

# COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

1777 F Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006  
tel 202.509.8400 fax 202.509.8490 www.cfr.org

## United States Middle East Policy

Prepared Statement by

**Ray Takeyh**

*Senior Fellow for Middle East Studies, Council on Foreign Relations*

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More than any other nation, Iran has always perceived itself as the natural hegemon of its neighborhood. Iranians across generations are infused with a unique sense of their history, the splendor of their civilization, and the power of their celebrated empires. A perception of superiority over one's neighbors defines the core of the Persian cosmology. The empire shrank over the centuries, and the embrace of Persian culture faded with the arrival of the more alluring Western mores, but an exaggerated view of Iran has remained largely intact. By dint of their history and the power of their civilization, Iranians believe that their nation should establish its regional predominance.

However, to ascribe Iran's foreign policy strictly to its sense of nationalism and historical aspirations is to ignore the doctrinal foundations of the theocratic regime. The Islamic revolution of 1979 left a permanent imprint on Iran's foreign policy orientation. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini bequeathed his successors an internationalist vision that divides the world between the oppressed and the oppressor. Such a view is consistent with Shia political traditions where a minority sect struggled under Sunni Arab rulers that were often repressive and harsh. Thus, the notion of tyranny and suffering has a powerful symbolic aspect as well as practical importance. Iran is not merely a nation seeking independence and autonomy within the prevailing order. The Islamic revolution was a struggle between good and evil, a battle waged for moral redemption and genuine emancipation from the cultural and political tentacles of a profane and iniquitous

West. Irrespective of changing nature of its presidents, Iran will persist with its revolutionary and populist approach to regional politics.

For much of the past three decades, the Islamic Republic's inflammatory rhetoric and aggressive posture concealed the reality of its strategic loneliness. Iran is, after all, a Persian nation surrounded by Arab states who were suspicious of its revolution and its proclaimed objectives. The Gulf sheikdoms arrayed themselves behind the American shield, Iraq sustained its animosity toward Iran long after the end of its war, and the incumbent Sunni republics maintained a steady belligerence. Iran nurtured its lethal Hezbollah protégé and aided Palestinian rejectionist groups but appeared hemmed in by the wall of Arab hostility. All this changed when Iraq was reclaimed by the Shias and the Arab Spring shook the foundations of the Sunni order. Today, the guardians of the Islamic Republic see a unique opportunity to project their power in a region beset by unpredictable transitions.

For the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei Arab Spring means "a people have emerged who are not dependent on America." Whatever confidence-building measures his diplomats might be negotiating in Europe, the Supreme Leader insists that Iran is "challenging the influence of America in the region and it is extending its own influence." In Khamenei's depiction, America is a crestfallen imperial state hastily retreating from the region. Today Tehran sees an America unable to impose a solution on a recalcitrant Middle East. Whatever compunctions Tehran may have had about American power greatly diminished with the spectacle over Syria where Washington's redlines were erased with the same carelessness that they were initially drawn.

The key actors defining Iran's regional policy are not its urbane diplomats mingling with their Western counterparts in Europe, but the Revolutionary Guards, particularly the famed Quds Brigade. For the commander of the Quds Brigade, General Qassim Soleimani the struggle to evict America from the region began in Iraq. "After the fall of Saddam, there was talk by various individuals that they should manage Iraq, but with Iraq's religious leaders and Iran's influence, America could not reach that goal," proclaimed Soliemani. The struggle moved on and today "Syria is the front-line of resistance." For the hardliners, the Sunni states attempt to dislodge Assad is really a means of weakening Iran. The survival and success of the Assad Dynasty is now a central element of Iran's foreign policy.

The fear gripping Arab capitals is that an arms control agreement will inevitably lead to détente with Iran. This concern has some justification in history. During the heydays of arms

limitation talks between the United States and the Soviet Union, nuclear accords were often followed by commerce and diplomatic normalization. Washington has often been seduced by the notion that a nuclear agreement can pave the way for other areas of cooperation. The challenge for the United States is to defy its own history. America must find a way to impose limits on Iran's nuclear ambitions through negotiations while restraining its regional ambitions through pressure. This will require rehabilitation of America's battered alliance system in the Middle East. Strategic dialogues and military sales can only go so far. Washington's cannot reclaim its allies' confidence without being an active player in the Syria and Iraq. So long as America exempts itself from these conflicts then its other pledges ring hollow to a skeptical Arab audience.

