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Preserving the Revolution and Achieving Regional Hegemony: The Challenge of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Forty-three years ago, Iran went from being a monarchy allied with the West and guarantor of stability in the Persian Gulf, to a revolutionary state determined to subvert the status quo in the Middle East. Epicenter of the most serious challenges faced by the United States and Israel in the region in recent decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a revisionist regional power that shares with countries such as Russia, China or Venezuela the will to impose a world order.

Iranian military doctrine

Since the triumph of the Islamic revolution in 1979, the Iranian regime has been obsessed with ensuring the survival of the political system established after the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty. The immediate confrontation with the United States over the hostage crisis in November 1979 and the long war with Iraq between 1980 and 1988 are the formative experiences of both the young

Islamic Republic and its leaders. A regime that, since its foundation, has survived the sanctions, suspicion and enmity of its neighbors and, to a greater and lesser degree depending on the years, international isolation. These circumstances have left a deep imprint of resentment and distrust of the outside among the country's leaders.

Broadly speaking, the main objective that has marked Iran's foreign and defense policy since 1979 is the survival of the revolution. Here we are not referring to the preservation of Iran as a sovereign nation, but to its political form: the Islamic Republic. The following principles that have guided the Iranian military doctrine are the territorial integrity and strategic autonomy of the country. Exporting the revolution and achieving regional hegemony are the ultimate goals that explain Iran's policy. Tehran identifies Israel and the United States as the main threat to each and every one of the stated objectives. Therefore, each principle entails the need to expel the United States from the region and end the existence of the state of Israel. Iran's ruling elite is not only convinced that Israel and the United States are an obstacle to its hegemony, but they have been actively conspiring to destroy the revolution since before it even triumphed.

More specifically, Iran's defense principles fall into two categories depending on the circumstances: In peacetime Iran seeks deterrence by all methods at its disposal, maintain a continuous state of alertness and readiness, and rely as much as possible on national combat systems and weaponry (investing in a robust defense industry). In wartime Iran advocates the decentralization of its armed forces to mitigate the impact of the enemy attack, make use at all times of its unconventional capabilities (including terrorism), intimidate the enemy with as aggressive a response as possible, concentrate capabilities on the enemy's weak points (which do not have to be military in nature or directly associated with the attacking nation), ensure that the enemy pays a high price through retaliatory attacks away from the front lines, use the network of paramilitary groups in the region as part of the military response, and finally emphasize religious zeal and willingness to martyrdom in the course of operations to break the will of the enemy.¹

¹ Jahangir Arasli, "Obsolete Weapons, Unconventional Tactics, and Martyrdom Zeal: How Iran Would Apply its Asymmetric Naval Warfare Doctrine in a Future Conflict", *George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies*, April 2007. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/occasional-papers/obsolete-weapons-unconventional-tactics-and-martyrdom-zeal-how-iran-would-apply-its-asymmetric-naval#toc-conclusion>

Deterrence has been the traditional pillar of Iranian military doctrine. To achieve this, Iran has employed three patterns of conduct: periodic defiance of its enemies (through targeted attacks or hijackings) to probe its determination and resilience in confronting Iran, deception (through the advertisement of advanced fake weapons systems) and demonstration (of each new weapon system developed).² The use of the latter two techniques sometimes makes it difficult to have a clear picture of Iran's true military capabilities. This ambiguity is deliberate: in the words of General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards' aerospace force, the idea is to show only "the tip of the iceberg" and leave Western governments with the doubt of how far Iranian military power really goes.³

It is common for Iran to show its new underground bases, missiles and drones. This policy of leaks through videos and photographs is a key part of Iranian deterrence: demonstrating that they have the capacity to retaliate against an attack and that this would not prevent a brutal response from the regime. The problem with these "demonstrations" is that they are sometimes false; propaganda to convince Iran's enemies that, should they attack Iran, they would not control the escalation of the conflict. Thus, in 2008 edited images of a missile test were released and, on other occasions, Iran has come to present fighter jets that have turned out to be made of wood.

