

# Iranian Perceptions of U.S. Policy toward Iran: Ayatollah Khamenei's Mind-set

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An understanding of the critical role and mind-set of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, is essential for anyone wishing to assess the prospects of a rapprochement between Tehran and Washington. It is important to note that the aims and policy choices espoused by the Supreme Leader have to be understood within the context of the immediate political circumstances at the time of his appointment as Supreme Leader and the evolution of global geopolitics since the end of the Cold War.

## The history and social psychology shaping Iran's foreign policy

Under the rule of the Shah of Iran, throughout most of the Cold War period, Iran's role had been that of a client state under Western (U.S.) hegemony. In fact, this had been Iran's position in the world order for most of the last two centuries. This subservience was caused by its dependence on the rising Imperial powers of Great Britain and Russia and later the United States. The Qajar state had been marked by weak institutions, a premodern military, and an unindustrialized economy. In this, Iran was no different from many of the great powers of Asia, notably Mogul India and the Ottoman Empire. While Iran had managed to avoid the total subjugation that befell India, it had not managed to adapt as effectively as its Ottoman neighbor to its west. In response to these pressures, the twentieth century witnessed the rise of two complementary trends or movements that sought to revive and modernize the Iranian nation.

The first was the movement for constitutional reform in the early twentieth century that prompted the constitutional revolution of 1905, followed by the democratic revolution of 1951, and ultimately the revolution of 1978. This current in Iran's modern history was driven by the people's demands for democracy and popular participation in state governance. Second, there was a parallel movement to strengthen and modernize the institutions of state to reassert Iran's independence and autonomy in the face of immense Imperialist pressures. This nationalist project, as with Atatürk's reforms in Turkey, sought to preserve the integrity of Iran's borders and the unity of the nation, which had been under imperialist encroachment for almost a century. One of the principal instigators of this project was Reza Pahlavi—tracking Atatürk's reforms—before the Second World War. This nationalism was also manifest during the reign his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, while Iran's independence and autonomy were completely undermined due to U.S. dominance. Nevertheless, this trend has carried over as one of the principal goals of the Islamic Republic.

These two strands represent the prevailing character of the Iranian people's national psyche. From this perspective, Iranians view their recent history as one of steady but constantly interrupted movement toward a strong state supporting a democratic nation. Overlaying this is the Islamic aspect of Iranian society. This aspect is subordinate to Iranian nationalism, but it has evolved in a way that preserves Iran's national identity while building a bridge to the wider Islamic community through fraternal ties with other Shi'ite communities and through Iran's ability to project itself as a defender of Islam against Western hegemony. These factors have allowed it to transcend national and ethnic boundaries across the Middle East and the Islamic world in a way that prerevolutionary governments could not. Some discern a messianic or evangelical dimension to Iran's mission that should not be overstated even though it provides some legitimacy for the Islamic Republic.

Yet, paradoxically, the reaction of the world powers to these efforts has been one of subversion and resistance. Iran's experience has been that these powers have sought to deny Iran's progress irrespective of the ideological complexion of the government of the day. Hence, the world powers subverted Reza Shah Pahlavi's state building just as readily as they deposed Mossadegh's democratically elected government. Similarly, the constitutional revolution of

1905 was destroyed by Western intervention; and Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami's liberalization and reform programs for the Islamic Republic were met with indifference and unyielding hostility by the United States and the West.

To the Iranians, the only system of government acceptable to the West seems to be Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's client state, which invested its petro-dollars in favor of Western interests, obeyed policies imposed from outside, and only entertained reforms that either furthered his interests or did not conflict with his authoritarian rule. Democracy was not an option available to the Iranian people and neither was national autonomy.

This is the backdrop that has shaped and informed Iranians' national psyche and the Supreme Leader's view of the world powers' aims vis-à-vis Iran. In his mind, rejection of the Islamic Republic entails a rejection of this Iranian evolution, just as previous reforms and movements had been sabotaged and derailed. It is important to note that, whether out of belief in them or in response to domestic political forces, the Supreme Leader cautiously supported Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami's liberalization and international reconciliation agenda from 1997 to 2005. Khamenei may have been disappointed, but not surprised, by the antipathy shown by the world powers. For Tehran, this response of treating a state as beyond the pale, even though it has modified its policies to accommodate international demands, confirms the belief that the world powers (in today's context, the American hyper-power) simply desire to subjugate and subordinate Iran to serve U.S. hegemonic interests.

