



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **THESIS**

**UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS IS IRAN MOST LIKELY TO  
PURSUE AGGRESSIVE AMBITIONS?**

by

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December 2010

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**UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS IS IRAN MOST LIKELY TO PURSUE  
AGGRESSIVE AMBITIONS?**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE IN DEFENSE ANALYSIS**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis investigates and explores the factors and conditions that have led Iran to pursue its aggressive ambitions. It begins with an overview of Iran's history prior to the revolution, specifically during the Shah's reign, which became the impetus for an Islamic Revolution. It moves on to describe Iran's history its culture, its geographical location, political structure and economy to provide some insights about how these factors have helped shape its ambitions. It continues by investigating Iran's ambitions through three lenses—Defensive, Aggressive, and Unstable Iran. The consequences and the implications of Iran's wider ambitions on a regional and global scale are further explored, as well as the reactions and actions taken by the international community to contain Iran's ambitions. Lastly, the thesis talks about courses of actions that might convince Iran to back down from its aggressive ambitions and transform itself into a peaceful country that will contribute stability to the region as well as resume friendly relations with the international community.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran was characterized as an industrial country. The transformation of Iran was accredited to Reza Shah Pahlavi's ambitions to modernize the country, which "included developing large-scale industries and infrastructure projects, and reforming the judiciary, among others."<sup>1</sup> His son, Mohammad Reza Shah, succeeded to the throne in 1941, reigning for 16 years. Mohammad Reza Shah continued with his father's vision and expanded his constitutional powers and increasingly involved himself in governmental affairs. He allied the country with the West. Some of his domestic reform policies, such as granting women voting rights, eliminating illiteracy and undertaking land reform were opposed by some nationalistic politicians and Islamic leaders. With the help of Iran's security and intelligence organization, SAVAK, which served as the monarchy's main power base, the Shah controlled and suppressed his opponents and those who opposed his reforms. With the country's reliance on high oil revenues, "the Shah pursued his goal of developing Iran as a mighty regional power dedicated to social reform and economic development."<sup>2</sup> Concentrating on improving the country economically, but being dictatorial, the Shah tended to ignore public opinion and curtail political liberties, which eventually resulted in civil unrest and ultimately led to the revolution that brought down his regime.

The Islamic Revolution brought back home the exiled Islamic leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who the Shah had deported for his anti-reform stance and for having accused the Shah of surrendering the country's independence and sovereignty to the U.S. and to Israel. From quasi-democratic rule under a monarch, Khomeini established a theocratic rule over Iran and launched the Cultural Revolution to Islamize the country.<sup>3</sup> In 1979, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was established as "a military force loyal

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<sup>1</sup> Shapour Ghasemi, "History of Iran: Pahlavi Dynasty," *Iran Chamber Society*, <http://www.iranchamber.com/history/pahlavi/pahlavi.php>.

<sup>2</sup> Iran Chamber Society, "History of Iran: Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi," *Iran Chamber Society*, [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mohammad\\_rezashah/mohammad\\_rezashah.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mohammad_rezashah/mohammad_rezashah.php).

<sup>3</sup> Iran Chamber Society, "Historic Personalities: Ayatollah Khomeini," *Iran Chamber Society*, [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/rkhomeini/ayatollah\\_khomeini.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/rkhomeini/ayatollah_khomeini.php).

to the Revolution and the clerical leaders, as a counterbalance for the regular army, and as a force to use against the guerrilla organizations of the left, which were also arming.”<sup>4</sup> The government nationalized most private sector business and those opposed to Khomeini’s radical economic and social changes were put on trial or punished.

In the aftermath of the revolution, internal turmoil spread throughout Iran. Fearing Iran’s new Islamic leadership and taking advantage of Iran’s weakness, neighboring Iraq invaded Iran in the hopes of becoming the most powerful state in the region. “The Iran-Iraq War was multifaceted and included religious schisms, border disputes, and political differences.”<sup>5</sup> With religious zeal, the Iranians fought back and pushed into Iraq, which actually assisted Iranians to export the revolution beyond Iran by appealing to Shi’ites who were 75 percent of Iraq’s enlisted men.<sup>6</sup>

Mobilization of the Shi’ites further intensified during the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in 1982, giving rise to radical Shi’a militia groups, among them Hizbollah and Al-Quds. “Hizbollah is heavily influenced by Iran and the impetus for the creation of Hizbollah was Iran’s Revolutionary Guard which aims to further Shi’a Islamic revolution and ideologies.”<sup>7</sup>

The aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war revived Iran’s effort to develop nuclear weapons. Iran’s nuclear program had been initiated by the Shah to generate electricity and as a source of energy. After the revolution, doubts grew about Iran’s intent regarding its nuclear development program, and the UN ended up imposing sanctions in 1995 in an effort to enable foreign inspectors to visit its nuclear facilities.

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<sup>4</sup> “Iranian Civil Strife: Coming of the Revolution,” *Globalsecurity.org*, Military, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/iran-revo.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Chapin Metz, ed. *Iraq: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1988), <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/>.

<sup>6</sup> Farhang Rajaei, *Iranian Perspectives on the Iran-Iraq War* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997), 51.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Anthony Wege, “The Hezbollah Security Apparatus,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* II, no. 7, [http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php?option=com\\_rokzine&view=article&id=51](http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php?option=com_rokzine&view=article&id=51).

Another challenge Iran posed after the revolution was to reclaim disputed lands which the country had relinquished during the Shah's reign, as well as land invaded by Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war.

## **A. SCOPE AND PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of the factors that inspire Iran to pursue its ambitions. One question we will pose is under what conditions is Iran likely to pursue aggressive ambitions?

Since the pre-revolution era, Iran's ambitions have grown dramatically and become more sophisticated, as we see with its most recent quest to develop a nuclear program. It cannot be denied that Iran's ambitions pose high risks to its neighbors as well as to other foreign countries. Despite several embargos and sanctions imposed on Iran to prevent it from pursuing its ambitions, the country has not shown any signs of backing down or any indication of giving in to the UN resolutions. On the contrary, Iran has been intensely challenged, yet is more determined than ever to face up to its adversaries.

To slow down Iran's goals and de-escalate tensions in the region, the world community needs to devise another approach. To do this requires understanding and getting to the bottom of what motivates Iran. Only by doing this will the UN and other countries be able to devise a constructive plan to help Iran re-channel its ambitions constructively to benefit not only Iran, but also other countries. While we attempt to explore these factors in this thesis, we will also take into the account the implications of the U.S.-Israel-Iran relationship, as well as the role of U.S. interference in the Middle East in relation to Iran's ambitions.

## **B. THESIS QUESTION AND IMPORTANCE**

This thesis will answer the question: "Under what conditions is Iran most likely to pursue aggressive ambitions?"

The question might seem simple. However, it requires developing an in-depth understanding of the country, its history, its geographical location and several other factors before it can be answered. The complexity introduced by the involvement of other ideologies, foreign nations and the UN also need to be taken into account when examining Iran's ambitions. Is it correct to say that *leaving Iran to achieve its ambitions would have dire consequences for the Arab states in terms of Iran's influence and control over the oil flow, the expansion of Islamic Shi'ite ideologies, Shi'ite aggressiveness towards small neighboring states, and the spread of terrorism?*

This multi-part question may be especially useful for helping to unravel the factors that the international community could use to help Iran address its ambitions in ways that provide the country as well as the region with a more realistic opportunity for regional stability.

## **C. METHODOLOGY**

This study will offer a conceptual framework for understanding the nature and scope of Iran's ambitions and the role of outside nations in Iran's pursuit of its ambitions. The framework primarily derives from secondary source materials that point to or describe Iran's increasing ambitions.

## **D. THESIS OUTLINE**

### **1. Chapter II: Iran's History: Roots of Its Ambitions**

In Chapter II, we will discuss Iran's ambitions from four perspectives drawing on its history:

1. Culture—Iranian nationalism has been a strong force in Iran since the revolution. In this section we will examine how Iran became a vulnerable country during the Shah's reign, and how the unification of the government under the nationals was designed to reverse this perception and protect the country from foreign intervention.
2. Politics—Understanding the country's transformation from a constitutional government (pre-revolution) to an Islamic government (post-revolution) will assist us in examining the shift in Iran's ambition

from building its economy to protecting and expanding its religious ideologies and its foreign policies. Here we will also highlight the government's abilities and methods of controlling and unifying the Iranians to garner stronger support for its ambitions. In this section we will talk about the government's different "personalities" - from the era of clerics to the era of Revolutionary Guards and how these have influenced Iran's ambitions.

3. Economy—Iran appears to want to control oil and gas in the region. Iran's influence vis-à-vis oil is one means it uses to pressure foreign nations to agree to its goals.
4. Geography—Iran's location in the Middle East between Sunni countries paves the way for Iran to promote and expand the Shi'ite religion in the region to both protect its ideology and to recruit more followers. Not coincidentally, this assists it to exert control in the region. Iran seeks also to protect itself from Israeli threats, as well as prevent foreign forces in the region from intervening in its domestic national affairs.

## **2. Chapter III: Evaluating Iran's Ambitions Deterrence Dynamics Model**

In this chapter, we will attempt to integrate the four perspectives just described with three "Deterrence Dynamics" (borrowed from *Deterrence Dynamics*, authored by Jacquelyn Davis and Robert Pfalzgraff). These three deterrence dynamics are:

1. Defensive—Is Iran trying to protect itself from foreign intervention, Israel's threat, and the U.S.'s desire to deter it? Is it trying to protect Shi'ite ideology?
2. Aggressive—To what extent can Iran's ambitions be tied to its desire to be a regional power with control over oil? Does it seek to expand its influence in an effort to pressure the U.S. to back down in its support of Israel?
3. Unstable Iran—Would de-stabilizing the country bring about a shift in Iran's ambitions, ideally curtailing them? Or would promoting a different perspective help shift extremists' attitude toward stricter Shi'ite ideologies?