Apart from behavioral patterns associated with deterrence, the core of it lies in the nuclear program and the development of missiles and drones. The idea is that Iran not only has the capability for a second strike, but that it will be devastating. Traditionally, Iran has relied on the country's vast territory and mountainous terrain to underpin this deterrent strategy. The storage of missiles and drones, as well as the development of key parts of the nuclear program in underground bases and scattered tunnels (in many cases, under mountains) seeks to undermine the morale of the enemy and increase the cost of any military intervention. Iran's geographical

² Jahangir Arasli, "Obsolete Weapons, Unconventional Tactics, and Martyrdom Zeal: How Iran Would Apply its Asymmetric Naval Warfare Doctrine in a Future Conflict", *George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies*, April 2007. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/occasional-papers/obsolete-weapons-unconventional-tactics-and-martyrdom-zeal-how-iran-would-apply-its-asymmetric-naval#toc-conclusion>

³ David Axe, "Iran Winning the Underground Arms Race", *The Daily Beast*, April 13th, 2017. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/iran-winning-the-underground-arms-race>

location is also an ally in its deterrence strategy: the possibility of unleashing a storm in the Persian Gulf and closing the Strait of Hormuz would mean wiping out 30% of global oil exports and putting the world economy in check.⁴

Since 2011, Iranian military doctrine has been revised several times. The main novelty is the expansion of the battlefield beyond Iran's borders and the willingness not to limit itself to a "second attack" but to a "massive retaliation." Expanding the battlefield not only allows Iran to increase its strategic depth, it also gives it the initiative by being able to hit its enemies from multiple fronts.⁵

Iran has not achieved this strategic depth through the conquest of new territories. Nor through the deployment of its conventional forces. Iran still lacks the tools for an effective projection of its offensive power beyond its borders in a sustained manner over time.⁶ These limitations have led Iran to draw on alliances with the Shia populations of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The Shiite communities present in different countries of the region have been the spearhead of Iranian interventionism. Except in the case of Syria, this has not been a policy of pacts with governments, but with paramilitary groups created, financed, armed, trained and directed by Iran itself in violation of the sovereignty of its neighboring countries. Here, the Islamic Republic has come to confuse the interests of Shiism with those of Iran. By using Shiite militias in other countries to serve Iran's interests, Tehran has blurred the political and religious loyalties of Middle Eastern Shiites. This has been the subject of tensions with the Shiites of Iraq or Yemen, who see how their interests are sometimes sacrificed by those of Iran. In Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Sistani has been a regular critic of Iranian interference in the Shiite community.⁷ In Yemen there

⁴ Omar Lamrani, "Iran's Conventional Military Capabilities", *Newlines Institute*, July 9, 2020. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/iran/irans-conventional-military-capabilities/>

⁵ Abdolrasool Divsallar, "Will Iran Adopt A "Massive Retaliation" Doctrine?", *LobeLog*, 28 de mayo de 2019. <https://lobelog.com/will-iran-adopt-a-massive-retaliation-doctrine/>

⁶ J. Matthew McInnis, "Iranian Concepts of Warfare: Understanding Tehran's Evolving Military Doctrines", *American Enterprise Institute*, febrero de 2017. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/iranian-concepts-of-warfare-understanding-tehrans-evolving-military-doctrines/>

⁷ Mustafa Saadoun, "Shiite factions close to Sistani move to separate from Iran-backed militias", *Al-Monitor*, 4 de diciembre de 2020. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/12/iraq-iran-pmu-sistani.html#ixzz7WGN0VBPA>

have also been tensions between the Houthis and Iran over the development of the civil war.⁸ These alliances also reveal the pragmatic character of the Iranian regime: for the sake of keeping Iran's only allied state in the region, Tehran did not hesitate to recognize the Alawites of Bashar al-Assad's regime as Shiites (a great act of faith, considering Alawite beliefs in reincarnation and consecration). Similarly, the Zaidi beliefs of the Houthis in Yemen did not pose any impediment to the assistance of an Islamic Republic that embraces Twelver Shi'ism.

