# *Iran's Geostrategy Beyond Regime Defense*

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**January 2020**

### *A Modern History of Ruptures and Revolutions*

Iran is both a millennia-old civilization and an empire that was never truly dismantled. Its history is marked by dynastic rivalries, invasions, civil wars, and the alternation between periods of cultural and geopolitical decline and revival. In the modern era, Iran's trajectory has been shaped by a duality: on one hand, the idea of *Iran-as-civilization*, destined to radiate outward to its margins and in relation to other civilizations; and on the other, the idea of *Iran-as-modern-nation-state*, focused on defending its national interests. This duality led to a historical paradox at the end of the 19th century. After a century of foreign imperialist interference—particularly from Russia and Great Britain, engaged in the "Great Game"—the Qajar monarchy, rather than resisting these predatory incursions, chose to open the country wide to British economic interests. The goal was to attract investment and promote modernization, thereby strengthening the Iranian nation-state.

This forceful entry of capitalist economic foundations and its resulting dislocations sparked a protest and reform movement. It brought together both religious figures opposed to the modernization of the legal system under their control, and reformers advocating for a reinterpretation of tradition in order to meet the challenges of modernity. This movement culminated in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911. This pattern would repeat through successive moments of rupture — in 1945 with the stranglehold of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, the CIA-backed coup against Mossadegh in 1953, or in 1964 after the passage of a law granting judicial immunity to U.S. military personnel. These moments culminated in the Islamic Revolution of 1979, a moment of convergence among diverse social interests that united to dismantle the Shah's powers and resist foreign influence.

Religion, as an overarching and trans-social phenomenon (98% of Iranians are Muslims and 90% of them are Shiites), then emerged as a unifying force, crystallizing the rejection of foreign political and cultural domination. However, it is important to keep in mind that, although the revolution started from the mosques, it was not monolithic—it did not embody only the current that would eventually prevail: the theocratic one. In fact, alongside the communists and other syncretic movements (such as the People's Mujahedin), there was a strong democratic current that aimed to keep religion in the background. Major intellectual figures like Mehdi Bazargan or Ali Shariatmadari spoke of a "spiritual democracy." Michel Foucault described the Iranian Revolution, which he called a "spiritual revolt," as an experiment in transforming politics in accordance with the specificities of the Shiite Iranian

*episteme* (the discourse universe and value system) and that aimed at a "change in subjectivity and political rationality."[1]

The victory of the theocratic camp over the democratic one was consolidated by the war with Iraq and by reliance on the conservative segments of society—namely, the clergy, the *bazaris* (merchant class), and the peasantry. But over the past 40 years, reformist dissent has grown in light of the regime's internal contradiction: ruling in the name of divine law is dictatorial by nature—claiming that everything the rulers do is legitimized by a Higher Law—and ultimately ends up alienating religion itself, which becomes reduced to mere politics and ideology.

According to the doctrine of clerical governance (*wilayat al-faqih*) adopted by Iran in 1979, the absolute criterion of power is *Islamicity*, even beyond national interest. A central aim of the revolution was a "return to the self," achieved through the rejection of Western intoxication—what was termed *"Westoxication"*—which called for not only an Islamic revival but also a redefinition of *Iranianness* through a return to tradition and in opposition to Western values (perceived as materialistic and spiritually bankrupt). This social doctrine has not produced a coherent or theoretically robust system of thought. Instead, it has relied on the instrumentalization of practical aspects of Islamic tradition (*fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence) and its symbolic elements (the Imam of the Age / Supreme Leader, *Mahdism*, etc.).[2] This lack of theoretical substance, combined with a tendency toward ideological appropriation, has reduced Islamicity to a bulwark against Western otherness and a tool for geopolitical expansionism.