### The shifting geopolitical landscape

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei<sup>1</sup> has played an active role in formulating Iran's foreign policy since becoming president of the Islamic Republic in 1981 (to 1989). Following his promotion to the office of the Supreme Leader in 1989 (following the death of the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Imam Khomeini) he came to shape and dominate Iran's foreign policy making.

His ascendancy to the post of Supreme Leader coincided with the breakup of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the United States becoming the world's sole superpower. In the background it also marked the start of China's gradual ascent as a major power.

These developments marked not only a material change in Iran's strategic calculations but also, more critically, a dramatic shift in U.S. behavior toward other states. As some French observers noted, American hyperpower was complicating and undermining many institutions of governance in the international system. The reassertion of America's belief in its own exceptionalism and growing appetite for asserting its power unilaterally further widened the gap between Tehran and Washington.

Further complicating the relationship between Iran and the United States was the position of Israel vis-à-vis Iran. Tehran and Tel Aviv were allies with mutual interests in the Middle East during the Shah era. Since the revolution of 1979, this relationship was tested and cooled but their national interests sustained an effective unofficial working relationship. The end of the Cold War and the emasculation of their mutual enemy after the first Persian Gulf War marked the end of this cordial relationship. Thereafter Israel's stance shifted and became overtly hostile toward Iran.

Faced with this shift, Iran deployed public rhetoric and support for non-state actors in the Arab world to oppose Israel in a measured way. This of course is cited by the United States and the West as evidence of Iran's sponsorship of terrorism. The deterioration of the relationship with Israel transformed Tel Aviv's role from that of a moderator in U.S.-Iran relations to one of agitator. As a result, Washington's own policies and objectives have become more rigid and hostile. It can even be argued that appeasing Israel has become the implicit key to achieving U.S.-Iran rapprochement.

### The Supreme Leader's perspective

Ayatollah Khamenei's public views on the United States and Israel are widely documented, publicized, and interpreted subjectively by observers on both sides. As articulated, these views are seen as the basis for Iran's foreign policy goals, which today include the nuclear issue. The Supreme Leader's position over the course of the past two decades has been consistent, articulating a clear view of Iran's place in the world, its sovereign rights as a responsible member of the international community, and its responsibility in supporting

the interests of Muslims worldwide. The written record on these positions is clear. The first and foremost issue is whether the United States seeks regime change in Iran. Khamenei firmly believes that “the United State of America’s view of the Islamic Republic is based on the rejection of its existence.”<sup>2</sup> Even the repeated demands by the United States for Iran to “change its behavior” is interpreted as a prelude for stripping Iran of its Islamic identity in an effort to establish a puppet state and exploit Iran’s natural resources.<sup>3</sup>

What is also unusual is that these powers disagreed with one another in ninety percent of matters. But they all agreed that this new tree has to be uprooted and that the flame of the Islamic Revolution has to be put out.<sup>4</sup>

These assertions have intensified suspicion toward the United States to the extent that even President Obama’s earnest efforts at engagement were seen as insincere. This became apparent when Obama on two occasions wrote directly to the Supreme Leader, offering to overcome past grievances and revitalize relations based on mutual respect. Khamenei, wary of past American reversals and true intentions, nonetheless responded positively to the first letter, creating an opening in prospects for rapprochement. However, this opportunity was short-lived. U.S. support for protesters during the disputed Iranian presidential election of 2009 was viewed as an attempt at subversion.<sup>5</sup> Obama’s second letter did not receive a response from Khamenei, who argued: “Which do we believe? Is he seeking to establish relations based on trust and respect or for the people to pour into the streets, opposing the system?”<sup>6</sup>

Khamenei maintains that America’s enmity toward Iran went deeper than its Islamic identity, and entailed a rejection of Iran’s essential virtues—in particular, the Iranian people’s sense of independence, steadfastness, resilience, and resistance to foreign domination:

One of U.S. official has said that they have to uproot the Iranians. Another U.S. official has also said that a moderate and good Iranian is a dead one ... [T]he American officials have always insulted our nation, our nation’s only sin is the defense of its identity and independence ... [T]he American officials have spoken this way to our nation ... for past thirty years ... and then they claim that they have unclenched their fists towards us and we should forget the past.<sup>7</sup>