These Shiite militias amplify Iran's second strike and massive retaliation capability. They replace the shortcomings of a conventional military force and diversify the Iranian regime's response capacity.⁹ They also provide Tehran with plausible deniability by providing cover for its attacks on Israeli, American, Saudi or Emirati targets: a hybrid war that creates a gray zone that allows Iran to act against its enemies through third parties avoiding both escalation and direct retaliation.¹⁰ Thus, the United States responds to attacks on its bases in Syria and Iraq with bombings against Iranian-led militias in Syria and Iraq, but not against whoever is pulling their strings. The UAE and Saudi Arabia do the same to the Houthis when they are attacked. This hybrid war creates a status quo favorable to Iran's interests, keeping the conflict within a framework in which the Islamic Republic limits the options for escalation of the conflict.

The Iranian regime is convinced that, without a hegemony or regional balance favorable to its interests, its isolation and vulnerability to an Israeli or American attack will persist.¹¹ This implies widening Iran's security perimeter and deepening its unconventional influence in countries in

⁸ Seth J. Frantzman, "The bizarre life and death of Iran's 'ambassador' to Yemen's Houthis", *The Jerusalem Post*, 26 de diciembre de 2021. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-689803>

⁹ J. Matthew McInnis, "Iranian Concepts of Warfare: Understanding Tehran's Evolving Military Doctrines", *American Enterprise Institute*, febrero de 2017. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/iranian-concepts-of-warfare-understanding-tehrans-evolving-military-doctrines/>

¹⁰ Naveed Ahmad, "Iran's 'Forward Defense' Doctrine Missile and Space Programs", *International Institute for Iranian Studies*, 11 de octubre de 2020. <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/centre-for-researches-and-studies/irans-forward-defense-doctrine-missile-and-space-programs/>

¹¹ Ariane M. Tabatabai, Nathan Chandler, Bryan Frederick y Jennifer Kavanagh, "Iran's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts", *Rand Corporation*, 2021. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA444-2.html

the region to maintain the option of a "proxy war." General Soleimani was one of the main architects of this strategy. However, what Iran understands as a defensive policy is seen as an imperialist policy by its neighbors. The bulging network of Iranian-led and armed paramilitary groups is perceived as a quest for hegemony that has nothing to do with their defensive needs. In this sense, the projection of Iranian influence in the Middle East has been a double-edged sword for Tehran. On the one hand, it has consolidated Iran's presence in different countries, but on the other, it has stirred up the populations of these against Iran (especially the Sunnis). Soleimani acted as a pyromaniac and afterwards as a firefighter. A paradigmatic example is Iraq, where Iranian interference in Baghdad led to a sectarian Shiite policy that alienated the Sunni minority. Some Iraqi Sunnis ended up throwing themselves into the arms of fundamentalist groups such as the Islamic State to confront discrimination in Baghdad. Soleimani then had to use Shiite militias – partly responsible for the problem – to help in the fight against these radical Sunni movements.

Interventionism in the region has also been a destabilizing factor at the domestic level. In the face of economic hardship, many Iranians disapprove of investing in Yemeni, Iraqi, Syrian or Lebanese militias. For this reason the regime insists on the purely defensive character of these militias, as if they were Iran's last line of defense to avoid having to fight the Islamic State or the United States on Iranian territory. However, as evidenced by the recurrent demonstrations and acts of protest, the perception of Iranians is quite different.

This policy did not die with Soleimani. His successor, Ismail Ghaani, reaffirmed the will to continue arming and financing the different Shiite paramilitary groups in the region.¹² In addition, Supreme Leader Khamenei in 2019 tasked Revolutionary Guards Commander Hossein Salami, with deepening Iran's influence in the region and extending the reach of its military presence. This new expansion was dubbed by Khamenei as the beginning "of the second phase of the Islamic revolution" of 1979.¹³

¹² Alex Vatanka, "Whither the IRGC of the 2020s? Is Iran's Proxy Warfare Strategy of Forward Defense Sustainable?" *New America*, 15 de enero de 2021. <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/whither-irgc-2020s/>

¹³ Abdolrasool Divsallar, "Will Iran Adopt A "Massive Retaliation" Doctrine?", *LobeLog*, 28 de mayo de 2019. <https://lobelog.com/will-iran-adopt-a-massive-retaliation-doctrine/>

Deterrence

Given the weakness and backwardness of its conventional forces, Iranian military doctrine continues to rely on deterrence and asymmetric warfare. This reality is imposed by the lack of financial resources, as well as the sanctions imposed by the United States, which limit the country's access to foreign technology and weaponry.

