sinai, Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) or al-Jihad (founded by the physician Ayman al-Zawahiri), and 'third type jihadi' off-shoots of the Muslim Brotherhood, inspired by the vision of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966).

424 NB. Three years diplomacy ended in an Egyptian Turkish summit in Ankara in September 2024. After decades of support for the Muslim Brotherhood (to curry favour with Arab states), Erdoğan has redirected Turkey's attention to more urgent domestic, regional and international issues. Iran and Egypt afford him substantial political, military and economic benefits.

425 The two Accords were the fruit of secret meetings hosted by President Jimmy Carter (1924-2024; Pres. 1977-1981) at the Presidential retreat, Camp David. The Accords were signed by the Israeli PM Menachem Begin (1913-1992; PM. 1977-1983) and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat (1918-1981; Pres. 1970-1981). On the Accords, p. 212.

autonomous region in the West Bank and Gaza, and the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty (1982), which normalized relations and ceded Sinai back to Egypt, Egypt has embraced its identity as a regional mediator since the Oslo process in the early 1990s.[426] Iranian Egyptian diplomacy is, though, a sustained exercise in risk management: neither side can take its eye off pressing domestic issues and the perplexing machinations of the other.

5. Iran, IS and Al-Qaeda

Islamist militancy takes many forms in many countries. To some adherents it is a motivating ideal and source of identity, to others a movement, a community, a cause worth dying for. To its enemies, part of the power and threat Islamist militants pose is their diversity, elusiveness, unpredictability, and capacity to fragment, disperse and reform. Like other major powers, Iran has struggled to engage, let alone guide, Islamist initiatives it has not created. But it is still rightly viewed as the arch-advocate of armed conflict against countries and ideologies it deems 'infidel'. We end this chapter on this theme to ensure Iran's deeper, and more dangerous, regional interests are clearly understood; in particular, its very different approach to IS (Islamic State)[427] and Al-Qaeda. We focus on these two groups here.

Fig. 105. ISIS Founder Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (1959-2010) and Al-Qaeda's Osama bin Laden (1957-2011) (*Source: Wikipedia*)

426 NB. after the rift between Fatah and Hamas in 2007, Egypt has frequently mediated between Palestinian factions, Hamas and Israel. In May 2021, it brokered peace during a fierce 11-day period of Israeli Palestinian violence.

427 IS (Islamic State; الدولة الإسلامية *ad-Dawla al-Islāmiyya*) is also known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham), or by the Arabic acronym Daesh.

6. ISIS

IS is a relative newcomer to Islamist militancy.[428] Founded ca. 2004 by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (born as Hamid Dawud Mohamed Khalil al-Zawi: 1959-2010), IS grew out of a group known as *Jaish al-Ta'ifa al-Mansurah* (Lit. Army of the Victorious Sect). This group joined with *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*, *aka* JTJ or Jama'at (Lit. Congregation of Monotheism and Jihad), formed by the Jordanian militant Islamist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (born Ahmad Fadeel Nazal al-Khalayleh: 1966-2006) in Afghanistan in 1999, and its older pan-Islamist cousin Al-Qaeda (see below), in their fight against the US and their international and local allies during the 2003-2006 phase of the Iraq War. In 2006, IS formally associated with Al-Qaeda in a newly established Mujahideen Shura Council. A Salafi jihadist movement, ISIL came to prominence in 2014 when it overran vast tracts of NW Iraq and E Syria leaving death and destruction in its wake.[429] By the end of 2015, with an international force of ca. 30,000 fighters, a budget of <$1bn, control of over 110,000km^2 and ca. 12m. people, IS declared a new global caliphate subservient to its own extreme, brutally applied, version of Sharia Law. After prolonged conflict with US, Iraqi and Kurdish forces, IS was finally defeated (regionally) in 2019. It went underground to regroup, propagate violence worldwide,[430] and reemerge with equal ferocity and support in N Africa, the Sahel and Central Asia.

Iran is no friend to IS and IS does not seek Iranian backing. From the outset, Iran viewed IS activity in Iraq and Syria as an unwelcome threat on its border,[431] while IS's Salafist ideology dismissed Shiite Iran and its leaders as 'infidel'. Over the years, IS has done enough to justify Iranian antipathy and Iran enough to motivate its citizens (particularly its Sunni Kurds) to take the fight to IS.[432] When in 2015 IS proclaimed an Emir for Iran, and in June 2017 launched an attack on the Iranian Parliament and mausoleum of Ayatollah

428 NB. Thought the precise date of its formation is unclear, IS was active by 2004.

429 Cf. During the conflict, IS became notorious for its brutality in Syria and Iraq, particularly towards Yazidis, Iraqi Turkmen, Christians, Shia Muslims and Mandaeans. It publicized its Salafist agenda and wanton violence (including against soldiers, journalists, aid workers and ancient sites) on gruesome videos.

430 Cf. IS has been directly linked over the years to lone wolf attacks on individuals, events and buildings, and to larger scale incidents with mass casualties, such as the three suicide bombs in Paris on 13 November 2015, the bombing on 3 January 2024 of an event in Kerman, Iran, honouring the assassinated IRGC Commander Soleimani Kerman, and the bombing of a music event in Crocus City Hall in the city of Krasnogorsk, in the Moscow Oblast, Russia, on 22 March 2024.

431 NB. Iran was praised by Iraq for being the first country to send support (in June 2014) for its fight against ISIL. The Quds Force was a 'key player' and IRGC Commander Soleimani a 'mastermind' in Iraq's action against IS.

432 For analysis, see D. Esfandiary and A. Tabatabai (2015), 'Iran's ISIS policy', *International Affairs* 91.1: 1-15: https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12183; J. Brodsky, 'ISIS was behind the Kerman attack. Iran still blames Israel and the United States, though', *Atlantic Council: IranSource* (8 January 2024): https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/isis-iran-kerman-israel-us; accessed 30 January 2025.

Khomeini, it sealed its fate and reputation in Iran.[433] State-run media outlets consistently denounce it as a 'terrorist' organization, while the former Foreign Minister Javad Zarif (b. 1960: Min. 2013-2021; VP for Strategic Affairs 2024-present) scathingly dismissed 'the so-called Islamic State' as 'neither Islamic nor a state'.[434] The recent resurgence of IS in Afghanistan (ISIS-K, viz. Islamic State Khorasan Province), and its increasingly successful attempt to recruit Iranian Sunni Kurds (and others) to turn against Iran, have rattled Tehran. Since the 7 October Hamas attack in S Israel, Iran has engaged in its own international counter-terrorism project with IS firmly in its sights.[435] The EU and Western Alliance will be understandably anxious Iran's actions increase the likelihood of conflict spreading beyond MENA. Meanwhile internally the Iranian regime cynically uses the existential threat ISIS poses to justify its harsh securitization agenda.

7. Al-Qaeda

Iran's attitude to Al-Qaeda is very different. As former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (b. 1963; Sec. of State 2018-2021) said in a speech at the US Embassy in Tbilisi, Georgia, on 13 January 2021, 'We ignore this Iran-al-Qaida nexus at our own peril.' He quoted a letter by Osama bin Laden, one of the original masterminds behind Al-Qaeda, 'Iran is our main artery for funds, personnel, and communication … There is no need to fight with Iran unless you are forced to.'[436] To Pompeo, though Al-Qaeda may have been on the ropes after US and allied retaliation for 9/11 (and other terrorist attacks), it had successfully – and securely – embedded itself in Iran, from whence it still poses a significant threat to Western interests. There is much here to ponder. Iran's relationship to Al-Qaeda both before and after 2021 provides an essential context for evaluating Pompeo's assessment. We would do well to remember, as Mir and Clarke have said, 'The nature of the relationship between Al-Qaeda and Iran is one of the most contentious debates in the counterterrorism community, dividing analysts, policymakers and government officials.'[437]

433 Cf. 'Isis claims responsibility for deadly blasts in Iran', *Financial Times* (4 January 2024): https://www.ft.com/content/8aaabbc9-7b54-4070-8acc-ba9d75dcfcf1; accessed 30 January 2025.
434 Cf. M. J. Javad, 'Mohammad Javad Zarif: A Message from Iran', *The New York Times* (20 April 2015): https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/20/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-a-message-from-iran.html; accessed 30 January 2025.
435 Cf. I. Al-Marashi, 'Iran is waging its own war on terror', *Responsible Statecraft* (22 January 2024): https://responsiblestatecraft.org/iran-attack-pakistan-syria; accessed 30 January 2025.
436 M. Pompeo, 'The Iran-al-Qaida Axis', *A Lecture given at the US Embassy in Tbilisi, Georgia on 13 January 2021*: https://ge.usembassy.gov/the-iran-al-qaida-axis; accessed 30 January 2025.
437 Cf. A. Mir and C. P. Clarke, 'Making Sense of Iran and al-Qaeda's Relationship', *Lawfare* (21 March 2021): https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/making-sense-iran-and-al-qaedas-relationship; accessed 30 January 2025.

Fig. 106. President Rouhani at the UN General Assembly in October 2018 downplaying Iran's relationship to Al-Qaeda (*Source: Diplomatic Courier*)[438]

Though new evidence is emerging all the time about Iran's past and present relationship to Al-Qaeda, it seems clear that, from its inception in a series of meetings in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1988, until 2004 when, according to US sources, two thirds of Al-Qaeda's leadership had been apprehended by the CIA, Iran (often *via* Hezbollah) provided training, finance, weapons, explosives and intelligence material for use (particularly) against Israel.[439]

Al-Qaeda saw itself as in the 'vanguard' of a global Islamist revolution that would create a new transnational caliphate. Based originally in Sudan and later Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda created over time a highly sophisticated global network of individuals and institutional affiliates who were committed, in the first instance, to reclaiming the Arabian Peninsula from 'infidel' Saudi Arabia and the US stationed there (to oust Saddam Hussain from Iraq).

As the movement grew the scale of its vision and operation grew with it. Maintaining Jews and Christians (with weighty US support) sought to destroy Islam and extend their global dominance and control on MENA, Al-Qaeda masterminded a wave of terrorist attacks on US targets, including bombing the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on 7 August 1998, and hijacking the planes that crashed into the Twin Towers in New York

438 Cf. the robust refutation of this by US Ambassador Marc Ginsberg, 'Inside Iran's Terror Alliance With Al Qaeda', *Diplomatic Courier* (12 October 2018): https://www.diplomaticourier.com/posts/is-iran-supporting-al-qaeda-inside-their-terror-alliance; accessed 17 February 2025.

439 Cf. Iran and Al-Qaeda developed stronger ties through their shared support of the Bosnian *mujahideen* during the Bosnian War (1992-5). On this, C. Deliso (2007), *The Coming Balkan Caliphate.* London: Bloomsbury, 8f. NB. In 1995, the US imposed expanded its sanctions against Iran, with US intelligence suggesting this did little to reduce the subsequent levels of support Iran provided its proxies (viz. ca. $700m. to Hezbollah between 2012-2020, and as much as $16bn to buttress the Assad regime in Syria).

on 9 September 2011 killing <3000 people, disrupting the global economy, and changing fundamentally modern geopolitics. The 'War on Terror' (especially on Al-Qaeda) that President George W. Bush (b. 1946; Pres. 2001-2009) initiated in retaliation, saw the US and its allies invade Afghanistan (2001-2021) and Iraq (2003) to root out the perpetrators of atrocities, including Osama bin Laden. The 1998 US indictment of bin Laden was very clear, Al-Qaeda had 'forged alliances … with the government of Iran and its associated terrorist group Hezbollah for the purpose of working together against their perceived common enemies'.[440] Bin Laden was finally tracked down and killed in May 2011.

After 9/11, the relationship between Iran and Al-Qaeda became more complex, with Iran providing sanctuary to known associates of Al-Qaeda and the 9/11 bombers, while seeking to avoid the appearance complicity in the 9/11 attack or Al-Qaeda's operation more generally.[441] To have done so, Tehran clearly reckoned, would have confirmed negative perception and increased the threat it faced. If, as some claim, Iran and its Al-Qaeda residents have become more prominent in oversight of Al-Qaeda activities over the last decade or so, this has merely deepened the regime's dilemmas. US and Israeli operatives have, with seeming impunity, killed senior members of Al-Qaeda and the IRGC inside Iran,[442] while according to a 2023 UN report Iran-based Saif Al-Adel is effectively the leader of Al-Qaeda worldwide.[443]

440 Cf. A. Zagorin and J. Klein, '9/11 Commission Finds Ties Between al-Qaeda and Iran', *Time* (16 July 2004): https://web.archive.org/web/20040720012152/http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,664967,00.html; accessed 31 January 2025; also, https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf. NB. Among the report's findings, 'Iran facilitated the transit of al Qaeda members into and out of Afghanistan before 9/11, and … some of these were future 9/11 hijackers.' Also, D. L. Byman, 'Unlikely Alliance: Iran's Secretive Relationship with Al-Qaeda', *Brookings* (31 July 2012): https://www.brookings.edu/articles/unlikely-alliance-irans-secretive-relationship-with-al-qaeda; accessed 1 February 2025.

441 Cf. These include co-founder of Al-Qaeda Saif Al-Adel (b. 1960), Osama bin Laden's son Saad (1979-2009), Abu Muhammad al-Masri (1957-2020), a senior associate of Al-Qaeda leader and co-founder Ayman al-Zawahiri (1951-2022), and Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi (1966-2006), the founder of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) which morphed into ISIS.

442 Cf. On 7 August 2020, Abu Muhammad al-Masri and his daughter Maryam were shot by Mossad agents in Tehran.

443 On Saif Al-Adel's significance for Al-Qaeda today, see M. Barak and E. Azani (2023), 'Iran and al-Qaeda Under Sheikh Saif al-Adel: The Ramifications for Israel', *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*: http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep55431; accessed 1 February 2025.

