



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The Return of Imperialism: The Islamic Republic of Iran

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Moscow and Beijing are pulling the world back into twentieth-century geopolitics, but Iran is pulling it even farther backward in time: to the Age of Imperialism. Many US allies, while quick to condemn imperialism in principle, are unfortunately eager to cast that principle aside for access to the Iranian market.**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama, in a widely publicized book, announced the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy and with it the strong prospect of a longstanding democratic peace. He called it, in a moment of hubris, the end of history.

The wars in the Balkans (the first to take place in continental Europe since WWII) and the wide-scale ethnic and religious massacres that accompanied them, followed by the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington DC, severely dented this vision. It was probably laid to rest altogether with the rise of Putin in 1999 and the return of geopolitics on Europe's fringes in the war with Georgia in 2009, Putin's assault on eastern Ukraine in 2014, and his troops' bold annexation of Crimea the same year.

Putin has contributed greatly towards pulling the world back to the twentieth century after the illusions it harbored about what the 21<sup>st</sup> century was likely to be. The same can be said of Beijing as its policy of peaceful engagement gave way to an assertion of power in in the China Seas. Both Russia and China have seriously alarmed their neighbors and other states.

It seems, however, that the world might be reverting further backward than one century. It is regressing back to the Age of Imperialism, only this time the

major catalyst is eastern, not western; Muslim, not Christian; Shiite, not (predominantly) Protestant; “radical”, not conservative.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, which ranks only 17th in terms of economic output in the world, is hardly a major power. It hovers somewhere around the same score in terms of scientific contributions (barring patents, which it largely keeps in-house for military purposes). Yet it is demonstrating almost daily its imperialist reach in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza, and is developing ballistic capabilities to threaten Europe.

The reader may be puzzled. How is Iran different from Russia, China, and the US?

The answer lies in focus, capabilities, and responsibility. China’s and Russia’s assertions of power are focused on land and seas contiguous to their borders. Relative to its capabilities, Russia’s recent foray in Syria is a minor affair justified in some sense by a desire to fight jihadists, many of whom came from the Caucasus, which are part of the Russian Federation.

Russia is also a player in the great power game. If the US felt compelled to fight ISIS, Russia had to take part to check American power in the area. All three powers, especially the US and China, have far-flung interests that necessitate a presence worldwide. It is the role of the US in preserving the freedom of the seas, so indispensable to global trade, that leads to tensions between China and the US and its allies. These powers have the responsibility and capabilities (one hopes) to resolve their many issues of contention.

Iran is different in that it is the only country whose focus is on political, military, and terrorist intervention and involvement in areas beyond its contiguous borders against states that have not struck the homeland.

Israel, the state it vows to destroy, never wanted a fight with the Islamic State of Iran. Not only is it not in the Jewish tradition to tell other states how they should be ruled, but a strong lobby within Israel believed for many years that Iran would renew ties for mutual benefit, as it did in the days of the Shah. So strong was this conviction that Israel allegedly sold weapons to Iran during its protracted war with Iraq.

Yet it was the Islamic Republic of Iran that created Hezbollah in faraway Lebanon to fight Israel and which today threatens the Jewish state with 100,000 missiles. It has placed its launching sites in the homes of Lebanese villagers and townspeople. Naturally, these villagers, along with the Israeli civilian population, are at great risk.

Prior to the Syrian civil war, the Assad regime – while allied with Iran – placed limitations on an Iranian military presence in Syria. Now that the Assad regime

has been weakened, Iran is exploiting the new dynamic to transform Syria into another Lebanon. Imported Shiite militias under Iranian Revolutionary guidance and command create missile sites similar to those in Lebanon. Terrorist activity is being increased, and munitions factories and forward bases are being established inside Syria and along the border of the northern Golan. Israel vows to stop Iran and is probably behind the “unidentified” air attacks, the most recent a massive one, to prevent Iran from realizing its immediate objective.

Though Saudi Arabia is not entirely innocent regarding Iran, it did hugely support Saddam Hussein’s war against the new Islamic Republic along with other Gulf States, such as Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. The kingdom’s hope was that Saddam would contain Iran. It has not massively supported and armed proxy groups the way Iran has done in Lebanon and Yemen.

The Saudis were in fact instrumental in the Ta’if agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war in 1989. The agreement disbanded the Sunni and Druze militias in Lebanon and allowed only Hezbollah to remain a militia. Since then Hezbollah has become the strongest fighting force in Lebanon, stronger even than the army.

The Saudis no doubt greatly regret that concession to Iran. It was Hezbollah, Iran’s creation, that in 2005 assassinated Saudi-backed Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and three years later effectively took over the government in a massive show of armed strength in the streets of Beirut. Lebanon has effectively become Iran’s puppet state.

Instead of the triumph of liberal visions of globalization, which include the dismemberment of imperial powers, we are seeing the return of imperialism in the form of Iran’s violent foreign interventions. Unfortunately, many allies of the US prefer material interest – the prospect of profits in the Iranian market – over the principle they themselves enshrined of putting an end to imperialism.

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