



PERSPECTIVES

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Iran Must Demonize Its Enemies to Justify Itself

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The consolidation of revolutionary regimes through demonization of ideological and political foes is a common practice, and the Islamic Republic of Iran has been no exception to this rule. Indeed, the Islamist regime's intense preoccupation with constructing a negative image of its adversaries has become one of its foremost defining features.

At the onset of spring, the Islamic Republic of Iran observes the holiday of Noruz (the roots of which originated in the pre-Islamic period). As he does every year, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei went to the city of Mashhad during Noruz this year to deliver a speech. Unlike his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini, who was not inclined to draw extra attention to this event, Khamenei delivered a highly publicized speech at the Imam Reza mosque – the burial place of the eighth Imam of the Shiite dynasty – which blamed external factors for Iran's economic woes. In an attempt to divert public anger away from the regime's domestic failures, the Supreme Leader reiterated a motif that had become almost routine in his speeches: Iran is under economic assault from its enemies. He dismissed the financial mechanism set up by the Europeans to help Tehran through the sanctions era as [a joke](#).

This theme was amplified by President Rouhani's speech, which blamed external factors without reference to any of the regime's many failures in managing the economy or to accusations of corruption among senior Iranian officials.

Emphasizing external threats from real and imaginary enemies in order to strengthen domestic unity is hardly new to Shiites in general or Iranians in particular, and the intense preoccupation of the revolutionary regime with defining its adversaries according to its needs has become its foremost modus operandi.

Revolutionary ideology requires that the regime explicitly describe the opponent and the (alleged) dangers it poses in order to legitimize its own values and policies. The survival of a revolutionary regime thus depends to a great extent on its ability to maintain its chosen image of the enemy. In accordance with this thinking, senior members of the Islamist regime have consistently stressed the existence of an external enemy that threatens the foundations of Iran's government.

It is worth noting that the current regime began its path as a resistance movement, and its success at uniting the different streams of Iranian society reflected its ability to create the perception of a common enemy. Such unification of forces rested on the premise that there was a just and righteous leadership on one side, and an illegitimate ruler supported by the West – against the will of the people and against Islamic ethics – on the other.

A similar line of thinking can be discerned among radical movements calling for a return to Islam, and in the ideological paradigm as reflected in the ideology of the revolution's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini. They, too, perceived the West as a hindrance to the realization of a just Muslim society based on loyalty to the divine command and the path of the Prophet.

With that said, the Iranian revolutionary regime differs somewhat in that it is predicated on a hybrid fusion of divine order and republicanism. In other words, there are those who owe their place in the establishment to the will of the people, and those whose place in the leadership is determined by the Supreme Leader. This hybrid pattern creates an ideological line that does not correlate to any governmental model used in the West and places religious jurisprudence at the center of a purportedly more equitable social order.

The Shiite struggle for status in the Muslim world vis-à-vis the Sunni orthodoxy contributed to the formation of this rival perception. The fight for the allegiance of the masses is rooted directly in the Shiite foundational myth, based on the historical narrative of the battle of Karbala (680 CE), in which Hussein ibn Ali – grandson of the prophet Muhammad – was killed by the Umayyad ruler when he came to claim his right to the caliphate. The Shiite establishment makes extensive use of conceptualizations derived from this narrative, and invests great effort into describing warriors and clerics as continuing the path and heritage of Hussein.

Demonization of the enemy received a major impetus during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), when the Islamist regime underscored the difference between the Iranian army and volunteer forces and the Iraqi army. The former were described as loyalists and defenders of Islam, while the latter were described as heretics who represented a regime of tyranny and oppression.

After four decades, the preservation of revolutionary zeal is a considerable challenge in a society in which some 70% of its citizens were either not yet born in the years preceding the revolution or were too young at the time to remember them. While the regime's efforts should be directed toward managing state affairs in a manner that meets the needs of the people, it continues to repeat the old mantra that external factors are to blame for all the country's ills.

This persistent deflection raises the question: What is the role of the regime itself in increasing unemployment and economic distress? Is the sharp rise in the cost of basic food products the result of sanctions alone, or are there structural failures in the Iranian economy?

The country's economic structure is based on oil and gas revenues, and the dual economic structure contains two parallel axes: the official axis of the government budget; and a parallel axis of charitable foundations known as the "Bonyads Economy."

At the height of the Iranian currency crisis, a group of academic experts wrote to the [Iranian president](#) detailing the reasons for the crisis and making a number of recommendations for its alleviation. These included, *inter alia*: 1) reducing dependence on the energy market as a main source of income; 2) preferring local production over cheap imports; 3) ceasing interventions by the defense establishment in the economy; 4) gradually transitioning from a command economy to a free market economy; 5) providing incentives to private investors; and 6) increasing supervision and collection of taxes from companies and corporations.

Despite the solid grounding of these recommendations, and the fact that the Supreme Leader ordered the implementation of a "resistance economy" based on local production, it appears that no effective measures were ever implemented.

Consider, too, the Iranian water sector. Dehydration of large parts of the rural area plunged Iranian agriculture into a deep crisis in the last decade. But did that crisis stem exclusively from a lack of rainfall during those years, or was it created by the Revolutionary Guards' dam-building policy?

Moreover, is there a connection between recent floods that left 500,000 citizens in the [city of Ahwaz](#) without shelter and the dam project on the Karoun River? Iranian environment experts have been harshly criticized for some time over the dam projects that began in the 1990s (i.e., the period of Iran's rehabilitation after its war with Iraq).

The Iranian resistance movement, which took shape in opposition to the rule of the Pahlavi monarchy, has repudiated its message of social justice, fair distribution of wealth, and liberation of the political and economic system from dependence on foreign elements. Khomeini's promise that Islam is the solution

to all social ills has not been fulfilled, and the allocation of resources has left various strata of Iranian society deprived.

The implementation of an economic model according to principles of Islamic law has encountered difficulties, and not necessarily due to sanctions alone. According to the Islamic economic concept, the allocation of resources to promote an “axis of resistance” is justified on the grounds that those “who are in a campaign for God” are entitled to receive charitable funds. However, the Islamic Republic's aspiration to become a regional hegemon has led its leaders to divert resources beyond its borders at the expense of its citizens.

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