

# The Iranian Revolution at 40: Shifting Grounds, Continuing Resilience

Written by Mohammed Nuruzzaman

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MOHAMMED NURUZZAMAN, MAR 14 2019

Iran celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution on February 11, 2019. On that day 40 years ago, the last Pahlavi ruler Shah Mohammad Reza Khan's reign collapsed and a new Islamic government, led by the firebrand Shi'a religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, officially took the charge in Iran. The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary assumed extra significance in the face of renewed hostility by the Donald Trump administration to dismantle the revolution once for all and the determination of the Iranian government to march ahead in the spirit of the revolution. Trump's National Security Advisor John Bolton unveiled a naked threat to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei: "I don't think you'll have many more anniversaries left to enjoy". Iranian President Hassan Rouhani rebuked Bolton and told a large public gathering in Tehran: "This nation has managed to establish a system of Islamic Republic and an independent system of government".

This short piece contends that whatever course or color America's anti-Iran hostilities take now or in the future, Ayatollah Khomeini's "Islamic Republic" is here to stay. The way the Islamic Republic of Iran has progressed in the last 40 years, often passing through numerous twists and turns, conforms to its national resilience to hold on to the revolution, project an independent voice in world affairs and expand its influence in regional and global affairs.

### The Context and Timeless Rationale of the Revolution

The Iranian Revolution took place at a critical juncture in world history that was characterized by a ceaseless fight between the oppressed and the oppressors. The fight between the oppressed and the oppressors took a new dimension during the post-Second World War anti-colonial movements that largely succeeded in overthrowing the colonial structures by the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. Still, exploitation and domination of the oppressed in the Third World hardly ended. There was only a shift from colonialism to neo-colonialism – a change from direct to indirect forms and modes of exploitation and control. The Iranian Revolution, primarily crafted in religious terms, was a decisive rupture in neocolonial control and exploitation of the non-West by the West. The revolution was a massive popular response to eliminate Western, and more specifically American, domination and control over Iran. Khomeini successfully fired up the Iranians with the slogan: "neither East, nor West, the Islamic Republic" to defeat American meddling in Iran, ascertain Iran's independence in regional and international politics, and establish redistributive justice and social harmony built on Islamic values and beliefs in the domestic arena.

Khomeini's slogan of liberation from Western imperialism and Socialist revolutions, as well as the pursuit of domestic social justice, shored up Iranian resistance to America. The success of Iranian resistance, in turn, further inspired anti-Western movements across the Third World for self-determination. The anti-imperialist outcries became more viral and emphatic.

Khomeini's revolution, at the same time, was markedly different from other historical liberal or leftist revolutions. The French revolution of 1789, for example, was built on European Enlightenment ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. The Russian and Chinese revolutions were guided and defined by a Marxist secular spirit of liberation from oppressive political and economic systems. In contrast, the Iranian Revolution was an Islamic religious revolution in both content and color. The revolution was developed around the Shi'a ideas of enduring sufferings, martyrdom, and

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opposition to secular Pahlavi dynastic rule to defend Iran's Islamic identity, norms, and values. Khomeini, in exile in France during the peak revolutionary period, successfully mobilized the mass of Iranians by appealing to their religious sentiments to oust Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and install a clergy-led government to fully Islamize Iran.

The revolution reinitiated another significant course of development in the Middle East, which did not draw the attention of many people. It made a loud break from the post-First World War secular political trends in the region. The collapse of the Islamic Ottoman Empire by 1923 and the introduction of European concepts of secularism, the nation, and the nation-state greatly recast the Middle East political order. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the modern Republic of Turkey, discarded Islamic religion as a guiding principle of his new republic, largely isolated Turkey from the Muslim Middle East and closely followed Europe in his pursuit of secular modernization of Turkey. Like Kemal Ataturk, the Iranian Shah was a die-hard supporter of secularism who did everything possible to keep the Shi'a clergy at bay. Khomeini's Islamic Revolution repudiated this secular trend in regional politics and firmly introduced an Islamic faith-based system of politics and government.

At the core of Khomeini's Islamic Revolution was the motto of "independence, freedom and the Islamic Republic". The concept of "independence", as he explained, consists of two things. The first is the rejection of the ideological supremacy of Western Liberalism with its exploitative capitalism and Eastern Socialism. The second is the elimination of Western imperialistic influence within Iran and the Muslim world through the prioritization of Islamic ideological precepts to redesign domestic governance and external relations. He rejected socialism's overemphasis on materialism and the subjugation of human agency to a socialist system. The problem with Western liberalism, as he saw it, was its exclusive dependence on scientific reasoning as the only means to produce knowledge and improve society. The Islamic Republic, according to Khomeini, prioritizes the importance of heavenly revelations to guide human societies in their entirety, with an ethical consideration for economic justice, social harmony, and political reconciliation.

