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Introduction

On October 7, 2023, the Palestinian group Hamas launched an audacious attack on Israeli towns and kibbutzim north of the Gaza Strip, killing some twelve hundred Israelis and taking over two hundred hostages. Israel was shocked by the depravity and scale of the attack, and embarrassed by how easily Hamas outwitted its intelligence and breached its defensive wall to force the Palestinian issue back onto center stage. Israel reacted with a ferocious assault on the Gaza Strip. The ravages of the ensuing war and the humanitarian catastrophe that it unleashed, coupled with prospects of, first, war between Israel and Hezbollah, and then Israel and Iran, was a watershed moment for the Middle East. The United States' hope for a lasting Arab-Israeli peace as the foundation for regional economic integration and a trade corridor stretching from the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean was replaced by worries over imminent regional conflagration.

This was the latest chapter in the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also the bold manifestation of the ascendance of the Axis of Resistance, a regionwide revisionist political and military alliance of like-minded militias stretching from Lebanon through Syria, Palestinian territories, Iraq, and Yemen, formed and backed by Iran, and anchored in the same goal of defying America and defeating Israel.¹ The axis was demonstrating its power and reach along with its ability to upend America's plans for the region. This manifested a strategy that Iran has honed and doggedly pursued for decades to confront the United States and assert its influence in the region.

Hamas was part of the Axis of Resistance and shared Iran's strategic objectives. Iran and its close ally, Lebanon's Hezbollah, had trained and funded Hamas's military wing—and its sister organization, the

Palestinian Islamic Jihad—boosting its intelligence and operational capabilities. Once Israel embarked on its war in Gaza, Iran and other axis members came to Hamas's aid. They mobilized their military, political, and communications networks across the region, launching drone and missile attacks on Israel from Lebanon as well as US forces in Iraq and Syria, and immobilizing maritime trade in the Red Sea from their perch in Yemen. They displayed an uncanny ability to translate their shared strategic objective of combating Israel and the United States into a coordinated but flexible region-wide response. Israel retaliated against Hezbollah, and then in a show of force Israel attacked Iran's consulate in Syria in April 2024. Iran responded with a brazen attack on Israel with hundreds of drones and missiles, which led in turn to an Israeli attack on a military base in Iran. Then in July Israel assassinated the head of Hamas in Tehran and two months later killed Hezbollah's chief in Beirut. Iran again reacted with a barrage of missiles aimed at Israel. These exchanges brought the region to the verge of an all-out war. The axis had thus announced itself as a formidable regional force. That only increased the specter of direct confrontation between Iran and Israel, which would inevitably entangle the United States in broader conflict. Not long after, in October 2024, Israel invaded Lebanon to destroy Hezbollah and thus Iran's footprint in the Levant. Awaiting a conflagration, the Middle East's security once again sat on a knife's edge.

The West was surprised by the capabilities of the axis, and was clearly unaware of its intent and plan of action. Its understanding of Iran's strategic calculations is hopelessly inadequate and dangerously outdated. The West still looks at Iran through the prism of the 1979 Revolution, and the central role that religion and the clergy played in it. It is true that revolutionary ideology defined the character of the Islamic Republic during its formative years, and the values and memory of the revolution remain embedded in Iran's statecraft, but as this book will make apparent, the revolution no longer explains Iran's actions on the world stage. In fact, Iran's policies during the Gaza war should convince us that the time that Iran's actions could be neatly explained by Islamic ideology or intent to export its revolution is in the past. Rather than confirm the caricature image of an archaic theocracy begrudging

modernity and seething at the West, the war in Gaza made it clear that Iran today sees itself as the inspiration for a global movement of resistance to the United States—a reinvoation of the familiar anti-imperialism and anticolonialism ideals of the latter part of the twentieth century—and seeks to organize the Middle East around it. To achieve this aim, Iran is acting on assumptions and calculations that reflect historical experiences, security imperatives, and great power ambitions.

