

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN MIDDLE EASTERN POLITICS

Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001

Alone in the world

Edited by
Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi



Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001

Examining Iranian foreign policy with a focus on the years since 2001, this book analyzes the defining feature of Iran's international and regional posture, its strategic loneliness.

Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001 offers an in-depth analysis of the key drivers behind Iran's foreign policy: power, strategic culture, and ideology. In addition, the authors examine Iran's relations with key countries and regions, including its often tenuous relations with China, Russia, and America, as well as its bilateral relations with non-state actors such as Hezbollah. The common thread running throughout the volume is that Iran is alone in the world: regardless of its political maneuverings, the Islamic Republic's regional and international posture is largely one of strategic loneliness.

Regrouping contributions from the US, Canada, Europe, and Iran, this book provides an international perspective, both at the theoretical and practical levels, and is essential reading for those with an interest in Middle Eastern Politics, International Relations, and Political Science more broadly.

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Finally, we wish to specify that the views expressed in this volume do not represent those of the Government of Canada, but solely those of the individual contributors.

Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi

List of abbreviations

AEOI	Atomic Energy Organization of Iran
CSR	Center for Strategic Research
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HEU	highly-enriched uranium
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
JAM	Jaysh al-Mahdy
LEU	low-enriched uranium
MeK	Mojahedin-e Khalq
MOIS	Ministry of Intelligence and Security
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NPT	Non-Proliferation Treaty
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
SCNS	Supreme Council for National Security
WMD	weapons of mass destruction

Introduction

Alone in the world

Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi

In the early days of the twenty-first century, little change seemed to be taking place in the Middle East and, as a result, the media and public in the West were showing limited interest. The Israeli–Palestinian peace process born out of the 1993 Oslo accords, for instance, had stalled by the end of the decade, while it was becoming clear that young leaders such as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Jordanian King Abdallah II, and Moroccan King Mohammad VI were not moving forward with much-anticipated political reforms.¹ Saddam Hussein's Iraq did not pose a serious threat to his neighbors anymore, while Turkey had yet to emerge as an interesting experience of coexistence between political Islam and secular democracy. As for Iran, the optimism surrounding the election of reformist President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 was fading as conservative forces within the regime were blocking his ability to move forward with the reforms that many Western policy-makers were hoping for. All this changed after September 11, 2001, however, as the invasions of Afghanistan in October 2001 and Iraq in March 2003 brought the Middle East – and Iran – back to the forefront of the world's attention.

For all the commotion made about Iran as an aggressive and rising regional power, we believe that the most defining feature of the Islamic Republic's international posture today is its isolation. Tehran has managed to feed the hostility and suspicion of its Arab neighbors (especially Saudi Arabia) and of Israel. Iran is not a member of any security arrangement, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for the Persian Gulf monarchies or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Turkey's case. Moreover, four regional powers surrounding Iran – India, Israel, Pakistan, and Russia – enjoy the security guarantees provided by nuclear weapons. Iran's support for regional groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories does not significantly alter the equation. Although both groups have become increasingly important within regional dynamics in recent years, they have also become progressively independent of Tehran – to the extent that they act more as partners of the Iranian regime than as proxies.

Beyond the Middle East, the situation is even bleaker for Tehran. Since 1979, Iran has faced relentless efforts on the part of Washington to isolate it

diplomatically and economically. In particular, the accumulation of several rounds of US and United Nations sanctions, including the most recent ones under the Barack Obama Administration, are having a significant impact on the Iranian economy and further deepen the country's isolation. Iran's diplomatic overtures towards other regional or rising powers such as Brazil, China, Cuba, India, Russia, Sudan, and Venezuela have not improved its overall position. More often than not, the governments of these countries (especially in China, India, and Russia) only back Iran when it suits their diplomatic or commercial interests. But if push comes to shove – often under US pressure – they tend to leave Tehran out in the cold. At the same time, those more ideologically inclined towards Iran such as Venezuela simply do not have enough leverage to help Tehran more than symbolically.