These powerful ideas of liberation from imperialistic domination, independence in domestic and foreign affairs, and embrace of social justice and harmony that created a universal appeal in Iran. No wonder, they continue to inspire the Iranians to hold onto their 1979 Islamic Revolution.

## The Revolution and the Unfolding Realities

The Islamic Revolution was also an erratic development in its time. Religious fervor hardly dictated regional and global politics in a world sharply polarized along the East-West divide epitomized by Soviet-American rivalry from 1945 onwards. The Western press projected the revolution as an impending threat that the West can effectively control following the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. However, press reports were in most cases exaggerating reality. Other than a few significant changes in global geopolitics like Iran's break from the U.S. sphere of influence and the initiation of a new cold war between Shi'a Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, the revolution caused little change in the Middle East, with its impacts mostly confined within Iran's national borders.

Ayatollah Khomeini's call to the Arab people across the Persian Gulf against their U.S.-backed puppet regimes went mostly unheeded. Sunni Arabs saw Khomeini's Islamic Revolution as a Shi'a revolution exclusively built on his newly developed doctrine of *Velayat-e-faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist). Contrary to the Shi'a belief in maintaining political quietism until Imam Mahdi, the last Shi'a Imam, reemerges from occultation, the doctrine of *Velayat-e-faqih* insists that Shi'a religious scholars could truly represent Imam Mahdi and carry out day-to-day political and administrative activities till he reappears. This Shi'a religious interpretation had little appeal to Sunni Arabs whose political and social order was traditionally, but not always, controlled by a Caliph, and after the First World War by kings, sheikhs, emirs, and dictators of different stripes.

The general Shi'a support to Khomeini's *Velayat-e-faqih* had the potential to consolidate the revolution first inside Iran and then produce spillover effects in neighboring Arab countries with significant Shi'a minority groups, as in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states (minus Bahrain), or majority Shi'a population, as in Bahrain and Iraq. It frightened Sunni Arab monarchs and dictators alike, who, along with the U.S., used Iraq as a bulwark to confront the revolutionary fervor up-close. The resulting Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988) devastated the economies and exacted a

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massive human cost on both countries. Iranian revolutionaries were crippled for the time being. The only cross-border success of the revolution was the nurturing of the Lebanese Shi'a political and military group Hezbollah, which thrived and still strives on the rationale of confronting Israel.

In the last four decades since the revolution, Iran has navigated through a regional and international environment replete more with hostilities and fewer pigeon holes. Four distinct periods stand out – the period of early hostility and confrontation (1979-1989), pragmatism and flexibility of the 1990s and early 2000s, open confrontation against the West (2006-2013), and a return to diplomacy and peace overtures (2013–).

In the first period, Iran managed to thwart existential threats to the revolution posed by the U.S. and Arab-backed Iraqi invasion of Iran. Under the presidencies of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), Iran pursued reforms at home and flexible policies abroad to court European powers and the U.S., but little success was achieved. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's (2005-2013) policy of outright confrontation with the U.S., in the wake of U.S.-engineered invasion of Iraq in March 2003, pushed the two countries apart. Tehran's stern confrontation with the U.S. on several issues, coupled with the unfolding nuclear conflict, saw the piling up of devastating sanctions against Iran, including joint and extensive U.S. and EU sanctions imposed on January 1, 2012. The Rouhani administration's policy of flexibility and peace overtures yielded the 2015 nuclear deal with the U.S. and other world powers. However, the deal was ditched by the incumbent American President Donald Trump in May 2018. The Trump administration has not only demanded an end to Iran's ballistic missile program, an issue not covered by the nuclear deal but has also unsuccessfully mobilized efforts to build an anti-Iran coalition through a diplomatic gathering in Warsaw in late February this year to force Iran to renegotiate the nuclear deal.

## Continuing Resilience

Noticeably, Iran has survived all waves of hostility; it has occasionally faltered but hardly did it fall off the orbit. Iran's history of defiance to the U.S. has been continuously driven by Khomeini's desire for independence from foreign domination and the commitment to the Islamic Republic. The social, economic, military and scientific progress the Iranians have made over the past years indicates that the Islamic Republic holds strong potential to confront and survive future challenges and threats easily.

First, notwithstanding the economic hardships they are suffering, the revolution enjoys support among Iranians. Most Iranians oppose American meddling in their domestic politics. The two opposing groups of Iranian elites – the conservatives and the reformists – are locked in severe power struggles internally, but neither of them rejects the Islamic Revolution and its tenets. Nor did most leaders of the powerful reformist Green Movement of 2009, which primarily contested the legality of President Ahmadinejad's electoral victory for a second term in office and opposed the continuation of the Islamic system of governance. There are public discontents and many Iranians partially relate the discontents to American sanctions. Regime change through foreign conspiracies looks like a far-fetched reality.