## *An increasingly militarized Post-Revolutionary regime*

The decision-making power of the regime today is concentrated in the hands of the Supreme Leader, but internal balances favor the military—more specifically, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, or *Pasdaran*). Building their power by monopolizing their symbolic achievements (participation in the Revolution and the war against Iraq), political influence, and material resources (economic rents), the *Pasdaran* are now able to rival the clerics at the top of the state.

[1] *La Révolution iranienne et Michel Foucault*, http://1libertaire.free.fr/FoucaultIran02.html

[2] The central intellectual reference for conservatives is Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969), a man of letters and son of a religious dignitary. For Al-e Ahmad, Iran's national identity is ontologically founded on religious values and the social involvement of the clergy. He fought against Western influence, which he considered a disease, "Westoxication" (gharbzadeghi), preventing the sociocultural development of peoples affected by this influence. See Jalal Al Ahmad, *Westoxication (Gharbzadeghi)*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1988.

Thus, whereas immediately after the revolution 50% of parliament was composed of clerics, today they represent only about 10%. Meanwhile, members (and former members) of the Revolutionary Guards fill the vacuum left by the clerics within state institutions, thanks to their popular support secured through control of the *Basij* militia, their vast financial resources, and their ideological grip. Indeed, they control nearly one-third of the national economy—particularly key sectors such as hydrocarbons, telecommunications, construction, and finance—and they play a role in the surveillance and indoctrination of the regular army (*Artesh*). Nearly 40% of officer training is devoted to revolutionary indoctrination and Muslim ethics, and according to the constitution, the armed forces must be "popular Islamic forces" that defend the ideology of the Islamic Revolution.[3]

It is necessary to assess what remains of the effects of the war against Iraq, which mobilized millions of armed men and resulted in nearly half a million deaths in Iran. This war provided a strong ideological foundation for the regime, merging Islamic identity and nationalism through the martyrdom narrative of the "Sacred Defense"[4]. While the representation of power in Iran remains strongly marked by religiosity and a moral and cultural exceptionalism that, until recently, helped mask divergences regarding the legitimacy (and rationality) of the Islamic state, one can seriously doubt that today the Iranian people would accept to mobilize by the millions—the so-called "army of 20 million" touted by the regime—in a war either triggered or suffered because of the regime (and the *Pasdaran*'s adventurism throughout the region: in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and through networks among Shiite communities across the Gulf).

## *A Strategic Doctrine conditioned by Geopolitical Ostracism*

Foreign intervention has been a constant in modern Iranian history, shaping its defensive strategic posture. However, the dual rupture caused by the 1979 revolution and the war against Iraq from 1980 to 1988, brought about upheavals in both strategic and operational doctrines. Geopolitical ostracism, the disarmament resulting from the attritional war

[3] Sepher Zabih, *The Iranian military in revolution and war,* Routledge, New York, 1988, p. 140.

[4] The primary uniqueness of Twelver Shiism is the messianism derived from the mystical role attributed to the 12 Imams who succeeded Ali (the last Imam is "occulted," so messianism remains active and present), whose writings and deeds (their hadiths) illuminate the Quran. Another particularity is the centrality of martyrdom — especially through the figure of Hussein, assassinated in 680 at Karbala — which testifies to the "usurpative" nature of political power that, as a necessary evil awaiting the messianic return, must be confronted by moral excellence and the demand for justice. War is therefore always fought to defend the order of justice. The theocratic regime, then virtually without armies (dismantled after the high command fled with the Shah), exploited and abused this notion of martyrdom by celebrating "sacred death," sending men, sometimes adolescents, poorly trained and equipped, to the front lines, and encouraging the population to accept sacrifices.

against Iraq and the arms embargo, the naval conflict with the United States in 1987-1988 (the end of the Tanker War, US Operation Praying Mantis)[5], and the neutral observation of the 1991 Gulf War, marked key stages in the shift of Iranian strategy towards what could be called asymmetric deterrence. This strategy was developed based on technology transfers from Russia, China, and North Korea, as well as indigenous scientific and technological capabilities. It can also be argued that the development of Iran's nuclear enrichment program—which now places it on the threshold of acquiring a nuclear arsenal—is an additional element in its asymmetric deterrence strategy.