It is this continuing isolation and strategic loneliness that has led us to subtitle this volume “Alone in the World.” In this Introduction, we start by providing an overview of the evolution of Iran's international posture since 1979. We follow with a discussion of the key drivers of Iranian foreign policy and of the main schools of thought explaining it, and conclude with an overview of the volume's chapters.

Iran's evolving international posture since 1979: less ideological, but still lonely

The Khomeini era

Iran's modern history is tumultuous and complex. The 1979 Iranian Revolution put an end to the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–79) and the reign of its last king – or Shah – Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and gave birth to the Islamic Republic of Iran. This new regime was led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–89), who proclaimed himself Supreme Leader (*Vali-e Faqih*). With this revolutionary change, Tehran abandoned the pro-Western international posture of the deposed sovereign and adopted an idealistic foreign policy that attempted to unite Islam, Third Worldism, and anti-imperialism under a single paradigm.

For several reasons, chief among them the fear of a rebellion from its Shia population, Iraq attacked Iran in September 1980, launching the long, bloody, and expensive Iran–Iraq War (1980–88). The conflict could have ended in a stalemate in 1982–83 when several Arab leaders offered to negotiate an end to the hostilities. However, Khomeini responded to peace proposals with declarations on the obligation of Iranian armies to “liberate” Baghdad and Jerusalem.² It is only in 1988 that Khomeini yielded to pressures from pragmatic elements in the Iranian political establishment and agreed to an armistice with Iraq. It is important not to underestimate the impact of the Revolution and the war with Iraq on the current perceptions of Iranian decision-makers. Most of them witnessed first-hand these chaotic and violent events and were strongly impacted by them.³ As a result, many became highly suspicious of the West's designs in the Middle East, in part because the US

and some European states had provided political, financial, and military support to Saddam Hussein during the war.

With respect to foreign policy, Tehran supported throughout the 1980s various liberation or opposition movements throughout the Middle East and North Africa. This was the case in its immediate neighborhood (such as Kurdish groups in Iraq and Turkey and Shia groups in Bahrain), in the Levant (Islamic Jihad in Palestine and, more significantly, Hezbollah in Lebanon), and even farther away, for example in the Western Sahara (the Polisario Front).⁴ This strategy attracted the ire of several of Iran's neighbors, even to this day. In particular, almost all Sunni Arab states have looked on with much concern at such Iranian involvement in the broader Middle East. Accordingly, this has led many of them, chiefly Saudi Arabia, to seek to counter Tehran's attempts to influence regional developments.

Post-Khomeini Iran and Rafsanjani's Second Republic

Khomeini's death in 1989 and his replacement as Supreme Leader by Ali Khamenei and the election of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to the presidency gave birth to a new era in Iran. Internationally, this "Second Republic"⁵ witnessed a marked decrease in Iran's revolutionary ambitions along with a greater emphasis on a reduction in its support for terrorism abroad and on post-war economic reconstruction. Even if the Islamic Republic continued to be portrayed in the media as a terrorist sponsor and a rogue state, in fact the Iranian government in the 1990s progressively forsook its revolutionary ideals and increasingly focused on the pragmatic protection and pursuit of more conventional national interests.

This is what Olivier Roy has dubbed the "trivialization of Islamist movements."⁶ For Roy, Iran represents the best illustration of the nationalization of Islamism: "since the cease-fire with Iraq in June 1988, Iran returned little by little into the fold by following a foreign policy founded on its national interests, without ideological consideration, if only in rhetoric."⁷ Roy suggests that after a "Jacobin period," revolutionary states inevitably grow aware of the international system's pressures and return to the classic behavior of defending their national interests. This results from the constant practice of power, which leads to the identification with a nation-state and a specific political space, and thus with pragmatism and realism.⁸

By the end of the 1980s, Iran had become a pariah state, isolated on the international scene and internally exhausted by the war with Iraq. Post-Khomeini Iran thus gradually shifted from the pursuit of universalist causes towards an increasingly pragmatic foreign policy. In repeated efforts aimed at reducing its isolation and mitigating its strategic loneliness, Iran sought to mend its relations with Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states, while seeking to build closer ties with Russia and European states. Despite modest improvements, however, by the end of Rafsanjani's second term in 1997, Tehran remained largely isolated.