Iran's armed forces are distinguished by their bicephaly: The Artesh are the regular armed forces, descended from the Imperial Army of the last Shah. Given the loyalty of the officer corps to the overthrown monarch, the Artesh was always suspicious in Khomeini's eyes. To solve this problem, it was decided to create another armed group deeply ideologized and loyal to the revolution: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard (Pasdaran).

The Revolutionary Guards have been gaining political and economic power in recent decades, becoming not only a sort of praetorian guard of the revolution, but a parallel state. Since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's mandate (2005-2013), the Pasdarans have increased their control over the country's ports, its oil and gas terminals, banking and insurance companies, the petrochemical and aluminum industries, transportation and construction companies... It is estimated that, directly or indirectly, they control 40% of the country's economy.¹⁴ All these resources are in addition to the funds received directly from the government (around 62% of the total national defense budget).¹⁵ The Pasdarans also act as a sort of private networking club, where active and former members support each other and occupy key positions in industry, government and the state security apparatus. They have the strong support of Supreme Leader Khamenei and conceive themselves as a bastion that ensures that the revolution does not take a step back in Iran. His clashes with the "reformist" government of Hassan Rouhani and the foreign policy of Javad Zarif were constant, the latter even lamenting that the country's foreign

¹⁴ Eyal Zamir, "Countering Iran's Regional Strategy: a Long-Term, Comprehensive Approach", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Focus 174, mayo de 2022, 12.

¹⁵ Hesam Forozan y Afshin Shahi, "The Military and the State in Iran: The Economic Rise of the Revolutionary Guards," *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 71, no. 1, febrero de 2017, 67-86.

policy had been hijacked by the Revolutionary Guards.¹⁶ The Pasdarans are therefore more than a counterweight to the Artesh and the civilian government: they have become the regime's center of gravity.¹⁷

Prioritizing the Revolutionary Guards over the Artesh has meant betting on unconventional tactics and the possibilities of asymmetric warfare. This is nothing more than an exercise in making virtue of necessity given the state of the regular armed forces. The bulk of Iran's navy still dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, when the Shah sought to transform the imperial navy into an offshore fleet. The arrival of the revolution left the process half done and Iran has largely survived with the wickers of the navy projected by the last Shah fifty years ago. Thus, the main ships are of American origin, a reminder of the years when Iran was Washington's main ally in the region. Iran has three frigates and two corvettes sold by the US in the sixties, another of its corvettes was once the royal yacht, launched in 1936 in Holland; ten fast attack boats sold by France in the seventies; six patrol boats sold by the United States in the fifties and sixties; four amphibious assault ships sold by the US in the seventies; several hovercrafts sold by the United Kingdom in the seventies and three Soviet Kilo-class submarines. The most modern ships are locally made: five Sina-class fast attack boats, built since 2003; four Moudge-class frigates (one under repair), introduced since 2007; a Fateh-class submarine (introduced in 2019 and 2 more under construction) and more than 10 Ghadir-class mini-submarines introduced since 2007.

Iran's Air Force does not present a better picture. Iran has 336 combat aircraft, but none of them can be considered modern. Only 94 are considered semi-modern. The rest is obsolete material. Its aircraft are of American origin (F-4, F-5 and F-14), Russian (SU-24 and MiG-29) and Chinese (F-7). Iran is the only country in the world still using F-14s. One of the Islamic Republic's priorities is the acquisition of Russian SU-30s once economic sanctions have been lifted.¹⁸

¹⁶ Farnaz Fassihi, "Iran's Foreign Minister, in Leaked Tape, Says Revolutionary Guards Set Policies", *The New York Times*, 25 de abril de 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/25/world/middleeast/iran-suleimani-zarif.html>

¹⁷ Eyal Zamir, "COUNTERING IRAN'S REGIONAL STRATEGY: A Long-Term, Comprehensive Approach", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Focus 174, mayo de 2022, viii.