## **3. Chapter IV: Implications of Iran's Ambitions: Regional Vs. Global**

In this chapter, we will explore the different consequences of Iran's ambitions on both a regional and global scale, and describe why it is important that the UN and foreign

nations stop Iran from pursuing its ambitions. We will also consider what steps and approaches should be put in place to impel or compel Iran to re-consider its ambitions, and how foreign nations should cooperate in order to urge it to pursue its ambitions more profitably and peacefully.

#### **4. Chapter V: Conclusion: Assessing Iran's Increasing Ambitions**

Here is where we will summarize the study, as well as make recommendations for how Iran and other countries can both cooperate and use their ambitions to greater mutual benefit.

## II. IRAN'S HISTORY: ROOTS OF ITS AMBITIONS

Reflecting a mixture of several different nations and races, Iran's history can be traced as far back as 2,500 years ago. The influx and assimilation of different races and nationalities formed "two kingdoms which played the most significant role in the history of the Persian Empire and Iran: a) Parsa or Persis as the Greeks called it, the Persian kingdom in the south and b) the Medes in the northwestern parts of the present day Iran."<sup>8</sup> Since as long ago as the Saffarid Dynasty, Iran has fought numerous wars with neighboring countries and other foreign nations from as far away as Europe that were trying to invade and take control of the country. Persians fought fiercely to protect their land and manifested perseverance and courage even when confronted by better equipped armies.

With the country's strategic location, Iran developed trade relations with both China and Rome through the use of the Silk Road. This made it easy and convenient for Iran to trade goods and engage in cultural exchanges between the two hemispheres.<sup>9</sup> However, the establishment of the Silk Route also made Iran more susceptible to invasion, and when the country was conquered by the Arabian Moslems in 633–656, the Persian Empire collapsed. With the Persian defeat, the Arabians introduced Islam, which slowly permeated through the Persian empire, and proved attractive, especially to the lower classes who were the ones most affected by oppression and abuse.

The Persians eventually revolted and gained the upper hand. It was their turn to penetrate Arabian society, bringing with them their own culture. As Persians slowly spread out through Arabia, they introduced Shi'ite ideologies and expanded existing Shi'ite minority groups who were already living outside Iran.

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<sup>8</sup> Salam Iran, "Iran Info: Iran's History in Brief," (2003), <http://www.salamiran.org/IranInfo/General/History/>.

<sup>9</sup> "History: Iran's History in Brief," *Iran Culture and Information Center*, <http://www.iranvision.com/briefhistory.html>.



Figure 1. Silk Road <sup>10</sup>

When Persians gained independence from their Arabian conquerors, Turks, who had been regarded as little more than slaves and soldiers, started to rise in the ranks. Moslem Iranian rulers and caliphs became increasingly dependent on them. With their influence, Turks later established an Ottoman Empire and Iran was divided into several kingdoms ruled by Turkish monarchs who themselves assimilated into the Islamic and Iranian cultures as early as the eleventh century. After the initial wave of Turks came the Mongols and the country was again divided into small independent states until Persia was conquered by a Shia Moslem, named Ismail, who initiated the rise of the Safady Dynasty. Under the reign of Shah Abbas (1587–1629 AD), Iran re-established itself as a superpower, but later fell apart when Afghans invaded (1722–1725 AD), and Peter the Great of Russia waged war against Iran. Following the Afshar Dynasty (1736 AD), the Qajar Dynasty rose to power in 1750 AD. The Qajars reunified the country, only for it again to fall prey to invaders, this time from Europe.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The Moderate Voice, <http://themoderatevoice.com/wordpress-engine/files/silkroad.gif>.

<sup>11</sup> "History: Iran's History in Brief."

Even into the modern era, Iran's geographical location attracted invasion. For instance, its "plentiful oil reserves drew significant attention from Britain, Russia, and the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Britain and Russia vied for influence in Iran (then Persia) in the period leading up to the First World War in an effort to obtain oil and other concessions."<sup>12</sup> In this second era of Iran's significance, the country's oil wealth drove foreign countries to vie with each other in and over Iran and profit from the country's natural resources, prompting Iran to protect and shield its most prized resource from foreign control. In their efforts to control Iranian oil, foreign nations not only colluded and sided with each other, but also toyed with the Iranian regime in order to get it to oust leaders who were critical of their motives. Revolts brought chaos, which in turn diminished the power and influence of the Iranian government over its people. With Britain and Russia competing for control, both then took advantage of the turmoil to reach an agreement in 1907 about spheres of control—with Russia controlling Iran's northern region and the British the southern part.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, we could say Iran's ambitions not only grew out of its rich history, but different actors and players with varied motives helped mold and contribute to these ambitions.

## **A. CULTURE**

Iran's culture has been influenced and re-shaped by different people who settled and then left the country long before the Shah's 1925 rise to power. Known for its resilience and fighting spirit, it is said Iran was "initially a nation of conquerors, but has been repeatedly invaded, conquered, and humbled by other powers, including the Greeks, the Arabs, the Mongols, and the Turks."<sup>14</sup> More recently, the Shah's reign and his

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<sup>12</sup> "Historical Overview of Politics and Power in Iran," *World Savvy Monitor* (March 8, 2009), [http://worldsavvy.org/monitor/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=500&Itemid=867](http://worldsavvy.org/monitor/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=500&Itemid=867).

<sup>13</sup> "History: Iran's History in Brief."

<sup>14</sup> David E. Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), 5.

modernization projects entailed opening Iran's doors to western culture, as well as granting Britain control of all of Iran's oil resources through its ownership of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.<sup>15</sup>

Eventually, the U.S. inherited the position occupied by the British, and though he took pride in Iran's importance to regional security, the Shah proved incapable of making his own decisions without U.S. blessings.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, this did not sit well with neutralist Shia leaders.

Religion has always played a major role in Iran and "Shi'ism has been a central feature of Iranian life since the time of the Arab conquests in 637 A.D. Shi'ism provides an ideological framework from which Iranians can draw strength and peace. It is central to their identity as a theocratic state and a source of deep commitment inherent in their collective national identity."<sup>17</sup> In the wake of the Shah's regime disintegrating during the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini was able to establish an Islamic state. The revolution was a response by the Iranian people to the Shah's authoritarian style of leadership and his continued submission to foreign powers. Khomeini's unprecedented victory prompted the public as well as religious leaders elsewhere to unite behind him as they rallied to try to topple monarchies and constitutional governments and establish Islamic nations.

The establishment of an Islamic Iran based on Shi'ite ideology "served as the nucleus and the driving force in the unification and resistance of foreign control and influence."<sup>18</sup> Iranians have viewed the revolution as a source of freedom from years of oppression and injustices during the Shah's reign and the country's submission to foreign powers.<sup>19</sup> Or, as another author has put it, "Although the revolution's distinctive religious

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<sup>15</sup> Shapour Ghasemi, "History of Iran: Pahlavi Dynasty," *Iran Chamber Society*, <http://www.iranchamber.com/history/pahlavi/pahlavi.php>.

<sup>16</sup> David E. Williams, Jr., *Iran's Nuclear Program: An Assessment of the Threat to United States* (Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, December 2009), 9, 13, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

and nationalist components were Shi'a and Iranian respectively, Iran's leaders proudly viewed their revolution as belonging to the entire world—or at a minimum, to the entire Islamic world.”<sup>20</sup>

Iranians' nationalism and strong dedication to Shi'ia Islam can be attributed to their history of being victims of invasion, oppression, and control. Their ambition to re-take Bahrain and some Gulf Islands, which they claim, had previously belonged to Iran, and their bullying of smaller nations is, in some respects, a show of defiance in the face of the country's historic vulnerability, and reflects their desire to alter Iran's image and identity.

## **B. GEOGRAPHY**

Iran's location means it is surrounded by predominantly Sunni countries, and “as a religious minority, Shi'ites in Iran have always been suspicious and wary of their neighbors.”<sup>21</sup> The lack of trust between Sunnis and Shia has helped isolate Iran, at the same time Iran has sought to defend itself from foreign intervention and control.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Power and Paradox in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 81.

<sup>22</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics*, 16.



Figure 2. Geographic Location of Iran

Even prior to the revolution, Iranians had started to diffuse Shi'ism to their Arabian neighbors. But it was not until Khomeini assumed power as the new leader of the Islamic Republic that Iran began to commercialize and spread the Islamic Revolution itself.<sup>23</sup>

To export the revolution meant exporting Shi'ism. In order to do this effectively, Khomeini and others forged ties with both Sunni and Shi'ite organizations. They also created new groups to help arouse the public and provoke existing regimes.<sup>24</sup> One of Khomeni's strategies was to export Shi'ism as a force multiplier in the region. By creating chaos through assisting Shias who were unwelcome in neighboring countries, he made it very difficult for any foreign nation to take control and influence Iran.

<sup>23</sup> Geoffery Kemp, "Iran and Iraq: The Shia Connection, Soft Power, and the Nuclear Factor," *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report 156 (November 2005), <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/sr156.pdf>, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Frederic Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East* (RAND Corporation, 2009), 81.

Iran's open support for Hizbollah and other terrorist groups has not only broadened Iran's reach in the region, but has posed an impediment for any foreign nation trying to influence Iran. According to Henry Crumpton, the State Department Counterterrorism Coordinator, "Its ties to Hezbollah also provide Iran with a power projection tool—an extension of their state, allowing it to authorize (or prevent) terror attacks as a way to exercise influence in the region or beyond."<sup>25</sup>

Iran's strategy of exporting Shi'ism was not just an ingenious defensive move, but was designed to ensure Iran would be the central force that would and could control the Middle East.