Iran's military doctrine fits into a strategic vision of power codified in 2004 within the "National Vision for 20 Years" (or Vision 2025) plan. This plan aims, through research and development efforts, investments (including foreign ones), and a new policy encouraging scientific and political incentives, to create a knowledge-based society founded on moral and national cohesion.[6] The factor of "moral cohesion" is fundamental and strategic, as Iran faces nationalist separatism—especially from Kurdish and Baluchi populations—while only about 60% of its population is Persian. It should also be noted that the vision of Iran's "greatness," seen as a country and civilization with a multi-millennial history, drives ambitions to reach scientific and technological frontiers, including nuclear and space capabilities. Iran joined the "clubs" of uranium enrichers in 2003 and space launchers (Safir 2 since 2009, and Simorgh in July 2017).

Iran's operational doctrine combines "mosaic defense" and "forward defense" through the demonstration of conventional, asymmetric, and hybrid[7] defense and counterattack capabilities—according to Pentagon terminology: "It is designed to deter an attack, survive an initial strike, and retaliate against an aggressor to force a diplomatic solution to hostilities while avoiding any concessions that challenge its core interests."[8] It rests on:

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[5] Operation Praying Mantis took place on April 18, 1988, consisting of an attack on Iranian naval forces in Iranian territorial waters in retaliation for the mining of the Persian Gulf, which had caused damage to a U.S. warship.

[6] This implies a population that is "active, responsible, altruistic, believing, satisfied, endowed with ethics, discipline, and a cooperative and collaborative mentality; devoted to the revolution, the Islamic order, the flourishing of Iran; and proud to be Iranian." — Ali Khamenei, *20 Year National Vision*, Iran Data Portal, http://irandataportal.syr.edu/20-year-national-vision

[7] Asymmetry in strategy refers to the use of capabilities (weapon systems, operational concepts, doctrines) that avoid direct force-on-force confrontations, striking weaknesses while avoiding strengths, and employing all forms of cunning, surprise, and destabilization (including beyond the battlefield, even outside law and morality). Asymmetry is not a new strategic concept but takes on new meaning in a new strategic context and with new techniques. Today, asymmetry is at the heart of great powers' strategy as they attempt to evolve their systems from industrial configurations to industrial-informational models, exploiting approaches that optimize knowledge and real-time information exploitation.
Hybridity is considered a mix of conventional combat, irregular warfare (including terror, insurgency, organized crime, and WMD), and cyber warfare.

[8] Fiscal Year 2014 *DoD Annual Report on Military Power of Iran-Executive Summary,* January 2015, https://fas.org/man/eprint/dod-iran-2014.pdf

- The duality between, on one hand, the Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran or Sepah, about 155,000 men), combining special forces, paramilitary units, and conventional means for operations within national territory and in regional projection (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, to a lesser extent Yemen), and popular territorial defense (through affiliated militias, the Basij, which number in the millions), and on the other hand, the regular army (Artesh, 290,000 men);
- The dispersion of Command and Control (C2) centers (there are reportedly 32 throughout Iran) and, in the case of the Pasdaran, decentralization of C2 (autonomy for certain units, such as the Al-Quds Brigade);
- The streamlining of regular force structures (brigade-centered).

With forces dispersed across national territory, Iranian armies are positioned to quickly repel an attack. The choice of a strategy and operational doctrine dominated by asymmetry has been publicly commented on by Iranian officials.[9] This doctrine is undoubtedly an instrument that will evolve in the coming years depending on access to technologies and shifts in power relations within the regime and geopolitically. Iran's asymmetric "anti-access" capabilities mainly include: attack helicopters and fast-attack craft, anti-submarine warfare assets (missiles and mini-submarines) and air defense, ballistic missiles (long and medium-range, Shahab-3 and Ashura, with the eventual goal of an ICBM based on the Safir), cruise missiles, SAMs, naval mines, and armed drones.