### **Iraq: Iran's New Frontier**

The Islamic Republic's approach to Iraq has undergone a subtle and important change. For much of the period in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion, Tehran's overriding objective had been to prevent Iraq from emerging as the dominant power in the Persian Gulf contesting Iranian quest for hegemony. Thus, it was crucial for the theocratic regime to ensure the Shia political primacy. However, Iran also guarded against any spillover from the enraging civil war that was threatening Iraq's cohesion. Dismemberment of Iraq into three fledgling states at odds with each other would present Iran with more instability in its immediate neighborhood. To pursue its competing goals, Iran embarked on a contradictory policy of pushing for elections and accommodating responsible Sunni elements while at the same time subsidizing Shia militias who are bent on violence and disorder.

The threat emerging from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has led Iran to become much more transparent and aggressive in its approach to Iraq. Iran has stepped into the many vacuums of Iraq: organizing its forces, directly defending its key cities and providing indispensable assistance in a timely manner. Iranian officers are embedded with Iraqi units and are leading campaigns against ISIL strongholds. In the process, Iran has been instrumental in stemming ISIL's assaults and may account for shrinkage of its frontiers. However, these successes have come at costs that could endanger the stability of the region and the independence of Iraq itself.

Iran's reliance on the Shia militias as opposed to the Iraqi army has done much to disquiet the Sunni community, further accentuating the sectarian cleavages that divide that hapless country. Given that the rise of ISIL has much to do with the grievances of the Sunni community regarding its marginalization in Iraq, such a brazen attempt to empower the Shia militias at the expense of Iraqi national institutions further threatens the cohesion of that country. Although the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Abadi is concerned about the scope and scale of Iranian intervention, it has limited options given the forces arrayed against it. Iran's claim that its intervention as opposed to the passivity of the United States and Turkey has saved the day does seem to resonate with both the Shias and the Kurds.

To be sure, Iran has even begun reaching out to a segment of the Sunni community with its offer of arms and aid. The message of assistance is buttressed by the claim that the international community and the United States are indifferent to the plight of Iraq. It is best for the Sunni community to come to terms with Iraq's new benefactor, the Islamic Republic of Iran. This message has thus far not been well-received by the Sunni leadership. As the result of ISIL's assault and Iranian response, Iraq today once more stands divided against itself.

Yet another disturbing aspect of Iran's machinations in Iraq is its plans for the Shia militias potentially beyond Iraq. Iran's model of operation in Iraq is drawn from its experiences in Lebanon in the early 1980s. At that time, Iran amalgamated a variety of Shia parties into the lethal Hezbollah. In recent years, Hezbollah has emerged as not just Iran's most reliable terrorist ally but an Iranian proxy in variety of the region's conflicts. The Hezbollah shock troops have appeared not just in Lebanon but also in Syria and Iraq. The purpose of Iran's military dispatches and its organization of the Shia militias may have been limited to Iraq but as the region further descends into a sectarian conflict, these forces may yet serve as an instrument of Iranian power throughout the Middle East.

### **Syria: The epicenter of the New Middle East**

The Arab Spring and its promises of peaceful democratic change grounded to a halt in Syria. Bashar Assad followed the grisly footsteps of his father in massacring his countrymen. The civil war in Syria is not just tearing up that country but it is defining the future of the region. The Middle East is a region that perennially divides against itself. The late Malcom

Kerr, one of the preeminent historians of the region, once described the 1960s as a time of an Arab cold war with the monarchies and radical republics struggling against each other. Power more so than ideology defined that cold war, thus allowing it to gradually fade. Today, a different and a more durable cold war is descending on the Middle East, this time underpinned by sectarian identities. Syria is at the heart of this conflict, pitting Iran and the Shia militants against Saudi Arabia and the Sunni sector. The region cannot regain its footing unless the Syrian civil war somehow ends.