Fig. 108. What is the relationship between Iran and Al-Qaeda? (*Source: Khabaragency.net*).

So, what of the present relationship between Iran and Al-Qaeda?[444] Many analysts doubt there is an easy answer. It is unlikely, given their twisted history and ideological (especially religious and strategic) differences, Iran and Al-Qaeda cooperate easily – or, as importantly, trustingly – as strategic partners who plan and act in harmony. Better, perhaps, to acknowledge they see mutual, tactical, benefits in their collaboration. Iran can keep a close eye on a potential security risk (nationally and regionally), while Al-Qaeda can shelter (somewhat) in Iran against a relentless US counterterrorism programme. If Al-Qaeda gains less materially from Iran than other terrorist organizations, state support sets them apart from many, while Iran gains another (cheaper) proxy in Al-Qaeda for its war against Israel and the West.

444 Cf. Mir and Clarke provide a useful, detailed, account of the evolving relationship between Al-Qaeda and Iran *inside* Iran.

That said, US and UN sources have suggested recently, Al-Qaeda cells in Afghanistan and its E African affiliate al-Shabab, increasingly overshadow the Iran-based Al-Qaeda leadership.[445] From all such, US, EU and UK agencies would do well to keep on high alert; particularly, with Iran increasingly engaged in cyber warfare against Western targets.[446]

445 NB. considerable weight is, however, attached to the presence there of the senior logistical figure Abd al-Rahman al-Maghribi (b. 1970).

446 Cf. On 7 November 2023, the Office of the US Director of National Intelligence reported, 'Iran's growing expertise and willingness to conduct aggressive cyber operations make it a major threat to the security of U.S. and allied networks and data. Iran's opportunistic approach to cyber-attacks makes critical infrastructure owners in the United States susceptible to being targeted' (https://www.cisa.gov/topics/cyber-threats-and-advisories/advanced-persistent-threats/iran).

Conclusion

In light of the preceding, we end this chapter with a provisional statement of four issues which Western policymakers would do well to be attentive in relation to Iran and Iranian foreign policy.

1. **Internal disagreement.** Though, like many autocratic regimes, Tehran always aims to present itself as a united government in a harmonious country, in reality (as we have seen) this is far from the case. External pressure reveals (predictable) divisions of opinion between ideological 'hawks' and moderate 'doves', progressives and conservatives. Hence, for example, we find the former Ambassador, envoy to the EU, and political advisor to President Rouhani, Hamid Aboutalebi (b. 1957), tweeting on 16 January 2023, that Iranian foreign policy had been 'captured by extremists'.[447] This followed a statement by thirty-six former diplomats listing domestically damaging failures in Iranian foreign policy.[448] Sales of drones to Russia, crippling economic sanctions, uncertainty around the JCPOA, and Iran's perceived complicity in the 7 October attack by Hamas, have been of particular concern.[449] When President Raisi's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahain therefore spoke of his desire to '… institutionalise the on the ground achievements of the Resistance', 'doves' feared a new era of hardline Iranian policy and diplomacy. Internal disagreement is a fact of life in Tehran – indeed, in Iran generally – as public protests testify.

2. **External empowerment.** Despite internal disagreement and a series of setbacks internationally – for example, the drastic weakening of Hezbollah, dissent within the Iraqi IRI, risk of embarrassment from Lebanon's Bitar enquiry, and Israel's successful courtship of Azerbaijan – pan-Islamic support for Iran's hostility to Israel, normalising of relations with Saudi Arabia, new cooperation with Turkey, and relative stability in a volatile region, suggest Iran may still have more cards to play than some hope. If Iran's regional proxies weaken, powerful, new, international alliances can compensate. If US-backed Israel hits back, it faces the ire now of China- and Russia-backed Iran.

447 P. Wintour, 'Senior Iranian ex-diplomats expressing open criticism of regime', *The Guardian* (16 January 2023): https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/16/senior-iranian-ex-diplomats-expressing-open-criticism-of-regime; accessed 29 November 2024.
448 Ibid.
449 Cf. on this, S. Jafari, 'Iran's Middle East Influence May Actually be Declining', *Atlantic Council: IranSource* (5 November 2021): https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-middle-east-influence-may-actually-be-declining; accessed 17 February 2025.

3. **International alliances**. As indicated previously (p. 105), Iran sees itself as sitting at the top table of contemporary geopolitics. Regional issues, though preoccupying, are not overwhelming. It stands on the high rocks of Chinese goodwill and Russian need. It belongs to networks of affinity that accept its ideological priorities and autocratic style. Its younger policymakers mediate flexibility to their stiffer elders. Relative patience in not overreacting to Israeli and US aggression over the Hamas attack on 7 October has positioned Iran closer to majority global opinion than its critics might want.[450] Chinese restraint and Russian passion are powerful diplomatic fuel for Iran's long-running political engine.

Fig. 109. How bad is the EU's relationship with Iran? (*Source: Foreign Policy*)[451]

450 Iran's acceptance of, if not complicity in, the 7 October attack was buttressed in mid-November 2024, when the *de facto* leader of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (1985), accused Israel of genocide in Gaza, denounced its aggression towards Lebanon and Iran, and called on Israel to respect Israel's sovereignty and not attack Iranian targets. On this, see M. Salem, 'Saudi crown prince accuses Israel of committing "collective genocide" in Gaza', *CNN* (13 November 2024): https://edition.cnn.com/2024/11/12/middleeast/saudi-mbs-accuses-israel-genocide-gaza-intl/index.html; accessed 20 January 2025; also, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20241112-saudi-crown-prince-demands-israel-not-attack-iran; accessed 20 January 2025. At a meeting in Riyadh on 9 October 2024, however, Iran's Foreign Minister Araghchi issued a stark warning to MBS about the need for unity to avoid escalation of regional conflict: see https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-crown-prince-meets-iran-foreign-minister-riyadh-saudi-agency-says-2024-10-09; accessed 20 January 2025.

451 Image: Iran's FM Amir-Abdollahian welcomes EU High Representative Borrell at the foreign ministry in Tehran on 25 June 2022 (*Credit:* ATTA KENARE/AFP via Getty Images). Cf. A. Vohar, 'Europe's relationship with Iran has never been worse', *Foreign Policy* (19 September 2023): https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/19/europes-relationship-with-iran-has-never-been-worse: accessed 17 February 2025.

4. **Western indecision.** Western policymakers face the dilemma of deliberate confrontation with Iran (which may win votes at home but throw Iran into the arms of dangerous rogue nations) *or* diplomatic engagement (which may be time-consuming, and sceptics will dismiss as futile). While the world awaits President Trump's inauguration on 6 January 2025, and Western powers ponder what could take the place of the JCPOA, the Iranian leadership, with its newly elected President Pezeshkian, has time to take stock. Hitherto demonstrating strong survival instincts, Tehran may wait for others to act first. Meanwhile, it can turn Chinese investment to infra-structure renewal and wooing its citizens' hearts and minds. With this in mind, and in light of the Council of Europe's 12 December 2022 statement on Iran, EU policymakers would do well to, i. monitor closely the progress of the Bitar enquiry in Lebanon (which may disclose Iranian complicity in the Beirut explosion); ii. be attentive to ethnic minorities in Iran and the Sunni minority in Iraq (as potential agents for change in both countries); iii. rethink the JCPOA and propose a strategic review of Middle Eastern policy in light on Iran's new geopolitical profile; and iv. revisit the wisdom of sanctions and the $113 bn in European oil and energy trade (2021) that has continued in spite of them.[452]

452 For a substantial critique of High Representative Borrell's 2023 statement on Iran, S. Ghasseminejad and B. Taleblu, 'An Overhaul of the EU's Iran Policy is Long Overdue', *Politico* (18 February 2023): www.politico.eu ; accessed 29 November 2024.

Question 8

What is the nature of Iran's relationship to other Arab neighbours and regional proxies?

We turn in this last chapter to complete our survey of states and non-state actors Iran engages regionally. We look at its relationship to Iraq (where Hezbollah has been active) before and after the Iran-Iraq War and fall of Saddam Hussein, at its role in the civil wars in Syria (and fall of the Assad regime) and Yemen (where it supports the Houthis rebels). We also look more briefly at its varied interactions with Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan and Qatar. Here unique cultures, faiths, languages, traditions, personalities and relationships co-exist with Arab formality, affection and mutual distrust. To most outsiders, MENA is full of mystery and menace. Western involvement in the region has rarely fostered harmony. It is a world Shiite Iran may denounce as 'infidel' but understands, as something of an outsider, from the inside.

Fig. 110. Map of the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea (*Source: Research Gate*)

Before we turn to Iran's relationship to Iraq, three contextual points to supplement what has been said already about Iran's regional profile.

1. Iranian ideological imperialism has fostered, and profited from, political chaos, regional instability and socio-economic deprivation. Hard-headed political, economic and military strategy guides Tehran as much as Shiite faith and piety. More than this, anti-Western, anti-Israeli, anti-US rhetoric resonates with a majority in MENA, even if some find Iranian militarism, authoritarianism, and fundamentalism hard to stomach. As to deployment of its IRGC, Quds Force and proxy militia, neighbouring states are divided: to some they have been instruments of national liberation, to others, agents of international oppression. They have certainly accomplished more than direct action might have achieved and contributed directly to bolstering – to the delight of some and dismay of many – Iran's standing regionally and globally.

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2. Iran's proxies are a microcosm of its vision and ethos. Although potentially a tangible admission of the regime's weakness, Iran's proxy militia represent an ideological extension of Ayatollah Khomeini's vision for *ummah*, namely, a pious, borderless, Islamic state.[453] This ideal was enshrined in the name 'Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC),[454] and is consciously perpetuated in the activity of Iran's proxies. To realise this vision, Khomeini was willing to work with 'infidel' powers to dethrone Saddam Hussein: to fulfil their spiritual vocation, radical Islamist militia will embrace martyrdom, *Shahidat* (Pers. شاهدت; Lit. I witness).[455] As such, Iran's proxies are not ultimately living and dying for a country or political cause: their *jihad* is to cleanse the world in *Allah's* name for the sake of his new, true, community, *ummah*.[456]

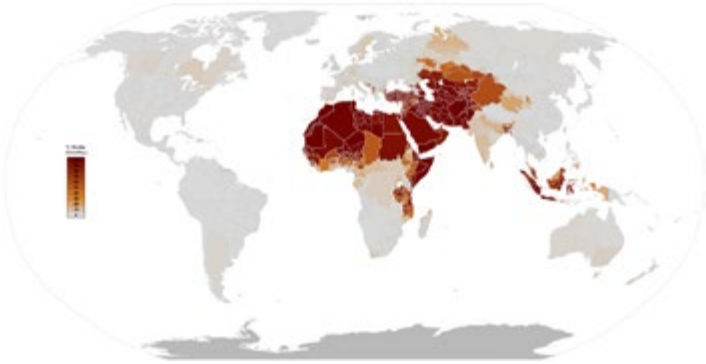
453 On the use of proxies as an admission of Iran's military weakness and political isolation, R. Cohen and G. Shamci (2022), 'The "Proxy Wars" Strategy in Iranian Regional Foreign Policy', *Journal of Middle East and Africa,* 13.4: 385-405. NB. *ummah* (Lit. 'mother source', i.e., nation, identity, religious community), as a pan-Islamist concept, supplants the primacy of country, culture, tribe and kin.

454 On the choice and freighting of the name, Seliktar, O. and F. Rezaei (2020), *Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 13.

455 As the Prophet Mohammed is heard to say, 'Wish death and welcome the afterlife.' On this, Hiro, D. (2018), *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy.* Oxford: OUP, 149.

456 Cf. the so-called 'Logic of Ummah'. On this, see Firestone, R. (1999), *Jihād: The Origin of Holy War in Islam.* New York: OUP; Denny (1975), 'The Meaning of "Ummah" in the Qur'an', *History of Religions* 15.1: 34-70; Esposito, J. (2004), 'Ummah', in *The Islamic World: Past and Present.* Oxford: OUP.
NB. The 'Constitution of Medina' (CE 622) names Jews, Christians and pagans and includes them in *ummah*.

Fig. 111. Population density of Muslims globally (*Source: Wikipedia*)



3. Third, in submission to the Iranian regime's Shiite ideology, regional proxies inconsistently balance their local identity and objectives with state sponsorship of a righteous, regional, 'Shia Crescent'.[457] Factionalism, fragmentation, personalities and poor communication, blight Iran's management of its dependents, particularly after the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, who masterminded this aspect of Iran's international relations. What was always a strange mixture of regional interest groups – from Lebanese Hezbollah to Iraqi al-Badr, from Yemeni Houthis to Palestinian Hamas, and various affiliates in Syria – Iran's control of its proxies was often conceptually and strategically tenuous: with the death of Soleimani and subsequent decapitation of Hezbollah in Lebanon, new cracks have appeared. That said, though security forces worldwide are better prepared than a decade ago to track and dismantle terrorist cells and thwart random attacks, Iran is far from being a spent case. With its will to prevail now tied to Chinese investment and its MENA interests, to arming Putin for Russia's war in Ukraine, and to Erdoğan's Ottoman-style imperialism, it can't be written off.[458]

457 Cf. US General Joseph Votel (Commander, US Central Command) said of Soleimani in 2018, 'Wherever you see Iranian activity, you see Qasem Soleimani, whether it is in Syria, whether it is in Iraq, whether it is in Yemen, he is there and it is the Quds Force, the organization which he leads, that I think is the principal threat as we look at this and the principal ones that are stoking this destabilizing activity.' Cf. further, P. Bergen, 'The Killing of Iran's General Soleimani is Hugely Significant' *CNN* (2 January 2020): www.edition.cnn.com; accessed 29 November 2024.