Second, U.S. policy of toppling Iranian clergy by igniting internal unrest through sanctions did not work in the past. President Trump's policy of creating maximum pressures on Iran by reducing Iranian oil exports to zero and cutting Iran off from global trade stands little chance of success as well. Iran's economy, in fact, is not performing extremely badly in the face of sanctions and American pressures. Between 1995–2011, Iran achieved an average GDP growth rate of 8.7%; it holds the 60<sup>th</sup> rank in the 2018 Human Development Report (out of a total of 189 countries); all Iranian households have access to water and electricity, and the poverty level was reduced to 10% by 2014. Dependence on oil revenues has also been progressively reduced. In the last five years preceding the revolution (1974-1979), Iran's total oil revenues amounted to \$1.03 trillion (in 2018 dollar value); the oil revenues jumped down to just \$0.6 trillion in the post-revolution five-year period from 2007 to 2011, and oil incomes declined to just \$50 billion in the last Iranian financial year (March 2017 to March 2018). The use of sanctions on Iranian oil exports by the U.S. may not damage the Iranian economy that much.

In response to Western Sanctions, the Iranians are implementing a new strategy, dubbed "resistance economy", to cope with the pressures of sanctions. This strategy is aimed at promoting domestic production for domestic consumptions to reduce imports and dependence on foreign currencies, particularly dollar-based foreign trade. So

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the objective is to reduce Iran's vulnerabilities by promoting domestic capacity to absorb economic shocks, improving Iran's industrial and technological competitiveness, and facilitating the development of a knowledge-based economy. On the global level, Iran has been pursuing a policy of "Look East" for quite some years. It is more aligned with China and Russia, is a part of China-led massive economic development program "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) and participates in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and other regional economic groupings' activities. Leading EU member states Britain, France and Germany remain committed to the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal and are ready to support legitimate trade with Iran. The three European states recently launched a special payment system, called INSTEX (Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges) to bypass U.S. sanctions. Though Trump's sanctions are biting the Iranian economy, they are unlikely to bring Iran down to its knees and force its surrender to American demands.

From an alternative angle, U.S. hostility and sanctions have made Iran militarily more powerful and regionally more assertive. Post-1979 severance of ties with America and the ever-present threats to revolution and national security pushed the Iranians to achieve self-sufficiency in military technology and hardware production. The result is a massive domestic defense production base and export opportunities to major countries around the world. Today Iran produces almost all of its critical military equipment from battle tanks and submarines to sophisticated unmanned aerial vehicles and long-range ballistic missiles. Such military advances are not to defeat the U.S. military in the Middle East but they are meant to effectively deter any possible U.S. aggression from dethroning the revolutionary forces.

Along with its military advances has come Iran's increasing role in regional politics, mostly spurred by the Arab Spring. Anti-government uprisings in Damascus, starting in March 2011, took Iran to Syria. Iran had sheer strategic reasons for supporting and propping up the "axis of resistance" (comprising Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah). The rise of the Islamic State in the summer of 2014 got Iran actively involved in the fight against the caliphate in Iraq and put it on the same strategic page with the U.S. The Iranian sphere of influence has therefore extended from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea via Baghdad and Damascus, with the presence of Iranian troops and Iran-trained militias on Syria's borders with Israel. Iran is defiantly maintaining its presence, despite Saudi opposition and repeated Israeli aerial attacks on Iranian military assets and Hezbollah forces in Syria. Iranian forces and allied militias are so delicately dispersed through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon that any U.S. military attack to roll back Iran's military presence and influence, let alone an invasion of Iran to dislodge the Islamic government, sounds like an unrealistic option for the Trump administration.

## Conclusion

To conclude, after 40 years of the Islamic Revolution, Iran has consolidated itself both domestically and regionally by developing itself into a dominant regional power. Domestically, Iranians remain committed to the basic objectives of the revolution - independence, freedom and the Islamic Republic. They occasionally erupt in protests against the policies and practices of their government but stand united to safeguard their independence and resist foreign interference in their domestic affairs. On the economic front, redistributive social justice as promised by Khomeini did not make much headway in the last four decades, primarily due to domestic corruptions, economic mismanagement, and sanctions. This revolutionary goal, if achieved in the future, is likely to further solidify the unity of the Iranian nation. Overall, Iran stands much stronger than it did before the revolution with its military and social capacity that to defend itself from future foreign aggression and protect the Islamic Revolution.

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