The Islamic Republic has long moved past its revolutionary beginnings and evolved into a prototypical nation-state. Islam remains the language of Iran's politics, and an instrument in the hands of its political class and military leaders to realize political and economic interests at home and define national interest abroad, but those aims are now secular in nature. Over the past four and a half decades, Iran has embraced a particular vision of national security that was defined in broad brush by the Islamic Republic's two supreme leaders who have led the country since the revolution, Ayatollahs Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei. That vision is inimical to the United States, and seeks Iran's security and greatness in keeping US influence at bay. In practice, this vision has found manifestation in the evolution of the grand strategy that has been guiding Iran's statecraft. This book will tell the story of this grand strategy. It will show that the authoritarian nature of the Islamic Republic notwithstanding, it is strategic considerations rather than managing dissent and domestic stability that is front of mind for Iran's rulers.

Consider that the October 7 attack and the Gaza war came barely a year after popular unrest swept across Iran, seriously challenging the Islamic Republic's hold over the country. In September 2022, thousands of Iranians had taken to the streets to protest the death of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, at the hands of the morality police who enforce observation of the hijab—head covering for women. Almost immediately, the protests evolved into a direct challenge to the core ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic as women across Iran shed their scarves, burned them in public, and symbolically cut their hair to decry the imposition of religious strictures on individuals, society, and politics by law and brute force. The protests soon attracted a broader cross section of political dissent in urban areas, and most intensely in ethnic

minority regions of Baluchistan and Kurdistan. These protests were an undeniable revolt against the domination of religious strictures over society and politics, the theocratic underpinnings of the Islamic Republic, and its harsh authoritarianism and mismanagement of the economy. For many Iranians and more so observers in the West, this was, at last, a secular and liberal backlash against Islamic rule in Iran, and the authoritarian imposition of its writ on society.

In the West these two events, spanning 2022 to 2023, were two sides of the same coin. Iran's incessant confrontation with the West and aggressive regional actions were the reason why the Islamic Republic was facing anger at home. Iran's policies, its critics surmised, had isolated it in the region and the world, and subjected its economy to severe sanctions, impoverishing its population, which was no longer willing to assume the cost of the grand strategic schemes that its leaders were pursuing. Was this not obvious to the guardians of the Islamic Republic that their strategy of defiance and confrontation was exacting an exorbitant cost on their population, loosening their hold over power? If the October 7 attack and its aftermath was evidence, that was not the conclusion that Iran's rulers drew from the popular revolt of September 2022.

The country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, saw that revolt not as a sign of the failure of Iran's foreign policy but rather its success. The protests were a plot hatched by Iran's enemies exactly because Iran was winning, getting closer to its goals.² In dozens of interviews and speeches after the protests started as well as after calm returned, the state's leader chose not to focus on the inviolability of the religious strictures that the protesters had challenged or talk about the country's dire economic situation. In fact, references to Islam and its laws were conspicuously scant in his remarks. Instead, he warned of a concerted attack on Iran's national security. Observers in the West are quick to dismiss such references to foreign intrigue, which are also echoed by leaders such as Russia's Vladimir Putin or Turkey's Recep Erdogan, as cynical ploys to delegitimize dissent. But these turns to protecting the nation against foreign intrigue, especially during crises, reflect the Iranian leadership's deeply held views, and the prism through which they see and react to events.

In his comments, Khamenei carefully analyzed the protests as a conspiracy, meticulously planned and instigated by the United States and its allies to weaken Iran, engineer regime change, and even break up the country. In a tweet in September 2023, on the eve of the first anniversary of the uprising, he accused the United States of forming a “Crisis Group” dedicated to destabilizing other countries, “including Iran.” The United States, he tweeted, “wished to create crises in Iran by aggravating ethnic [and] religious differences and using the issue of gender and women. That is [the] US’s plan.”³ Looking back at the protests in a 2024 speech, he asserted that resistance to the religious and legally mandated observation of the hijab is a “foreign project” and “imposed crisis.”⁴ These were clarion calls to the country’s security forces, making it clear to them that what they faced on the streets was not a battle between religion and secularism, and dictatorship and democracy, but instead a struggle between Iran and the United States. Stability and order demanded foiling foreign intrigue.