The Supreme Leader is seriously concerned about the “global hegemonic aspirations” of the United States:

The Americans say that “we had dominance over you during the Shah, the revolution arrived and kicked us out, and you should return it to us, enabling further dominance.” This is the core issue between the Americans and us. They accuse us of trampling on human rights and support terrorism, but their real intention is to reinstate their will on our governance and economy.<sup>8</sup>

On the nuclear issue, Khamenei maintains that the U.S. aim is to thwart Iran’s “scientific progress,” which is manifested in its hostility toward the nuclear program. He believes that this opposition is not based on a fear of proliferation, but rather is intended to hinder the advancement of Iran. Paradoxically, this has merely accelerated Iran’s progress in key fields of nuclear energy, nanotechnology, and primary industries:

In their comments and political commentary, they say western governments are opposed to Iran’s achieving nuclear energy. Nobody cares whether they agree to it or not. Has the Islamic Republic asked permission for achieving nuclear energy? The Iranian nation has not entered this arena with the permission of others, so it cannot be denied permission. All that matters is that the Iranian people want and have agreed to have this energy.<sup>9</sup>

Khamenei also sees the nuclear issue a part of the general aggression of the United States based on intimidation, false propaganda, and constant accusations against Iran’s nuclear program. This is all part of an overall plan to end the Islamic Republic. At a meeting with Iranian nuclear scientists, the Supreme Leader commented on Iran’s nuclear program, international pressure, and sanctions:

The sanctions have been there since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, but the nuclear issue is a recent development. Therefore, their main problem is that there is a nation that is determined to become independent, a nation that is not prepared to give in to oppression, a nation that is determined to expose oppressors, and a nation that wants to tell other nations that it has achieved this goal and that it will make even more accomplishments.<sup>10</sup>

He has kept reiterating that if a nation wanted to preserve dignity, national identity, security, and national interest, it should go ahead with innovation and endeavor.<sup>11</sup>

On the Middle East, the Leader reiterates that the U.S. strategy for “domination” over the Middle East extends beyond exploitation of the region’s natural resources, to encompass the culture, beliefs, and faith, ultimately removing any basis for independent thought and attaining an ironclad client–patron relationship. Therefore, he concludes, the eventual goal of the United States is to establish corrupt and subservient governments, a tactic that has succeeded in some countries in the region, aligned with the United States’ “Greater Middle East” plan<sup>12</sup>:

The American Greater Middle East plan was designed to harmonize all interests in the region and offer them to the insatiable hunger of power-thirsty American arrogance. They are not satisfied with their current influence and domination. They want absolute domination. They are seeking to gain absolute authority over the world, especially this region, which is full of human and natural wealth and is a very strategic area.<sup>13</sup>

The Supreme Leader has always viewed the Middle East peace process, with the United States as the principal mediator, as a fallacy that is certain to fail and not resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This is because, he contends, Israel is not committed to human values, or to international law and U.N. resolutions. Furthermore, he perceives a systematic pattern of Israel’s renegeing on past agreements. Hence, even if a settlement is achieved, they will violate it. As an alternative, the Supreme Leader believes in an equitable solution:

The logical solution is the one that must be accepted by all morally fair individuals across the world and all those who believe in the conventions of the modern world. The logical solution is to hold a referendum among the people of Palestine, including all those who have been displaced from Palestine and who, of course, are willing to return to their homeland. That is a logical solution. And a referendum should be held among all those who used to live in Palestine before the year 1948—that is, the year the fake Israeli government was established—including Muslims, Christians, and Jews. These people should be allowed to determine the government of Palestine in a referendum. That is democracy.<sup>14</sup>

Khamenei describes American double standards as deriving from self-interest; the United States tramples on the rights of others, but invokes human rights

when it is advantageous. The Supreme Leader while addressing top Iranian officials stated that

During their invasion of Iraq, they [Americans] used 10-ton bombs in Basra. They killed many people, civilians, children and women in Basra as well as in other places. During the same days, a few American pilots whose planes had been shot down were captured by the elements of the Ba'ath Party. They televised interviews with the pilots, but the Americans protested that the Ba'ath Party had violated international regulations and that POWs should not be interviewed. This is how they behave. They are the biggest violators of democracy as well; this was exemplified in the American rejection of the election results in Gaza.<sup>15</sup>