Khatami's Iran

The two presidential terms of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) further transformed the Islamic Republic, both domestically and internationally. Khatami got elected on a platform of change that appealed primarily to an increasingly globalized young generation. Khatami traveled the world to promote his message of international coexistence, which he deftly named the “Dialogue among Civilizations,” in opposition to Samuel Huntington’s concept of the “Clash of Civilizations.”⁹ The Iranian president’s main objective was to reduce tensions with the international community by, for instance, emphasizing the need to support international institutions such as the United Nations.¹⁰ His efforts led to some successes. Khatami, in particular, was able to reduce tensions with Saudi Arabia and the petro-monarchies of the Persian Gulf, while his more nuanced stance on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict helped ease some concerns in Tel Aviv and Washington.

Yet despite these rhetorical openings, Khatami remained critical of Western foreign policy. In fact, he never challenged the main foundations of the Islamic republic’s foreign policy, such as its support for Hezbollah or its struggle to gain international acceptance for its right to nuclear technology.¹¹ Even when trying to change only the tone and rhetoric of the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy, Khatami faced major resistance from powerful conservative forces within the regime who either had vested interests in maintaining the status quo or were genuinely alarmed with the reformists’ ambitions. The backlash was so strong that Khatami was, as Ghoncheh Tazmini explains, “both the president of the country and the leader of the opposition.”¹² The “axis of evil” speech in 2002 by US President George W. Bush (2001–9), putting Iran in the unenvious company of Iraq and North Korea, damaged Khatami’s efforts since it offended conservatives and reformists alike. Although the president kept course by supporting US efforts to oust two common foes – the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq – conservative politicians used the opportunity to challenge Khatami’s authority at every turn, ultimately making him a lame-duck president for his last years in office.

The ascent of the Neoconservatives

By the mid-2000s, the perceived failure of the reformist movement (perhaps in part because expectations were too high in the first place) opened the way for the rise of a new group of conservatives, labeled “neoconservatives” by Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri.¹³ With a low turnout in the 2005 presidential elections (63 percent) favoring the highly-mobilized conservative constituency, Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad succeeded in winning the presidency, becoming the first non-clerical president since the early 1980s. Ahmadi-Nejad ran on a platform of social justice aimed at attracting the vote of the disenfranchised classes, a constituency usually neglected by reformists and traditional conservatives alike. The new president’s efforts to bring in

middle-aged hardline conservatives, many of whom had served as young officers in the war with Iraq, into the political and economic structures of the Islamic Republic has since led to much infighting within the regime, especially with the old guard who feel threatened by the ascension of this new generation.

Ahmadi-Nejad and his allies were able to induce some changes with regard to foreign policy. Their foreign policy is based on a desire to counterbalance the US, Israel, and their Arab allies while trying to develop closer ties to rising powers, such as Brazil, China, India, Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela, who could potentially support Iran's challenge to Western dominance. This has naturally led to further tensions with Western states, especially the US. Yet for all his controversial diatribes, Ahmadi-Nejad has not strayed too much off track with respect to the traditional positions of the Islamic Republic. For instance, although the president appears tougher than his predecessor on the nuclear issue, he has in fact adopted positions broadly consistent with Tehran's traditional stance that Iran has the right to the peaceful use of nuclear technology, as allowed by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In the region, he has not questioned the general thrust of Iran's traditional policies and has continued relying on partners such as Hezbollah and Syria. However, his aggressive public discourse – mostly for consumption among Arab publics – has left Iran even more isolated within the international community.

Iran and the Arab uprisings: more losses than gains

Iranian leaders were, no less than in other countries, taken aback by the turmoil that erupted in the Arab world in early 2011. In general, the conservative factions that dominate the Iranian regime have publicly supported the uprisings, with the exception of Syria, but have sought to represent the opposition movements as expressions of an "Islamic awakening" directed against the US and its regional allies.