### **C. POLITICS**

Prior to the revolution, Iran had a constitutional government. Reza Shah introduced economic reforms and re-structured the military and government administration. When his son succeeded to the throne, he continued his father's reform policies and economic reconstruction, with a view to making Iran a leading regional power at the same time.<sup>26</sup>

The Shah's involvement in political and governmental matters generated wide disapproval from politicians and his reform programs were sharply criticized by religious leaders and the public due to his over-dependence on foreign nations and his breaching of the constitution.<sup>27</sup>

After the Shah was removed from power, Khomeini transformed the country into an Islamic Republic, while at the same time exercising his power over several revolutionary groups.<sup>28</sup> Competition among political groups was not new in Iran, where the political system is best described as a "composite of key personalities, their informal

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<sup>25</sup> U.S. House of Representatives Report, "Recognizing Iran as a Strategic Threat: An Intelligence Challenge for the United States," Staff Report of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Sub Committee on Intelligence Policy August 23, 2006, 20.

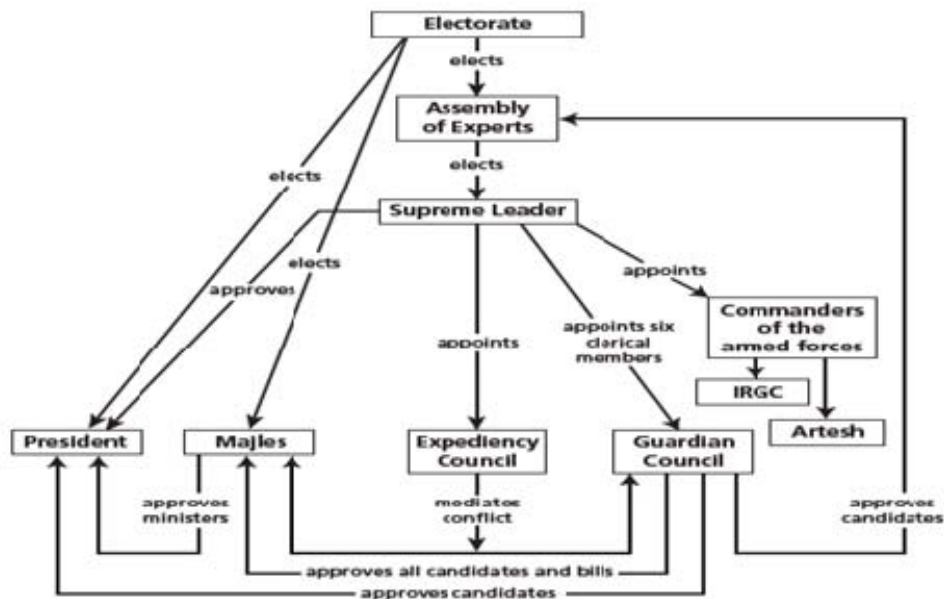
<sup>26</sup> Iran Chamber Society, "History of Iran."

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics*, 37.

networks and relationships with other individuals and power centers (all of which converge over common interests in the form of political factions), and the institutions with which they are associated.”<sup>29</sup> From the Supreme Leader, to the president, to the Majles, and including the Assembly of Experts, the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council, the Judiciary, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations (SCFR) and Iran’s Security Forces, the different roles and actors who are formally and informally involved in Iran’s government influence the country’s decision-making and implementation of its rules and policies, but with the Supreme Leader always at the nexus.<sup>30</sup>

**Figure 3.1**  
**Distribution of Power in the Constitution**



SOURCE: Adapted from Mehran Kamrava and Houchang Hassan-Yari, "Suspended Equilibrium in Iran's Political System," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 94, October 2004, p. 506.

RAND MG579-2.1

Figure 3. From Mullah's, p. 23

<sup>29</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics*, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Thanks to the different political groups and indirect actors involved in the country's political system, Iran's constitution and formal political structure do not fully shape or describe the entirety of the country's political system. Instead, the survival and stability of Iran's political system is the result of the complex nature of the relations among these several groups as each faction is counterbalanced by another power group.<sup>31</sup> These have grown in time.

### **1. Era of the Clerics**

In the 1980s, major positions in the Iranian government were held by clerics. Clerics' dominance in key parts of the government and society during this period grew from their support for the Islamic leader. They brought him to power and helped him with his vision for creating an Islamic Iran. The clerics were indispensable to Khomeini's rule. He conferred on them control over various important establishments and government institutions, thereby ensuring he had their support to enforce his policies in both domestic and international areas.<sup>32</sup>

### **2. Era of the Bonyads**

Seyed Ali Khamenei was elected Iran's supreme leader when Khomeini died in 1989 and Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani was elected president. Rafsanjani's reconstruction program involved establishing business relationships with merchants that resulted in informal groups and networks, known as bonyads. It was through this informal structure for doing business that a surge of bonyads was able to dominate the economic environment. Trading freely and unregulated by any political group or trade policy, bonyads were able to accumulate assets and improve Iran's economy. Taking advantage of the situation, they also used their financial resources to consolidate power and influence. Replacing the clerics as wealth producers, the bonyads became increasingly influential and prominent in Iran's political system. The role they played in

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<sup>31</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics*, 23, 38.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

government policy-making did not only involve improving Iran's economic situation and creating wealth for the country, but they also influenced government decisions and policy implementation beyond the economy.<sup>33</sup>

### **3. Era of the Revolutionary Guards**

The year 2000 marked the beginning of the Era of the Revolutionary Guards. Under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Revolutionary Guards came to control almost every institution in Iran, and served as the Praetorian Guard for conservatives. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (the IRGC), serving as the right hand of the Supreme Leader, became increasingly conspicuous in the political arena. The IRGC's role has been to uphold and preserve the doctrines of the revolution, to include support of terrorism and expansion of terrorist groups, as well as involvement in the country's political matters.<sup>34</sup>

Today, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps remains the most powerful among all the political groups influencing policy making in the government.

In sum, what we can say is that whoever has gained access to and support from the Supreme Leader, has been able to play the leading role in shaping policy.

*The story of politics and power in Iran is marked by tension between conservative and liberal, religious and secular, autocratic and democratic, and elite and populist elements. From its ancient and Shia Islam influences to its particular brand of nationalism, theocracy, petrocracy, and oligarchy, the forces shaping modern day Iran are unique.*<sup>35</sup>

### **D. ECONOMY**

Iran's vast oil reserves not only brought economic prosperity to Iran during the Shah's regime, but also interference from foreign nations competing to control Iran's oil

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<sup>33</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics*, 56–57.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 58, 60.

<sup>35</sup> "Three Main Factions within Iran's Government," *World Savvy Monitor* (March 8, 2009), [http://worldsavvy.org/monitor/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=497&Itemid=870](http://worldsavvy.org/monitor/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=497&Itemid=870).

production. Foreign nations increasingly meddled in Iran's affairs and weakened the government's capacity to monopolize and serve its own interests. The aftermath of World War II resulted in a global economic downturn and the government needed financial resources. Trying to avoid dependency on foreign assistance and investments, the Majlis appointed Mohammed Mossadegh as Prime Minister in 1951 to oversee the nationalization of the oil industry in order to gain greater control over its domestic supplies.<sup>36</sup>

Iran understood oil is what the superpowers were after. It has used its oil ever since. "Control over the greatest concentration of energy resources has two goals: (1) economic: huge profits for energy corporations, construction firms, arms producers, as well as petrodollars recycled to U.S. treasury, etc; and (2) it is a lever of global geopolitical control."<sup>37</sup>

Rich in natural gas and ranked as the country with the world's third largest oil reserves,<sup>38</sup> Iran has long recognized that by controlling oil in the region, it would gain the necessary resources to fund its terrorist activities and exert its influence on other countries with large Shi'a populations.<sup>39</sup> Iran's ability to control the flow of oil in the region would mean that foreign nations that have a heavy presence in oil-rich Arab countries would see their influence and presence diminished. In addition, countries in the region would have to succumb to Iran's goals and ambitions. Meanwhile, given its oil reserves, Iran has proven its ability to continue the expansion of its nuclear program through which it also seeks to create instability and exert its influence.

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<sup>36</sup> Williams, Jr., *Iran's Nuclear Program: An Assessment of the Threat to United States*, 15, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Representative Press, "The Question of Oil: U.S. Corporate Interests in Control of Middle East's Oil," <http://www.representativepress.org/Oil.html>.

<sup>38</sup> "Independent Statistics and Analysis," *U.S. Energy Information Administration*, <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/Iran/Background.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 12.

## E. CONCLUSION

Iran's increasing ambitions can be said to have been shaped by its history of having been repeatedly conquered and invaded by different powers, and by its dominance by superpowers. This has influenced its culture of resilience and its desire to defy aggressors.<sup>40</sup>

With this culture also comes Shi'ism, which has played a major role in Iranians' nationalism, and has helped bind Iranians together. "Iranian nationalism combined with Shi'ism has led to the emergence of a proud people with a desire for self-determination that often challenges Western ideas for the position and direction of the Middle East."<sup>41</sup>

Iran's strategic location between Sunni states had made it easier for Iran to export revolution and Shi'ite ideologies to its Arab neighbors, and empower minority Shi'ite groups in the region. The actors involved in Iran's domestic political system have also profoundly contributed to its aggressive ambitions and have helped shaped Iran's identity.

*Revolution enhanced Iran's sense of exceptionalism and created a potent mixture of religious ideology and deep-seated nationalism. The Islamic Republic today has the ability to act beyond the confines of the revolution as a nation pursuing nonideological state interests, but its viewpoints and behavior continue to be shaped by Iran's tortured history and identity as a revisionist and revolutionary state.*<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 12.

<sup>41</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

### **III. EVALUATING IRAN'S AMBITIONS DETERRENCE DYNAMICS MODEL**

#### **A. INTRODUCTION**

Iran's culture, religion, and government, as well as its growing ambitions, have changed over time. Having been bullied and invaded by other countries, Iran has struggled to change its personality in an effort to regain its image as a mighty and powerful nation in the region. Iran has played its hand as the weak and the mighty, the oppressed and the oppressor. Studying Iran's ambitions through three lenses - as Defensive, Aggressive and Unstable Iran—should help shed additional light on the country's growing ambitions. According to these three lenses, we see an Iran that seeks to protect its security and sovereignty, that bullies other nations, and that spreads Shi'ite ideologies in its attempt to acquire a nuclear arsenal.