The language of threat and intimidation employed by the United States toward Iran is not only detested, but it has also served to harden the position of the leadership toward pursuing any form of engagement. The liberal use of “all options on the table” by the United States has also exacerbated the animosity the Iranian leadership feels:

The U.S. has threatened us in every occasion; they have always said military option is on the table. Whenever they talk about Iran, they threaten our nation. These threats do not affect us, but they have shown their true face of animosity.<sup>16</sup>

Khamenei believes that the United States will only negotiate on an agenda defined by Washington<sup>17</sup> and will readily ignore the international community when it suits them.<sup>18</sup> He is also convinced that the offers of negotiations are a tool to heighten pressures and animosities.<sup>19</sup> Hence, attempted overtures from both sides have failed because of a fundamental lack of trust. This was the case with the Leader's response to President Obama's overtures:

They say we have stretched a hand toward Iran. If a hand is stretched covered with velvet glove but it is cast iron inside that makes no sense. Do not be fooled by the velvet cover, look deeper and you will see the sinister motives of the Americans.<sup>20</sup>

From the Supreme Leader's point of view, negotiation is a two-way process and unilateral diktats will not yield a solution—both perspectives should be respected



in a positive-sum game. He maintains the United States seems to remain fixated on achieving a one-sided, imposed, outcome via talks.<sup>21</sup> In this, there seems of be a level of incomprehension about the scope of bargaining. The Supreme Leader has explicitly remarked on this issue, using the nuclear negotiations as an example:

They ask us to come to the negotiations on the nuclear issue but they have their own objectives and goals, based on their aim of stopping Iran's nuclear program. Therefore they are not there to negotiate, they aim to stop Iran completely and if Iran does not abide, they place sanctions and threats. What type of negotiations is this?<sup>22</sup>

Conversely, the Islamic Republic views negotiations as a means of achieving compromise on a range of fundamental issues. "When two parties want to negotiate on their differences, they both need to move from their respective positions towards a compromised position,"<sup>23</sup> said Khamenei to pilgrims in the holy city of Mashhad.

In Khamenei's mind, the United States has been engaging in fomenting domestic turmoil, creating divisions and conflict amongst the population and government officials:

One of the big plots of the enemies of the Iranian nation is to foment discord inside the country under ethnic, religious, political and partisan pretexts.<sup>24</sup>

He has, on many occasions, pointed out the distrustful and destructive nature of U.S. actions, which are seen as a major obstacle toward revitalization of relations, leading the Supreme Leader to question the signs of this "change":

Change must not be accompanied by ulterior motives and verbiage. If you try to pursue the same goals and only change the policies, that constitutes a machination, not a change. If you intend to bring about genuine change, you must show something in action. In any case, all the American officials as well as other people must know that the Iranian nation will not be deceived or intimidated.<sup>25</sup>

In general, Khamenei perceives a clear plan of attack at work: first, force the Islamic Republic to abandon its goals; second, deprive Iran of its natural and human resources; finally, widen the gap between the government and the governed.<sup>26</sup>



Last but not least, he believes that although the Islamic Awakening (Arab Spring) in the region has been initiated by Iran, the waves of Islamic Awakening have been inspired by the victory of Islamic Revolution. He said that the Western materialistic civilization has failed to bring happiness and prosperity to mankind, adding that Western communities are suffering from absence of morality and negligence of the commands of God, no welfare is available in the Western societies, and that family principles are no longer respected.<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting to know that the Iranian Leader predicted the upheaval in Arab countries in the year 2000 when he proclaimed that the global upheaval against the United States has commenced.<sup>28</sup> Recently labeled by Iran as “Islamic Awakening,” and by the West as the “Arab Spring,” the upheaval first erupted in Tunisia in late 2010, and it has strengthened his view on the U.S. collapse in the region and beyond. The Supreme Leader provides the following evidence for the rise of Islam, with Iran as its vanguard:

