

Imagining a Path to Beyond the Clerical Regime in Iran

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For years we have been scrambling to contain or frustrate Iran's ambitions and weapons aspirations. Perhaps we can continue to push the can down the road, but at some point, either Iran's regime will have a nuclear weapon, or this regime will no longer be. So, the real question thus becomes not whether the regime – which plays by no rules or law – can be contained, but whether it will survive.

So, what causes a regime like Iran's to fall? And by this I do not mean an invasion. Those of us who complain about the rising tide of isolationism in conservative ranks must answer their critics. The Middle East has indeed sucked us into endless wars. We have indeed been carrying way too much water for allies, from the Saudis to the Europeans, for their interests. As a nation, we do not rely on Persian Gulf oil; we are there for our allies.

Even Israel, whose very ethos and founding principles are informed by the imperative of reestablishing Jewish self-reliance, had in the last three decades – really dating back to the War of Attrition's conclusion in 1970 (a matter for a different article) – been pressured and conditioned by successive US administrations into passivity, into punting on its unilateral, and especially preemptive, self-defensive actions in favor of allowing the US to take care of too many regional problems. Israel was asked by administration after administration to box and shelve its growing regional power instead of unleashing it for our common interests. Which leads us to this point, where more Americans are asking whether even Israel should take more initiative in not only defending itself, but in helping the American-led alliance. So, I understand the impulse – akin to Israel's in 2004-5 in Gaza – to just run away into our fortress and let the region stew in its own problems.

It is true our allies, even Israel, can be asked to do more. But in the end, Iran is also our war. The war against Islamic radicals is also our war. Sadly, these wars are not of our choosing. Iran has waged war against us

since 1979. It has reached beyond the Middle East to kill our servicemen in Europe, and even at one point was caught trying to blow up a Washington, DC restaurant. Unchecked, Iran will arrive at our shores with a vengeance. And lest one think their Islamic radical ideology is at all limited, one should only recall the words of various, senior and main-line Iranian officials and clerics over the years about London: 'the British capital would do well to convert now to the Islamic world on peaceful terms rather than resist the inevitable and be forcibly converted later.' This is an aim which is overtly advocated in the Islamic Republic, whether we chose to hear it or not.

Islamic Brotherhood movements and their ideological antecedents divide the world between the world of Islam and the world of the Jihad and the sword for over a millennium before the USA was even a concept. Whether we want to cut and run is of no matter to them; they will follow. They will come to our shores, and they will perpetuate more 9/11's.

So, despite our exhaustion of the Middle East, we are damned into a struggle with some of its movements and nations. And it behooves us, then to understand and leverage whatever forces on the ground that are there – in terms of both nations and trends – toward a strategy that defeats the most dangerous enemies while minimizing having to turn reflexively toward employing major conventional US forces.

So I come back to the key question: what assets, in terms of allies, movements and ideas are out there inside and around Iran which can be leveraged to help bring about the collapse of the Iranian regime without sending more of our boys into harm's way, so that in the end we are not faced with a nuclearized and regionally ascendant Iran?

Two events I think give us clues. First, the Iranian regime apparently plans to raze the tombs of Mordechai and Esther and replace it with a Palestinian consulate. Second, despite its best efforts, Iranians are scribbling graffiti with images from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh and visit his grave as a pilgrimage site. On one level, one can say the former is an expression of the regime's vile anti-Semitic desire to attack anything

Jewish and rub the Jewish people's face in it. The latter could be an expression of the Iranian people's rich literacy and love of their national poets – sort of like a Shakespeare festival in England. Both of those are true, of course, but I think they show something much more serious is afoot in Iran that has Iranian leaders laying awake at night in worry.

Indeed, I think both suggest there is a robust language of opposition in Iran which is missed here in the West.

Let me explain how I get from the tomb of Esther and grave of Ferdowsi to a drone strike in Baghdad.

Regime vulnerabilities in terms of Persian nationalism

While Khamenei holds total power over the state structure in Iran through the IRGC, other powerful forces are at work. Among the most powerful and dangerous for the regime is Iranian/Persian nationalism.