According to the Defensive Model, it is Iran's history of being invaded and controlled by foreign nations that has been the driving force behind its ambitions. A Defensive Iran seeks to instill fear in its opponents in an effort to defend its security and sovereignty. According to the Aggressive Model, Iran projects itself via support for terrorism, the spread and expansion of Shi'ite ideologies, by bullying neighboring countries, and by imposing itself as the leader in the region. Aggressive Iran poses a clear challenge to U.S.-led allies. However, it is Unstable Iran that poses the most devastating threat to the region and the world as a whole. The transfer of nuclear technology to proxies and other terrorist organizations and its use would have massive implications, aside from the fact that this could trigger an international war.

Under each of these three headings—Defensive, Aggressive, and Unstable Iran—Iran's ambitions can be further examined and categorized according to its likely strategic and operational goals. These different goals are bound to influence Iran differently, and call for further examination to better understand the directions in which Iran's ambitions could take it.

## B. DEFENSIVE IRAN

### *Strategic Goals:*

- Protecting security and sovereignty
- Preserving Shi'ite ideologies
- Strengthening and spreading Iranian nationalism

### *Operational Goals:*

- Thwart any regime change
- Prevent interference and repel threats from foreign nations
- Instill fear

Having experienced many battles and invasions, Iran has learned a lot from its history. Given its history, its growing ambitions can be justified as a means to defend the country from any future foreign intervention. “Iranians view their history with immense pride—tinged with bitterness—and consider their country to be one of the world’s great civilizations.”<sup>43</sup> Under this model, a defensive Iran perceives its ambitions as a means by which to protect the country’s existence, its sovereignty, preserve Shi’ite ideologies and prevent any attempts at regime change. A defensive Iran is said to view its ambitions as the key to its survival.

The urge to defend the country stems from historical meddling by foreign powers. For instance, Iran’s fear of U.S. domination was heightened by the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. The fear was that the invasion of these neighboring countries could trigger a regime change in Tehran.<sup>44</sup> With an increase in U.S. forces and military establishments scattered throughout the region, Iran no doubt feels it is being fenced in and surrounded, particularly with the strong presence of the U.S. Air Force.<sup>45</sup> Persian pride has also contributed to defensiveness against western policies that would impose western ways in the region.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics*, 6.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>45</sup> Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, xiii.

<sup>46</sup> Williams, Jr., “Iran’s Nuclear Program,” 74.

Some disgruntled Iranians who prefer more freedom and more flexibility rather than strict adherence to Islamic ways have found comfort in allying themselves with western powers in an effort to pressure Tehran to introduce reforms. As people divide over how liberal or traditional Iran should be when it comes to Islam, Iranian nationalism has been a uniting force that the government uses to counter pressure for change in the country's political environment. Iran's Islamic government and its claim about Iranian sovereignty have been credited as the driving force behind the country's stability. Or, as some analysts have said, "The overlapping and factional nature of the Iranian regime is a source of its very stability and survival."<sup>47</sup>

As in the cases of Pakistan and Israel—both of which have a nuclear arsenal—Iran's ambitions can be perceived as defensive in nature. Out of insecurity, Iran has to covertly demonstrate that it is capable of repelling any threat from foreign countries. Propagating fear about what Iran is capable of doing and achieving may be a successful strategy whereby Iran instills doubt and prevents any foreign country from meddling in its national and foreign policies.<sup>48</sup> To instill fear, having a nuclear program would convince other countries to take Iran seriously. At the same time, having a nuclear capability would prevent Iran's government from looking weak.<sup>49</sup> Having a nuclear program "became a bellwether of Iranian independence and a demonstration of national pride and technological know-how."<sup>50</sup>

As in the case of Pakistan, which has its own insecurities, the U.S. has acknowledged that Pakistan's development of nuclear power has helped it address its vulnerability.<sup>51</sup> Still, with the public execution of the former Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein, and the elimination of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, Iran may feel more rather than less vulnerable. Fear of sectarian violence in Iraq, which has triggered

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<sup>47</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, 38.

<sup>48</sup> Jacquelyn Davis and Robert Pfalzgraff, "Iran with Nuclear Weapons: Anticipating the Consequences for U.S. Policy" *The Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis* (2008): 45.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics*, 96.

<sup>51</sup> Christine C. Fair, "Should Pakistan Get A Nuke Deal?," (March 23, 2010), [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/03/23/should\\_pakistan\\_get\\_a\\_nuke\\_d](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/03/23/should_pakistan_get_a_nuke_d).

anti-Shi'ite and anti-Persian violence in the past, may result in Al-Qaeda inspired terrorism. Other concerns are a massive influx of Shi'a refugees evacuating their home countries in the case of civil unrest, and a U.S.-led attack on Iran's nuclear program.<sup>52</sup> These are just some of the worries plaguing Iran. As far as the region is concerned, Iran would like countries to believe its ambition is rational and is intended only to appease and calm domestic pressures, as a sign of pride and prominence, and to declare its status as the regional leader.<sup>53</sup> This is similar to Russia's intent with its nuclear program following the Second World War when it was trying to gain an equal footing or outdo the U.S.<sup>54</sup> To quote Feroz Khan "insecure states that lack firm security commitments from allies and that fear for their survival are essentially 'orphans' in a nuclear-armed world."<sup>55</sup>

### C. AGGRESSIVE IRAN

#### *Strategic Goals:*

- expanding Iran's influence in the region
- reclaiming disputed territories
- controlling the flow and price of oil
- declaring Iran as leader of all the Muslim faithful
- spreading Shi'ism
- promoting economic & political interests in the region

#### *Operational Goals:*

- changing the power equation in the Middle East
- acquiring weapons of mass destruction
- isolating the U.S. and eliminating foreign influence from the region
- establishing alliances and support for terrorist groups

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<sup>52</sup> Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 156–157.

<sup>53</sup> Williams, Jr., *Iran's Nuclear Program: An Assessment of the Threat to United States*, 50.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Feroz Hassan Khan, "Nuclear Proliferation Motivation," *The Nonproliferation Review* 13, no. 3 (November 2006): 502.

If we examine Iran through the lens of the Aggressive Model, Iran's goals can be perceived to be assertive. Iran appears to want to incite a confrontation with its neighbors as well as drag in foreign countries, which would pose a major challenge for the U.S. In this context, Iran's goals would seem to include "(1) expanding Iran's influence over the Gulf Arabs and reclaiming sovereignty over disputed territories and waters; (2) codifying the influence of Persian nationalism among dissident tribes and provinces within and bordering Iranian territory; (3) controlling the flow of Persian Gulf oil and its pricing; (4) isolating the United States and expelling its influence from the region; and (5) bolstering Iran's credentials as leader of all Muslims, including those in the Arab world."<sup>56</sup> Contrary to what the Defensive Model suggests, an Aggressive Iran would have a significant impact as it acts on its ambitions.

The expansion of Iran's influence in the region through the dissemination of Shi'ite ideologies and Iran's full support for Shi'ite factions in neighboring countries is one way for Iran to fulfill its ambitions. Support for Shi'ite communities provides Iran with important strongholds and bases outside of Iran. According to Iranian elites, the Islamic regime does not have any imperial ambitions, but is mostly concerned with increasing its influence politically in the region and among Muslim nations.<sup>57</sup> Many believe that Shiism extends beyond the religious arena into politics, and religious conversion is not the main objective. Instead the aim in spreading Shiism is to gain greater political influence.<sup>58</sup> "Iran is active in spreading Shiism even in the countries which don't have a Shiite minority...to revive the dreams of the Safavid."<sup>59</sup>

Expanding Iran's influence would also enable Iran to reclaim disputed territories which it claims originally belonged to it and which it considers to be of strategic significance, e.g., it regards Bahrain as an Iranian province and also seeks the UAE's Abu

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<sup>56</sup> Jacquelyn K. Davis and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., "Iran with Nuclear Weapons: Anticipating the Consequences for U.S. Policy," *Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis* (September 2008): 18.

<sup>57</sup> Davis and Pfaltzgraff, "Iran with Nuclear Weapons: Anticipating the Consequences for U.S. Policy," 34.

<sup>58</sup> Manal Lutfi, "Religious and Political Shiism in Syria," (June 28, 2008), <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=3&id=13224>.

<sup>59</sup> Osama Saraya, "Saudi King: Spreading Shiism Won't Work," [http://www.kilil5.com/news/6302\\_saudi-king-spreading-shiism-wont](http://www.kilil5.com/news/6302_saudi-king-spreading-shiism-wont).

Musa and Tunb Islands.<sup>60</sup> Tensions were aroused in 2007 when Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's spiritual adviser threatened to free Bahrain and repeated Iran's intention to adjoin a loose province to its native land.<sup>61</sup>

The Tehran government has actively been involved with Shi'ite communities abroad in places like Lebanon and Iraq to help it achieve its short-term political ambitions and expand its influence.<sup>62</sup> This includes supporting "the Lebanese Hizballahs, the Palestinian Hamas, Pakistan/Afghanistan's Taliban and Iran's Revolutionary Guards which have all been considered as terrorist organizations."<sup>63</sup> For the U.S., which supports Israel, this is of great concern because Hizbollah has been resisting Israeli occupation on Lebanese territory as well as on Palestinian land. The result has been numerous attacks on both sides, to include war in 2006.

Though Iran has not openly supported the orthodox Sunni Moslem organization, Al-Qaeda, Iran might see potential for a tactical alliance with Al Qaeda.<sup>64</sup> For instance, it has actively worked "with the Taliban (through its IRGC/Qods Force elements) along the lines of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend,' in its vision of ousting U.S. forces from Afghanistan."<sup>65</sup> Even small, low-level Iranian-assisted violence, like street protests and riots, could inspire militancy in countries with small Shi'ite populations like the UAE and Kuwait.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Davis and Pfaltzgraff, "Iran with Nuclear Weapons: Anticipating the Consequences for U.S. Policy," 34.