The defense of the hijab, therefore, has become a matter of shoring up state authority, and the harsh measures used to suppress the protests and punish those who participated in them have been justified not to protect Islamic rules but rather to defend the homeland. In fact, the protests achieved a notable victory in that observance of the hijab grew lax after the 2022 protests as throngs of women have since routinely appeared in public without head coverings. But the authorities do not display the same resigned attitude when it came to vigilance against a perceived foreign hand in destabilizing Iran.

Khamenei tells rapt audiences of security officials, politicians, and clerics that Iran is close to achieving its strategic goals, asserting, “It has climbed the foothills and is nearing the mountain peak.”⁵ It must remain steadfast and not tire of the journey. The closer it gets to the summit, the more America will strive to block its way. He sees the October 7 attacks and the war in Gaza through this lens; the crisis before America and Israel are evidence that Iran is getting closer to the peak. The imbroglio has taken away Israel’s aura of invincibility and put America on its heels in the region and more broadly the Global South. It has also cast Iran and its Axis of Resistance as veritable regional power brokers.

But what lies at the peak that Khamenei speaks of? What is the goal that Iran seeks? In 2005, Khamenei charged the National Expediency Council (Majles-e Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam), consisting of senior state leaders, with producing a strategic vision for the Islamic Republic. The result, “The Vision for Islamic Republic of Iran in the Horizon of 2025” (“Cheshmandaz-e Jomhouri Eslami Iran Dar Ofoq-e 1404”), was an Iranian version of similar multidecade “visions” that have proliferated across the developing South. Iran’s Vision 2025 likewise called for industrialization and economic growth, cultural, educational, and technological advancement, and building a modern Islamic state.⁶ The goal this vision set before Iran was to become the premier political, economic, scientific, and technological power in West Asia.

Four years later, in March 2009, in a speech to mark the start of the fourth decade of the revolution, Khamenei confirmed the commitment to this vision, stating that the coming decade would be one of “progress, development, and justice.” In that speech, he also identified the United States as the main obstacle to realizing those goals.⁷

The vision embedded regional ambitions in national ones, but as Khamenei admitted, it also revealed the fundamental contradiction in pursuing a vision of development in tandem with insisting on confrontation with the West. Faced with this dilemma, Iran’s rulers have argued that it is the United States that is at war with Iran, intent on blocking its path to the realization of its goal with economic sanctions and domestic unrest, and by containing its regional influence. Iran must overcome that challenge through resistance—economic, political, and military. Iran has not progressed on the goals of its Vision 2025 as planned, but it has invested considerably more in resisting America. That resistance, it expects, will protect it against US pressure, but also give it leverage, time, and space to continue to pursue its national objectives.

Twenty years on, the goals that Vision 2025 had in mind are moving further from Iran’s grasp. Although Iran’s rulers do not openly acknowledge the costs inherent in resisting the West, the price that the country is paying for pursuing it is undeniable. So why stay on this course, especially if it is true that behind the veneer of revolutionary legacy and

Islamic ideology, today's Islamic Republic functions as a modern legal-rational nation-state?

States have interests, but it is state leaders who interpret them and act on them.⁸ It is a country's leadership that defines what is essential to national security, where it begins and ends, and how to pursue it.⁹ That conception then informs their grand visions, guides their quotidian actions, and explains their patterns of behavior.¹⁰ Iran's conception of national security has evolved since 1979 around a distinct and deeply held view of national interest and national security, rooted in both recent and not-so-recent history—legacies of colonialism and national humiliation, loss of territory and foreign intrigue, and then war with Iraq and confrontation with the United States. That conception of national security is now ensconced in the worldview of Iran's leaders, guiding their defiant actions on the world stage. Those actions are not ideological expressions or random acts of violence devoid of direction; rather, they reflect a strategy and plan of action to execute it. It is appropriate to question the wisdom of that strategy, and that has become ubiquitous in public debates within Iran. That does not, however, obviate the fact that there are assumptions, a line of reasoning, and a particular reading of history that account for Iran's worldview and actions.