458 Not least, while other countries in the Levant struggle politically, vocationally and economically, by comparison.

1. Iraq and the legacy of war

Iran's relationship with its vast, conflict riven, neighbour Iraq poses a huge challenge for external analysis and internal assessment. The fluid dynamics of regional and cultural evolution, which are very clear here, render conclusions and predictions perilously difficult. As often in MENA, history impacts present events. War and mutual suspicion have dominated Iranian Iraqi relations: we look at 21st events in light of these.

Fig. 112. The Iran-Iraq border as a conflict zone (*Source: Warfare History Network*)[459]

459 Cf. J. Walker, 'New Borders, Old Enemies, the Iran-Iraq War', *Warfare History Network* (October 2007): https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/new-borders-old-enemies-the-iran-iraq-war; accessed 17 February 2025.

2. Precursors to the Iran-Iraq War

For more than 1000 years, Iraq (then Mesopotamia, viz. the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers) occupied much of ancient Persia. Birthplace of the great Western civilizations of Sumer, Akkad, Babylon and Assyria, Mesopotamia fell to the imperial might of Persia, Rome and Greece, and in the 7th century to the spiritual power of Islam. Baghdad became the capital of the Abbasid dynasty in the 8th century. From the fall of Baghdad to Mongol forces in 1258 CE, and the supplanting of Safavid rule by Ottoman power, law, religion and culture from ca. 1650 CE, Mesopotamia was in Ottoman hands until Turkey's defeat in WWI. Modern Iraq was formed from the Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul: it remains a culturally cosmopolitan agglomeration of ancient tribes.

The name Iraq (from *Irāq ʿArabī*, or Arabian Iraq) conveys cultural ties to its neighbour Iran (otherwise *ʿIrāq ʿAjamī*, or foreign [i.e., Persian] Iraq). The long, straight, politically determined, border between the two nations was a cause of contention long before the 20th century.[460] The most protracted dispute in the modern era (over control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway) began in 1936. Hostilities paused with the Algiers Agreement in 1975,[461] but returned in the mutually crippling 8-year war from 1980 to 1988.

Iraq was officially a British mandate from 1921 until the creation of the independent Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq in 1932. The country became a republic in 1958 after a coup led by the charismatic military leader Abdul Karim Qasim (1914-1963; PM. 1958-1962). The rise of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in 1968 laid the ground for one party rule, first by Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr (1914-1982; Pres. 1968-1979) and then the dictator Saddam Hussein (1937-2006; Pres. 1979-2003). Abundant oil financed modern Iraq until Saddam squandered the country's resources and crushed dissent. Iranian Iraqi relations improved briefly in 1978, when Iranian agents in Iraq exposed a pro-Soviet coup; but goodwill was short lived, and war ensued.

3. Saddam Hussein and the Gulf War

We looked at the causes and consequences the 8-year war between Iran and Iraq earlier (p. 6). The details of the conflict cannot detain us. Three features of its lasting impact deserve mention.

460 Cf. the border between Iran and Iraq is 1599 km. (994 miles) long.

461 According to this agreement, Iraq surrendered half of the border area in exchange for Iran withdrawing help for Iraqi Kurdish rebels

First, Saddam Hussein's opportunistic attack on a neighbour he deemed vulnerable and in disarray after the Islamic Revolution, is symptomatic of the way other states in West Asia have watched one another … and wondered about Iran. Iraq's '14 July Revolution' in 1958, that ended its brief experiment in (Hashemite) monarchy, prepared the way for Ba'athist ascendancy, renewed confidence in Iraqi identity, and a new readiness to contest its border with Iran. Significantly, Iraq's Shiite majority backed Saddam's Sunni territorialism against their Shiite neighbour. As this illustrates, tribal, cultural, and religious identity do not always determine West Asian conflict. Anger, animosity, jealousy and ambition – which modern International Relations include in the 'affective' – have played their part in framing Iranian Iraqi relations.

Second, to balance the last point, if Saddam was jealous of Pahlavi wealth and Western connections, and sought to assert Iraq's dominance,[462] Iran came to resent (and actively resist) Iraqi support for its minorities and separatists. In both countries, government failures and the war weakened nationalism and strengthened ethnicity, militancy and regionalism. A rare beneficiary of the Iran-Iraq War was pan-Kurdish consciousness. Proxy regional militia also flourished. Pro-Iraqi separatists (backed by the Iranian National Council of Resistance) operated inside Iran: Iraqi Kurds (allied to the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) drew support from Tehran. From 1979 until the fall of Saddam (2003), Iran and Iraq stirred domestic instability and cross-border insurgency. Despite its international isolation and fierce independence, Iran has emerged the stronger from the war and its aftermath.

462 NB. And, perhaps, in the process annex Iran's Arab-majority Khuzestan province.

Fig. 113. Iraqi Kurdish militia (*Creator: Mohamed Messara | Credit: EPA/Landov*)[463]

Third, the brief Gulf War (2 August 1990 to 28 February 1991), in which US and its allies defended Kuwait against Iraq's invasion, prepared the way for Iran's later involvement in, and more recent proximation to, Iraq.[464] In time, allied backing for Kuwait, which many in the Gulf initially supported, stirred anti-Western sentiment and prompted Tehran to show greater interest in Iraq's politics, religion and future. However, as in its war with Iraq, other international actors were in play. Historically, Iraq looked to a mixed bag of support from the US, UK, USSR, France, Italy and Yugoslavia; Iran to the even stranger (and looser) combination of Syria, Libya, China, DPRK, Israel (*sic*), Pakistan and S. Yemen. Though tried, tested, and changed over time, global alliances were baked into West Asian politics and Iranian Iraqi relations during the Gulf War. This may not have been what the US and its allies imagined or intended at the time, but unintended consequences are the stuff of history and diplomacy: like Iranian Iraqi relations we should not expect them to always be clear at the outset or 'make sense' in the end.

4. The Fall of Saddam and the rise of 'Islamic State'

Controversially, in March 2003 the US and its allies invaded Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein's brutal regime and destroy his alleged cache of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' (WMD). Warnings and time had been given, Saddam heeded neither. By early December 2003, he was captured (near his home in Tikrit) and imprisoned. He was tried, indicted, and executed (for crimes against humanity) on 30 December 2006. The impact of Saddam's fall on Iraqi Iranian relations has been immense. Two issues stand out.

First, short term, the US and allied occupation of Iraq created the potential for national

463 Cf. G. Myre, 'Why does the U.S. like Iraq's Kurds but not Syria's?' *WAMU88.5* (23 September 2014: https://wamu.org/story/14/09/23/why_does_the_us_like_iraqs_kurds_but_not_syrias; accessed 17 February 2025.

464 Iran remained neutral during the Gulf War.

renewal, but the case for war was never secure, and resentment in the region, and instability in Iraq, grew. Iran was a beneficiary. When in May 2003 the seasoned US diplomat Paul Bremer (b. 1941), (second) head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, opted to bar the influential Ba'ath Party from government, and disband the Iraqi Army and security services, he unwittingly created a power vacuum. In the process he alienated hundreds of thousands of trained and capable Iraqis. Over the next twenty years, according to the Iraq Body Count (IBC) project, between 185k and 208k civilians died in the civil war and societal chaos that ensued.[465] When the Iraq Governing Council (IGC) sought to end Saddam's historic discrimination against Iraqi Shia and Kurds, using the established '*Muhasasa Ta'ifia*' (quota) system, it conscientized ethnicity. From 2003-2018, political power in Iraq was fraught, fought over, and fragmented. Radical elements came to the fore. Initially sympathetic to the plight of Iraqi Shia, and keen to curb US influence in MENA, Iran read Iraq through the lens of regional security and ideological self-interest – but this soon changed.

Fig. 114. Destruction in Ramadi, Iraq in 2006 (*Source: Wikipedia*)

Second, in the maelstrom of civil strife and politico-economic chaos that battered Iraq from 2003 to 2018, radicalism flourished. Shiite ideology came face-to-face with its asymmetric, pan-Islamist, military rival Daesh (see above p. 182).[466] Across Iraq and Syria, ISIL brutalised 'infidel' Muslims and non-Muslims in its savage crusade to create a new caliphate.

465 Cf. on the 20th anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq, A. Ibrahim, '20 years on, was removing Saddam Hussein worth the war in Iraq?', *Al Jazeera* (20 March 2023): https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/20/the-iraq-war-twenty-years-on; accessed 29 November 2024.

466 On Iranian investment to counter Daesh, J. Kadivar (2022), 'Propaganda and Radicalisation: The Case of Daesh in Iran', *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 9.1: 70-98.

Regional terror became a global security nightmare. Iran invested heavily in countering this threat on its border, developing strong ties with forces of stability (particularly the Shiite majority) in Iraq.[467] As we have seen, IS was defeated militarily in Iraq in December 2017. A Global Coalition still monitors, and seeks to counter, evidence of its resurgent activity. Strategies to control militant factions in Iraq bred a culture of political repression. Widespread protests broke out in October 2019. Though lockdown in the pandemic gave some legitimacy to government crackdowns, resentment, corruption, and external coercion persisted when COVID abated.

5. Iran and Iraq today

Despite setbacks, from 2020 (under the watchful eye of IRGC Commander Qasem Soleimani)[468] 'soft war' tactics by Iranian-backed militia[469] and the 'Islamic Resistance in Iraq' (IRI, *aka* '*muqawama*'), led to their gaining prominence in national life.[470] However, a fresh wave of support from Iran for the militant, anti-American and anti-Israeli, Shia cleric-politician Muqtada al-Sadr (b. 1974) helped his Sadrist Party (newly allied to the Saairum Party) win a majority of seats in parliamentary elections in both 2018 and 2021.[471] Protests following the failed assassination of PM Mustafa al-Kadhimi in November

467 NB. Both in office and afterwards, Iraqi PM Nouri al-Maliki (b. 1950; PM 2006-17, VP 2014-15, 2016-18) made several visits to Iran. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Iraq in March 2008, the first Iranian Head of State to do so since the 1979 Revolution. As an expression of accord, in 2003 Iranians were granted permission to visit Shia religious sites in Iraq at Najaf and Karbala. To some observers, Iran has failed to capitalise on Iraq's cultural compatibility and socio-political vulnerability; meanwhile, Iraqi nationalists resent Iranian interference and/or its Salafist extremism.

468 NB. Soleimani's successor, the non-Arab-speaking Esmail Qaani (b. 1957), does not appear to possess the same charisma or ruthlessness as his predecessor.

469 On this, Cf. C. Smith and M. Knights, 'Remaking Iraq: How Iranian-Backed Militias Captured the Country', *Washington Institute* (20 March 2023): https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/remaking-iraq-how-iranian-backed-militias-captured-country; accessed 24 November 2024. 'Soft war' is defined here as the use of 'non-kinetic tools to build a trifecta of power': this includes the judiciary, both civilian and military in the executive, and the legislature.

470 Cf. This coalition of militias includes Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. On Iranian militia in Iraq, M. Boot, 'Iran-Backed Militias in Iraq Poised to Expand Influence', *Council on Foreign Relations* (13 October 2020): https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/iran-backed-militias-iraq-poised-expand-influence; accessed 24 November 2024.

471 Al-Sadr – famous for his hardline *fatwas* (which lost him moderate Shiite support) and for saying on CBS's '60 Minutes' in 2003 'Saddam was the little serpent, but America is the big serpent' – followed his father (the Grand Ayatollah Muhammad-Sadiq al-Sadr, a prominent Twelver Shiite cleric and *marja*, 1943-1999) as head of the anti-US Sadrist Movement in Iraq. Returning from exile in 2014, he formed the Peace Companies militia against ISIL (NB. some see this as a deliberate act of optical and political reinvention). From much written on al-Sadr, the 'death squads' of his 'Mahdi Army' (2003-8) during the civil war, and his subsequent formation of the 'Promised Day Brigade', see Cockburn, P. (2008), *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq.* NY: Simon and Schuster; Q. Abdul-Zahra, Qassim and S. Salaheddin, 'In about-face, Iraq's maverick al-Sadr moves closer to Iran' *AP News* (24 June 2018): https://apnews.com/international-international-general-news-1a8b780028c4485f925fe5406f718035; accessed 3 February 2025.

2021,[472] led to 73 Sadrist MPs resigning (June 2022) and al-Sadr withdrawing from public life (August 2022).[473] If opposition to IS threw Iran and Iraq together, increased trade and support for Iraq's post-war reconstruction have deepened that relationship at a government level.[474] However, grass-roots Iraqi antagonism towards Iran persists,[475] and much political skill will be needed (on both sides) to secure Iraq's place in the 'Shia Crescent'.[476] In short, Western policymakers should not assume Iran and Iraq are close or consistent allies – but neither should they reckon help for Iraq will not also indirectly benefit Iran.[477]

472 On Iranian involvement in quelling protests that followed the failed assassination, see S. Yuan, 'Is Iran Losing Some of its Grip on Shia Militias in Iraq?', *Al Jazeera* (12 November 2012): https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/12/is-iran-losing-some-of-its-grip-on-shia-militias-in-iraq; accessed 24 November 2024.

473 NB. Sadr continues to carry weight in Iraqi public life. Following Israeli airstrikes on the Tel-Sultan refugee camp in Gaza in May 2024, he called for the US Embassy in Baghdad to be closed. On 5 December 2024 he turned to social media to urge Iraq's 'government, people, parties, militias and security forces' not to intervene in Syria after the fall of Assad.

474 Cf. Iranian exports (excluding oil) to Iraq were ca.$9 bn in 2021. On this, https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/irq/partner/irn

475 Cf. In 2018 and 2019, two Iranian diplomatic posts were torched during large anti-Iranian protests. On this, A. Rubin and F. Hassan, 'Iraq Protesters Burn Down Iran Consulate in Night of Anger', *New York Times* (27 November 2019): https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/27/world/middleeast/iraqi-protest-najaf-iran-burn.html; accessed 29 November 2024; S. Kulab and M. Faraj, 'Protesters Burn Down Iranian Consulate in Southern Iraq', *PBS/AP* (27 November 2019): https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/protesters-burn-down-iranian-consulate-in-southern-iraq; accessed 29 November 2024.