<sup>61</sup> Shimon Shapira and Daniel Diker, "Iran's 'Second' Islamic Revolution: Its Challenge to the West," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, 53.

<sup>62</sup> Christoph Marcinkowski, "Between Greater Iran and Shi'ite Crescent: Some Thoughts on the Nature of Iran's Ambition in the Middle East," *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies* (2007): 28.

<sup>63</sup> Afshon P. Ostovar, *Guardians of the Islamic Revolution: Ideology, Politics, and the Development of Military Power in Iran* (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009), 10.

<sup>64</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," *Congressional Research Services* (June 22, 2009): 29.

<sup>65</sup> Davis and Pfaltzgraff, "Iran with Nuclear Weapons: Anticipating the Consequences for U.S. Policy," 34.

<sup>66</sup> Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 149.

Islamic Iran has been trying to impose itself as the leader of the region, which has caused concerns among neighboring states. For Saudi Arabia, the continued rise of Iran threatens to lead to a conflict between Sunni's and Shi'ites. The Kingdom does not want to witness an Iranian sponsored demonstration similar to what happened during the 1980 & 1990 Hajj pilgrimages in Mecca. Saudi Arabia, considered to be the leader of Sunni Muslims, has reason to fear that Iran will stir up chaos inside the Kingdom by offering its support to Saudi Shi'ites.<sup>67</sup> For the UAE and Bahrain, with their high number of Iranian residents, the fear is that Iran might try to reclaim its disputed islands, as well as incite street protests. The gulf country of Qatar, which shares with Iran a rich natural gas field, is also cautious about Iran's ambitions.<sup>68</sup>

An Aggressive Iran in possession of a nuclear arsenal would enable Iran to deter and defy any foreign influence in the region and would also help prevent the possibility of externally supported regime change. Once it has nuclear weapons, Iran would automatically gain a more prominent role in shaping the stability and security of the region.<sup>69</sup> One big advantage for Iran in acquiring nuclear power is that it could then deter Israel from attacking it, and would have the power to retaliate with devastating effect when attacked by any enemy. With a nuclear capability, Iran would be able to further promote its political and economic interests. If Iran can control the region politically, Iran would be able to isolate or limit other countries, like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE from dealing with the U.S.<sup>70</sup>

It cannot be denied that Iran's development of a nuclear program would have grave consequences for the region. "Iran is not Iraq . . . . It is stronger politically and militarily. One cannot attack Iran without paying a heavy price. Leaders of the West clearly realize this."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Katzman "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," 27.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Shahram Chubin, "Iran's Nuclear Ambitions," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/chubin\\_intro1.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/chubin_intro1.pdf), 6, 10.

<sup>70</sup> Davis and Pfaltzgraff, "Iran with Nuclear Weapons: Anticipating the Consequences for U.S. Policy," 3420.

<sup>71</sup> Wehrey et al., "Dangerous but not Omnipotent," 147.

#### **D. UNSTABLE IRAN**

##### *Strategic Goals:*

- promoting the Islamic Revolution to the Gulf countries
- destruction of Israel
- defying U.S./UN embargo and establishing outside economic ties
- mastering nuclear technologies

##### *Operational Goals:*

- passing on weapons technology
- deterring a U.S./Israel attack
- using proxies to combat enemies
- fostering terrorism

Under this model, when the regime collapses, “certain elements could seek to use external threats as a means of regaining popular support.”<sup>72</sup> In this scenario, several factions would no doubt race to take control of the country. At its worst, a civil war would result. Aside from havoc inside Iran, attempts to sell or trade weapons, to include Iran’s nuclear technology, would pose a high risk of danger to the international community. Hence, Unstable Iran’s ambitions would prove especially devastating, and Iran’s nuclear capabilities and its support for terrorism should be a major concern.

Strict measures imposed on Iran by the UN have caused internal rifts between the government and the public. An embargo on imports, the freezing of Iranian assets and other trade restrictions have crippled Iran’s economy. Several firms have relocated to other countries, with thousands transferring their businesses to the Gulf thanks to increasing rates of inflation and high unemployment which especially affect the younger

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<sup>72</sup> Davis and Pfaltzgraff, “Iran with Nuclear Weapons: Anticipating the Consequences for U.S. Policy,” 3451.

generations. With the Iranian government depending on the public's zeal and fighting spirit, the fact that most members of the younger generation do not bother about politics, but would rather leave the country in search of greener pastures, is a problem.<sup>73</sup>

Nevertheless, given Iran's long history of perseverance and defiance, coupled with its pride, not even sanctions have diminished Tehran's ambitions. As reported in a RAND Project Air Force study, "these measures may merely induce Tehran to stand firm in its refusal to comply with the expectations of what it regards to be powers hostile to the very existence of the Islamic Republic while strengthening the very conservative forces that the sanctions were meant to undermine."<sup>74</sup> One way in which the government has adapted is to present Iran as the victim of bullying by Sunnis and Iran's surrounding Arab nations. This was confirmed by former Iranian Foreign Minister, Ardeshir Zahedi who has claimed that tightening sanctions against Iran would not be effective since "Iran is self sufficient in food, energy and minerals."<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, with Iran's strategic location and its status as a major oil and gas producer, trade sanctions are not an efficient way to curb Iran's behavior because Iran can always circumvent the rules and find a partner willing to trade.<sup>76</sup> Although many foreign firms might have abided by the sanctions, some countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been hesitant in their support for sanctions on Iran for strategic reasons. Consequently, sanctions imposed since the Islamic revolution have not achieved their objectives, to the extent anticipated.<sup>77</sup> This was confirmed by the current Iranian

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<sup>73</sup> Davis and Pfaltzgraff, "Iran with Nuclear Weapons: Anticipating the Consequences for U.S. Policy," 3451.

<sup>74</sup> Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 171.

<sup>75</sup> Eldon Griffiths, "The Islamic Republic Won't Last Forever. The Iranian Phoenix Will be Reborn," <http://blog.crossculture.com/crossculture/2010/07/the-islamic-republic-wont-last-forever-the-iranian-phoenix-will-be-reborn.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 170.

<sup>77</sup> Sherifa D. Zuhur, "Iran, Iraq, and the United States: The New Triangle's Impact on Sectarianism and the Nuclear Threat," *Strategic Studies Institute*, 60.

President when he reiterated that he will not back down from his foreign and domestic policies and will continue to challenge his opponents and the rules of the international system.<sup>78</sup>

With an Unstable Iran, the country's quest to destroy Israel could be expected to dominate Iran's agenda. The Jewish state has been described as Washington's operating base in the Middle East,<sup>79</sup> and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's spiritual mentor, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, has encouraged him "to make the destruction of Israel a publicly declared strategic goal that sits near the top of the Iranian agenda."<sup>80</sup> The longstanding conflict between the Jewish state and the nearby Islamic countries could induce Iran to attack Israel through the use of proxies. Its own instability could inspire Iran to garner support from other Islamic countries by joining with it in its stance against Israel. The potential for all Muslims to unite when confronted by a common enemy was demonstrated in the 2006 war between Hizbullah and the Jewish state.<sup>81</sup>

## **E. CONCLUSION**

With Iran's ambition examined from three different perspectives, it is worth noting again that Iran's history has had a major impact on its outlook. With Iran having been invaded several times by different powers and having been interfered with by foreign countries, it is no wonder it has developed as it has. Like any rational country, Iran is cautious about its surroundings and is keen to defend its borders and sovereignty. As pointed out by Christoph, "The fact that the great powers have in fact intervened covertly in Persian affairs has led ordinary people, political leaders, even the rulers themselves to interpret their history in terms of elaborate and devious conspiracies."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Shahram Chubin, "The Iranian Nuclear Riddle after June 12," *Carnegie Endowment* (January 2010): 168.

<sup>79</sup> Shapira and Diker, "Iran's 'Second' Islamic Revolution: Its Challenge to the West," 49.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>81</sup> Haji-Yousefi Amir, "Whose Agenda Is Served by the Idea of a Shia Crescent," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 126.

<sup>82</sup> Marcinkowski, "Between Greater Iran and Shi'ite Crescent: Some Thoughts on the Nature of Iran's Ambition in the Middle East," 10.

The Iranian regime has served as the driving force to unify the country in its quest to repel any threat or interference. Hence, its goals and ambitions have themselves served to help safeguard the regime and ensure the country's integrity.

The lessons Iranians have learned from their past have predisposed them to be aggressive in their dealings with other nations so as not to experience the same oppression they have previously. Supporting Shi'a emigration to other countries and assisting spread Shi'ite influence in the region is one way to keep the country free from foreign control. The acquisition of military and nuclear capabilities is also designed to empower Iran and ensure its right to be a leader in the region.

With a Defensive Iran, the country's ambitions are focused internally on the country's existence, while an Aggressive Iran displays regionally motivated ambitions. In an Unstable Iran, some ambitions on the part of various factions would involve foreign countries. Hence, ambitions under this model would be the most disastrous and most challenging for the U.S. and its allies to deal with.

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#### IV. IMPLICATIONS OF IRAN'S AMBITIONS: REGIONAL VS. GLOBAL

The 1979, Islamic Revolution acted as a catalyst for Iran's growing ambitions. Having suffered from foreign invasion and influence under the Shah, many Iranians believed that he had undermined and sacrificed Iran's interests. In response, Iran's ambitions grew aggressively over the years. They have alarmed not only Iran's neighbouring Arab countries, but foreign countries as well. Iran's quest for regional control and supremacy and its desire to widen its power and influence far beyond the Middle East have worried some states in the international community, to include the United States and its allies.