¹⁸ Defense Intelligence Agency, "Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance", *U.S. Government Publishing Office*, 2019.

Not surprisingly, faced with the extreme vulnerability of its regular forces and the lack of open access to the international arms market, Iran has opted for both the nuclear program and a domestic defense industry specialized in missiles and drones. The other option would have been to abandon its policy of confrontation with the West and abandon the revolution, which the regime is not willing to do.

Since the revelations in 2002, the regime has been playing cat and mouse with the international community and the IAEA in particular. Announcements of centrifuge dismantling were followed by revelations of new facilities that the regime kept secret, Uranium enrichment at Natanz was publicly halted in 2003 to be quickly reactivated in 2006 while the uranium enrichment ratio has fluctuated as if it were stock exchange shares (less than 5% in 2006, more than 20% as of 2011, less than 3.67% in 2015 and more than 60% as of 2021). Finally, and in the face of the Trump administration's abandonment of the agreement and the implementation of a policy of maximum pressure towards Iran, the regime announced in 2020 that it was no longer bound by the constraints imposed in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of the summer of 2015.¹⁹

Unlike in the cases of Syria and Iraq, Iran's nuclear infrastructure is scattered throughout the territory of its vast and mountainous geography. The program is currently supported by more than twelve facilities in different locations. The most important are located in Busher, Parchim, Fordow, Natanz, Isfahan, Tehran and Bonab. Those of Fordow, Parchin and Isfahan are underground. In the case of the first, it is located more than 80 meters underground. Destroying the Iranian nuclear program completely would require a large-scale air strike at multiple sites and making use of the largest and most sophisticated bombs (which, at fifteen tons, can only be used by B-52 and B-2 bombers, although work is currently underway on a smaller, lighter ammunition that can be used on F-35s).²⁰

https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/Iran_Military_Power_LR.pdf

¹⁹ Raphael Ofek, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Where Is It Going?", *The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, 14 de septiembre de 2021. <https://besacenter.org/iran-nuclear-program/>

²⁰ David Axe, "Iran Winning the Underground Arms Race", *The Daily Beast*, 13 de abril de 2017. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/iran-winning-the-underground-arms-race>

Most likely, Iran will not seek to complete the nuclear program. Equipping itself with nuclear weapons would turn the country into a North Korea and, while Iran still has hopes of being a country minimally integrated into the world economy and trade, it is doubtful that it will go down this road. What Iran is looking for with the nuclear program is a deterrence through shortening the time and steps necessary to get hold of the bomb (having everything ready to miniaturize it and mount a warhead on a missile). What Tehran intends to do is to have the crime prepared without committing it. It is their plan to avoid both an attack and complete international isolation. Meanwhile, uncertainty about Iran's timing to seize the bomb and deploy it would be enough to deter its enemies from attack. Uncertainty and unpredictability (hence the fanatical religious rhetoric, deliberately designed to cast doubt on the West) are the Islamic Republic's two favorite techniques.²¹ It is a more attractive and beneficial way than breaking the deck. It allows the regime to keep its options open. However, if Tehran concludes that its nuclear facilities are going to be attacked anyway, or that its country is going to continue to be sanctioned no matter what, its calculation with regard to taking the last step could change.

As far as the usefulness of the nuclear programme is concerned, consideration should be given to the possibility that the Iranian regime should not only have deterrence in mind. With the invasion of Ukraine, Putin has introduced a new nuclear doctrine that goes beyond defensive posture. In this way, the threat of nuclear retaliation is used to cover offensive military interventions of a conventional nature such as the invasion of Ukraine. The nuclear umbrella is therefore extended to military aggressions beyond the borders of a country and thus achieve a certain impunity in them. It cannot be ruled out that Iran, if it ever equips itself with nuclear weapons, will embrace a similar doctrine to shield its activities in Lebanon or Syria.