476 To some, the 'Shia Crescent' (viz. the unification of all Shia peoples throughout Persia, Syria and Iraq) is the primary objective of the Iranian regime. The term was coined by Jordan's King Abdullah II in 2004 to highlight Iran's interference in Iraq's 2005 election. On this, F. Haddadin, 'The "Shia Crescent" and Middle East Geo-Politics', *Foreign Policy* (21 January 2017): www.foreignpolicyblogs.com : accessed 29 November 2024. NB. as further evidence of Iranian pragmatism, to garner Sunni support for (or non-interference in) their vision, it has funded Sunni militia (i.e., Hamas and the Houthis).

477 NB. Border security and separatist movements remain sensitive issues for Iran and Iraq. Following an IRGC missile strike on Iranian Kurds, on 19 March 2023 Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani and his Iraqi counterpart Qasim al-Araji signed a security agreement to counter Iraqi Kurds launching cross-border attacks on Iran.

Fig. 115. Not seeing eye to eye? President Pezeshkian meeting Iraqi PM Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani (b. 1970; PM 2022-present) on a visit to Baghdad in September 2024 (*Source: The New Arab*) [478]

6. Syria and the reshaping of alliances

Syria has been a reliable ally of Iran since the Islamic Revolution; however, there can be little doubt that the remarkably swift fall of the Assad regime in early December 2024, and its probable replacement by a hardline Sunni regime, have been a major strategic setback for Tehran.[479] With the long winter of Assad rule at an end, what the new Syrian political Spring will bring remains to be seen.

To set this in context: Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000; Pres. 1971-2000) never made a state visit to Iran and Ayatollah Khomeini did not see his Alawite Shia neighbours as 'true Muslims'. But Syria was the third regime (and first Arab state) to recognise the new Islamic Republic in 1979.[480] Strong ties developed between Syria and Iran during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) when Syria positioned its troops along its border

478 Cf. on the causes of tension and potential problems in the Trump administration, see O. Habibinia, 'Pezeshkian's visit can't hide cracks in Iran-Iraq relations,' *The New Arab* (25 September 2024) https://www.newarab.com/analysis/pezeshkians-visit-cant-hide-cracks-iran-iraq-relations: accessed 18 February 2025.

479 NB. In late-December 2024, members of Iraq's Iran-backed PMU militia (or *Hashd al-Sha-abi*) were deployed to the Syrian border in a move clearly aimed at safeguarding Iraq against fall-out from the fall of the Assad regime and extension of the influence of the insurgent group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). On this, see p. 204; also, https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2024/12/24/739641/Iraqi-Hashd-al-Sha%E2%80%99abi-deploys-forces-to-border-with-Syria-after-Assad%E2%80%99s-fall; accessed 20 January 2025.

480 Cf. Syria followed Pakistan and Russia. On this, J. Goodarzi (2013), 'Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment', *Middle East Studies* 4.2: 31-59.

with Iraq to enable Iran to prosecute the war safely on other fronts.[481] Under Bashar al-Assad (b. 1996; Pres. 2000-2024) ties between Tehran and Damascus strengthened. A number of factors contributed to this, some shaped by Iran, others by Syrian need or shifting sands in MENA.

To Iran, Syria represented historically an easy (albeit shaky) target for political, ideological, and economic co-option. Though the Assad family are Alawites,[482] they found common cause during the Syrian civil war (from 2011) with the full range of Syrian Shia groups,[483] including Ismailis (at 3% of the population, the largest Shia group in Syria) and Ithna Asharia, or 'Twelver Shia' (the largest Shia group worldwide).[484] Despite theological differences, during the Assad regime, Iran was been a strong political, ideological, military and financial backer of the Shiite coalition against Syrian Sunnis. This resonated with Iran's hopes to expand its power and create a new Safavid empire.[485]

Fig. 116. HTS forces and Syria's interim leader (from 29 January 2025) Ahmed al-Sharaa (*Sources: CSIS and Wikipedia*.

481 Olmert, Y. (1991), 'Iran-Syrian Relations: Between Islam and Realpolitik' in D. Menashri, ed. *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World.* NY: Routledge, 174. Also, Ashton, N. and B. Gibson (2013), *The Iran-Iraq War: New International Perspectives.* NY: Routledge; Murray, W. and K. Woods (2014), *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History.* Cambridge: CUP.
482 Alawites are, to many Syrians, an elite and unpopular Shia minority. They are mostly found in Latakia Governorate and in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Damascus.
483 There are in 17 distinct Shia groups in Syria (i.e. Al-Zahraa, Zarzur, Zita al-Gharbiyah, Al-Zurzuriyah, etc) that tend to be centred in different parts of the country.
484 Ithna Asharia Muslims are located primarily in the cities of Damascus, Homs and Aleppo.
485 G. Tsourapas (2019), 'The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Foreign Policy Decision-Making in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4.4: 464-481.

Over the years, Iran was clearly aware of the regional (and global) optics an alliance with Syria afforded. Until its recent readmission into the 'Arab League' (May 2023),[486] Syria shared Iran's pariah status in MENA and the Gulf. Both had more friends outside the region than inside. After Assad, a reconstituted Syria directly impacts Iran's regional profile and political power. Though Iran and Syria embody the theological and demographic diversity of their countries and Shia identity, they also demonstrate the diplomatic and military power of transnational ideas, from which visions of empire and religious crusades emerge. How Iran will respond to the still evolving situation in Syria post-Assad remains to be seen. Much will depend on the ideology and direction of Syria's new leaders. Historically, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham traces its roots to the Salafi-Jihadist rebel group *Al-Nusra Front*, with a clear agenda to oust Assad and unite Islamist interests in a post-Assad Syria. Effective as a resistance movement, many inside and outside Syria remain sceptical about the ability of HTS and its new *de facto* leader Ahmed al-Sharaa (aka Abu Mohammad al-Julani, b. 1982) to rule and reconstruct their war-battered country.

Fig. 117. Hezbollah in Syria (*Source: Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*)[487]

486 Syria was suspended for more than a decade. On this, G. Cafiero and E. Milliken, 'How important is Syria's return to the Arab League?', *Al Jazeera* (19 May 2023): https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/19/analysis-how-important-is-syrias-return-to-the-arab-league; accessed 27 November 2024.

487 Cf. C. Choucair, 'Hezbollah in Syria: Gains, Losses and Changes', *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies* (1 June 2016): https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2016/06/hezbollah-syria-gains-losses-160601093443171.html; accessed 18 February 2025.

From a Syrian perspective, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Gulf War (1990-1), Iraq War (2003-2011), and its own internationalised civil war, required it work closely with Tehran. Its alliance with Iran reduced regional threat and brought material benefits. To some analysts, without Iranian (and Russian) backing the Assad regime would have fallen long ago; perhaps, during the March 2011 'Arab Spring' protests, or at any number of times during the 'Syrian Civil War'. Throughout, Iran-backed Hezbollah fighters played a crucial role; indeed, their recent weakening by Israel may in part explain the swift military gains made by Syrian rebels in late-2024.[488] Whatever their future, Iran and Syria have drawn strength and inspiration from each other in the past … not least in their shared 'Hands off!' to the West. Three themes in Syrian Iranian relations deserve notice. First, Iran's financial support for Syria.[489] In 2019, the *Middle East Monitor* reported Iran contributed >$6bn *p.a.* to prop up the Assad regime.[490] If true, this was more than two thirds of Syria's GDP ($9bn est. *p.a.*).[491] It signals a remarkable investment in a dictatorial government in so many ways *unlike* Iran's corporate Shiite form of parliamentary democracy. The pragmatic political and ideological adaptability we saw in Iran's dealings with communist China and secular Russia (above p. 139) is evident here again.

488 NB. Hezbollah's central in the Syrian civil war is well-documented. With 7-9000 fighters, its activity in in Qusayr, Homs and Aleppo helped to secure it broad political support in Syria and Iran. However, suspicion and criticism of Hezbollah inside and outside Syria abound. Al-Sadr accused Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (1960-2024) of advocating Shia sectarianism in majority Sunni countries, while another Sadrist leader accused Hezbollah of 'killing more Syrians than Israelis'. Internally, the Shia cleric Subhi al-Tufayli (b. 1947), founder and first Secretary General of Hezbollah (1989-1991), denounced the movement's role in the Syrian civil war as an Iranian-backed sectarian war against Sunnis that, he said, 'plagues the Ummah'. To al-Tufayli, Hezbollah had become a stooge to prosper the imperialist power of Iran, Russia and the US in Syria. On the weakening of Hezbollah, see M. Rebeiz, 'Assad's fall in Syria will further weaken Hezbollah and curtails Tehran's "Iranization" of region', *The Conversation* (11 December 2024): https://theconversation.com/assads-fall-in-syria-will-further-weaken-hezbollah-and-curtails-tehrans-iranization-of-region-245606; accessed 4 February 2025.

489 NB. Qatar has also been courting post-Assad Syria, see F. Shahbasov, 'After Assad, What Role will Qatar Play in Syria?', *Gulf International Forum* (17 February 2025): https://gulfif.org/after-assad-what-role-will-qatar-play-in-syria; accessed 18 February 2025. On Syria, the EU and GCC post-Assad, see L. J. M. Mazzucco, 'The EU and GCC cautiously engage Syria's new regime', *Gulf International Forum* (13 February 2025): https://gulfif.org/the-eu-and-gcc-cautiously-engage-syrias-new-regime; accessed 18 February 2025.

490 M. Behravesh, 'Iran's Ambitious Post-War Reconstruction in Syria', *Middle East Monitor* (5 March 2019): https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190305-irans-ambitious-post-war-reconstruction-in-syria; accessed 24 November 2024.

491 Cf. World Bank Data, https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/ : accessed 19 April 2024.

But the investment ensured in Iran's eyes a foothold on the border of Israel and Lebanon, both of which (in different ways) threaten/ed Iranian security.[492]

Second, since the end of World War II one of the most consistent irritants to the Assad regime was the pan-West Asian Sunni 'Muslim Brotherhood', or 'Society of the Muslim Brotherhood' (Arab. جماعة الإخوان المسلمين *Jamāʿat al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*). Founded in Egypt in 1928 by the Islamic scholar and teacher Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), as we have seen (above p. 181) the Muslim Brotherhood re-emerged as a major force in Egyptian politics during the Egyptian 'Arab Spring' when it was legalized, and its affiliate Mohamed Morsi became President (2012-3). When Morsi was ousted, the Muslim Brotherhood was declared a terrorist organization. Long before this, between 1979-1981 Syrian members of the Muslim Brotherhood orchestrated attacks and rioting in Aleppo, Homs and Hama to topple the Assad regime. No lovers of the Alawite Assad or the Shiite ideology emanating from Tehran, the Muslim Brotherhood has for decades acted to unite some Syrians and Iranians. To the surprise and concern of many observers, including in Damascus, Turkish diplomacy, political strategy, and financial pressure, have acted to bring hitherto hostile Sunni groups (including the Taliban and Muslim Brotherhood)[493] into the orbit of Tehran. Divided tactically and ideologically, they unite against Israel and the West. Like the Assad regime, Syria's new leaders may need Iran's Shia *and* Sunni proxy capabilities.[494] Tehran will probably be happy to help.

492 Cf. Behravesh, *idem*. NB. we should not underestimate the extent to which incidents such as the 'Cedar Revolution' in February 2005 (when protests forced Syrian troops to withdraw from S Lebanon following the assassination of ex-PM Rafic Hariri on 15 February), served as catalysts to closer Syrian Iranian cooperation. Iran resented the loss of an active Syrian presence on the border with Israel. We may assume similar disquiet in Tehran in November 2024, if Lebanese Hezbollah sues for peace in its most recent clash with Israel.

493 Cf. S. Hamid and S. Grewal, 'What Iran's 1979 Revolution Meant for the Muslim Brotherhood', *Brookings* (24 January 2019): https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-irans-1979-revolution-meant-for-the-muslim-brotherhood; accessed 24 November 2024. As evidence of recent anti-Iranian sentiment in the Muslim Brotherhood, the article quotes the spiritual head of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926-2022) describing Iran's proxy Hezbollah as 'the party of the Devil' and the head of the Muslim Brotherhood Gamal Heshmat decrying Iran's 'expansionist project in the region'. For earlier tension between Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, see T. Badawi and O. al-Sayyad, 'Mismatched Expectations: Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood After the Arab Uprisings', *Carnegie Middle East Centre* (19 March 2019): https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/03/mismatched-expectations-iran-and-the-muslim-brotherhood-after-the-arab-uprisings?lang=en&center=middle-east; accessed 18 February 2025.

494 For insight into earlier accommodation of Syria to the Muslim Brotherhood, Y. Talhamy (2009), 'The Syrian Muslim Brothers and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship', *Middle East Journal* 63.4: 561-580.

Third, the impact of Iran's new intimacy with Turkey (see above p. 162) is one of a host of uncertainties surrounding the future of Syria.[495] Though Tehran and Ankara are both impacted by Kurdish militancy, it is unclear how comfortable the Iranian regime will be if Erdoğan sees Syrian instability as an invitation to further Turkish expansionism.[496] Equally, pan-national Kurdish insurgency, which already contributes to instability in MENA, is as likely to stir international interventions in Syria as perception Erdoğan has Iranian support. Pressure reveals strengths and weaknesses in relationships: the depth of commitment between Iran and Turkey may become clear in the way they respond to Syria's future. If the EU, and the Western Alliance generally, is to play a meaningful part in supporting Syria as it rebuilds after the crippling Assad era, then it will be not through self-interested meddling but actively supporting pan-Syrian reconstruction and resisting outside forces that do not see Syria's future in that way.