As expressed by some Arab nations, Iran has the "ability to influence the domestic political circumstances of its neighbors, and its ability to act as a spoiler in the peace process."<sup>83</sup> As pointed out by Emily B. Landau, moderate nations in the region are threatened by Iran's pursuit of power. Through the use of Iran-backed Shi'ite communities which have been used as conduits to spread its influence.<sup>84</sup> For instance, after the prosecution of Saddam Hussein, Iraq's fledgling stability and independence were challenged by Shi'ite groups that had the ability to influence political activity and chaos inside the country<sup>85</sup>. Iraq offers an example of how Iran can destabilize the region, particularly as it trains and arms Shi'ite militant groups.<sup>86</sup>

One fear is that the spread of Iranian-backed Shi'ite groups across the Middle East will cause friction between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis.<sup>87</sup> The race for power between Shi'ites and Sunnis will then destabilize the region with groups vying to oust

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<sup>83</sup> Casey L. Addis et al., "Iran: Regional Perspectives and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service* (2010): 1.

<sup>84</sup> Emily B. Landau, "A Nuclear Iran: Implications for Arms Control in the Nuclear Realm," *Institute for National Security Studies* (July 2008): 44.

<sup>85</sup> Addis et al., "Iran: Regional Perspectives and U.S. Policy," 20.

<sup>86</sup> Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, "Country Reports on Terrorism: State Sponsors of Terrorism Overview," April 30, 2007, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2006/82736.htm>.

<sup>87</sup> Shapira and Diker, "Iran's 'Second' Islamic Revolution: Its Challenge to the West," 52.

each other from power. With Shi'ites penetrating Arabian culture, Sunnis are at risk of losing their religious dominance in the region. Iran would then have an easier time triggering a regime change, especially when it uses the rhetoric of calling countries illegal regimes.<sup>88</sup> As pointed out by Vali Nasr, "The change in the sectarian balance of power is likely to have a far more immediate and powerful impact on politics in the greater Middle East."<sup>89</sup>

The spread of Iran's influence in the region has also been through the formation of Shi'ite militias to defend against and fight forces opposed to Islam and Shi'ism. These Shi'ites militants have become more aggressive, to the extent that they now advocate terrorism to manifest their power. The most popular and successful Shi'ite militant group is Hizbullah in Lebanon, which many in the international community label a terrorist organization. Judith Kipper of the Council on Foreign Relations has described Hizbullah as the best there is at what it does.<sup>90</sup> This is further confirmed by a 2007 Department State Report that claims that, "Hizbullah remains the most technically capable terrorist group in the world."<sup>91</sup> The fear of the spread of terrorism was laid at Iran's feet in 2006 when the U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called Iran the main source of terrorism and said it has been operating in strategic regions in the Middle East causing serious concern to the U.S.<sup>92</sup>

Terrorist activities have not only affected the Middle East, but have also had far-reaching international implications, which the world witnessed nine years ago in the bombing of the New York World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Hizbullah's impact on the international scene has been significant due to its links with other international terrorist groups in different parts of the world, and especially since, it has

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<sup>88</sup> Shapira and Diker, "Iran's 'Second' Islamic Revolution: Its Challenge to the West," 53.

<sup>89</sup> Vali Nasr, "Regional Implications of Shi'a Revival in Iraq," *The Washington Quarterly* (Summer 2004): 7.

<sup>90</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Dexter Filkins, "The New York Times, Hezbollah Said to Help Shiite Army in Iraq," <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/28/world/middleeast/28military.html>.

<sup>91</sup> U.S Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism: Chapter 6, Terrorist Organizations," *Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism*, April 30, 2007, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2006/82738.htm>.

<sup>92</sup> Greg Bruno, "State Sponsors: Iran," [http://www.cfr.org/publication/9362/state\\_sponsors.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/9362/state_sponsors.html).

successfully established military cells on every continent.<sup>93</sup> Terrorists have killed foreign military personnel and civilians alike, have caused chaos in several countries, and have been a major concern for the U.S. and its allies. Michael Ledeen, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, refers to Iran as the mother of terrorism because Iran's name is always involved and linked to terrorist activities in the region.<sup>94</sup>

The Iranian Islamic regime has understood that to reinforce and sustain its control and influence internationally, it has to use its most important natural resource, a resource on which the whole world depends, namely oil. As one of the members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the second largest country with an oil reserve, Iran's ties with the fifth largest OPEC producer, Venezuela, has troubled some U.S. officials.<sup>95</sup> "Using oil as a weapon by favoring policies that drive up the price is a key to this relationship, as higher oil prices fill state coffers and undermine the oil-dependent U.S. economy."<sup>96</sup> Some countries such as Russia and China have increased their trade relations with Iran in order to capitalize on the country's resources. Considered to be Iran's second largest oil importer, China has seen its companies make major investments in Iranian oil ventures. In their bid to strengthen economic ties and gain favorable concessions from Iran.<sup>97</sup>

Aside from fostering ties with foreign states and building robust economic partners, *The Guardian* reported in 2004 that London's International Petroleum Exchange has been endangered by Iran's plans to establish a trading market for the Middle East region and OPEC members.<sup>98</sup> Iran's ability to forge ties with some OPEC members, and

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<sup>93</sup> Shannon W. Caudill, "Hizballah Rising, Iran's Proxy Warriors," *Joint Force Quarterly* (April 2008): 128

<sup>94</sup> "Iranian Nuke Dreams Challenge Bush Doctrine, Monday," *Fox News*, April 25, 2005, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,154407,00.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Caudill, "Hizballah Rising, Iran's Proxy Warriors," 131.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Jason Simpkins, "Money Morning, China Deepens Ties with Iran and Venezuela in Spite of U.S. Consternation," <http://Moneymorning.Com/2010/04/20/China-Iran/>.

<sup>98</sup> Terry Macalister, "Iran Takes on West's Control of Oil Trading," *The Guardian*, Wednesday June 16, 2004, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2004/jun/16/iran.oilandpetrol>.

its establishment of a trading market, would signify Iran's strength and dominance in the oil industry. If successful, Iran's use of oil as a means to bolster its regional and international influence and control would have dire consequences.

The long history of animosity between the U.S. and Iran has helped fuel Iran's ambitions. Iran's desire to develop nuclear weapons is in part to challenge U.S. supremacy in the region and limit or restrain its influence in the international system.<sup>99</sup> The presence of U.S. and foreign military troops in the Middle East has been deemed by the Iranian regime as an effort by the U.S. and its allies to meddle in Middle Eastern affairs and is considered detrimental to the country's sovereignty. Iran firmly believes that the U.S. wants regime change, and hence fears a military attack is inevitable.<sup>100</sup> To counter an attack and defend the country, the Iranian regime is gambling that the acquisition of a nuclear arsenal would make Iran sufficiently powerful. To deter an invasion or regime change.<sup>101</sup>

The notion of the Islamic regime developing and possessing nuclear weapons has been extremely alarming to the international community due to its "profound implications for regional stability, U.S. military planning, and for American and global efforts to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)."<sup>102</sup> A nuclear Iran is of significant concern to the U.S. because of Iran's ability to use nuclear weapons against Israel, because of the vulnerability of U.S. and foreign personnel in the region, and because of the possibility of Iran passing nuclear weapons or technology to terrorists or proxy groups to be used to wage war against the U.S. and its allies.<sup>103</sup> The Iranian regime has made its intention to wipe Israel from the map public on several occasions and has waged a proxy war in Lebanon and Palestine through the Lebanese Hizbullah and Sunni militants in Palestine. Iran does not seem troubled by the possibility of Israeli

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<sup>99</sup> Shapira and Diker, "Iran's 'Second' Islamic Revolution: Its Challenge to the West," 44.

<sup>100</sup> Ali Mostashari, "Iran: Rogue State?," *Military Center for International Studies*, 2.

<sup>101</sup> Barry R. Posen, "A Nuclear-Armed Iran: A Difficult but Not Impossible Policy Problem," *A Century Foundation* (2006): 1.

<sup>102</sup> Davis and Pfaltzgraff, "Iran with Nuclear Weapons," 4.

<sup>103</sup> Mostashari, "Iran: Rogue State?," 2.

retaliation, probably because the Iranian regime calculates its likelihood of survival is high due to the country's large size as compared to Israel's small size; one expectation might be that Israel would be entirely annihilated in a nuclear war.<sup>104</sup>

On a more general note, some foreign officials are concerned that a nuclear Iran might use its deterrent force to pursue more violent and sophisticated foreign policies, and might threaten other nations if its demands are not met with approval.<sup>105</sup> As the presence of U.S. forces in the region is deemed a hindrance to Iran's ambitions, possession of a nuclear arsenal would likely give Iran the power to rid the region of foreign troops and press for foreign policies that are favorable to it. It would appear that Iran's policy is not to use military force to remove impediments to its ambitions, but to deliberately increase costs inflicted on the enemy. The Islamic regime seeks to undermine its enemies and does not seem to hesitate to use violence to increase its influence.<sup>106</sup>

Iran's possession of nuclear weapons has "implications for cascading, or what used to be called horizontal or onward proliferation."<sup>107</sup> This poses a threat to the region by triggering an arms race as other countries feel threatened by Iran's weapons and would want to acquire the same weapons themselves. In this sense, there would be a cycle of weapons build-ups and would turn the region volatile, with every country brandishing its weapons in order to instill fear and get its own way. Other regions such as Europe and Asia would also be threatened by this, especially since the quest to possess WMDs would likely quickly grow out of control.