There is already a profoundly useful consequence of the nuclear program for Tehran: it acts as a lightning rod for international attention. In the face of the nuclear challenge, the rest of Iran's actions pale into a second plane. In this way, the confrontation with Iran is reduced exclusively to the nuclear realm, continuing the regime with impunity to pursue its ambitious missile and drone program. Iran's missile and drone arsenal is arguably growing in the shadow of the nuclear program. It is true that Israel and the Gulf monarchies have not lost sight of these other elements

²¹ "The Geopolitics of Iran: Holding the Center of a Mountain Fortress", *Stratfor*, 16 de diciembre de 2011. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/geopolitics-iran-holding-center-mountain-fortress>

of Iran's destabilizing activity, but in the case of Europe and the United States, their attention has been virtually reduced to the nuclear program.

In the field of drones and missiles, Iran's advances have been remarkable. Here they have truly made a virtue out of necessity. The drone program dates back to the war with Iraq (1980-88) and is driven by Qods Aviation Industries, Iran Aircraft Manufacturing Industries and Shahed Aviation Industries. Most Iranian drones are copies or derivations of foreign drones. The Shahed series of drones have been designed from the American RQ-170 captured in 2011. Iran has been developing different models of drones, from suicide drones such as the Kiam-2 (and with a range of 1,000 km) to reconnaissance and attack drones such as the Karrar, Mohajer, Fotros, Kaman and Ababil. The new generation of drones has a range of 1,000 km. and the ability to remain in flight 24 hours.²² For twenty years Iran has transferred drones to its allies and militias in the region. Starting with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iranian drones are currently employed by paramilitary groups in Yemen, Iraq and Syria. The result is that no country in the Middle East is out of reach of Iranian drones.

Iran has also pursued an ambitious missile program of its own. Iran already has 13 different types of operational missiles and has four more in development. Most (7) are short-range models, although it also has several medium-range models (5 between the operational and in development). There are also orbital launchers.²³ The Fateh-110 and Shahab-1 are the shortest range models (300 km). The Shahab-3 (1,300 km), Emad (1,700 km), Ghadr (2,000 km) and Sejil (2000 km) are the longest-range.²⁴

The pace of missile development and production in Iran is remarkable. Ten new versions of ballistic missiles have been introduced in the last seven years. It has also disclosed the

²² Jeremy Binnie, "Iran unveils cruise missiles in underground UAV base", *Janes*, 30 de mayo de 2022. <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/iran-unveils-cruise-missiles-in-underground-uav-base>

²³ "Missiles of Iran", *CSIS Missile Defense Project*, 10 de agosto de 2021. <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/iran/>

²⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Iranian Missile Threat," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 30 de mayo de 2019. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-missile-threat>

inauguration of several underground complexes (several of them under mountains) from which to store and launch the missiles (in Hemmat, Khormoj, Parchin and Shiraz). Iran is continuously working to build new impenetrable complexes, as well as modernize and expand existing ones.²⁵ The latest base was revealed on January 28, 2022. Dubbed Strategic Base 313, it houses both drones and missiles and is supposedly located 500 meters below the Zagros Mountains. Iran has compared these bases under the mountains to volcanoes, ready to erupt and cover the entire region with fire should they be attacked.²⁶

Since 2017 Iran has conducted six ballistic and cruise missile strikes in Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia. Two of them, in January 2020, against US bases in Erbil and Ain Al Asad in Iraq. More than twelve ballistic missiles were used in the attack. Iranian ballistic and cruise missiles pose a direct threat to the entire military and economic infrastructure in the region, as well as to the transit of oil tankers through the Persian Gulf. As with drones, Iran also transfers missiles to its militias and allies in the region, making the country one of the world's largest missile proliferation hotspots in the world.

International isolation has led the Islamic Republic to develop a self-defense industry, which, without being as developed or sophisticated as that of Israel or Turkey, is a unique case in the Middle East and allows Iran a certain strategic autonomy (although not enough to meet demand).²⁷ If Israel or the United States have not yet destroyed Iran's nuclear program, much of the blame lies with the drones and missiles developed in recent years. The ability to massively retaliate using missiles and drones has been a key element of this deterrence.