6. Yemen and the price of civil war

Iran's relationship to Yemen is shaped by geography, history, ideology, and the protracted civil war that still rages there.

The Persians were a major presence in the Gulf of Aden in the early Middle Ages. Over time, Yemeni ports began to compete with Persian outlets for goods from India and the Far East. Tension mounted and in the 12th century the powerful Salghurids from S. Persia besieged Aden to extend their regional influence. Thereafter Zaydi tribesmen in the northern highlands of the greater Yemen region led the resistance to Ottoman expansion and in 1597 formed the Zaydi imamate (founded by the Shiite Imam al-Mansu-al-Qasim, 1559-1620), otherwise known as the Qasimid State.

Over the next three centuries, despite diplomatic ties to the Persian Safavid dynasty, Qasimid control (except over the Sultanate of Lahej) succumbed to tribal infighting, and in 1849 it was absorbed into the Ottoman province of Yemen Eyalet. In the mid-20th century Shah Reza Pahlavi developed strong ties with Yemen and in the 1960s supported Yemeni militants in their resistance against Soviet backed Marxist insurgents.

495 Cf. on Turkey post-Assad, see B. Maddox, 'The fall of President Bashar al-Assad is a blow to Iran and Russia – and a boost for Turkey' (December 2024): https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/fall-president-bashar-al-assad-blow-iran-and-russia-and-boost-turkey; accessed 4 February 2025; G. Dalay, 'Turkey has emerged as a winner in Syria but must now use its influence to help build peace', *Chatham House* (December 2024): https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/turkey-has-emerged-winner-syria-must-now-use-its-influence-help-build-peace; accessed 4 February 2024.

496 Cf. on the impact of the fall of Assad on Iran and Turkey and their relationship, see V. Nasr, 'In Post-Assad Middle East, Iran's Loss Is Turkey's Gain', *Foreign Policy* (10 December 2024): https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/12/10/syria-assad-turkey-erdogan-iran-geopolitics-middle-east-rivalry; accessed 4 February 2024; A. Soltanzadeh,'Iran-Turkey ties tested by Assad's downfall in Syria' *DW* (12 December 2024): https://www.dw.com/en/iran-turkey-ties-tested-by-assads-downfall-in-syria/a-71037109; accessed 4 February 2025.

Iran's interest in shaping the religious identity and political loyalty of its strategically located Yemeni neighbours was enhanced by the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. In short, Iran has not suddenly seen the importance of Yemen: it is an old friend and an ancient adversary.

Yemen's catastrophic civil war (from September 2014) traces its roots to regional strife in Houthi centres in N Yemen (from June 2004) and Iran's strategic sponsorship of young Yemeni for religious studies in Tehran. Among those who studied in Tehran was the Zaydi political, religious and military leader Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi (1959-2004).[497] The son of a prominent Zaydi cleric from the northern Haydan District of Saada Governorate, with a deep sense of his (Shiite) religious and regional identity, Al-Houthi became a member of the Zaydi/Shafi'I 'Al-Haqq' (The Truth) party in the Yemeni parliament (1993-1997). He broke away to form his own party over the issue of South Yemeni separatism, and after time in exile returned to head the Houthi movement Ansar Allah (or Ansarullah; Lit. 'Helpers/Supporters of God', in its militant opposition to the pro-Western, Saudi supported, ruling party of President Ali Abdullah Saleh al-Ahmar (1947-2017; Pres. 1990-2012). Ansar Allah drew much of its early inspiration from Hezbollah in Lebanon, championing economic development and Zaydi Shia rights. Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi was killed in the summer of 2004, when government troops targeted crowds of Ansar Allah supporters. His death inspired insurrection. His legacy, with its pro-Iranian, anti-US, anti-Israeli ethos, is honoured in the rebels' name 'Houthis' and in the involvement of Badreddin's family in the cause he championed.

497 Evidence suggests Hussain Badreddin had close ties to Ayatollah Khamenei and Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah.

Fig. 118. Houthi rebels take Sana'a (*Source: Al Jazeera. File: Hani Mohammed/AP Photo]*)[498]

In September 2014,[499] with tension building between the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC, led by Rashad al-Alimi) and the pro-Houthi faction in the General People's Congress (GPC), Houthis militants launched a successful offensive against the capital Sana'a.[500] In response to this populist 'September 21' *coup d'état*, PM Mohammed Basindawa (b. 1935; PM 2011-2014) resigned. Short-lived attempts by the UN to create a 'unity government' failed. On 22 January 2015 Houthi forces overran the Presidential Palace, the President's residence and various military sites. President Abdrabbuh Mansu Hadi (b. 1945; Pres. 2012-2022) and his ministers resigned, plunging the country into deeper political and economic chaos. On 6 February 2015, Zaydi Shia Ansar Allah (*aka* the Houthis) formed an interim governing body, the Supreme Revolutionary Committee (SRC), with Mohammed al-Houthi (b. 1979) as its President. Tasked to form a new 551-seat legislative assembly and 5-member Presidential Council, in late-July 2016 a collective executive was formed, the Supreme Political Council, with Saleh Ali al-Sammad (1979-2018) as its first President.[501]

498 Cf. 'Yemen war: 5 years since the Houthis' Sanaa takeover', *Al Jazeera* (21 September 2019): https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/21/yemen-war-5-years-since-the-houthis-sanaa-takeover; accessed 18 February 2025.

499 Political tension began to mount in June 2014 when the Yemeni government increased fuel prices dramatically as part of a scheme to reform subsidy programmes and unlock IMF support. The changes were perceived to benefit the wealthy (and corrupt) ruling elite and penalise the (already) poor majority, who relied on fuel for water, food and daily employment.

500 NB. The Houthis are part of Yemen's large Shia minority. On this basis, critics frequently project Iranian influence.

501 Al-Sammad was killed in a Saudi drone strike on 23 April 2018.

In mid-August 2016, the new SPC formally replaced the interim SRC, and in October 2016 Abdel-Aziz bin Habtour (b. 1955; PM 2016-2024) was appointed Prime Minister.[502] Political and military conflict has raged in Yemen since the *coup* in 2015, with the SPC chaired by Houthi hard-liner Mahdi al-Mashat (b. 1986), after the assassination of his predecessor (April 2018), and Saudi Arabia backing President Mansur and the Yemeni army. The international community (including the UN, US, Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council) continues to support the PLC and oppose Houthi rule.[503]

What of Iran's involvement in Yemen and the impact of the civil war in general? The rationale for Iran's active interest in Yemeni affairs is probably clearer to the regime than to outsiders.[504] National security, regional stability, and Shiite ideology[505] are almost certainly factors, as is antipathy to Saudi Arabia and other 'infidel' Arab states. But there is edge and passion in Tehran's commitment to the Houthi cause.[506] It provided backing to the 2015 *coup* and gave its formal support for the SPC in 2019 (when the Yemeni Embassy was also transferred to the Houthis).[507] The fact the Houthi-led SPC is explicitly anti-Israeli and anti-US will also carry weight in Tehran, and among Iran's allies.[508] The more the US, Saudi Arabia and its regional allies (viz. Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Bahrain, and the UAE) back President Rashad Muhammad al-Alimi (b. 1954; Pres. 2022-present) and ROYG (the Republic of Yemen Government), the more likely,

502 Despite his position in the Houthi-led government, Habtour has historic ties to President Mansur Hadi and opposes the separatist movement in S Yemen.

503 Over the years, UNSC resolutions and US sanctions have done little to deescalate conflict in Yemen.

504 For analysis, see Cf. A. Vatanka, 'Iran's Yemen Play: What Tehran Wants—And What It Doesn't', *Foreign Policy* (4 March 2015): https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2015-03-04/irans-yemen-play; accessed 4 February 2025.

505 NB. Prior to 2014, the dominant Islamist group in the General People's Congress was the Sunni Al-Islah Party, with which Tehran trained Houthi had little sympathy. Fears Al-Islah might regain influence factors into Iranian decisions on Yemen.

506 Purportedly to counter piracy, in 2011 Iran dispatched submarines and warships to Yemen's coast in the Gulf of Aden. Cf. also on Iran's relationship to the Houthis, K. Robinson, 'Iran's Support of the Houthis: What to Know', *Council on Foreign Relations* (1 March 2024): https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/irans-support-houthis-what-know; accessed 5 February 2025.

507 NB. Iran's backing for the Houthis is more strategic than ideological. It is more akin to the freer-floating relationship it has to Hamas than to the tighter ties it has had historically with Hezbollah. A US Security Council spokesperson went further in 2015 stating, 'It remains our assessment that Iran does not exert command and control over the Houthis in Yemen' (quoted in: https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/030917_Rand_Testimony.pdf.). Neighbouring Arab states are less clear. In November 2019, the Arab League denounced Iran as complicit in the Houthi takeover of the Yemeni Embassy in Tehran. On this, S. A. Hussain, 'Arab League Condemns Iran for Handing Yemen Embassy to Houthis', *Arab News* (21 November 2019): https://www.arabnews.com/node/1587481/middle-east: accessed 24 November 2024. The Iranian Embassy in Sanaa has been consistently linked to Houthi activity. In January 2016, the Embassy was damaged in a Saudi airstrike on the city.

508 The Iranian-backed Houthi have drawn support from affiliates in Lebanon and Syria, and more widely from North Korea, Syria, Iraq, Qatar, Hezbollah, and Venezuela. Most recently, Russia has shown alarming interest in the Houthi cause.

It seems, Iran will harden its resolve and increase its support for the Houthi cause.[509] The civil war in Yemen has cost >400,000 lives and brought incalculable harm to its citizens, economy and infrastructure.[510] Some reports call it the world's 'worst humanitarian crisis', with the UN estimating 60% of deaths between 2015-22 were the result of famine and/or healthcare provision. Two-thirds of the population (i.e. 21.6m. people) are still reckoned to be in dire need of assistance, with 5m. at risk from famine and another 1m. from cholera. Both sides in the conflict have been accused of violations of human rights and international law.[511] In the early summer of 2021, Houthi forces suffered significant setbacks in the oil rich area around the northern city of Marib. Between March and June 2022, some progress was made towards a peace deal, but conflict, chaos and suffering persisted.[512] Peace talks, sponsored (again) by Oman, in June 2023 broke down, with the Chinese news agency *Xinhua* reporting al-Mashat had pressed for further financial, military and strategic concessions.[513] By 2024, direct conflict between the Houthis and Saudi-backed Yemeni forces had largely subsided, with the Houthis turning their attention to shipping in the Gulf to protest and indirectly counter Israel's action in Gaza. US and allied airstrikes in 2024, in response to Houthis attacks on shipping, targeted Tehran politically.[514] While Iran and Saudi Arabia fight their brutal proxy-war in Yemen, lasting peace in the country remains a pipedream.[515]

509 NB. Wikipedia provides a useful overview of foreign interest and investment in the conflict in Yemen: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_involvement_in_the_Yemeni_civil_war_(2014%E2%80%93present); accessed 5 February 2025.

510 For an overview and assessment of the conflict, see 'Conflict in Yemen and the Red Sea', *Council on Foreign Relations: Center for Preventive Action* (8 October 2024): https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen; accessed 5 February 2025.

511 NB. The Houthis are widely seen as a 'terrorist' organization and part of the 'Axis of Resistance'. Militant Houthis have been accused of enlisting child soldiers and targeting civilians.

512 In 2018, the UN reported more than half the country were in a 'pre-famine condition'.

513 NB. In the proxy war in Yemen between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Houthis are also backed by Iran's allies, viz. North Korea, Syria, Iraq, Qatar, Hezbollah, and Venezuela.

514 K. Robinson, 'Iran's Support of the Houthis: What to Know', *Council on Foreign Relations* (1 March 2024): https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/irans-support-houthis-what-know; accessed 24 November 2024.

515 NB. we should not rule out the possibility that either China or the US will exert pressure on the peace process, to protect their investment in the Iranian Saudi rapprochement (China) or in Israel's national security and regional power (the USA).

Fig. 119. The humanitarian crisis in Yemen's civil war (*Source: Human Rights Research Center*)[516]

We turn now to look more briefly at Iran's relationship with other regional neighbours.

7. Saudi Arabia, China and the 'Abraham Accords'

Despite what we have said of Iran and Saudi Arabia's proxy war in Yemen, for reasons largely unrelated to the conflict, the last two years have seen some improvement in Saudi Iranian relations. Unlikely as it may seem, these ancient rivals and historic torch bearers of Shiite (Iran) and Sunni (Saudi Arabia) Islam, have for strategic reasons placed long-term diplomatic accord above short-term regional advantage. Though recent events in Israel-Gaza, and more broadly in MENA, may change their minds, two sets of issues have, it appears, brought them to this position.

First, Iran and Saudi Arabia were, and are, directly and indirectly affected by the US-brokered 'Abraham Accords'. Signed between the United Arab Emirates and Israel on 13 August 2020, and Bahrain and Israel on 15 September 2020, the 'Abraham Accords' were trumpeted at the time as a new basis for peace in MENA.[517]

516 Cf. D. Castano, 'The World's Worst Humanitarian Crisis: War in Yemen', *Human Rights Research Center* (26 October 2023): https://www.humanrightsresearch.org/post/the-world-s-worst-humanitarian-crisis-war-in-yemen; accessed 18 February 2025.

517 Though somewhat overtaken by recent events, the 'Abraham Accords' continue to carry more weight with the Emirates than with, say, Saudi Arabia that is focused on a 'Two State Solution' to Israeli Palestinian conflict. President Trump's highly provocative proposal on 4 January 2025 for a US 'take-over' of Gaza, and its transformation into a regional 'riviera', flies in the face of the spirit and letter of the historic Camp David and Oslo Accords and recent progress on a 'two-state' solution.