Iran's ambitions have several implications for U.S. foreign policy, as the United States has been the central focus of its ambitions. Allowing the Iranian regime to pursue its ambitions would result in greater instability, aggravate terrorism, and lead to energy chaos and proliferation of WMD. The intensive competitive relationship between the U.S. and Iran suggests that the U.S.'s allies have a major role to play in helping to bridge

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<sup>104</sup> Posen, "A Nuclear-Armed Iran: A Difficult But Not Impossible Policy Problem," 15.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>107</sup> Davis and Pfaltzgraff, "Iran with Nuclear Weapons," 2.

the gap between Iran and the U.S..<sup>108</sup> Pressure and threats are not options for getting Iran to comply with the UN and the international system. An Iranian expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Karim Sadjadpour, has pointed out that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei believes that responding and giving in to pressure only generates more of it<sup>109</sup> and, hence, a diplomatic approach is the only viable option, which is further supported by Harvard University professor Stephen M. Walt, who maintains that the way to deal with Iran is through diplomacy.<sup>110</sup>

To tackle and soften Iran's ambitions, the United States should devise new diplomatic approaches and revise its foreign policies towards Iran and the Middle East at large. Designing new U.S. policies must take into account the complexity of Iran's ambitions. As a first step, the U.S. should abandon its old rhetoric and project a less confrontational attitude by engaging in a multilateral dialogue with Iran that would recognize the importance to Iran of ensuring its security.<sup>111</sup> In terms of U.S. foreign policy, the U.S. must realize that its policies are creating instability in the region. "Spreading democracy, using sticks to try to prevent nuclear proliferation, threatening "regime change," using the hysterical rhetoric of the 'global war on terrorism'—all undermine the stability we so desperately need in the Middle East."<sup>112</sup>

The U.S. and its allies should acknowledge Iran's theocratic regime and recognize that democratizing Islamic countries is a remote possibility, as democracy does not conform to the tenets of Islamic belief. Democracy can only be introduced to countries whose government and people welcome such a transition and, hence, pressuring regime change in Iran to force democracy will only trigger a fiery confrontation.

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<sup>108</sup> Posen, "A Nuclear-Armed Iran: A Difficult But Not Impossible Policy Problem," 10.

<sup>109</sup> Karim Sadjadpour, "Seven Questions: What Iran Wants," *Foreign Policy* (July 10, 2008), <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=20293>.

<sup>110</sup> Caudill, "Hizballah Rising: Iran's Proxy Warriors," 131.

<sup>111</sup> Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 176.

<sup>112</sup> William E. Odom, "Down Home Common Sense, Victory is Not an Option: The Mission Cannot be Accomplished. It's Time for a New Strategy," <http://downhomecommonsense.net/VictoryisnotanOption.html>.

The large presence of foreign troops in the region has created insecurity for the Iranian regime. Plans by the U.S. and its allies to retain foreign forces to counter Iran's influence and to act as a stabilizing force in the region have made Iran suspicious of long-term U.S. interests. As voiced by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, regional problems and confrontations can be resolved regionally by member states without the intervention of outside forces.<sup>113</sup> To help Iran recover its sense of security, the U.S. must emphasize that it does not have long-term intentions to stay in the region. To make this clear, a timetable for withdrawal of foreign forces must be in place and implemented. Clear signals must be sent to the Iranian regime that only a very small number of troops would stay in the region to protect U.S. interests and monitor regional security. Ideally, these forces would work in conjunction with Arabian and Iranian forces to police the region. The U.S. must "underscore that U.S. military postures are for defensive purposes and to ensure stability, not to develop U.S. bases in order to launch attacks on regional neighbors."<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, to address the region's stability and Iran's insecurity, a multilateral security framework should be drafted that would include all the key players in the region, along with the international players such as the European Union and some of Iran's trading partners, such as Russia and China.<sup>115</sup> Because a security framework alone does not guarantee stability, participants must stipulate a new set of rules for how to deal with chaos, security measures, and interstate relations.<sup>116</sup> These would have to be agreed to by the participants as well by any other countries in the region.

Because of Iran's long history of animosity toward the West, the U.S. should make symbolic gestures that would help Iran's perception of the U.S., such as acknowledging Iran as a major player in the region. The U.S. should affirm Iran's capacity to play a constructive role in the Middle East in terms of assisting with regional

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<sup>113</sup> "Mottaki: Iran Monitoring Enemies' Diplomatic Moves Closely," *Fars News Agency*, February 23, 2010, <http://english.farsnews.com/printable.php?nn=8812041691>.

<sup>114</sup> Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 176.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>116</sup> Landau, "A Nuclear Iran: Implications for Arms Control in the Nuclear Realm," 43.

security, to include introducing confidence building exercises, such as military exchanges and training.<sup>117</sup> Engaging Iran to sponsor and volunteer for humanitarian assistance activities would help mobilize Iran's citizens and provide ordinary Iranians with the opportunity to meet and cooperate with foreign nationals and, hence, help change their perceptions about the West. Involving Iranians in inter-regional public activities would be a good way to build ties with the Iranian people who, in turn could influence the regime's perceptions about and dealings with the West.

Though there have been several diplomatic attempts in the past by the UN or Middle Eastern countries to broker a dialogue between Iran and the West, initiating a dialogue with Iran would probably require the U.S. breaking the ice first. Each country would have to set aside its animosity and try to negotiate contentious issues with the assistance of other countries. If both countries are not in agreement, the UN or another mediating party would have to step in to try to find resolution to issues that would be beneficial for both the U.S. and Iran. The U.S. should make use of issues that are common problems for both, such as drug trafficking, refugees, or ones having to do with the environment or health.<sup>118</sup>

The U.S. could use the assistance of Iran's allies in its diplomatic approach, such as by engaging Syria, Iran's closest ally in the Middle East, in talks relating to regional cooperation and security. Turning to Syria would be a relatively easy way for the U.S. to reach out to Iran.<sup>119</sup> Since Russia and China have good relations with Iran, fostering stronger U.S.-Russia ties or bolstering relations between the U.S. and China could help isolate Iran and might motivate it to open military and economic talks with the West. Providing some kind of incentive for Iran to back down from some of its ambitions, especially those that are not in accordance with international norms and could instead create conflict within the region, would perhaps elicit a positive response from the Iranian regime.

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<sup>117</sup> Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, 176.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>119</sup> Joe Klein, "Swamp Land, The Iran Approach," <http://swampland.blogs.time.com/2009/03/03/the-iran-approach/>.

Similarly, regional conflicts must be addressed in order for Iran and the U.S. to rebuild trust. The issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict and Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands have to be resolved. Americans have to do a better job of applying a standard of equality, and the U.S. administration should declare Israel's occupation of Palestine and part of Lebanon "illegal," the same as it did when Iraq invaded Kuwait. Applying a double-standard policy undermines U.S. credibility and Iranians' confidence in the U.S. government.

*When U.S. policy clearly identified the illegality of Israeli settlements—as it did during the Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations—U.S. diplomats were able to achieve genuine progress at beginning to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, as evidenced by various armistice agreements and the Camp David accords. Even if Arab parties did not “like” Israel, they knew that there was at least the possibility of a settlement based on return of occupied territory.<sup>120</sup>*

Iran's involvement in drafting peace treaties to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict would be of major significance to the Islamic regime because finding a peaceful solution to the conflict would also pave the way for Iran and Israel to mutually sort out their own issues. Here the U.S. and the Arab countries could assist.

On the nuclear issue, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) must make clear that its policies are applicable to all nuclear countries, without exception. If the U.S. and the IAEA are suspicious of Iran's nuclear intentions, nuclear inspections must be conducted periodically in all nuclear countries to check any non-compliance of IAEA rules. A representative from each nuclear country should accompany IAEA officials on their inspections in order to ensure that no double standard is applied and that no country escapes scrutiny. Moreover, nuclear supplies must be strictly controlled and supplied by one or two trusted suppliers that are strictly monitored by the IAEA. The U.S. can introduce energy projects in the region and Middle Eastern countries and Iran can collectively find ways to conserve energy and support a greener environment with less

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<sup>120</sup> The Race for Iran, "The Obama Administration, Iran, And Middle East Peacemaking," September 6, 2010, <http://www.raceforiran.com/the-obama-administration-iran-and-%E2%80%9Cmiddle-east-peacemaking%E2%80%9D>.

use of natural resources. These measures would also potentially help gain back Iran's trust and confidence, particularly if the international community demonstrated its commitment to peacefully reintegrate Iran back into the international arena.

Security has long been like a black cloud for Iran. Its growing ambitions to secure itself have created instability in the region. With several foreign nations and international agencies dragged into the region's problems, Iran's fears and ambitions now affect the whole world and trouble several states, including the U.S. Iran's unchecked ambitions will result in dire consequences if the Islamic regime is left as is.

A concerted international effort by all nations is essential to stop Iran's pursuit of its ambitions. As the only superpower in the world, the U.S. has a major role to play in overseeing and controlling Iran's ambitions. Hurling threats will only escalate the crisis. The only solution for pacifying a volatile Iran seems to be to continue diplomatic talks with the Islamic regime. Even if prior dialogues have not resulted in success, diplomatic negotiations should be continued with vigor, even if it takes time. John Limbert, a retired ambassador and professor of International Affairs at the U.S. Naval Academy has said, "Talking, hard and disagreeable as it might be, is likely to be more productive than continuing 28 years of noisy and sometimes violent confrontation."<sup>121</sup>

Iran and U.S. have deep-rooted resentments and suspicions. Sitting down at a negotiating table and engaging in talks might not be easy. Yet, maintaining realistic expectations may be the only hope for a promising and progressive dialogue.<sup>122</sup> Working to earn Iran's trust in the West is the initial step that the U.S. must undertake in order for the Islamic regime to reciprocate and soften its stance regarding its ambitions. Therefore, the U.S. must aggressively pursue diplomacy with Iran. As Iran's security and the regime's survival are issues that have long troubled the country, the U.S. must capitalize on these concerns and relay a clear message to Iran that the U.S. government will not pursue regime change and will not be interfering in Iran's internal matters.<sup>123</sup> "Political

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<sup>121</sup> John W. Limbert, "Negotiating with the Islamic Republic of Iran: Raising the Chances for Success-Fifteen Points to Remember," *United States Institute of Peace* (February 7, 2008): 4.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>123</sup> Christoph Marcinkowski, "Between Greater Iran and Shi'ite Crescent," 35.

and economic reform in addition to a stable investment climate could fundamentally redraw both the way the world perceives the country and also the way in which Iranians view themselves.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Andrew Gavin Marshall, “From Global Crisis to ‘Global Government,’ U.S. Intelligence: A Review of Global Trends 2025,” <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=11426>.