Because the situation in each country is defined by local characteristics and has evolved differently, developments in the region have elicited a variety of responses from Tehran. When it has suited them, Iranian policy-makers have sought to maintain pressure on Arab autocrats by, for example, beaming television images portraying protesters in a positive light. Conversely, when protestors challenged Iran's close ally Syria, Tehran's response has been dramatically different. However, one shared feature has been that the Iranian government did not instigate any of the protest movements; more broadly, the Islamic Republic's very limited ability to influence outcomes in the emerging order in the Middle East has become increasingly clear.

The case of Egypt is illustrative. Tehran publicly welcomed the departure of President Hosni Mubarak, who had actively supported American and Israeli policies while opposing Iran and its allies Hezbollah and Hamas. Iran's calculus was that any political change in Egypt would bring to power actors with more nuanced views of the Islamic Republic. Yet despite Iran's interest in improving

relations, several factors prevent Tehran from exerting significant influence in Cairo. Most Egyptian politicians – including the Muslim Brotherhood – will be careful that bilateral ties with Iran do not reach a point where they are a source of significant concern in Washington or Tel Aviv. There is also significant resistance within Egypt with regard to Iranian overtures. In particular, groups with vested interests such as the security services and the Sunni religious establishment are suspicious of Iran's motives. Iran's ability to gain influence in Egypt will therefore remain limited since those factors militating against Tehran will not change, regardless of who rules Egypt.

The upheaval in Syria is directly detrimental to Iranian interests. State media in Iran were initially silent about the uprising and, after it became impossible to ignore, tried to present it as a foreign plot. This illustrates the distress in Tehran over the potential fall of the Syrian regime, a long-standing ally of the Islamic Republic. Tehran has responded by supporting Damascus in several ways, including by reportedly providing lethal and non-lethal equipment and military advice. Although Iran will continue to help the Syrian government, its support is extremely unlikely to significantly affect the overall situation on the ground. Since events in Syria are driven by domestic factors, Iran has a limited ability to influence the outcome. That being said, the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad – or even his substantial weakening – would significantly undermine the Islamic Republic's position in the region as it would cost it its only ally among Arab states. Moreover, Syria has served as a conduit for Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon, a strategic advantage that Tehran does not want to lose. Events in Syria, in sum, show that the Arab uprisings are detrimental to Iran's regional standing.

Overall, Iran did reap some gains from the departure of pro-US leaders – particularly Mubarak – who had taken a strong stand against Iran in the past. Though this provides it with a temporary propaganda victory, Tehran faces substantial obstacles to extending its political sway in the region. As Arab governments become more representative, their foreign policies will likely be less consistently aligned with Western interests but, despite Iranian efforts to take advantage of these changes, new regional policies are likely to reflect domestic political pressures rather than external influences. Such an evolution in the foreign policy of some Arab states would undermine the Islamic Republic's traditional appeal to Arab popular opinion because of its anti-Western position. Even if regional governments adopt more independent policies, it is unlikely that they would substantially curtail long-standing relationships with Washington in order to improve ties with Iran.

How to explain Iranian foreign policy?

Though there exists a large and diverse literature on Iran's foreign policy, there is little agreement on what drives it. It is nonetheless possible to regroup diverse explanations under three common threads. For most authors, what drives Iranian foreign policy is some combination of power (the international

distribution of power, and more specifically Iran's place within it), domestic politics (which usually includes strategic culture and factional competition within the regime's elite), and the dichotomy of ideology and pragmatism.

A survey of the key writings by the doyen of Iranian foreign-policy studies, R. K. Ramazani, suggests that he views such a combination at play. According to Ramazani, Iranian foreign policy under the Islamic Republic has been characterized by the same tension between religious or universalist ideology and the pursuit of pragmatic interests which characterized Achaemenid, Sassanid, and Safavid foreign policies in the past 25 centuries.¹⁴ In a discussion of the export of the Revolution in the 1980s, Ramazani specifies that other factors – domestic politics and the external environment – also influence foreign policy.¹⁵ In the early 1990s, for example, Ramazani argues that in its relations with its immediate neighborhoods to the South (the Persian Gulf) and North (Central Asia and the Caucasus), Iran's rapidly growing pragmatism was driven by both domestic politics (the ascendancy of President Rafsanjani, a pragmatic conservative) and international factors (the end of the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War of 1990–91).¹⁶