²⁵ Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Arsenal Is Still Growing in Size, Reach, and Accuracy", *The Washington Institute*, 13 de diciembre de 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-ballistic-missile-arsenal-still-growing-size-reach-and-accuracy>

²⁶ Tessa Berenson, "Iran Reveals Secret Underground Missile Base", *Time*, 15 de octubre 2015. <https://time.com/4074627/iran-missile-base/>

²⁷ Robert Czulda, "Defence industry in Iran – between needs and real capabilities", *Defense & Security Analysis*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2020, 201-217.

Regional hegemony

The latest element of the asymmetric warfare developed by Iran is the militias and paramilitary groups present in several countries in the Middle East. In the absence of regional allies (with the exception of the Damascus government), Iran has been forced to seek (or create) its allies among different non-state actors. As the most powerful Shiite state in the Muslim world, Iran has sought to structure a "Shiite axis" in the Middle East by offering its support to Shiite minorities (or, in the case of Iraq, majorities).

The Quds Force, a branch of the Revolutionary Guards created in 1988 to organize clandestine activities abroad, strengthen ties with foreign Shiite communities and export the revolution, is responsible for directing, coordinating, arming, training and financing this network of Shiite (and Sunni in the case of Gaza) militias: Zainabiyoun Brigade and Fatemiyoun Brigade in Syria; Hezbollah in Lebanon; Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Haraqat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Badr Organization and Kataib Sayyed al-Shuhada in Iraq, Ansar Allah (Houthis) in Yemen, al-Ashtar Brigades and Saraya al-Mukhtar in Bahrain and Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza... in total, more than 320,000 members distributed in different organizations closely linked to the Quds Force (more than two thirds of them in Iraq and Yemen). Iran's dependence and structure varies for each country and militia. In the most successful case, Lebanon, Hezbollah has managed to become a "state within the state." In the case of Iraq, several of the Iranian-trained militias have come to receive official recognition from the Baghdad government. Some militias are led directly by the Quds Force, while others maintain their decision-making autonomy. How has Iran managed to break through and create so many militias? The regional expansionism of the Islamic Republic has been based on taking advantage of the different crises that have arisen over the last forty years. Whenever a civil war breaks out in a country or a revolutionary process begins, Iran has tried to take advantage of the power vacuum to establish a presence and assist in the creation of a Shiite armed group. It is a reactive strategy that exploits the circumstances and mistakes of its adversaries. The Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) allowed Iran to enter the country and create Hezbollah. Iran was not responsible for the war, but it knew how to take advantage of it. The pattern is repeated in Iraq after the US invasion of 2003 and, especially, after the rise of the Islamic State in 2014. Syria after the start of the 2011 civil war and Yemen after the Arab Spring protests of 2011. Once this presence is established, Iran's interest is to prolong the crisis

and ensure that the country's institutions remain weak enough to remain dependent on Iranian-armed militias or not have the strength to disband them and regain a monopoly on violence.

Without being responsible for the revolutions, civil wars or invasions that have allowed it to enter different countries, Iran has been responsible for taking advantage of the chaos and trying to delay these conflicts in time by using them as proxy wars against its regional and international rivals. Thus, Lebanon and Syria are held hostage by Iran's confrontation with Israel; Yemen over Iran's rivalry with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; Iraq because of its conflict with the United States. These countries become springboards to attack Iran's rivals. Domestic conflicts mutate into international confrontations. The result is an eternalization of conflicts that serves the interests of the Islamic Republic.

Iran's objectives with this regional expansionism of an indirect nature are several: to ensure that its enemies remain mired in conflicts far from Iran's borders (Saudi Arabia in Yemen, the United States in Syria...), to maintain the option of generalized retaliation on multiple fronts in case Israel or the United States attack Iran and, ultimately, to establish a bridge to the Mediterranean taking advantage of the growing Shia between Iran and Lebanon. A westward expansionism that would turn Iraq, Syria and Lebanon into puppet or patronage states and that has been the traditional policy of Persia since the times of Cyrus and Darius.²⁸