This is not a simple “rally-around-the-regime-when-threatened” phenomenon. Iranian nationalism is best understood through its 2000-year-old symbol: the Paisley. It has been a central motif of the Persian nation going all the way back at least to the Sassanid empire (224 AD), and has its origins even in Zoroastrianism probably as far back as the Achaemenid empire well over a half millennium earlier (500 BC). At its root, the symbol — called in old Persian Buta — is a stylized Cypress tree (which Zoroastrians regard as signifying strength and eternity) infused with floral mist (which Zoroastrians regard as the epitome of beauty). But this tree with the floral mist, rather than stand erect, is pliantly bending in the wind to form a teardrop with its top bent over. The Safavids (1500s onward) later adopted this motif from the previous Persian empires, and it was used as the central motif in all royal clothing, and even in the crown, all the way to the fall of the Pahlavis in 1979. The aim is to evoke the image of Iran as a strong, ancient, and eternal culture defined by its refined beauty, but always willing to bend to the prevailing winds in order to survive.

Islam is that strong wind to which the Persian/Iranian nationalist core has bent. Beneath all the Islam, the paisley remains the essence of the nation. The two coexist, but are always in some tension, especially since those who champion the Islamic overlay fear the resilience and authenticity of the non-Islamic historic core. The key here is that national pride and Islamic fidelity are not the same, and are at times not aligned or even antithetical.

While Khamenei may at times tenuously dabble in evoking, or at least coopting, nationalism in Iran, these efforts have been feeble and were abandoned rapidly. Why? Because they threaten the primacy of Islam in Iranian identity.

As much as nationalism was always anathema to the Islamist cluster of ideologies, it became in recent years especially threatening to the clerical establishment, since the clerics' corruption and monopolistic control of everything are increasingly viewed as a factor retarding the development of the nation's greatness or even damaging its core Persian national heritage. Iranian/Persian greatness is being sacrificed at the altar of Islamic ideology. As the frustration with the Iranian regime increases, so too does Iranian populism revert to Persian/Iranian nationalism which at its heart holds a stronger grip on the Iranians than any other aspect of their identity. As such, the language of nationalism in Iran has increasingly become the symbolic language of opposition to clerical rule in a way against which the regime has no counter.

Perhaps even more unnerving — since it betrays a volcanic potential underneath the calm surface — is that some of the more untethered Iranian politicians, who are adept at reading the populist nationalist surge, have even tried to tap it. As such, any sign that a politician is seriously attempting to leverage Iranian nationalism for political gain has been met with strong pushback. One of the most visible episodes of this is, for example, none other than President Ahmadinejad himself. He began his fall from grace with the IRGC establishment, Khamenei and Ayatollah Mohammed Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, not because of his curious policy of making final preparations for the return of the Mahdi (including renovation of the mosque around a well from which the Mahdi is said to emerge when he leaves his occultation), but first and foremost because he met with Mossadeq’s widow. While the Islamic revolutionary regime has always regarded the Mossadeq episode as a crime since it was “colonialist” intervention, and while even the likes of Ali Shariati were involved in that episode since it focused first and foremost on nationalizing the oil sector, the Islamist appendages to Mossadeq’s National Front (of which Shariati was) never actually liked his secular national-socialist agenda, and only saw it as a disposable means on the road to an Islamic end. Indeed, while using the National Front structure and including its leaders in the first formations of the new revolutionary regime in 1979, Khomeini moved fast to repress, imprison and execute the non-Islamist remnants of the Mossadeq’s National Front, including Sadegh Ghotz Bazadeh who himself had been a close aide to Khomeini. As such, the Islamic revolutionary leader, from Khomeini to Ayatollah Taqi Mesbah Yazdi view Mossadeq’s widow not as a still-useful means to achieve anything, but only as the lingering symbol of a set of Mossadeq’s secular and national-socialist ideas which violated everything for which they stand. As such, when Ahmadinejad met with his widow, he faced withering criticism foremost from his mentors and supporters. When he continued to embrace symbols of nationalism, he ran ever increasingly afoul of his mentors and the Islamic government as a whole. The anger deepened in late 2007, when Ahmadinejad hosted a summit with Putin, with a backdrop wall mural of the Avenue of Kings in Persepolis. The Iranian state press agency released a picture of the two walking to a podium in front of the mural, made to look as if they were themselves strolling down the Lane of Kings, evoking

the image of Cyrus' himself walking down that lane. Ever since the 1971 celebration organized by Shah of Iran for the 2500th-year celebration of founding of Persepolis, the site had been taboo in the public imagery in Iran. And here Ahmadinejad had thrust it to the center of his presidency. The message was clear: the leader of the Russian nation was walking with the "King" of the Persian nation. Ahmadinejad was dabbling far too dangerously in Persian nationalistic imagery, and thus beginning to position himself as a populist who might even seek to leverage this and challenge the regime. The result was not only his downfall, but strong harassment of him, his family and his allies in the period after his leaving office, especially by the very IRGC clique from which he had emerged.