■ ■ ■

In 2015, a senior Iranian official, on a visit to the United Nations in New York City, met with former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Reflecting on his own firsthand experiences with political transitions in the Soviet Union and China at the end of the Cold War, Kissinger probed his Iranian guest on when it might be that Iran would similarly abandon its revolutionary ideology and embrace pragmatism, as Kissinger had once summed up in an article: when would Iran cease being a cause and act as a nation-state—and when would Iran bury the hatchet with the United States.¹¹

That pointed the conversation to philosopher Immanuel Kant and his theory of “perpetual peace,” which stipulates that conflict between states ends when the protagonists have exhausted themselves with

conflict, and are no longer willing to spend blood and treasure for even an iota more of gain in influence or territory. It is only then, Kant had argued, that states will see greater value in peace than in war. Had Iran reached that point of exhaustion, Kissinger wondered? Could it see Kant's reasoning through the fog of its ideology?

Yet Kissinger was surprised that his Iranian interlocutor had already mastered Kant. (In fact, he had translated the German philosopher into Persian.) When would the *United States* exhaust itself, wondered his Iranian interlocutor? When would *it* see reason and change course in the Middle East? Iran, he emphasized, was not pursuing a religious vision but rather a grand strategy that sought security by exhausting America so that it would quit the Middle East and leave Iran alone. For Iran, greatness would come despite the United States, not by hitching its wagon to its regional agenda. The United States will not accept the Islamic Republic and the revolution that produced it. Rather than either surrender to American demands or abandon its ambitions, Iran has opted to resist the United States as a necessary step to achieving its goals, expecting that its path will be meandering and fraught with conflicts as well as setbacks, but moving forward nevertheless.

On that day in 2015, it was not Islamic ideology but rather Kant that sat between American and Iranian statesmen as they pondered what comes next. According to this Iranian statesman, Iran was *not* a cause, and Iran's actions on the world stage were *not* a matter of ideology. Instead, Iran's foreign policy was calculated and pragmatic, a matter of national security: working to compel the United States to abandon its own cause against Iran and its containment of the country.

That exchange reveals the mindset at play in Tehran, along with its logic, aims, and expectations—as flawed as they may be. It reflects a strategic calculus—one that assumes that by applying sustained pressure, American plans for the Middle East will come to naught, and Washington will tire of containing Iran and shift course.

Fast-forward a decade, and it has been the United States—and not Iran—that is showing signs of exhaustion. After all, three consecutive American presidents starting with President Barack Obama have made clear America's wish to reduce its commitment to the Middle East, whether

to pivot to Asia or focus on Russia—although that may well change in the face of recurring crises in the region. Iran has played its part, and its leaders believe a big part, in bringing about the exhaustion that has led America to shift its gaze away from the region. Iran's grand strategy, then—and not its ideological fervor—has yielded this unexpected success.

Why and when did the Islamic Republic come to this grand strategy? How and why has it changed over the course of the past four decades? If the West is to contend with Iran, then it must move past its shibboleths about the country in order to understand what Iran is after and why. Only then can it ponder about how it influences how Iran will evolve in the future.

The following chapters will trace the origins and development of Iran's grand strategy, its core assumptions and allure, and how it has evolved over the past four decades to shape Iran and its relations with the West. Most of all, this book reveals how Iran's strategy—no matter how we may judge it—is an overlooked influence in shaping Iran's own society and politics—the failure of reform, recrudescence of hard-line conservative forces, growing imbalance in civil-military relations, and country's peculiar political economy.