More Islamic, less republic and less autonomous

Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, is 83 years old. The entire state apparatus is aware of the delicacy of its succession. The Supreme Leader wields a power unequaled by any other figure and institution. The ultimate power when it comes to foreign and defense policy lies with him. The Islamic Republic has known only two supreme leaders: Khomeini and Khamenei. The extraordinary purge of candidates in the 2021 elections responds to the need of both the Revolutionary Guards and Khamenei and the country's more conservative elements to ensure a transition with as little turbulence as possible once Khamenei dies or becomes incapacitated. No person who is not close to the Revolutionary Guards or of well-known conservative

²⁸ "The Geopolitics of Iran: Holding the Center of a Mountain Fortress", *Stratfor*, 16 de diciembre de 2011. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/geopolitics-iran-holding-center-mountain-fortress>

credentials should access the position. The election of Ibrahim Raisi as president after an election in which a record number of candidates were disqualified is intended to ensure this goal.

However, the 2021 presidential elections not only offer us clues regarding the power struggle to pilot an eventual succession to Khamenei. For the first time in history, the turnout was only 48% and the number of blank or null ballots broke all records: 13%. All this after a campaign in which more than 600 candidates were banned from running in the elections. The Islamic Republic is becoming less and less of a republic. The difficult equation of a theocratic democracy has proved impossible. It has become increasingly clear to Iranians that the little room for decision-making and participation that they thought they had retained was no longer an illusion. The elections have only served to legitimize a regime that never intended to give a voice to the people. The 2021 elections have served to make many Iranians (and international observers) aware of this. The disappointment, however, was already served with the harsh repression of the protests during the government of the "moderate" Rouhani. Thousands of protesters have been killed and many more imprisoned in the protests that took place between 2017 and 2021. The possibility of a more centrist alternative died with the repression of these by the Basij.

Khamenei and the Raisi government have redoubled efforts to "Islamize" society. There is no Perestroika or Glasnost in sight, but a further tightening of repression. No gradual opening to the world, but further isolation. For Khamenei, the 1979 revolution is only the first step in a still incomplete process. In 2017 he stated that a true Islamic government had not yet been achieved in Iran. This would be the stepping stone to a true Islamic society and this, in turn, would be indispensable to build a true "Islamic civilization." From the point of view of Khamenei, Raisi and the Revolutionary Guards, there is still much to purify in institutions and society. The name of republic was always a mask to disguise the pursuit of a purely Islamist regime.²⁹

As far as foreign policy is concerned, the anti-Zionist, anti-Western and anti-American obsession has no sign of disappearing. Moreover, the regime's determination to continue to defy the West has led it to sacrifice one of the fundamental principles of the revolution (and of the Persian

²⁹ "Iran: A Darkening Picture at Home and Abroad", *Labour Friends of Israel*, mayo de 2022, 8-9. <https://www.lfi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Iran-A-Darkening-Picture-at-Home-and-Abroad.pdf>

state over the last few centuries): the need to maintain strategic sovereignty throughout the world. Isolated by sanctions and determined not to give in to the demands of the West, the Islamic Republic has thrown itself into the arms of China to avoid surrendering and to continue the struggle.

On Saturday, March 27, 2021, the foreign ministers of Iran and China signed a cooperation agreement covering the next 25 years. Little is known about it, as many of the contents remain secret, but it is doubtful that China has agreed to invest more than \$400 billion in exchange for a discount on oil imports from Iran. Iran has probably signed a new Turkmenchay treaty that compromises its independence and makes it, in the long run, a client state of China. This would mean the end of the Khomeini vision of building a country that marks its own course in the international sphere; free from the influence and interference of the superpowers. Iran has always presented itself as a third way in the Cold War, as an Islamic model, nationalist and proud of its independence from North American capitalism and Soviet communism. In the new Cold War that is coming, Iran has thrown in the towel with the third way. In the name of continuing an endless struggle against Israel and Washington, Tehran has sacrificed its independence and placed itself in the hands of Beijing. All this dismantles one of the last reasons of the defenders of the nuclear agreement with Iran: that this one would serve to empower Rouhani and the moderate sectors of the country at the same time that it would serve to attract Iran to the western sphere.