Ahmadinejad may have been clipped to size as he began down the path of populist nationalism, but the underlying appeal of nationalism continues to grow as a threat to the Islamic regime.

There are many examples suggesting the growth of Iranian nationalism recently at the expense of Islam and as a form of protest against the particularly Islamic nature of the Islamic Republic:

- Iranians now make a point of celebrating the old Zoroastrian festival of Nowruz, after decades of the regime's efforts to suppress it have failed. So prevalent has this festival become that the Islamic regime has given up making any meaningful effort to continue to suppress it.
- Arabic words in everyday life in Farsi — used for centuries — are being replaced with old Persian words in common usage.
- There is a sharp rise of references and study of Ferdowsi — considered the greatest Persian poet, father of the modern Persian language and author of great Persian history tract, *Shahnameh* or "Book of Kings" written between 977 AD and 1010 AD. He is seen to be the icon of Persian/Iranian culture, and his book, *Shahnameh*, is seen as an equivalent of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined to Greek culture, surpassing other giants of the Persian language and literary heritage, like Avicenna, Hafez, Saadi, and Rumi. Iranians often say



that without Ferdowsi, there would never have been an Iran. And yet, the Iranian regime, which does allow for Islamic greats such as Hafez, Saadi and Rumi to be taught in school, barely ever mentions Ferdowsi. The regime has produced popular TV series and films about almost all of the cultural icons in Iran — as long as they were also Islamic greats like Avicenna — but never one about the greatest, Ferdowsi. Instead, Ferdowsi's works have been attacked as un-Islamic by leading clerics, such as the cultural/literary watchdog Ayatollah of the Islamic regime, Morteza Mohtahari. A year ago, the Iranian regime commissioned the painting of the largest mural in Iran on a public wall in Mashhad, but it was ordered destroyed by Iranian officials the day before it was to be unveiled because they discovered it contained depictions from the *Shahnameh*. In response, a very long wall on the main boulevard in Mashhad has become a make-shift site where young Iranian artists have been drawing their own depictions from the *Shanameh*, although in recent days, the Iranian government has been cracking down hard on street artists and musicians. The clerics are right. Ferdowsi *is* a threat — intentionally so — to the Islamic nature of Iran. First of all, Ferdowsi wrote not a dry history with elegant language, but weaved into his history insights into what made rulers great (the quality of *Farr*), what made them evil, and what made them worthy of regicide or ouster. It is stunning to see how many articles are written in current Iran and exile community about what king and what circumstance is most analogous to the current, in the hope that it could provide some insight into how to bring down the Islamic regime.

- However, it is not one tract or two of Ferdowsi's on good and ill governance which alone terrifies the government and attracts disillusioned Iranians. That could be addressed by selective censorship. The problem the government faces is the symbolism of what Ferdowsi himself is. He embodies Iran's national soul, its essence, in contrast to its Islamic overlay. As such, the modern revival of Ferdowsi, the popular interest in *Shahnameh*, the increasingly frequent citations of him in popular non-Islamic literature (Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, for example) the

development of structures of learning and study in a more populist fashion, and currently popularity of interest in visiting his grave in Tus as a major pilgrimage site all are symbolic rejections of the Islamic nature of Iran.

- One Iranian woman during the Green Revolution in 2009 wrote about the importance of Ferdowsi as a symbol in the context of motivating protestors onward: “The significance of *Shahnameh* lies, first and foremost, in having been responsible for shaping the Persian historical identity with deep cultural and linguistic influence. In a sense, the soul of Iran lies in the *Shahnameh*, which to date has withstood against all odds of history and been instrumental in preserving a coherent sense of cultural identity.” Ferdowsi lived in the early Islamic era in Iran, but he made a strong point of noting that he was of the land-holding Dehqahn class — the pre-Islamic aristocracy serving the Sassanid empire until the Muslim conquest. After the Islamic conquest, the Dehqahn class became increasingly identified with the preservation of the pre-Islamic Persian literary tradition, especially encouraged by local potentates who asserted themselves in distinction to the Islamic Khaliph in waning periods of his influence during the early chaos of the Islamic era, such as the possibly non-Islamic Samanids under whom Ferdowsi lived. Ferdowsi represents the culmination of that Dehqahn tradition. Indeed, he often in *Shahnameh* used the term “Dehqahn” interchangeably with “Persian” or “Iranian,” and juxtaposed the Dehqahn and their literary preservation works as the antithesis of the then-recent Islamic-imposed overlay.
- While the un-Islamic, perhaps even anti-Islamic nature of the nationalist revival is problem enough for the regime, it includes an added dimension: the identification of first Pahlavi Shah, Reza Shah, with the revival and cultivation of Iranian nationhood. In this aspect, the glorification of Ferdowsi and the attempt to use him as a