The deterrent value of Iran's capability system is concretely illustrated by operations on Iranian Soil (combating Kurdish and Baluchi separatist movements), throughout the region (Iraq, Syria, Yemen), and in the waters of the Arabian-Persian Gulf.[10] In these regional operations, Iran has always avoided directly targeting American forces, but has done so

[9] Here are some examples of officials' expression about asymmetry:
- Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander in chief of Pasdarans: «Asymmetrical warfare... is [our] strategy for dealing with the considerable capabilities of the enemy. A prominent example of this kind of warfare was [the tactics employed by Hezbollah during] the Lebanon war in 2006... Since the enemy has considerable technological abilities, and since we are still at a disadvantage in comparison, despite the progress we have made in the area of equipment, [our only] way to confront [the enemy] successfully is to adopt the strategy [of asymmetric warfare] and to employ various methods of this kind. »
- General Hamid Sarkheili, spokeperson for the Exercise "Shohaday-e Vehdar" (Pasdaran), January 2012: « The armored and mechanized units of the IRGC Ground Force expanded the depth of their operation through exercising new asymmetric warfare tactics and relying on mobile firepower, iron-shield and secure and impenetrable communications and then destroyed the hypothetical enemy. »
- General (Air Force) Ahmad Miqani, July 2009: « We should sketch out plans in a bid to resolve problems, and our goal should be winning the upper hand in the balance of powers in asymmetric wars. »
Quotations from Anthony Cordesman, Bryan Gold, Garrett Berntsen, *The Gulf Military Balance: Volume I*, 2015, pp. 124-125

[10] Iran has developed an asymmetric maritime strategy that positions its naval forces and land-based anti-ship systems in the choke points of the Gulf. The regular naval forces (18,000 men) mainly control the Strait of Oman, while the Pasdaran naval forces (20,000 men) control the Strait of Hormuz, and could block hydrocarbon flows.

indirectly (notably through Iraqi militias), primarily aiming to demonstrate its military and political anti-access and counter-anti-access capabilities against the presence of the United States (and their allies). The capability-based policy mainly revolves around the necessity of demassification and a system combining: the swarming of agile, flexible, and highly maneuverable systems (fast attack boats, drones); the saturation of enemy defense systems with non-smart conventional weapons; missile barrages; interdiction (air, naval, and submarine); means to increase the survivability of the defense system (notably through camouflage, decoys, burial, mobility, distribution, and redundancy of systems); cyber defense; and popular revolutionary warfare in case of invasion.

Asymmetric warfare also includes an economic dimension, with the understanding that the US sanctions regime is considered an act of war—as Central Bank Governor Mahmoud Bahmani stated in July 2012:

*"If we want to use the normal rules to deal with the sanctions, we will definitely be faced with problems, therefore, like military wars that we have a series of asymmetric tactics, we should start a series of asymmetric economic wars under these sanctions since these embargoes are no less than a military war. We have started these asymmetric wars and hold meetings seven days a week and have set up a headquarters in the CBI to this end."* [11]

However, beyond the capability-building effort and regional geopolitical activism, Iran's asymmetric deterrence strategy today seems limited by two major strategic factors that Tehran's foreign policy and defense decision-makers have likely failed to fully assess: the American strategic management of the international sanctions regime, and the counterproductive effects of Iranian infiltration into the domestic political game of states considered as zones of influence, particularly Iraq.

### *The U.S. Regional Strategy limits the Effects of Iranian Asymmetry.*

The United States' strategy toward Tehran has been continuous since 1979. It consists of military pressure on Iran's periphery, political pressure on the regional and international stage, and a discontinuous economic sanctions regime imposed since 1995[12] for three main reasons: support for "terrorism" (to groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian Hamas, and Islamic Jihad); ballistic missile proliferation; and the nuclear program.