To many, though, they were also read tactically as a way to further isolate Iran and limit Russian influence in the Middle East. Four years on, the 'Abraham Accords' are still appealed to by some as a basis for deeper Arab Israeli cooperation; however, their significance for many has been overshadowed by unanticipated benefits to Iran and her regional proxies. What benefits? First, they have left Iran as chief protector of Islam against Israel and of Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem.[518] Second, until the recent conflict in Gaza, Arab states have been tending to seek improved relations with Israel. This has left militant Islamist looking even more to Iran for strategic leadership and financial and military support. Iran and its militant proxies have been thrown together in new ways. Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis may see greater need of Tehran's support, Tehran less benefit in their loyalty, militancy and volatility.[519]

Fig. 120. Signing the Abraham Accords (*Source: Britannia*)

Second, if Iran has benefitted from the 'Abraham Accords', so too has China. Mindful of Iran's strategic location, political isolation, and economic vulnerability – and, as we saw above (p. 145), concerned its financial and political investment in West Asia is not compromised by excessive regional instability – China has been working hard behind

518 MEE staff, 'Hundreds of Israelis Raid al-Aqsa as Palestinians Blocked from Site', *Middle East Eye* (9 April 2023): https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/al-aqsa-raid-hunderds-israel-palestine-denied-access; accessed 24 November 2024.

519 S. Jawahar, 'Lebanon: New Strategic Base for Hamas', *Sada* [Carnegie Middle Eastern Program] (17 October 2022): https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2022/10/lebanon-new-strategic-base-for-hamas; accessed 24 November 2024.

the scenes in the last two years to broker a rapprochement[520] between Iran and Saudi Arabia.[521] In 1998 and 2005, Iran and Saudi Arabia signed agreements on security and economic cooperation. These were binned by the hardline President Ahmadinejad. Relations soured further when the Saudis executed the prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr (b. 1959) on 2 January 2016. Now, driven by economic necessity, regional *real politik*, and China's capacity to render its form of bullish accommodation attractive – and ready to overlook their on-going proxy war in Yemen – Iran and Saudi Arabia have buried the hatchet and agreed their own 'accord'.[522] The West can no longer assume long-standing fissures in the Middle East will determine Middle Eastern politics. East Asia (+ Russia) has become increasingly interested in the direction West Asia takes.

8. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE): terrorism and territorial disputes

The archipelago of fifty or so Arab islands on the SW coast of the Persian Gulf that form the Kingdom of Bahrain is far more significant than its size might suggest.[523] Enriched by its crude oil processing revenue, Bahrain has become a significant focus for financial services, commerce, communications and tourism. The high-tech modern capital city of Manama attracts large numbers of Saudis for business and pleasure. Cosmopolitan in style, Bahrain is conservative in ethos, with its Constitution stating, 'the family is the cornerstone of society, the strength of which lies in religion, ethics, and patriotism'.

Fig. 121. Bahrain's ultra-modern skyline (*The Diplomatic Affairs*)

520 On the 'Asianisation' of the Persian Gulf and its impact on US diplomacy in the region, see Yazdanshenas, Z. and A. Saleh (2023), *Iranian-Saudi Entente and 'Asianisation' of the Persian Gulf: China Fills the Gap.* Washington, DC: Middle East Institute.

521 Cf. S. Z. Mehdi, 'Iran, China Sign Deal on "Belt and Road" Project', *Anadolu Ajansi* (27 March 2021): https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/iran-china-sign-deal-on-belt-and-road-project/2190154; accessed 24 November 2024.

522 S. H. Mousavian, 'Saudi-Iran Deal: After Years of Tension, a New Chapter for the Region Begins', *Middle East Eye* (20 March 2023): https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/saudi-iran-deal-tension-new-chapter-region-begins; accessed 24 November 2024.

523 Bahrain has a population of ca. 1.5m. (2023) of whom ca. 700k are Bahraini nationals. Its GDP is $105.6 billion (2024 est.) with a *per capita* income purchasing power of av. $65k.

Most Human Rights agencies condemn Bahrain's attitude to women, press freedom and public protest, and its record on the abuse and torture of prisoners and dissidents. Despite being the historic majority in Muslim Bahrain,[524] Shiite identity *per se* has become contentious, with Shiites frequently linked to popular protests or cited in government crackdowns. This is partly a reflection of Bahrain's difficult relationship to Iran since the 1979 Revolution, and partly a result of its officially 'inclusive' view of religion eschewing extremism.[525]

Historically, Bahrain was part of Iran, with one seat in the Iranian Parliament from the early 20th century. Close ties were confirmed in 1957 when the Hakim (ruler) of Bahrain, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa (1894-1961; r. 1942-1961) pledged his allegiance to the Shah of Iran. His son, Isa bin Hamad Al Khalifa (1933-1999; r. 1961-1999), who became the first Emir of Bahrain in August 1971, continued this connection, sharing Iran's close diplomatic ties to the US. In 1970, the last Pahlavi Shah surrendered his claim to Bahrain and a territorial agreement was signed. Relations between the two countries became tense after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In 1981, an attempted *coup* against the Sunni Emir, by the Iran-inspired (if not sponsored) 'Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain', saw thousands of Shiite Bahrainis imprisoned. The event sealed Bahrain's independence and its suspicion of Iran. Seeking to improve relations (and access Bahrain's natural gas), in November 2007 Iranian President Ahmadinejad visited Bahrain. By 2011, when Bahrain experienced its own 'Arab Spring' protests, relations had cooled considerably, with Bahrain looking more to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council for support.[526] Tense years followed, with Ayatollah Khamenei disconcertingly projecting Iranian ideology across the Gulf, and Hezbollah and the IRGC associated with Shiite insurgency in Bahrain. In January 2016, Bahrain joined Saudi Arabia in cutting diplomatic ties and ceasing flights to Tehran, after protesters attacked the Saudi Embassy in Tehran in retaliation for the execution of the outspoken Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr (1959-2016). Despite Bahrain provocatively normalising relations with Israel in 2020 and Iran boldly renewing territorial claims to Bahrain, Bahrain has most recently been inclined to follow Saudi Arabia's lead in trying to work with Tehran rather than against it.[527]

524 In the 1980s, ca. 55% Bahrain's Muslims were Shia as against 45% Sunni. By 2011, this had fallen to 49% with Sunni 51%.

525 NB. Bahrain has small communities of Jews and Christians and celebrates Christian and Hindu festivals. The Bahrain Association for Religious Coexistence and Tolerance monitors attitudes and promotes inter-religious activities. Unlike many Muslim countries, Bahrain not only permits public worship by other faith traditions but also proselytism.

526 NB. Bahrain is a member of the Saudi coalition against the Houthis.

527 On recent developments (and Russia's mediatorial role), see Staff, 'Bahrain and Iran agree to start talks aimed at restoring ties', *Al Jazeera* (23 June 2024): https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/23/bahrain-and-iran-agree-to-start-talks-aimed-at-restoring-ties; accessed 6 January 2025; N. Saeed, 'Bahrain-Iran edge closer to normalization despite setbacks', *Amwaj Media* (5 September 2024): https://amwaj.media/article/bahrain-iran-edge-closer-to-normalization-despite-setbacks; accessed 6 January 2024. M. Haghirian, 'Efforts to restore Bahrain-Iran ties gather momentum', *Middle East Council on Global Affairs* (3 November 2024): https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/efforts-to-restore-bahrain-iran-ties-gather-momentum; accessed 6 February 2025.

Two issues continue to impact Iranian Bahraini relations significantly. First, Bahrain's close links to the US. The presence of Central Command and the US Fifth Fleet in the US 'Naval Support Activity Bahrain' flies in the face of Iran's territorial interests. Piracy in the Gulf and Houthi targeting of international shipping have strengthened US commitment to the region and to retaining a presence in Bahrain. Second, Bahrain's decision to strip the Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Sheikh Isa Ahmed Qassim (b. 1937) of his citizenship. Accused by Bahrain's Interior Ministry of serving 'foreign interests' and promoting 'sectarianism and violence' through his teaching and leadership of the Shiite political party 'Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society', Isa Qassim has become a symbol of Shiite identity, Islamist protest, and pro-Iranian sympathies. Al-Wefaq is to many the political face of the militant Bahraini insurgency, which perpetuates the '2011 uprising' in seeking to end Al Khalifa rule and create a radical Shiite theocracy.[528]

Fig. 122. US troops in Bahrain despite Human Rights abuse (*Source: Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain*)

Until relatively recently, relations between Iran and the UAE were dominated by a dispute over three small islands. The dispute pre-dates the Iranian Revolution, with both states historically laying claim to the three strategically located (but otherwise insignificant) islands in the eastern Persian Gulf (near the entrance to the Strait of Hormuz), Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb.[529] Recent events have (as in the South China Sea) rendered these strips of rock of disproportionate geopolitical significance.

528 Numerous groups are associated with the Bahraini insurgency, most with strong connections to Iran. They include Al-Ashtar Brigades, Al-Mukhtar Brigades, Waad Allah Brigades, Saraya Thair Allah, Popular Resistance Brigades and February 14 Youth Coalition.

529 Cf. Buderi, C. and L. Ricart (2018), *The Iran-UAE Gulf Islands Dispute: A Journey Through International Law, History and Politics.* Leiden: Brill. The islands sit 20 km south of the Iranian island of Qeshm

On 30 November 1971 (two days before the formation of the UAE), Shah Reza Pahlavi signed a last minute 'Memorandum of Agreement' with the British-appointed ruler of Sharjah (one of the 7 sheikdoms that would form the UEA),[530] which allowed Iranian troops to be stationed on Abu Musa.[531] The issue of sovereignty was explicitly overlooked in this hastily framed agreement.[532] The location of Abu Musa (and the other islands), close to the deep water needed for oil tankers and other big ships, was always going to make them of interest to Iran to the north and the UAE to the south, *and* to any who wanted to protect or prevent shipping in the region.

Iran's radical Shiite ideology and imperial aspirations have always been closely monitored in the UAE. Its support for the Houthis in Yemen and proxy attacks on shipping through the Gulf of Hormuz have confirmed long-standing suspicion of Tehran. The election of Donald Trump in 2016, and his re-election in November 2024, have both been welcomed by the Emiratis as affording a potential ally to curb Iran's will to control trade in the Gulf. However, as elsewhere in MENA, counter-narratives must be absorbed into political analysis. Hence, despite on-going tension and suspicion between Iran and the UEA, both have come to accept a degree of mutual dependence. Improvement in their relations began when the US under President George W. Bush (b. 1946; Pres. 2000-2008) imposed harsh sanctions on Iran:[533] this caused Iran to look to Dubai as a centre for economic activity and Russia and China for much needed political, economic and military support. By the time Barak Obama became US President (b. 1961; Pres. 2009-2016), over half a million Iranians were based in Dubai, some to make money and perhaps as many to escape their country.[534] As elsewhere, national policy and other geopolitical realities, drive migration.

530 Cf. the UK controlled Abu Musa from 1908 until the late-1960s when it withdrew troops and handed control over to the Sharjah.
531 Cf. two days previously, Iranian troops had occupied the two smaller islands. Abu Musa, the (fractionally) largest of the islands, covers 12.8 km^2 (4.9 mi^2).
532 NB. No provision was made for the two Tunb islands.
533 These found expression in UN Security Council Resolutions, #1696 (2006), #1737 (2006), #1747 (2007), and #1803 (2008). For an overview of US-Iranian relations during G. W. Bush's presidency, see S. J. Hadley, 'The G. W. Bush Administration', *The Iran Primer* (5 October 2010): https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/george-w-bush-administration; accessed 27 November 2024. See also the Amwaj Media Interview, 'The New Chapter in the Iran-UAE Relationship' (10 August 2023): https://amwaj.media/article/interview-the-new-chapter-in-the-iran-uae-relationship; accessed 24 November 2024.
534 Ibid.

Fig. 123. The strategic importance of the Gulf of Hormuz and location of Bahrain (*Source: Global News*)

Two other factors have contributed to improved relations between Iran and the UEA in recent times.

First, a shared desire in authoritarian regimes in West Asia to suppress 'the forces of chaos'.[535] Rogue militias, popular protest, civil society activism, and Western influence, jeopardize state authority and the rule of ancient houses. Seen in this light, a will to preserve power outweighs a desire to compete. This socio-political realism, together with pragmatic economic, military and diplomatic co-operation – the lifeblood of the Arab League – have created a new centripetal dynamic in MENA and the Gulf.

Second, as in many places, the COVID pandemic created a new socio-economic vulnerability and new diplomatic urgency in the UAE and Iran. Both can be seen to have re-evaluated historic antagonisms and recalibrated diplomatic priorities. The UAE has reached out in new ways to ancient foes like Syria, Israel and Turkey … and Iran. Evidence for change in Iran's relationship to the UAE can be seen in the repeat visits to Tehran over the last three years by the Emiratis National Security Advisor Tahnoon bin Zayed al-Nahyan (b. 1971; NSA fr. 2016).[536] Security may be the driver, but coordination and accord are the result.

535 On totalitarianism and the will to survive in MENA, see T. Ahmad (2020), 'The Enduring "Arab Spring": Change and Resistance', *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 15.2: 91-107.
536 Cf. Amwaj Interview (2023).

Fig. 124. The Gulf Cooperation Council contemplating its response to Iran (*Source: Tehran Times*)[537]

Change in the Middle East tends to be slow. The Gulf Cooperation Council's[538] recent condemnation of Iran's 'occupation' of the three islands at the entrance to the Gulf of Hormuz suggests old issues may yet sink ideas of serious rapprochement.[539] To-date, the new proximation of Iran and the UAE seem set to continue, and perhaps deepen, if the Arab world unites against President Trump's approach to MENA.