Similarly, for Ray Takeyh, Iran's foreign policy is driven by three factors: Islamic and revolutionary ideology, national interests, and factional politics.¹⁷ Ever since the birth of the Islamic Republic in 1979, these three factors have constantly competed amongst each other to shape the country's foreign policy; at any given point in time, one may dominate but never eliminates the influence of the other two. In the early 1980s, for example, as "Khomeini's Iran thrashed about the Middle East looking for dragons to slay," ideology had the upper hand.¹⁸ With time, however, Tehran came to increasingly pursue a more realist foreign policy. Relations with Russia illustrate this pragmatic streak. According to Takeyh, the Islamic Republic's approach to Russia has been one of "sustained realism": Moscow and Tehran gradually came to a tacit bargain whereby Russia sells Iran arms and nuclear technology and provides it with diplomatic support while Iran refrains from meddling in Central Asia and the Caucasus.¹⁹

The argument that Iranian foreign policy can be at least partly explained by a constantly evolving balance between ideology and pragmatism is common. For David Menashri, the Islamic Republic's regional policy has succeeded in combining "early ideological conviction with a healthy dose of regard for national interests" – with the latter increasingly dominating the former as the 1980s and 1990s progressed.²⁰ Menashri cites in particular Iran's lack of support for the aborted Shia uprising in Southern Iraq in 1991 and its pro-Armenian stance in the ongoing dispute between (Christian) Armenia and (Shia) Azerbaijan. Though Iran's continued animosity towards Israel has its "roots in revolutionary dogma,"²¹ Menashri argues that even in such cases, Tehran's foreign policy can never be solely attributed to strict adherence to ideology. Leadership of the anti-Israel camp, in particular, provides concrete strategic benefits by enhancing the Islamic Republic's status as a regional power.²²

For many authors, Iran is a “normal” country, in the sense that the Islamic Republic’s ideology does not contribute to their explanations of its foreign policy. According to Shahram Chubin, three factors explain Iran’s more active and effective diplomacy of recent years: two related to the country’s power (a more permissive regional environment and the rise in oil prices) and a third related to domestic politics, the rise of hard-liners.²³ Chubin disagrees with analysts who, he argues, exaggerate or overestimate the “Iranian threat”: Iran in fact poses a limited military threat, its economy remains beset by structural weaknesses, and its soft power is limited. The country’s growing power has nonetheless led to many important shifts in its foreign policy. There has been, according to Chubin, a change in tone: rising power has led to “a certain braggadocio and recklessness and a coarsening of language.”²⁴ Moreover, he argues that by increasing its support for Hamas, Hezbollah, and other such groups, Tehran filled a vacuum in the Arab–Israeli conflict caused notably by the stalling of the peace process, the disunity of Arab states, and the unpopularity of US regional policies.

Other authors emphasize domestic politics.²⁵ Mehran Kamrava, for example, argues that factional debates within the top echelons of the regime have a considerable impact on the Islamic Republic’s foreign and security policy.²⁶ He posits that the elite can be subdivided into three broad though admittedly fluid groupings: conservative traditionalists, reformists, and radicals. The Supreme Leader, as the ultimate decision-maker, leaves the bickering factions with a calculated amount of leeway to engage in competition and conflict over foreign (and domestic) policy. He subsequently makes decisions with two objectives in mind: ensuring the perpetuation of the regime and maintaining a balance between key factions. Iran’s nuclear policy illustrates how the evolving balance of power within the regime influences major decisions. A majority of factions agree that Iran has a right to, and should pursue, nuclear technology; where they disagree is on the tactics and rhetoric used in this pursuit and the diplomatic costs they are willing to incur in the process. Iran’s policy, Kamrava argues, thus changed from one of “relative conciliation” to one of “intransigent belligerence” as the reformist era was gradually replaced by the ascendancy of the Ahmadi-Nejad-led hard-liners in 2003–5.²⁷