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## V. CONCLUSION: ASSESSING IRAN'S INCREASING AMBITIONS

Maintaining Iran's stability and protecting the regime's security have long been Iran's major concerns. Iran's insecurities are rooted in several invasions and a history of foreign control. Different cultures, from the Greeks, to the Arabs, to the Mongols, to the Turks have conquered Iran. Foreign control continued during the Shah's reign. The abundance of oil led countries such as Britain, Russia and the U.S. to vie for control of its resources, the country's finances, and the Shah. Defeated, humiliated, and victimized several times, Iranians were desperate for a change—an end to foreign control. The Iranians did not only oppose the Shah's submission to outsiders, but also the injustice of the international system which Iranians feel is manipulated and controlled by great powers like the U.S., to promote its own interests.<sup>125</sup>

By the 1970s, Iranians believed that Iran was in dire need of a strong leader who could thwart any foreign efforts to influence the country's national policies. Hope came in the form of Ayatollah Khomeini, who initiated the Islamic Revolution and transformed the country into an Islamic nation. He was considered by Iranians to be instrumental in ending the country's oppression.

As depicted by Ervand Abrahamian, "Khomeini is to the Islamic Revolution what Lenin was to the Bolshevik, Mao to the Chinese and Castro to the Cuban revolutions."<sup>126</sup>

The revolution was a turning point for Iran and brought massive changes to the country, politically, socially, economically and culturally. The transformation to a theocratic regime and Iran's status as an independent country free from foreign control has helped convince Iranians that the U.S. is targeting Iran because of the character of the Islamic regime, Iran's struggle to free itself from foreign domination, and the oil industry that the U.S. wants to control.<sup>127</sup> Thus, Iran sees the U.S. as a hindrance and obstacle in

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<sup>125</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics*, 13.

<sup>126</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 531.

<sup>127</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics*, 14.

its quest for stability and as a threat to the regime's sovereignty. Iran has no choice, then, but to weaken U.S. power. To reduce U.S. power requires that it muster most of the countries in the region to oppose a U.S. presence and defy U.S. influence.<sup>128</sup> By doing this, Iran would become a major power in the region.

This ambition to be the hegemonic country in the region has led Iran to export the revolution and to try to create instability by reaching out to Shi'a communities in different countries in the region. Creating instability in the Arabian countries enable the Islamic regime to mobilize Shi'a groups and assume dominant power. Reaching out and supporting Shi'a groups (as well as the Sunni communities) has helped create a barricade against the U.S. presence in the region. By being able to make trouble among them, Iran makes it difficult for foreign forces to reach into Iran and meddle in its affairs. Because the U.S. and its allies have demonstrated the ability to change a regime, as they did in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran has to explore and employ all available options to stop the U.S. from its plans to bring down the Islamic regime.

To deter U.S. intentions, Iran has to be aggressive in its strategies and use force and violence against Americans and those who support American interests in order to push them out of the region. "Iran must first weaken, discredit, and, if possible, humiliate the United States while at the same time successfully promoting its own influence and power as an alternative."<sup>129</sup> Terrorism became a tool the Islamic regime could use to show the international community its capability and the incomparable destruction it can cause. Several coordinated terrorist attacks have been carried out in different foreign countries with without Iran's involvement, but the 9/11 bombing of the New York Twin Towers is the most powerful the world has ever witnessed. It demonstrates the intensity that terrorism can inflict on civilians and governments alike, both politically and psychologically. In a briefing by the former U.S. Coordinator for Counterterrorism,

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<sup>128</sup> Chubin, "Iran Domestic Politics and Nuclear Choices," 303.

<sup>129</sup> Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian leadership Dynamics*, 17.

Ambassador Philip C. Wilcox reckoned that terrorists strike anytime at any place and civilians are usually victims of terrorism, thus the horrific nature of terrorism escalates everyone's insecurity and vulnerability.<sup>130</sup>

U.S. support and a strong alliance with Israel has aggravated Iran's hatred for the superpower. As retired Brig. Gen. Dr. Shimon Shapira and Daniel Diker quote from Gholam Ali Adel, an Iranian parliament speaker. "England, then America, wished to have control over the Islamic world, to prevent Muslim unity, and to have control of the oil resources in the Middle East. Therefore...they established an artificial, false, and fictitious entity called Israel."<sup>131</sup> After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Khomeini called for the destruction of Israel and labeled Iran's major enemy, the U.S., as the Great Satan, while Israel is the Little Satan, which should be wiped off the map.<sup>132</sup> Israel's nuclear program, the threat represented by U.S. and Israeli nuclear weapons, and Iraq's attack on Iran in 1980 for which the Islamic regime was not militarily prepared, have further threatened Iran's security. Military surprises have caused the Islamic regime to enhance and reinforce its military defenses and capitalize on its nuclear ambitions.<sup>133</sup>

In analyzing Iran's escalating ambitions, it can be concluded that the country's security and the survival of the regime are of utmost concern to it. Rationally, it is every country's duty to protect its security, but Iran's long history of victimization and submission to foreign powers has led the country to pursue more aggressive ambitions as it seeks to defend itself from outside interference. The survival of the Islamic regime is itself of critical importance to the country, since it was the Islamic Revolution that propelled the country to confront foreign forces and put an end to foreign control. The revolution was viewed as the country's liberation from submission to outsiders.

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<sup>130</sup> Philip C. Wilcox, "Special Briefing," April 30, 1996, [http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/arms/cterror\\_briefing/960430cterror.html](http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/arms/cterror_briefing/960430cterror.html).

<sup>131</sup> Shapira and Diker, "Iran's 'Second' Islamic Revolution: Its Challenge to the West," 4449.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>133</sup> Chubin and Litwak, *Debating Iran's Nuclear Aspirations*, 106.

Similarly, western culture is considered a threat to Iran's strict Islamic ideology; it is blamed for the fragmentation of the society.<sup>134</sup> Consequently, we could say the Islamic regime serves as the country's driving force and symbol of its strength.

Iran behaves aggressively when it is threatened and provoked. The State of the Union Address in 2002 when former President George Bush included Iran in the "axis of evil" together with North Korea and Iraq angered Iranians and instigated the release of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a member of a terrorist organization notorious for its killing of U.S. personnel in Afghanistan.<sup>135</sup> Iranians' distrust of the U.S. and its allies have made them believe that the U.S. is determined to bring down the Islamic regime. This, in turn, causes the Iranian leaders to "do what they believe they must do to ensure their regime's survival. With survival at stake, they will vacillate between extremes of concession and brutality."<sup>136</sup> Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, a top Iranian military official, has said through an Iranian New Agency that if America attacks Iran, no American in the region would survive.<sup>137</sup> This aggressiveness was reiterated by the Iranian Defense Minister who said that Iran would retaliate with unpredictable consequences if attacked.<sup>138</sup>

"The lesson that Iranians often draw from their history is one of "us alone against a hostile world."<sup>139</sup> This Iranian perception has played a significant role in shaping the Islamic regime's growing ambitions. Iran's desire to confront and challenge those who have exploited the country and Iranians' feelings of betrayal and mistrust have resulted in deep hatred for America and an anti-Western stance in Iran's relations with other

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<sup>134</sup> Limbert, "Negotiating with the Islamic Republic of Iran: Raising the Chances for Success-Fifteen Points to Remember," 3.

<sup>135</sup> Amb. Crocker, "Putting Iran in the 'Axis of Evil' Led Them to Release Brutal Insurgent Leader," *The Washington Independent*, <http://washingtonindependent.com/86820/amb-crocker-putting-iran-in-the-axis-of-evil-led-them-to-release-brutal-insurgent-leader>.

<sup>136</sup> Limbert, "Negotiating with the Islamic Republic of Iran: Raising the Chances for Success-Fifteen Points to Remember," 8.

<sup>137</sup> Vos Iz Neias, "Iran: Will Strike U.S. Troops if Attacked: Army Chief," <http://www.vosizneias.com/52709/2010/04/08/tehran-iran-will-strike-u-s-troops-if-attacked-army-chief/>.

<sup>138</sup> Haaretz, "Iran: If Attacked Our Response Will Be Wide-Ranging and Unpredictable," (August 23, 2008), <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/iran-if-attacked-our-response-will-be-wide-ranging-and-unpredictable-1.309716>.

<sup>139</sup> Limbert, "Negotiating with the Islamic Republic of Iran: Raising the Chances for Success-Fifteen Points to Remember," 6.

countries. In its effort to become a hegemonic power in the region, “Iran is determined to reshape the Middle East in its own image—a deliberate clash of civilizations with the United States.”<sup>140</sup>

The international community, and especially the U.S., will have a significant role to play in slowing down Iran’s ambitions. Resuming diplomatic talks with Iran is the only available option for world leaders. U.S. policy makers will have to change the world’s perception of Iran as an irrational country and take a more optimistic view regarding diplomacy. The international community will have to show its desire and commitment to safeguard Iran’s sovereignty and security, and do away with its double standards. Acknowledging Iran’s capacity to be a constructive regional leader should help earn trust and confidence from the Islamic regime. In exchange for Iran’s cooperation, the international community might need to help with economic development and stability. Restoring confidence in Iran and demonstrating the desire to forge genuinely friendly relations with the Islamic country should provide an atmosphere conducive to convincing Iran to transform its ambitions from those of an aggressive insecure power to those of a country interested in more useful and beneficial ways to assert itself. As pointed out by John Limbert, “The combination of Iran’s great imperial past and its weakness in the last three hundred years has created a gap between rhetoric and reality. Yet, while history certainly matters to Iranians, they will on occasion bury the past to reach an agreement, especially if that agreement serves a larger interest.”<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Shapira and Diker, “Iran’s ‘Second’ Islamic Revolution: Its Challenge to the West,” 34.

<sup>141</sup> Limbert, “Negotiating with the Islamic Republic of Iran: Raising the Chances for Success-Fifteen Points to Remember,” 1.

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