In the heady days of the Arab Spring, despots were collapsing with alacrity that heartened even the most cynical observers of the Middle East. A region known for authoritarian stability was suddenly faced with mass protests and calls for democratization that were proving successful. “Assad must go” was proclaimed from the seat of Western chancelleries. How could he not go when the more formidable House of Mubarak collapsed with such ease? And how could the president of the United States not call for the departure of an adversary after he had called for the eviction of America’s most trusted ally when he faced a popular revolt.

Still, Syria proved different. Its divided ethnicities, its central role in Iran’s assault on the prevailing Arab order, mean that Assad had many more cards up his sleeves. Washington proclaimed a goal but failed to plan for the actual removal of Assad. It is difficult to predict with precision how a civil war unfolds. By their very nature, civil wars are unpredictable phenomena, subject to sudden shifts and changing fortunes. However, it is not too premature to suggest that the morale of Assad forces is high while the fragmented opposition is suffering not just from lack of arms but also the absence of international patronage. The infusion of Russian arms, Iranian funds and Hezbollah troops will ensure that Assad is well-maintained. The opposition can add to this misfortune the image of Syria’s tyrant begin accredited by the United Nations for dismantling chemical weapons he was not supposed to have, much less use.

The Islamic Republic’s calculations always differed from those of the United States. The mullahs were confident that Assad could turn back the forces of history. To check Iran’s power in the Levant, the United States has to an active player in Syria. Through provision of arms to reliable rebels, taking a firm stand against Russian and Iranian mischief, it is still possible to dislodge Assad from power. The challenge becomes more difficult every day. Too many lives have already been lost and too much advantage has already been ceded to Assad

and the Ayatollahs. To reverse this trend will prove a formidable, but ultimately, an indispensable task.

### **America's Role**

Although the United States has been effective in estranging Iran from its European allies and its traditional Russian protector, we have played a limited role in affecting Iran's position in the Middle East. Beyond arms sales to Arab state and attempts to assuage Israeli concerns, we have not undertaken a systematic effort to isolate Iran in its immediate neighborhood. Under the rubric of a policy of coercion, all of Iran's seeming regional assets have to be contested. From the Shia slums of Baghdad to the luxurious palaces of the Gulf, Iran has to find a new, inhospitable reality as it searches for partners and collaborators.

The success of America's Iran policy to some extent hinges on the nature of U.S.-Israeli alliance. Simply put, Iran today pointedly dismisses the possibility of U.S. military retaliation irrespective of its provocations. It is entirely possible that Iranians are once more misjudging America's predilections. Nonetheless, while America's military option has receded in the Iranian imagination, Israel still looms large. Fulminations aside, Iranian leaders take Israeli threats seriously and are at pains to assert their retaliatory options. It is here that the shape and tone of U.S.-Israeli alliance matters most. Should the clerical regime sense divisions in that alliance, they can assure themselves that a beleaguered Israel cannot possibly strike Iran while at odds with its superpower patron. Such perceptions cheapen Israeli deterrence and diminish the potency of the West's remaining sticks.

All this is not to suggest that Washington cannot criticize Israeli policies, even publicly and forcefully. The ebbs and flows of the peace process will cause disagreements and even tensions between the two allies. But, as it plots strategies for resuming dialogue between Israel and its neighbors, the administration would be wise to vociferously insist that the dynamics of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations will not affect Washington's cooperation with Israel on Iran.

Despite all professions of common interests and subtle and indirect hints of cooperation to come, the Islamic Republic will only alter the dimensions of its foreign relations if it is confronted with a dramatic threat. As in 2003, Khamenei will be prone to pay a high price for his survival. Should we gain sufficient coercive leverage then we will be in a position to alter Iran's

policies. Under these circumstances, we would strive for restricting Iran's nuclear program as opposed to the highly problematic task of conditioning its enrichment activities. Iran would be asked to cease subverting its neighbors and limit its support to Hezbollah and Hamas to political advocacy. Human rights would have to assume a high place in our negotiations—Iran must be pressed to honor international norms on treatment of its citizens. In the end, it is important to stress that the confrontation between the United States and Iran is a conflict between a superpower and a third-rate autocracy. We should not settle for trading carrots and sticks and hoping for signs of elusive moderation from truculent theocrats. A determined policy of pressure can still ensure that the Islamic Republic will be a crestfallen, endangered and therefore a constructive interlocutor.