For other analysts, finally, the important rise in Iran’s power since 2001 is the key driver of its foreign policy. These authors argue that a variety of international events – the fall of long-time rival regimes of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 which acted as checks on Iranian regional influence, the rise in oil prices which provided the regime with a massive influx of cash, and the difficulties experienced by the US in Afghanistan and Iraq – all contributed to boost Iran’s regional position. This, in turn, provided it with opportunities to expand its influence abroad. Mark Gasiorowski, for example, agrees that what he labels Iran’s “new aggressiveness” is largely due to such favorable structural conditions. He specifies that this new aggressiveness is in fact restricted mostly to the nuclear

issue and to Iran's policy in Iraq; in other issue-areas, the country's foreign policy displays more continuity than change.²⁸

Neoconservatives vs. realists

It is possible, more broadly, to identify neoconservative and realist trends in the literature on the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. Neoconservative observers see Iran through an ideological prism. They believe that the Islamic Republic is led by "a bunch of mad mullahs" who pursue an ideological and revolutionary Islamist foreign policy.²⁹ For them, Iran seeks to "wipe Israel off the map" and destroy the "Great Satan," the United States. Many are associated with the American neoconservative movement, the Administration of George W. Bush (2001–9) and the Israeli right.³⁰ In addition to usually having an apocalyptic conception of Iran's role in regional and international affairs, many are staunch defenders of a US or Israeli military intervention against Iran's nuclear program, while some also support policies seeking the overthrow of the Iranian regime.³¹ Proponents of neoconservative views regarding Iran include scholars such as Fouad Ajami, Patrick Clawson, and Michael Rubin³² and journalists such as Arthur Herman, Charles Krauthammer, and Norman Podhoretz.³³

Realist authors, on the other hand, perceive Iran as a rational state pursuing its national interests. Realists propose different interpretations of the core tenets of their research program, but in general they assume that the state is the dominant actor in the international system, that the international system is anarchic and essentially conflictual, and that the pursuit of power and security are the primary drivers of state behavior.³⁴ Robert Gilpin defines the concept of rationality by stating that "individuals seek to maximize, or at least satisfy, certain values or interests at the lowest possible cost for them."³⁵ For realists, these values prioritized by states are power and security, not ideological ones such as the export of a revolution.

Realists therefore draw parallels between Iranian conduct and the foreign policies of the Soviet Union or Maoist China. Like these two states in the aftermath of their own twentieth-century revolutions, the Islamic Republic gradually became increasingly willing to compromise on many of the more ideological aspects of its foreign policy. For these authors, when Iranian leaders are now faced with a choice between national interest and ideology, interest will often prevail. Students of Iranian foreign policy who adopt a broadly realist outlook include Mohammed Ayoob, Nikolas Gvosdev, Dilip Hiro, Nikki Keddie, Vali Nasr, and Trita Parsi.³⁶ It is interesting to note, finally, that the most renowned French experts on Iran, such as Thierry Coville, Bernard Hourcade, Olivier Roy, and Yann Richard, generally share this vision of Iran.³⁷

Overview of the book

In this volume, we adopt the realist approach to studying Iran's foreign policy: despite its many particularities, the Islamic Republic largely remains a

“normal” country prioritizing the maximization of its power and security in the pursuit of its perceived national interests. The chapter contributors adopt a variety of perspectives on the more detailed means and objectives of Iranian foreign policy, illustrating the complexity of the topic. But overall, we view the traditional elements of power and security, in broad terms, as the chief drivers of Iranian foreign policy, even though we accept that other factors discussed in the brief review above – especially domestic politics, strategic culture, and ideology – also matter.

Even though the sources of its conduct are often disputed, in other words, the Islamic Republic is a pragmatic and rational actor whose foreign policy, like that of other states, seeks to maximize power and security. As witnessed by the contributions to this volume, there is disagreement, for example, on the ultimate objectives of Iran’s nuclear program or its policies in Iraq. Yet underlying these diverse aspects of Iran’s foreign policy is the common thread that forms the theme of this volume: Iran’s strategic loneliness. Indeed, Tehran is surrounded by US forces and Sunni Arab states traditionally suspicious of Iranian ambitions, and it has few reliable allies. At the same time, historical experiences of great power intervention in Iranian affairs have shaped the psyche of the country’s leaders, entrenching the conviction that Iran – a Persian and Shia island in a Middle East dominated by Sunni Arabs and Turks – is alone in the world; as Khomeini once argued, “the world is against us.”³⁸

In this context, the first three chapters survey the drivers of Iranian foreign policy discussed above: power, strategic culture, and the dichotomy between ideology and pragmatism. The fourth chapter then analyzes the country’s nuclear program. The remaining chapters analyze the Islamic Republic’s key bilateral and regional relations, with a focus on the years since 2001.