tool to encourage Persian nationalism at the expense of Islam has been intertwined since the period of the Shah in the interwar period. The period under Reza Shah is seen to have been a period of prevalent patriotic motifs of Iranian nationalism. He launched several major national projects to cultivate the history of Persia and anchor Iranian society around it, often as a deliberate attempt to weaken the clerics. Reza Shah ordered grand boulevards across Iran be built named after Ferdowsi, commissioned the modern grand mausoleum be built over Ferdowsi's grave, and founded the Academy of Persian Language and Literature. In 1934, Shah Pahlavi organized a national festival called the Ferdowsi Millennial Celebration to commemorate 1000 years of Persian literature, and then a few years later, established the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. When Shah Reza Pahlavi established the Academy of the Persian Language and Literature in order to reduce the prevalence of Islamic and Arabic words and ideas in Iranian culture, he explicitly referred to Ferdowsi as his inspiration since he also replaced Arabic words with Persian. It was Shah Reza explicit goal to use the academy as the vehicle to replace Arabic and Islamic words with their Persian counterparts. It was Reza Shah who commenced the archeological work in Persepolis a national priority, and started the work to restore the site in time to have a grand 2500th anniversary of its founding by Xerxes the Great, although it was Shah Reza Pahlavi's son, who had become Shah and actually presided over the celebration in 1971. And yet now, these revivals and expressions of Iranian/Persian nationalism have acquired a populist character, and are coated with validation, perhaps even intentionally, of the Pahlavi Shah dynasty as well.

- Simply, Ferdowsi symbolized non-Islamic Iranian culture, and his rise to popularity lately reflects the rising popular cultural rejection of Islam. And yet again, like Nowruz, Ferdowsi has taken on so much a life of his own in recent years that the Iranian regime has given up trying to diminish an annual festival (May 15) celebrating his works, and is even trying to coop it — to little avail — such as the recent efforts by Zarif to champion the commissioning of statues

- (notably in Russia, and not in Iran) or give speeches (reported in foreign-language Iranian press abroad but not in Farsi-language press in Iran).
- Another of the most visited internal pilgrimage sites in Iran recently has been the grave in Hamadan of the Jewess Queen Esther (of the biblical Jewish Purim story) and her uncle Mordechai. Iranians believe her to have been either the daughter-in-law to, married to, or the mother of, Cyrus. It is true that the grave is more likely to really have been the grave of a Jewish mistress Shushandukht of the Sassanian Emperor Shah Yazdegerd I (399-420 AD), and it is also true that historically it is more likely Queen Esther was the one of the latter wives of Xerxes I — Xerxes the Great (519-465 BC) — who was the fifth king of the great Achaemenid dynasty, the builder of Persepolis, and the ruler of the Persian/Medean empire at the apex of expanse and power (famous in the West for having lost the battle of Salamis in Greece to Themistocles). But that is irrelevant; she and her grave are increasingly seen symbolically to be a valued part of the greatness of the birth of the greatest Persian empire, and pilgrimages to her grave are meant to express Persian nationalism. That a Jewess is so regarded is a particularly poignant signal to the Iranian Islamic regime.

Iranian nationalism is poisonous ultimately for the Islamic Republic. Their plan to raze Esther's grave and to establish a never-ending construction site enveloping Ferdowsi's grave in Tus are nothing less than acts of despair.

Iranian regime vulnerabilities in a Shiite context

At the same time that the Iranian regime undermines Persia's history and mortgages its current national resources, promising future and potential regional allies in order to pursue a destructive theology, it should be noted that this ideology is an outlier. Its foundations run counter to traditional Shiite thought in four ways:

Valiyat e-Faqih

The Iranian regime has overstepped its Shiite tradition numerous times since the revolution, starting with the revolution itself and the installation of the Valiyat e-Faqih (Rule of the Jurisprudent).