9. Jordan, Oman and Qatar: Bridge builders for peace?

At the heart of the Middle East are three Arab states that eschew political and military polarities and seek to present themselves regionally and globally as bridge builders with Iran. These are the mid-20th-century Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (from 1946) ruled by King Abdullah II (b. 1962; r. 1999-present); the Sultanate of Oman, an absolute monarchy in the SE of the Arabian Peninsula (across the Strait of Hormuz from Iran), ruled since 2020 by Haitham bin Tariq (b. 1955), a pre-selected cousin to his long-serving and childless predecessor Qaboos bin Said (1940-2020; r. 1970-2020); and the wealthy, ultra-modern, State of Qatar, under the hereditary Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad bin

537 Cf. F. Salehi, 'Persian Gulf Cooperation Council and its internal crises', *Tehran Times* (29 May 2020): https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/448336/Persian-Gulf-Cooperation-Council-and-its-internal-crises; accessed 18 February 2025.

538 NB. If outsiders characteristically fail to understand the culture, faith and *habitus* of Middle Eastern countries, they also fail in underestimating the interconnectedness of Gulf States.

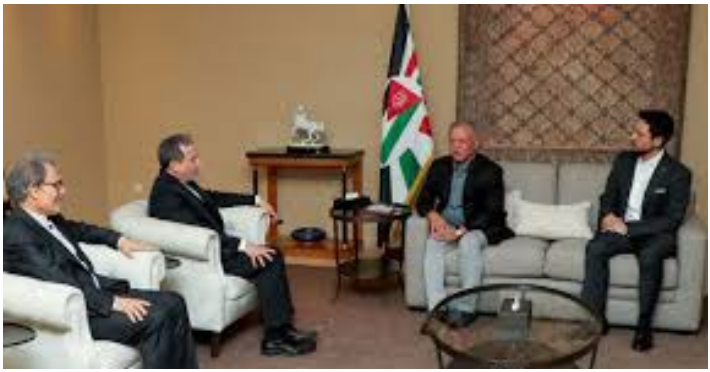
539 Iran International Newsroom, 'GCC Ministers Say Three Islands in Persian Gulf Belong to UAE', *Iran International* (23 March 2023): https://www.iranintl.com/en/202303231450; accessed 24 November 2024.

Khalifa Al Thani (b. 1980; r. 2013-present). In their different ways, these three countries independently buck the trend in West Asia by resisting international attitudes and knee-jerk reactions to Iranian ideology and activity, believing strongly in the benefits of regional harmony and folly of war. To the frustration of many, the authoritarianism of King Abdullah, the accommodating attitude of the Sultan of Oman, and the open-mindedness and mediatorial skill of the Emir of Qatar and his senior advisors, do not readily translate into direct confrontation with Iranian extremism – but neither will they ever become Iranian proxies.

9a. Jordan

Jordan has had a long, complicated relationship with Iran. It backed Saddam in the Iran-Iraq War,[540] sided against Assad in the Syrian Civil War, and has resisted close economic ties with Iran (preferring Saudi Arabia, Israel and the West).[541] Alongside this, Jordan and its king have faced a failed coup (April 2021),[542] criticism for unofficially opposing President Trump's 'deal of the century' (January 2020) to end Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iranian ire for sustained diplomatic equivocation. To some commentators (especially Israeli), Jordan is another Iranian proxy; to others, it is a poor, weak state that labours to maintain a credible profile globally and regionally and manage a huge number of Palestinian refugees. In the midst of this, King Abdullah has sought to emulate his father as 'the great peacemaker'.

Fig. 125. Iranian FM Araghchi meeting King Abdullah on a recent visit to Jordan (*Source: Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*)



540 NB. It needed Iraq's oil. On the 2021 'New Levant Initiative' between Jordan, Egypt and Iraq over oil supplies, see A. Musawi, 'The New Levant Initiative: Is it in Iraq's interests to enter an alliance with Egypt and Jordan?', *Iraq Now* (23 June 2021): https://irqnow.com/new-levant-initiative; accessed 28 November 2024.

541 In 2018 Jordan rejected economic ties with Iran because it was not a member of the World Trade Organization.

542 NB. sponsored, some suggest, by Israel and Saudi Arabia)

Jordan's preference for peace has been subject to sustained pressure since the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel.[543] King's Abdullah's repeated calls for an end to the conflict were largely ignored; except, perhaps, by those provoked to protest his ineffective support for the Palestinian cause. Though the King's position is secure, his credibility with his people has been compromised. A recent photograph of him in combat fatigues in an aircraft dropping aid into Gaza did little to reaccredit him optically.[544]

With 2m. (est.) Palestinian refugees in Jordan, the need for a strong response to the crisis has become increasingly clear inside and outside Jordan. When King Abdullah ordered the Royal Jordanian Airforce to intercept Iranian missiles heading for Israel on 13 April 2024, many in Jordan saw him as backing the wrong side. Bloggers called him a 'Traitor' online. The Israeli Embassy in Amman, stormed after the 7 October attack, was the focus for renewed protests.[545] The historic Wadi Araba peace treaty of 1994 was deemed to be in shreds.[546] Far from being an instrument of peace, Jordan has been cast increasingly as a potential aggressor. As the Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi (b. 1962; For. Min 2017-present) warned the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken (b. 1962; Sec. St. 2021-present) on 25 October 2024, 'we stand at the brink of regional war'. He also called on the US to oppose Israel's 'ethnic cleansing in Gaza'.[547] Jordan is caught in the middle of a chaotic and deteriorating situation.

Iran is acutely aware of Jordan's predicament, not least through its sophisticated spy network in the country. The country's economy is weakening, its susceptibility to drug trafficking (esp. 'Captagon') across the border with Syria and Lebanon (sometimes supported by Iranian militia) increasing.[548] Pressure on Jordan, Tehran knows, would expose Israel (and the US) to an unwelcome extension of its military front. The Muwaffaq Salti Air Base, with its 3000 US troops is an easy, and attractive, target for Iranian missiles. Jordan may soon be forced to decide where its regional loyalties really lie.

543 Cf. J. Salhani, 'Tightrope: Jordan's Balancing Act Between Iran and Israel', *Al Jazeera* (21 April 2024): https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/21/tightrope-jordans-balancing-act-between-iran-and-israel; accessed 24 November 2024.
544 Ibid.
545 Cf. N. Bulos, 'Jordanians protest nightly against peace deal with Israel amid anger over Gaza war', *Los Angeles Times* (11 April 2024): https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-04-11/jordan-pro-palestinian-protests; accessed 28 November 2024; also, for subsequent anti-Israeli-violence, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/24/gunman-dead-police-injured-in-shooting-near-israeli-embassy-in-jordan; accessed 28 November 2024.
546 P. Wintour, 'Jordan Faces Difficult Balancing Act Amid Row Over Role in Downing Iranian Drones', *The Guardian* (15 April 2024): https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/15/jordan-difficult-balancing-act-row-downing-iranian-drones-israel; accessed 24 November 2024.
547 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/25/israel-jordan-foreign-minister-ayman-safadi-stop-ethnic-cleansing-gaza; accessed 28 November 2024.
548 Cf. G. Diamond, 'Jordan is at Risk of Falling into Iranian Hands', *Yorktown Institute* (15 January 2024): https://yorktowninstitute.org/jordan-is-at-risk-of-falling-into-iranian-hands; accessed 24 November 2024.

Fig. 126. Oman's location and rugged, natural beauty (*Source: Britannia*)

9b. Oman

With a population of ca. 5.3m. (2024), a GDP of ca. $200bn (2023) and *per capita* annual income of ca. $40k., the absolute monarchy of the Sultanate of Oman is the oldest continuously independent Arab state. It lies to the East, S East and N East of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Yemen and looks N East across the Gulf of Oman and S East across the Arabian Sea, the narrow Strait of Hormuz symbolic of its close ties to Iran. In the 17th century, Oman competed with Britain and Portugal for mercantile, marine and colonial dominance in W and SE Asia, and, later, in E Africa (as far as Zanzibar). Seeing greater mutual benefit in cooperation than conflict, Oman provided protection for British trade in the Persian Gulf and Indian sub-continent. In the 20th century, Oman's strategic location, supple diplomacy (to protect its independence, security and economy), and historic ties to the UK and its allies, have enabled it to remain neutral in the face of regional conflict and global pressure.[549]

Oman's relationship with Iran is almost unique. With economic and diplomatic ties that predate the 1979 Revolution, Oman has chosen not see Iran as the threat (particularly the nuclear threat) that others do regionally and globally. This is surprising and important at many levels. Culturally, 25% of Omanis are Iranian Baluch, and most of the rest are Ibadi Muslims; potentially contentious issues Iran conveniently overlooks.[550] Similarly, though a majority of Arab states took sides in the Iran-Iraq War, Oman did not. It engineered

549 NB. For diplomatic, ideological, and strategic military reasons, the UK and US supported Oman in its opposition to the Marxist Dhofar Rebellion (1963-1976), which sought to create an independent state in Dhofar.

550 NB. Despite Oman also supporting the Camp David Accords (1978) and Egypt-Israel peace agreement (1979).

secret (unsuccessful) peace talks, and after the war mediated (effectively) between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the UK. Though sanctioning Iranian naval action in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz during the Gulf War, Oman has generally remained neutral in regional affairs, as a founding member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (from 1980), and (with Iran) of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77. With deepening economic interdependency,[551] Oman has on more than one occasion been a back channel for Iranian US discussions (including over the JCPOA and release of US prisoners).[552] As US Secretary of State John Kerry said of Sultan Qaboos's mediation, Oman 'played a critical role in getting these talks off the ground in the first place'.

9c. Qatar

Like other oil rich Arab nations, Qatar punches above its weight regionally and internationally. In recent times, it has presented itself like Oman as a peaceable, reasonable, presence in a volatile, unreasonable, region. To back up this claim, it has made its seemingly limitless resources available to convene enemies and coerce accord. More than this, again like Oman, it has fostered strong alliances in the West and won their respect and support for its endeavours. That said, to some Qatar's unquestioned strengths are also its weaknesses. So, its wealth blunts its self-awareness and awakens envy; its even-handedness may be true, but not always; its attractive flexibility fearful duplicity; its eagerness to broker peace – most recently between Israel and Hamas in Gaza – less a matter of integrity as self-righteous self-promotion. In all of this, Qatar's relationship to Iran is for analysts a ground for amazement and/or greater suspicion.

Qatari Iranian relations have remained remarkably cordial since they signed a demarcation agreement in 1969. With lucrative supplies of oil and gas potentially a ground for disagreement, bilateral ties have ensured both benefit from the vast natural resources they share geographically.[553] Hence, though Qatar provided financial backing to Iraq during its war with Iran, in 1989 Qatar and Iran agreed to exploit the N Qatar oil field – under Iranian water – together. Though Qatar and Iran are both members of the Non-Aligned Movement and Organisation of the Islamic Conference, Qatar is also a member (with Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) of the intergovernmental Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC; founded in 1981). Unlike other members of the GCC, Qatar is not predisposed to criticize Iran, preferring (as again in May 2023) to pursue mutually beneficial bilateral agreements with Iran.

551 Cf. Though challenged by the US (and other interested parties), in March 2014, Iran and Oman agreed to build a subsea pipeline to enable Iran to sell natural gas to Oman. In addition to this ca. $7-12bn deal, Iran and Oman have set up a joint bank, agreed to develop the Kish and Hengam gas fields in the Persian Gulf, and approved a joint petrochemical project worth ca. $800m.

552 NB. During the Obama administration, Oman was a key intermediary for US Iranian discussion of Iran's activity in Syria and plans to shut the Strait of Hormuz.

553 NB. Qatar and Iran co-own the South Pars/North Dome Gas Condensate Field, the largest gas field in the world.

Fig. 127. The Emir of Qatar meeting President Raisi in Tehran in May 2022 (*Source:* [554]).

Qatar's capacity for non-aligned thought and action – particularly, perhaps, in relation to Iran – has built friendships and destroyed alliances. Iranian Qatari relations have come under sustained scrutiny and pressure from a Saudi-led coalition of states in MENA since the 'Arab Spring'. Criticism has focused on Qatar's purported links (especially financial) to pro-Iranian (and anti-Israeli) proxy militia.[555] Matters came to a head in 2017.[556]

554 Cf. S. F. Mehdi, 'Qatar, Iran take big step forward toward expansion of ties', *Anadolu Ajansi* (12 May 2020): https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/qatar-iran-take-big-step-forward-toward-expansion-of-ties/2586340|: accessed 18 February 2025.

555 Cf. for example, K. Svetlova, 'The power behind the power: How Qatar helped the Houthis become a threat to Israel', *The Times of Israel* (28 December 2023): https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-power-behind-the-power-how-qatar-helped-the-houthis-become-a-threat-to-israel; accessed 10 February 2025.

556 Cf. P. Wintour, 'Qatar: UAE and Saudi Arabia step up pressure in diplomatic crisis', *Guardian* (7 June 2017): https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/07/qatar-fbi-says-russian-hackers-planted-fake-news-story-that-led-to-crisis-report; accessed 10 February 2025; Staff, 'Qatar row: Saudi and Egypt among countries to cut Doha links' *BBC* (5 June 2017): https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-40155829; accessed 10 February 2025. For a list and analysis of the bloc's 13 demands, see K. Fahim, 'Demands by Saudi-led Arab states for Qatar include shuttering Al Jazeera', *Washington Post* (23 June 2017): https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/saudi-led-arab-states-submit-demands-to-qatar-including-shuttering-of-al-jazeera/2017/06/23/d9d2711a-580e-11e7-9e18-968f6ad1e1d3_story.html; accessed 10 February 2025.