[11] in Anthony Cordesman, Bryan Gold, ...work quoted, pp. 124-125
[12] In 1979 sanctions were enforced to obtain the release of the hostages in the U.S. embassy, and in 1984 an arms embargo was imposed.

Washington temporarily lifted some sanctions from 2015 to 2018 under the JCPOA nuclear agreement[13] (primary sanctions related to terrorism support and proliferation remained in place), only to ultimately restore and tighten them.[14] This episode was likely aimed primarily at demonstrating to the Iranians how crucial sanction relief was to their economic growth and geopolitical normalization/reintegration on the regional and global stages. Major Western companies, including Boeing, expressed their willingness to invest tens of billions in Iranian infrastructure and key sectors. The Obama administration refused to make the JCPOA a treaty or even an executive agreement subject to Congressional ratification. On the day the agreement was signed, President Obama expressed deep distrust, if not disdain, toward the Iranian regime — "an authoritarian theocracy… anti-American, anti-Israeli, anti-Semitic, and a sponsor of terrorism." [15]

It should be recalled that the American strategy toward Iran is part of a broader regional geostrategic project: maintaining strategic access to the "Greater Middle East" zone (the continuum of Central Asia / Arabian-Persian Gulf / Near East). In this region, two major events helped codify the American strategy: the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979 and 1980). These events led to the establishment of a unified command dedicated to the region (US Central Command) in the early 1980s and gradually to a lasting logistical and military footprint — bases, deployment of ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) systems, arms transfers, cooperation, recurring exercises, integration (within the Gulf Cooperation Council) and interoperability of force structures, etc. For Washington, the Iranian "anti-access" risk refers to ideological emulation and financial and military support for movements opposing regimes close to Washington and the West, as well as the possibility of collusion with Russia or China.

Iran tried to escape the "Rogue State" label imposed by Washington, especially after the September 11, 2001 attacks, as the Islamic regime thought it could join the West in a

[13] The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) entails Iran eliminating its stock of medium-enriched uranium, reducing its stock of low-enriched uranium by 98%, and cutting the number of gas centrifuges by two-thirds for a period of 10 years. For the 15 years following the agreement, Iran commits to enriching uranium only up to 3.67% and not building new heavy-water reactors. Inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency were authorized to access Iranian nuclear sites. The sunset clauses (2025 and 2030 deadlines for uranium stock and enrichment levels) indicated the agreement's limited strategic value for Washington, which refuses to see Tehran acquire a nuclear arsenal and aims for permanent control mechanisms.

[14] Sanctions target key sectors: finance (access to the dollar and international markets, sovereign debt issuance); hydrocarbons; mining sectors such as gold, copper, iron, steel, aluminum; automotive; air and maritime transport, shipbuilding and port operators; construction and public works. Since April 22, 2019, exemptions granted to some countries importing Iranian hydrocarbons have ended (except for Iraq, renewed every three months), with an announced policy aiming for "zero hydrocarbon exports" from Iran.

[15] Interview in *the New York Times* 14 July 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/15/opinion/thomas-friedman-obama-makes-his-case-on-iran-nuclear-deal.html

common fight against salafism and jihadism. However, the United States did not follow through and maintained sanctions. Tehran then pursued a dual policy, radicalizing its stance by resuming its uranium enrichment program (in 2003), while offering cooperation in stabilization efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington allowed a period of semi-opening between 2005 and 2014 (effectively permitting Iranian actors indirect access to the U.S. financial market), apparently to prevent Iranians from playing a disruptive role in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. But in 2014, sanctions were strictly enforced again, and heavy penalties were imposed on third-party violators.