In Chapter 1, Thomas Juneau asks three questions: How much power did Iran possess in the years since 2001, and what was the nature of this power? What was the trend in Iranian power during this period? He argues that Iran’s power significantly improved in this period but that this sudden advantage is unlikely to be sustainable. Juneau shows that short-term gains were often bought at the expense of longer-term costs, and that the increase in the country’s power was largely the result of external factors which will evolve in a manner unlikely to be so advantageous to Iran. Moreover, a significant proportion of the growth in Iranian power was accounted for by intangible and unconventional elements: asymmetric military capabilities, the regional attractiveness of Iran’s rejectionist model, and alliances with non-state actors. At the same time, hard elements of power – chiefly wealth and conventional military capabilities – grew in absolute but not relative terms, perpetuating existing disadvantages.

In Chapter 2, Jalil Roshandel studies Iran’s decision-making culture, analyzing the *how* and *why* of its strategic philosophy and their implications for foreign policy. He identifies the main principles of the Islamic Republic’s strategic thought and then traces the historical evolution of the international and

domestic context of Iran's political and strategic decision-making. Roshandel emphasizes how the momentous implications of the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–88 brought fundamental transformations in Iran's self-image and in its world-view. According to him, moreover, an examination of Iran's strategic culture suggests that the country views itself as oppressed by other nations and fears foreign interference, especially by the United States and Israel. Its nuclear program, in this context, allows Tehran to maximize its pride and prestige and represents an important step towards achieving its goal of becoming a regional power and a major player on the international scene.

In Chapter 3, Mahmood Monshipouri argues that the Islamic Republic's ideology has remained constant since its inception in 1979. This ideology, which blends support for Shiism and its spread across the region, serves as a political tool to mobilize material and political support for Iranian allies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories. Throughout the region, Iran uses its ideology both as a spoiler and as a constructive player (for example in Afghanistan). According to Monshipouri, Iran's support for Shia factions throughout the Middle East is based on both strategic and ideological grounds. Monshipouri thus attempts to explain under what conditions ideological terms influence Iran's foreign policy and under what circumstances Islamist ideology serves the country's broader national interests. Given the many evolving security challenges facing Iran, he expects the Iranian ruling elites to follow a “zigzag pattern” of pursuing both ideological and geopolitical interests.

Ever since the extent of Iran's nuclear program was revealed in 2002, no other issue has so dominated the country's relations with the West. In Chapter 4, Nader Entessar proposes that there are several factors that have contributed to the adoption of Iran's nuclear posture. He argues that the country's security concerns outweigh any prestige variable. Moreover, Iran's near total lack of trust in the West's intentions and the absence of strategic allies place Tehran in a precarious position in the volatile environment in which it finds itself. Iran's bitter experience of the war with Iraq, its encirclement by unreliable and hostile forces, including those with nuclear weapons, and the strong US military presence on its eastern and western borders are constant reminders of the country's vulnerability to outside threats.

Kayhan Barzegar argues in Chapter 5 that three broad considerations have been significant in forming Iran's Iraq policy: the nature of the government that will rule the new Iraq in the years to come and its orientation towards Iran; the future impact of Iraq on regional politics; and the future of the regional US presence. Overall, Iran's policies in post-2003 Iraq have been shaped by both pragmatic and ideological factors. The former focus on geostrategic issues influencing Iran–Iraq relations, such as Iraq's territorial unity, Iran's quest to institutionalize its regional role and strategic discrepancies between Iran and the US. The latter stress that Iran's support for friendly Shia factions is necessary to empower these groups' role in Iraq. Yet Iran's Shia outlook should not be interpreted from a merely ideological perspective.