The Valiyat e-Faqih could be understood to some extent as an extension of the “rational” school of Shiite interpretation based in Qom. To Westerners, it can be best recognized as the Platonic rule of the philosopher king wherein philosophical understanding is measured by standards of clerical erudition and stature.

Traditional Shiite leaders eschewed political activism and opposed clerical governance, foremost among them being the most revered Ayatollah among all Shiites region-wide at the time, the Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari. Traditional ayatollahs had for over a millennium acquired their revered status through an intricately established structure of learning and following.

While formal political power was eschewed, the communal leadership was decentralized but strong, unquestioned and possessed of great influence and authority. Shiism exercised informal rather than formal power, and did so with great effect. Moreover, the lack of centralization allowed great latitude to each of any period’s grand Ayatollahs, or even more, to the few Marjah al-Taqlids of the age. For most Shiites — Arab, Persian and even Indian alike — these structures and the revered sources of emulation, were also a mechanism of safety and belonging that brought normalcy and solidity to Shiite life in otherwise tenuously-surviving Shiite pockets in a swirling and powerful Sunni sea.

The theology of the Valiyat e-Faqih robbed this leadership in one swoop of all authority. With a leader now able to speak in the name of the occulted

Imam, and worse, that he commanded a worldly power (Iran), the need for religious guidance, protection and belonging was supplanted by the divinely-inspired leader and his cult of personality. Shiism was upturned and the leadership structure built over ages was annihilated wherever the Iranians had reach. What was left underneath was a theological wild west, giving fertile ground for deviant franchises to emerge and thrive, if even suppressed by the Iranian regime.

Unleashing Ghulat

As such, Iran descended into what in Shiism has traditionally been called Ghulat, or extreme deviation, by absorbing or focusing on borrowed Sunni imagery regarding the return of the occulted 12th Imam, and the end-of-days scenario of the great apocalyptic war.

Shiism has always grappled with the rise of Ghulat (exaggerated/extreme/deviant) ideologies and the destructive aftermath of their empowerment. It comes with the terrain: Mainstream Shiism accepts interpretation and as such, understands that interpretation can wander into the obscure and dangerous. This plague goes back as far as Ali's death when one proto-Shiite scholar claimed he occulted and will return, earning him the title of Ghuluww, or "exaggerator" from which the term Ghulat comes. Shiite scholar-leaders have a long tradition of de-legitimizing within Shiism such dangerous deviations.

One theological "deviation" – the belief in the immanent return of the occulted 12th Imam, the Mahdi, and the imperative of war to prepare and cleanse the ground for his expedited return by confronting the West and Sunni Islam – were rejected by Khomeini and suppressed. Indeed, Khomeini was supported in this subjugation by the entire elite of the "rationale" school of thought emanating from the Qom seminaries. And yet, these elements formed the nucleus of the Furqan movement, a terrorist movement which found a home in the IRGC ranks in the ghastliness of the trenches in the Iran-Iraq war. Khomeini's suppression of them was unsuccessful. They rose to predominance in the intervening decades and

now have reemerged to dominate the good bit of the IRGC leadership, probably even Ghassan Soleimani himself.

Dabbling in Sunni imagery

Iran attempted to command regional leadership and seize the strategic initiative by adopting a new sort of neo-Nasserism. In this effort, it by necessity had to “out-Sunni” the Sunnis, and appended onto Shiism a Sunni agenda. When Iranians take to the streets to protest the cost paid in men and money for the war on Israel, it is because Persian Shiites recoil in disdain from fighting to the last Iranian or dinar to purchase glory for Arab Sunnis.

Moreover, since 1979, Iranian regime has chosen to align with Arabs and Sunnis who played central roles in various Arab-nationalist and Sunni efforts against other Shiite communities:

- Musa al-Sadr: Ayatollah Musa al-Sadr, the “Vanished Imam,” is without dispute the father of the modern-day Shiite Awakening, which is in and of itself agonizing for Tehran since it seeks to claim the mantle alone. That Musa al-Sadr did so in Lebanon, among Arabs, more than a decade before Ayatollah Khomeini landed in Iran from Paris, is an even greater problem. And the mystique surrounding his disappearance in Libya in 1978 embodied, as Fouad Ajami wrote in *The Vanished Imam*, the Shiite sense of dispossession, passion and grievance – let alone evoked the mysterious imagery of the occulted 12th. All this left the incoming Iranian revolutionary leadership, which imagined itself competing for regional Shiite imagination, as a rather boring and mundane lot. If there is one emotive and genuine symbol of Shiism and the community’s sense of millennial awakening in the latter half of this century, it is Musa al-Sadr, not Rouholla Khomeini, let alone Ali Khamenei. As such, it is a striking failure of the Iranian regime, one which rankles all the region’s Shiites, that the Iranian regime has rarely raised the issue of

the vanished Imam or spent any effort in its regional relations to get to the bottom of his disappearance. Nor is it lost that the Vanished Imam's two-decade project in building a strong, armed organization to defend Shiite interests – AMAL – has been marginalized and subordinated to Iran's proxy, Hizballah. Not only has Iran ignored the fate of Musa al-Sadr, but it vanquished his legacy as well. Lebanese Shiites, if not others in the region, neither have forgotten nor forgiven Iran for this failure.

- Moreover, Iran's revolutionary regime from the very first embraced as its closest ally the very movement against which Musa al-Sadr woke the Shiites in Lebanon, against which he organized Amal to defend, and opposed to which he worked tirelessly to defend Shiite communal interests: the PLO. Libya, it was understood by all Shiites, killed Musa al-Sadr at the beckoning of Yasir Arafat. Shiites in Lebanon believed the PLO was there not to liberate Palestine but to oppress and dispossess Shiites in Lebanon. That the PLO occupied Shiite towns and territories in southern Lebanon and expelled many of their inhabitants only symbolized the threat it posed to the Shiite community. And yet, the reviled and feared Yasir Arafat, the leader of the PLO was the very first leader invited to Tehran after the revolution.
- Jerusalem as focal cause: Shiites attach no particular significance – no moreso than Gaza, Giza or Benghazi – to Jerusalem. Indeed, its elevated status is viewed in Shiite historiography as a consequence of an early Islamic-era Sunni hatched anti-Shiite scheme to compete against Mecca to steal pilgrimage traffic and thus revenue from the Shiites for the brief period Shiites occupied Mecca. As such, the raising of Jerusalem as a worthy pilgrimage site for Muslims is categorized by Shiites as one of the first in a long line of Sunni attempts to boycott, embargo, and ultimately steal Shiite wealth and status. And yet, almost immediately after the Iranian revolution in 1979, Khomeini as one of his first acts invents and sanctifies the hitherto non-existent “World Jerusalem Day” and renders it on par with the most holy Shiite anniversaries. Usurping imagery from the

deeply felt and genuine Shiite holiday, Ashura, the day is replete with passion plays and imagery akin to the sacrifice of Hussein and Hassan. Even Sunnis have never thought to have an al-Quds day, but the Arafat/PLO aligned Shiite revolution made it a cornerstone of regime's invented neo-Nasserite, quasi-Sunni faith.

Ironically, the weaker the Iranian regime becomes internally, and the more it fails, the more it feels it needs to fall back on its image as a regional neo-Nasserite power. Failing internally, only external success could still validate it. And yet, the more it does so, the more it diminishes its uniquely Shiite and Persian essence and the more it embraces and defines itself around ideas common to so many other regional Arab-Sunni failed saviors.

Attacking Shiites

Iran's agents either attacked traditional Shiite leaders, or encouraged others, including Sunni Arabs, to attack Shiite communities in order to eliminate rival Shiite trends and drive Shiite communities under Iran's monopolistic protective umbrella.

Iran more directly saw traditional Shiite leadership as a threat and acted, at times violently and painfully, to eradicate the challenge they posed to Tehran's attempted monopoly:

Iran pulled all the stops to destabilize Iraq from 2003 onwards in any way they could – including by aligning with Syria to organize, fund and arm specific Sunni tribal alliance structures in western Iraq which had been established as an opposition to Saddam Hussein by Damascus after the

defection of Hussein Kamal in 1996. These Sunni agents stunned Shiites with a massive terror campaign, killing as many as 1000+ Shiites per week — from 2003-7 in order to make Iraqi Shiites despair of US leadership and protection, discredit the indigenous and traditional Iraqi Shiite leadership which represented a theological threat to Tehran, exacerbate the Sunni-Shiite divide and force vigilante retaliation, and ultimately to drive Iraqi Shiites into Iran's hands. At times, the Iranian agents even killed Shiite leaders (Abdul Majid al-Khoei in 2003 by a mob instigated by Muqtada al-Sadr, and Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim by a bomb which Iraqi Shiites believe was planted by Iran) to both deepen the climate of chaos and neutralize the growing theological threat those clerics posed to the Iranian revolution and broader Shiite leadership.