On 24 August 2017, Qatar restored full diplomatic relations with Iran.[557] Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, the Maldives, Mauritania, Sudan, Senegal, Djibouti, Comoros, Jordan, the Libyan government in Tobruk and Yemeni government, severed ties with Qatar and blockaded its air, sea and land routes. Qatar was unrepentant.[558] Over time, most opponents desisted: Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain persisted with the blockade. In 2021, talks began to normalize relations between these states.[559] Heavy conditions were imposed on Qatar, including concurrence with, and reporting to, other Gulf states going forward, and the repatriation (and future prevention) of political refugees. Qatar refused to comply and has continued to act without requiring international backing.[560]

Qatar's independence has borne positive fruit. It enabled it to join the US (and others) in condemning Iran's nuclear programme in 2010, whilst mediating with Syria[561] over the release of 57 IRGC operatives in May 2021; to work with the US to unfreeze $6bn of Iranian assets in exchange for five prisoners in September 2023; to cooperate with Iran to secure Qatar's hosting of the World Cup (2022); and, most recently, to mediate between Israel and Hamas (and their allies) to expedite peace talks to end the present conflict in Gaza and the West Bank (January 2025).

557 For regional analysis, A. Marzooq, 'The New Axis of Dissent: The Qatari money, and Turkey & Iran as the two largest representatives of Islam', *Gulf House for Studies and Publishing* (15 August 2017): https://web.archive.org/web/20171006032019/http://gulfhsp.org/en/posts/2104; accessed 10 February 2025.

558 During COVID, Qatar sent shipments of medical supplies to Iran. Cf. 'Qatar sends first batch of aid to Iran to combat coronavirus', *Middle East Monitor* (17 March 2020): https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200317-qatar-sends-first-batch-of-aid-to-iran-to-combat-coronavirus; accessed 10 February 2025.

559 Cf. Staff, 'Qatar crisis: Saudi Arabia and allies restore diplomatic ties with emirate', *BBC* (5 January 2021): https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-55538792; accessed 10 February 2025.

560 Cf. for example, E. P. Martin, 'Qatar rejects strikes on Houthis as US official says threat to shipping has to stop', *Tradewinds* (9 January 2024): https://www.tradewindsnews.com/casualties/qatar-rejects-strikes-on-houthis-as-us-official-says-threat-to-shipping-has-to-stop-/2-1-1580427; accessed 10 February 2025.

561 Qatar also provided substantial funding for this deal.

Fig. 128. Voices that no longer speak. Iran's FM Amir-Abdollahian and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Qatar's capital Doha in late-October 2023 (*Source: The Guardian*. *Photo: AP*)[562]

The need for a mediator who understands West Asia *from within*, has resources to fund its work and incentivize dialogue, and a will to be unpopular, when necessary, is clear. Many in the region (and more widely) remain suspicious of Qatari motives and methods. Iran, Israel and other states regionally and internationally, must absorb the awkward fact that both Mossad and Hamas have a presence in Doha. To those who do not believe in peace at any price, Qatar's mediation is as diplomatically ambiguous as Iran's militarism is repugnant. Hard questions confront policy makers who must choose between the (costly) peace Qatar leverages and the (continuing) threats West Asia faces. The reality is, more than most in MENA, Qatar understands West Asia as an insider *and* the West where it has its second homes. Janus-like internationalism is useful – and, of course, Qatar is not the first country to realise this.

562 Cf. for an assessment of Qatar as a mediator, P. Wintour, 'Why does Qatar mediate in so many conflicts, and what is its role in Israel-Hamas war?', *The Guardian* (21 November 2023): https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/21/why-is-qatar-often-a-mediator-and-what-is-its-role-in-israel-hamas-war; accessed 18 February 2025.

Conclusion

In the last two chapters, we have sought to shed light on the complex regional dynamics that Iran chooses to create or unintentionally faces. From this, two things are clear. First, the Iranian regime seeks to exert power in West Asia. Though struggling to control internal dissent, it has lost little of its original revolutionary zeal; indeed, if weakened (as some suggest), it is more likely to compensate for this in dangerous displays of ideological passion and military action. Fears of Iran are therefore well-grounded. Second, Iran is best understood by its near neighbours. Western powers and analysts will always struggle to penetrate the meniscus of Iran's ancient Persian culture and modern radical Islamism. If this suggests humility is needed in Western diplomacy with Iran, it should also stir hope that Iran's new non-regional allies – especially, Russia, China and North Korea (and their global dependents) – will also struggle to interpret Iranian intentions. Building connections with countries like Qatar, Oman and, to a lesser extent, Jordan, ensures the West has cultural 'native speakers' in West Asia to ensure messages to and from Tehran are faithfully and accurately translated. Without this, chaos and conflict seem set to continue, with potentially catastrophic consequences. Ensuring potential allies with the West are on side with its agenda is therefore as important as attempting to mediate in (seemingly unending) regional conflict.

Fig. Many still ask, 'Which way Iran?' (*Source: Al Jazeera*)[563]

563 Cf. 'Which way Iran?', *Al Jazeera* (13 February 2010): https://www.aljazeera.com/program/riz-khan/2010/2/13/which-way-iran; accessed 18 February 2025.

Part III

Iran - conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions and recommendations

This report has sought to describe the origins, character, mindset, and intentions of the current Iranian regime. In keeping with the ethos of Oxford House and Sallux, it has been particularly sensitive to the cultural, religious and ethical dimensions to Western engagement with Iran. Of particular note, for policymakers in the European Union, are we believe the following:

1. **The fragile and fragmented nature of Iran's internal life**, its politics, economic programs, radical Shiite religious ideology, socio-ethnic identity, and vision for the country's future. A sense of vulnerability shapes much of the style and direction of the country's current leadership.
2. **The strengthening bonds between Tehran, Beijing, Moscow and Pyongyang** .(and other states who look to them for ideological, military and economic support). Iran seeks to counterbalance its weakness by building protective – and note, mutually beneficial – alliances. Iran no longer acts alone. To deal with Iran is to deal with a nexus of states allied against the West.
3. **The importance of promoting wider regional discussion.** of Iran's nuclear program and its development (and marketing) of new types of ballistic missiles and drones. For all its bullish rhetoric and international allies, Iran is located in a volatile region and competitive community of Arab and Muslim states who it legitimately watches and/or rightly fears. Though the JCPOA process is dead, grounds for regional dialogue on these issues are not. President Rouhani proposed this in 2013: early indications suggest the new Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi is thinking along the same lines.[564] The West may not be able to initiate, or participate in this (officially), but it can and should work skillfully not to prevent it. As in the past, pressure from the West may kill the idea.
4. **The value of hosting and heeding minority representatives and perspectives from inside Iran**. As we saw in Chapter 3, Iran is a complex, composite, country and culture. Greater awareness of this changes perception of Iran and should challenge policy options *viz-á-viz* Iran. To do this in a way that hears without agreement,

564 In an early tour of key international destinations, the Iranian Foreign Minister met with the EEAS on 28 November 2024. It was the first such meeting since August 2022. The Minister had previously visited Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Iraq, Egypt and Turkey in a whirlwind tour of the Middle East in October 2024. For internal criticism of Araghchi's tour and Pezeshkian's 'zig-zag' foreign policy, see https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iranian-press-review-foreign-minister-tours-critics-question-strategy; accessed 21 January 2025. Iranian expansionism and pragmatism are clear in its recent courting of Algeria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and, more generally, in its creation of asymmetric (viz. ideologically and culturally unexpected) global and regional alliances.

respects without suspicion, agrees without commitment, and plans without duplicity, is extremely hard. However, Iran's demography, if not the weakness of the current regime, would suggest (if nothing else) that Iran's future and freedom, free from the shackles of Shiite oppression, may lie in some kind of new negotiation between the Farsi majority and the non-Farsi minorities that together compose the other 50% of the population. It is in any case not an option for involved policy makers to ignore half the population.

5. **The duty of liberal Western democracies to honour in theory and practice the terms on which they function as states**. The history of MENA (and Iran) is littered with the bitter legacy of the frequent disconnect between Western cultural *mores* and Western political actions. Similarly, European constitutional commitments to inclusivity, transparency, democracy and care are inconsistently applied in front-line diplomacy and security analyses. Though clear, public, re-affirmation by the West of the ground rules for honest and honourable engagement with Iran and her allies may not heal historic wounds – and certainly does not guarantee reciprocity – it will help to safeguard integrity going forward and remove an easy target for hostile criticism.
6. **The opportunity new leadership offers for a reset on Iranian-Western relations**. Whether it be the appointment of Prime Minister Pezeshkian and Foreign Minister Araghchi, the recent re-election of President Donald Trump, or the future choice of Supreme Leader Khamenei's successor, changes in personality give Iran and the world an opportunity to re-think, re-calibrate and reset relationships. If the current crisis can be overcome without major disaster, Iranian relations deserve care, respect, creativity and diplomatic and cultural sensitivity. EU policymakers are well-positioned to offer a fresh, distinctive approach. The EU has a history with Iran that is free from (some of) the baggage associated with US- and UK-Iranian relations. In the reset this report encourages, being seen to distance or differentiate itself from the US (and, possibly the UK), may be judicious A multi-track approach to Iran (and her allies) can help ensure multiple options for improved and improving relations.
7. **The potential of a 'carrot and stick' approach to hostile, unpredictable, regimes like Iran.** Humility and flexibility are assets in many walks of life. Good EU-Iranian relations need them in double measure. A flexible 'carrot' (incentivizing) and 'stick' (intimidating) approach is not without merit. Tough(-er) sanctions and warm(-er) words, depending on context and timing, can both be deployed to advantage. Falling into the easy, alluring, alternatives of *either* threat *or* accommodation will do little to (re-)build relations with Iran. Totalitarian regimes despise both. A tough, pragmatic, engaging, style of self-differentiated investment in moving things forward is more likely to be successful than one based on fear or aggression.

Addendum

Iranian opposition parties and organizations (select)

A. Non-Farsi movements:

1. Three cooperating Federalist groups with 19 separate organizations within them.

Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran	**Council of Iranian Democrats**	**Solidarity for Freedom and Equality in Iran**
The CNFI consists of parties and organizations belonging to different nationalities (Arab, Azerbaijani Turk, Baloch, Kurds and Turkmen) in Iran. All of CNFI's political organizations struggle to establish a secular, democratic republic in Iran. It was created in 2005	The CID formed in November 2017. It includes most members of CNFI and some other groups, e.g., the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the National Democratic Front of Iran.	This group has all major Kurdish parties and some leftist groups from Iran. It was established on 23 February 2019

2. 10 movements for various kinds of Independence.

Front of the Nations for self-determination
(a coordinating umbrella group). Established in 2005 https://fnfsd.com/fa/# (10 organisations)

3. Democratic Platform of the Peoples of Iran.

PJAK (https://pjak.eu/en/)
NB. In conversation, PJAK representatives indicated that besides PJAK, 3 other parties are active from the Baloch, Arab and Azeri ethnic groups, viz. Women from Rawa (Afghanistan), KJAR (Kurdish Women's Movement East Kurdistan), and Women from Iran Tribunal.

B. Majority-Farsi movements:

1. Republican
NB. There is no umbrella organization that provides information on these:

Iran Transition Council official website (iran-tc.com)
United Republicans of Iran (jomhouri.com)
Organisation of Iranian Peoples Fadaian (Majority) https://www.kar-online.com/
Tudeh Party of Iran https://www.tudehpartyiran.org/en/home/
Organisations of Iran's National Front outside America https://www.jebhemelli.net/
Movement of Democratic Republicans and Secularists of Iran http://nedayeazady.org/
Organisation of the People's Faithful Union of Iran https://efiran.org/
Secular Social Democratic Party of Iran https://rangin-kaman.net/
Bepish https://bepish.org/english
Union for a secular Republic and Human Rights in Iran https://iranian-republic.org/

2. Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) or National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/

3. Monarchist

Constitutionalist Party of Iran http://irancpi.party/
Farashgard movement https://www.farashgardfoundation.com/
Iran Novin Party: https://irannovin.party/

NB. having a smaller number of monarchist parties does not automatically mean a smaller following. It shows that the monarchists are more effectively organised.

C. Human rights organisations (illustration):

Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) https://iranhumanrights.org/
Iran Human Rights Documentation Center: https://iranhrdc.org/
Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRAI) https://worldcoalition.org/membre/human-rights-

activists-in-iran-hrai/
Abdorrahman Boroumand Centre (ABC) https://www.iranrights.org/center

D. Religious Minorities (some examples):

Bahai: http://iranpresswatch.org/

Christians churches: https://articleeighteen.com/
- Iranian Christians International (ICI)
- Global Catalytic Ministries (House churches in Iran)
- The Catholic Church in Iran (Armenian, Chaldean and Latin)
  Protestant Churches (Evangelische Gemeinde [German speaking], Presbyterian,Assyrian Evangelical, Assyrian Pentescostal, Jama'atRabbani (Iranian Assemblies of God)
- The Anglican Diocese of Iran
- Orthodox (Armenian Apostolic Church, Assyrian Church of the East)

Jewish organisations:
- The Tehran Jewish Committee
- The Iranian Jewish Ladies Organization
- The Kourosh-e Kabir Cultural Center
- The Jewish Association of Iran (Anjoman-e-Kalimian)

Zoroastrian organizations:
- The Anjoman-e Zartoshiyan
- The Council of Tehran Mobeds
- The Zoroastrian Women's Organization
- The Iranian Zoroastrian Association

This report is for EU policymakers, their aides, and all who are concerned to find a wise way to respond to the persisting problem that Iran presents to the Western Alliance. The triple aims of the report are exposition, education and encouragement.

With this publication we aim to provide politicians in EU Member States, MEP's as well as officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of EU Member States, a clear and comprehensive overview of the most relevant factors in dealing with Iran. For example, this publication offers a much needed complete overview of the opposition movements (Farsi and non-Farsi) that are often approaching politicians in Europe. Another key issue dealt with in this publication is an overview of the various international relations of Iran. This and other topics are presented in an in-depth way, however accessible for everyone who finds him or herself in need of information on this challenging issue.

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