- Iran’s development: “The Islamic Republic has made major strides in the all aspects of development; in the scientific, technology and political fields; increased efficiency in management, with greater strength for the nation. In terms of the Islamic world—in Africa and Asia, even in countries where Muslims are minorities—everyone sees the undivided sense of identity amongst Muslims is becoming stronger day by day.”<sup>29</sup>
- Islamic influence: The leaders of global arrogance thought Islam’s influence had diminished and become almost negligible, yet it has risen due to the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the “Islamic Awakening” all around the world. “The major indication resulting from the latest developments in the Arab world is the failure of United States dominance ... today, the capitalist system has reached a complete deadlock ... the world is at a historical juncture, where the Iranian nation and Muslim nations can play a fundamental role in advancing Islamic values worldwide.”<sup>30</sup>
- Islamic identity: The rise of Islamic identity has always been suppressed by the arrogant powers as it challenges their power. However, the rise of Islamic identity has become stronger than ever and has weakened the influence of United States and Israel in the region.<sup>31</sup>



The Leader firmly believes that the Islamic Republic's sense of independence and ability to carve a new idea of governance will be welcomed by other nations. This is one of the reasons the Leader expects Iran to be respected and acknowledged as a regional power:

Undoubtedly the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the establishment of a populist government—which was neither eastern nor western—and promoting the policy of resistance against the arrogant powers have been the most important source of hope for nations of the world<sup>32</sup> ... We adopted our system of democracy neither from the Eastern regimes nor from the Western regimes. We adopted our system from Islam, and our people elected an Islamic government due to their familiarity with Islam.<sup>33</sup>

Despite all this pessimism, the Supreme Leader has always left an opening for relations with the United States to normalize based on the following criteria:

As long as the U.S. continues its 30 years of hostilities towards Iran, our position will remain the same. However if you change your policies and behaviors, we would also change our policy. We have never said we are going to cut relations forever. We just want a relation that is not harmful.<sup>34</sup>

However, the key analytical questions that need to be assessed are: first, whether his actions in practice match this rhetoric. Second, whether these actions are rational and realistic. Third, how are long-term strategic goals balanced against immediate political needs, domestic and international?

### **Does the rhetoric match the reality?**

Khamenei's rhetoric relating to foreign policy matters has been consistent with both Iran's stated goal of being treated as an equal sovereign nation-state, meriting respect, and his rejection of what he terms "double-standards" or hypocrisy by the major powers. In reality, his actions over the course of his political career—both as President of the Republic, and then as Supreme Leader—have closely matched his rhetoric. Even during Presidents Rafsanjani's and Khatami's liberalization phase, which saw an unparalleled effort to improve relations with the outside world including the United States, the Supreme



Leader's actions were unchanged. He remained the principal guardian of the Republic's "bright-lines" of sovereignty and upgrading Iran's international position. He remained alert to the risk of the reformer's conceding too much too quickly in pursuit of short-term economic and political gains at the expense of Iran's ultimate strategic goals.

Similarly, under Khatami's successor President Ahmadinejad—whose ascendancy mirrored the change in tone in the United States under President Bush and the neoconservatives—the Supreme Leader has allowed hard-line positions led by the military and security apparatus in the interest of strengthening the Iranian state, while moderating any move to weaken the plural character of Iran's political society and system of governance. In this, he sought to balance state and societal interests, maintaining the twin tracks of a strong state and a democratic republic, even in its weaker form.

### **Are Khamenei's actions rational and realistic?**

Hence, it can be argued that the Supreme Leader has a clear set of objectives and priorities, and acts rationally to mobilize political forces to sustain this program. While his reaction to the 2009 elections was harsh, and as some politicians argue, has relatively undermined his popularity in Iran in the face of centrifugal forces which have enjoyed external support by powers that have gone on the record, it is also generally acknowledged in Iran. In his order of priorities, it is clear that a strong and unified Iranian state precedes all other considerations; and that a plural and democratic Iran can only exist and thrive within the framework of such an independent state.

On the international front he has generally directed policies but allowed the president and officials to execute them. However, as pressure on Iran has intensified and confidence in President Ahmadinejad has declined, leading to deterioration in the perceived legitimacy of the Office of the President, the Supreme Leader has assumed a more active role. While officials are still delegated to execute policy and negotiations on matters such as the nuclear file, they do so within a very clear and precisely defined framework. In this framework, Iran's rights under international law and its position as a responsible member of the international community are not up for discussion.