Iran's regime embarked on revolutionary policies across the board which tear it away from the mainstream of Shiism and render it vulnerable to any events or failures which expose its deviation. It has introduced into Shiism revolutionary ideas which undermine the millennium-long established Shiite leadership and tradition, destroying refined Shiite theological accumulated wisdom and culture along the way; embraced movements and causes traditionally identified as the enemy of Shiite communities; attacked and assassinated traditionally Shiite leaders; and it has exacerbated the vulnerabilities and even indirectly instigated and fueled the assault of Sunnis against Shiite communities.

Conclusion

We are witnessing the crumbling of two pillars — one Persian, one Shiite — with which the Iranian regime must cope, but finds it increasingly difficult with which to cope.

Iranian leaders wake up every morning and survey their world. What they see is a horrifying scene: a field filled with a colony of Monty-Python like killer moles, all of which they will need to whack down in a whack-a-mole death match. One misstep, and they lose control. And if they lose control, they are gone.

The Iranian regime uses two tactics to maintain control. First, the greatest Persian tale of all, the mythological cycle with roots as old as Persia itself, is the story of Shehrazad and *The 1001 Nights*. The essence of the story is not the art of storytelling in an attention-deficit-disorder-like fashion to buy time, but how Shehrazad manipulated the sequencing and motifs of the stories she told to slowly maneuver her way into awakening King Shahriyar's cold and dead soul to the point where she could control it, therein turning herself from the symbol of abject and hopeless weakness into the ultimate power of the realm. She understood in a Persian context, an enemy can not only be defeated, but controlled willingly, by taking control of his soul. Iran is constantly trying to pull off that strategy against us.

The second tactic the Iranian regime uses to always maintain control is to constantly change the rules. An Iranian woman who since has become quite famous, Azar Nafisi, once told me that dealing with the Iranian regime is like playing chess with a monkey. Just as you are about to position him into check mate, he leans over and eats your king. You are paralyzed, because you suddenly realize there are no rules, no paths to winning or to regulating the game. You just don't know what to do.

So far, the Iranian regime manipulated the soul of the West in ways which would have been the envy even of Shehrazad, and they have paralyzed with their rule-breaking a la Azar Nafisi's analogy. They have paralyzed their own population and the West also by being the monkey in the chess match, leaving others stunned and recalibrating, and thus always positioning themselves one step ahead. They must always remain one step ahead, because if not, they will lose situational control in their whack-a-mole death match reality.

We must understand that every outreach Iran launches is manipulation, and we act to throw the regime on its heels. We have to be the monkey in chess; act to leave them guessing how we are going to respond, act to terrify the regime into believing we will not play by rules they set, act to make sure they are always losing control of the situation and act to make

sure they can no longer whack down all the volcanic forces atop of which they sit.

Last summer, the Iranian regime shot down a drone of ours. The military responses our government drew up certainly had all already been gamed out, predigested and teed up for further manipulation by the Iranian regime. They knew exactly how we were going to act.

But we didn't act. We let President Macron ensnare us in another touristic foray into the Persian bazaar. At first, it was seen as weakness, and maybe that is what it was at that moment. And the Iranian regime moved fast to capitalize on that image.

But then, suddenly the game changed by our hand. The administration in late summer suddenly started talking about the greatness of Persian culture. Secretary Pompeo talked about how the regime mortgaged its historical and future Persian glory at the alter of a failed ideology. Shehrazad was reaching out to Iran's soul against the regime.

But then suddenly, we assisted the "living martyr" Soleimani, as he was called, reach the next level. The regime was paralyzed. We broke the rules it had set. It left the regime confused. It left IRGC officers guessing, uncertain, recalibrating and putting their finger in the wind to see where the wind would blow. They knew that the gorilla, not monkey, had now sat down to play chess – and they knew that this was a game they could not win.

So, to those who argued that the current administration did not have a clue or a shred of strategy about the consequences of killing Soleimani, I would answer the opposite. They were the first administration since 1979 that actually did know what to do. I just hope they stay the course until the regime is gone – without ever having to use US troops to do so.