Every state's grand vision could reflect hubris. That is true of Iran also, but to understand its actions abroad as well as its policies at home, we must understand that there is reasoning and calculation behind Iran's choices even when its behavior appears irrational and self-defeating.¹² Its drive to amass power and its strategy to assert its position is directed at securing its homeland against internal chaos and foreign intrigue. It is that concern, be it real or illusory, that shapes the assumptions, logic, and intent of Iran's strategy, and how and why the country has latched onto certain conceptions of national interest and national security.¹³

The Islamic Republic is the product of a revolution inspired by Islamic ideology. Key events since the 1979 Revolution have left a deep impression on the country's leaders, and as such, also account for how state and society have been organized. Between 1979 and 1989, Iran was transformed by the tumultuous upheaval of a great revolution, hostage crisis with the United States, brutal eight-year war with Iraq, and further confrontation with the United States in Lebanon. All of these early experiences combined to shape how the revolution's leadership saw

external threats and devised strategies to confront them. It is in interpreting the lessons of those events and addressing the strategic vulnerabilities that they exposed that Iran conceived the strategic objectives of its statecraft. It was in that context that Iran embraced the ideas of “sacred defense” and “resistance,” describing the goals of defense and deterrence.

Iran’s rulers concluded then that they failed to win their war with Iraq because Western powers, their Arab allies, and international organizations had all sided with Iraq. Still, Iran had pulled itself up by its own bootstraps to survive the war. Undaunted by the outcome, those who led and fought in the war emerged from it with confidence and a belief in their own efficacy. They did not want another costly war and, given that, going forward, Iran must stand on its own two feet to win security and grandeur by resisting and defying the Western-led international order. It must organize state and society around this goal, and build its economy and defense by going around international economic sanctions. This became the bedrock of Iran’s grand strategy.

That national security conception also builds on Iran’s historical experiences, and how the country’s collective memory has internalized them into its anxieties and ambitions—fear of foreign interference, loss of sovereignty, chaos, and disintegration, but also great power status deserving of an ancient civilization—yet its distinct characteristics reflect the imprint of what has come to pass after the 1979 Revolution.

The goal of resistance would in the decades that followed the revolution become the country’s grand strategy as Iran focused on the United States as the singular threat to its national security. This became especially true after 9/11, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, onset of a nuclear standoff between Iran and the West, and regional impact of the Arab Spring. It was during that long decade between 2001 and 2011 that the national security conception formed in the first decade of the revolution was expanded into a grand strategy of resistance. Iran’s nuclear program or its regional strategy of “forward defense”—to confront America’s superior military power through asymmetrical means and extend Iran’s defense parameter inside the Arab world—are all expressions of this broader grand strategy.

These ideas are more than reactions to specific threats and not just military doctrines. They are grand strategic visions, and organizing principles for state and society, that are foundational to the Islamic Republic's conception of itself and its place in the world. They have effectively shaped the Islamic Republic, its politics, economy, and social institutions. This book will trace the evolution of this grand strategy along with its roots, assumptions, and evolution.

Iran's security vulnerabilities as well as experiences with war, occupation, and imperialism are by no means unique. But how every nation reacts to those challenges is unique to it. Geography, culture, and most important, history loom large on those reactions. This is not to suggest that there is a teleology at play or that the past is a prologue to the future but instead that the trajectory that Iran has embarked on has to be understood against the background of the country's historical memory.

Writer Mark Twain famously said, "History does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes." Just as the foreign policy of the young Soviet Union could not help but remember the invasions of Napoleon and the might of Peter the Great, so too has the Islamic Republic's strategic outlook been informed by, and fed on, the collective memory of invasions, near disintegration, and humiliating imperialist interventions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Those experiences have formed a broad consensus on the causes and implications of such critical turning points as the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–6 or military coup of 1953. The founder of the Islamic Republic experienced firsthand the First and Second World Wars, occupation of Iran by the Allies, and coup of 1953.

The monarchy that the revolution toppled had sought to strengthen and empower Iran through economic development and social modernization, and by harnessing the benefits of a close alliance with the West. The Islamic Republic that the revolution wrought has looked for strength and grandeur in resistance to the West even at great economic cost to the country. Yet as the following chapters will show, there are similarities and in some areas continuities between these two visions, and unsurprisingly, they are juxtaposed in public debates in Iran today. The history that preceded the Islamic Republic has become the context and foil for how it wants to shape the future.

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