These represent Khamenei's "red-lines," a set of first principles that are not in question regardless of Iran's political constitution. That is, these principles would prevail whether Iran was a republic, military dictatorship, monarchy, or a secular state.

So how realistic is this prioritization? Khamenei believes one would expect, as most Iranians do, that such overarching principles are necessary for the achievement of Iran's long-awaited revival as a free, independent, and prosperous nation-state. Hence, from a domestic perspective his actions are rational.

In terms of international relations, rationality also is arguably at work in his decision making. Perceiving considerable flux and uncertainty in the global balance of power, and also cognizant of a similar flux in America and Israel's relations with Iran and the rest of the world, it is rational for Khamenei to maintain his bright-line positions at a time of major uncertainty, and regardless of the impact and consequences this stance will have on Iran in the short term. As he has repeatedly argued, Iran's strategic goals will be achieved through sacrifice and not appeasement.

### **How are strategic goals balanced against immediate political constraints?**

This balancing of strategic and short-term objectives remains the fundamental question in the debate over Iran's relationship with the United States. The constitution of the Islamic Republic allows the Supreme Leader considerable leeway in sticking to long-term goals despite enormous short-term costs and pressures. It also gives the Supreme Leader the option of changing the complexion of both the executive and the legislative branches of the state—enabling effective regulation of domestic pressures—without creating a radical shift in Iran's strategic priorities. This option is not available to the United States or most of Iran's adversaries.

As the Supreme Leader, Khamenei can also act as a lightning rod for domestic dissatisfaction by taking ultimate responsibility for painful or unpopular political decisions, allowing his government to pursue the agenda he has set. Moreover, the fact that he is legally the guardian of the

Islamic Republic means that every Iranian citizen has to weigh short-term expediencies against the long-term interests of the nation. For Iranians, the choices available today are a change in the complexion of government but acceptance of the continuity of the system and the strategic program set by the Supreme Leader.

For most Iranians living inside the country, the alternative would be the possibility of an Iraq or Afghanistan scenario: anarchy and the dismemberment of the country. For a society with clear memories of the uncertain outcome of a revolution and the pain of the Iran–Iraq War, stability and order remain the primary need on the road to a better Iran. The fact that the 2009 elections revived fears of a return to revolutionary turmoil was sufficient to restrain dissent and bolster the Supreme Leader’s authority. This was despite a reaction from the state that was more heavy-handed than even the state would have desired given the setback it dealt to the Khatami liberalization and its impact on international opinion.

This support spans several generations of Iranian society. For those that lived through the revolutionary era, stability and order are paramount. For the “sons of the Revolution”—as typified by the Revolutionary Guards—who fought to usher in the Islamic Republic, and defend it against domestic and foreign enemies, the strategies of Iran and nationalistic aspirations are paramount. And as an entrenched elite within the system, they have a clear interest in supporting the Supreme Leader come what may. Finally, the postrevolutionary and postwar generation, which comprise the majority of Iran’s youth, are educated and politically aware realists with a clear understanding of international and domestic politics. This group doesn’t subscribe to the view that the United States is a benign promoter of democracy, while also remaining skeptical and critical of the Islamic Republic’s own failings. They pay the price of the Republic’s political choices and are radically more democratic and secular in their aspirations than their forefathers. But in the absence of a clear alternative to the *status quo*—the Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syrian scenario is not appealing—and with a disdain for international “double-standards,” they are inclined to pursue gradual internal reforms rather than “regime change” policy and are prepared to endure Iran’s isolation as the price of its evolution.

## The four pillars and Iran's stance toward the United States

We have argued that a correct understanding of Iranian foreign policy requires a clear reading of the mind-set of the Supreme Leader, and an appreciation of the historical, social, and psychological backdrop that informs his thinking. This worldview rests on four pillars, which should be understood to facilitate and strengthen the move toward rapprochement between Iran, the United States, and its allies. From an informed perspective, the following principles are representative of a major part of Iranian public opinion, including that of the Supreme Leader:

First, it is critical to acknowledge and accept that, in principle, the Supreme Leader is not against normalization of relations with the United States. The issue is rather the acceptance of *Iran's rights, interests, and its place in the post-Cold War order*.

Second, Western conventional wisdom that Khamenei's opposition to normalization of relations is based on an inflexible ideology is baseless and should be discarded as a premise in rapprochement with Iran. In fact, the Supreme Leader's resistance stems from pragmatic political objectives, a point that he has made plainly visible: "Fighting arrogance is not rooted in religious feeling; rather it is based on national pride, identity and existence."<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, "if our nation stops fighting arrogance, it means that it is ready to yield to the interference of foreign powers, to accept humiliation, and to go back to the dangerous situation it faced prior to the Islamic Revolution."<sup>36</sup>

Third, the Iranian leadership absolutely detests use of *threat and intimidation* by any power, particularly the United States, to force their position on the negotiating table. "Our nation dislikes it when you [United States] continue to give slogans of 'dialogue and pressure,' 'we want to negotiate with Iran,' while simultaneously exerting pressures, threats and bribery. This is not a way to speak to our nation."<sup>37</sup>

This has made the Iranian nation place great importance on independence, justice, and self-respect. Hence, Iranians, and in particular the leadership, have condemned the United States for placing derogatory and disrespectful connotations to the country, such as the frequent labeling of Iran as a "rouge state," "axis of evil," "pariah state," or "state sponsor of terrorism." These

descriptions have only deepened the animosity the Islamic Republic feels toward the arrogance shown by the United States, and in words of the Supreme Leader, “Our nation hates threat and enticement,” further adding: “Is it possible for the Iranian nation to forget these events? During the last thirty years . . . some of them [American officials] have even demanded that our great and honorable nation be wiped out.”<sup>38</sup>

Last, the Supreme Leader seeks a *healthy relationship between Iran and the United States based on “mutual respect, noninterference and one that does not employ bullying, colonialism and dominance.”*<sup>39</sup> The Iranian people have no intrinsic hostility to any other society, or ethnic or religious group. Recognition of the Islamic Republic, its Islamic and national identity, coupled with respect for the Iranian nation and its heritage are key elements for Iranian leadership to enter negotiations and make a deal.<sup>40</sup> Iran sees itself not only as a great country but also as a country that is accredited with having been the cradle of civilization, with a rich culture and history that dates back millennia, and has contributed positively to the world in many fields, including science, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, art, and music. These attributes lend themselves to the heightened nationalism that Iranians feel and the expectation to be respected and recognized as a prominent member of the international community. Furthermore, the Leader has highlighted that “our nation during the 1400 years of Islam always has been at the helm of all Islamic nations.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, this national pride is deeply intertwined in the psyche of Iranians and their leadership, contributing to their staunch resistance to come under any U.S. dominance, subordination, or insult:<sup>42</sup>

The United States has constantly insulted Iranian nation and government. They have insulted such a noble and great nation, that its only sin is that it is defending itself for its independence . . . even the new US President [Obama] insulted Iran and the Iranian government in his inaugural speech.<sup>43</sup>

These four critical pillars are the key factors for improved relations between Iran and the West, including the United States. Paradoxically, while Iran’s position and international objectives are clear and rational by the standards of normal nation-states, it is the position of its (democratic) adversaries that has become more radical and unpredictable. There clearly needs to be a return to



Nixonian realism and much patient and skillful engagement to restore trust and bridge the gaps between the two sides.

## Notes

STYLE NOTE: Titles of speeches that are translated into English are in quotation marks, with the date; virtually all are from Khamenei's own website. Farsi titles are not put into quotation marks.

- 1 Ayatollah Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader of Iran, was appointed in June 1989, following the death of the founder of the Islamic Revolution, Imam Khomeini. The Supreme Leader of Iran is the highest-ranking political and religious authority in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The post was established by the constitution in accordance with the concept of Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists. The duties and powers of the Supreme Leader are outlined in Article 110 of the Iranian constitution. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali\\_Khamenei](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali_Khamenei).
- 2 "Supreme Leader's speech to government officials," August 18, 2010. [http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1354&Itemid=4](http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1354&Itemid=4)
- 3 Supreme Leader's address to academics at Tehran Science and Technology University, December 14, 2008. <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=4992>
- 4 "The Supreme Leader's view of global arrogance," October 9, 2009. (Hereafter, "Global Arrogance.") [http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1179&Itemid=13#Topp](http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1179&Itemid=13#Topp)
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