The JCPOA agreement had the effects of presenting the Iranians with the prospect of opportunities after sanctions are lifted, but also temporarily freezing Iran's nuclear program, containing Iranian activism in the Levant, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan, and enabling objective cooperation against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Clearly, the Iranians believed this agreement signaled a real strategic status change and that sanctions relief was assured, reverting to their post-9/11 position of a common fight against Salafi extremism—Javad Zarif declared at the time: *"Our common threat today is the growing menace of violent extremism and outright barbarism...The menace we are facing is embodied by the hooded men who are ravaging the cradle of civilization. To deal with this challenge, new approaches are badly needed. Iran has long been at the store front in the fight against extremism."* [16]

This misjudgment in the strategic evaluation of the situation regarding the JCPOA led Tehran toward another strategic error: their ultra-conservative and militarist turn. Thus, at the end of December 2018, Supreme Leader Khamenei appointed ultra-conservative Sadeq Amoli Larijani as president of the Expediency Discernment Council[17] (replacing Sharoudi, who died on December 23) and as one of the six theologians on the Guardian Council of the Constitution. [18] Replacing Larijani as head of the Judiciary, Khamenei appointed in early March 2019 Ebrahim Raisi, another regime ultra-conservative, who was also named vice-president of the Assembly of Experts.[19] Shortly after, in March 2019, General Qassem Soleimani (commander of the Pasdaran's Al-Quds Brigade) was awarded the highest military honor (the Order of Zulfiqar), designating him as the pillar of Iran's defense. This was followed by a series of security provocations by the Pasdaran: from May to September

[16] In CNBC, 15 July 2015 https://www.cnbc.com/2015/07/14/iran-and-major-powers-reach-nuclear-deal-report.html
[17] He is responsible for ratifying, in case of opposition from the Guardian Council to the Parliament, laws he deems essential and assists the Supreme Leader in governance.
[18] Its function is to ensure laws' compatibility with the Constitution and Islam.
[19] Composed of 86 clerics elected by universal suffrage, it elects and can dismiss the Supreme Leader.

2019, attacks on civilian cargo ships in the Gulf and on Saudi oil facilities, the destruction of an American drone over the Strait of Hormuz; then from November 2019 to January 2020, attacks via Iraqi militias on Iraqi bases housing U.S. soldiers and an attack on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. Even more counterproductive, Tehran, through General Qassem Soleimani, practiced an all-out policy of infiltration in Iraq, creating a unified command center with pro-Iranian Iraqi militias (in October 2019, according to the Pentagon); openly summoning the heads of Shia political factions in meetings in Baghdad or Qom, dictating policy in response to the Iraqi popular protest movement which demanded a new form of governance free of corruption and Iranian interference.

Facing Washington, Tehran has relied on the deterrent effect of escalating security tensions in the region and political influence in Iraq. However, not only has Washington position been strengthened by the anti-Iranian turn of the Iraqi popular protests, but it has also engaged in a security escalation just as asymmetric as Tehran's. Indeed, the direct and indirect strikes (via Israel) against Iranian or pro-Iranian targets in Syria and Iraq, which the United States has repeatedly conducted since summer 2019, and the drone assassination of General Soleimani on January 3, 2020, demonstrate that Washington is capable of employing a "better asymmetry" than Tehran—Iranian "agents" (proxies) are militias, whereas U.S. agents are Israel and the entire Coalition; Iranian targeted killings aim at Iraqi opponents, while U.S. strikes target key generals of the Iranian regime; Washington takes liberties with international law as much as Tehran, but nothing compares to the hegemonic power of the dollar, which forces the entire world to enforce sanctions.[20]

This show of asymmetric force has been backed by an unprecedented U.S. military buildup in the region since 2003, including additional troop deployments (there are about 48,500 soldiers in the Gulf area and 60,000 in the entire CENTCOM zone) and the establishment of an international naval task force for surveillance, deterrence, and interdiction. Given the circumstances of General Soleimani's elimination, one can infer that the Iranians underestimated American intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. Since 2003, the U.S. has built an unrivaled ISR system in Iraq, established and controlled the entire Iraqi civil and military infostructure, constructed the world's largest embassy in Baghdad and the largest consulate in Erbil—clearly to deploy ISR systems. It is worth

[20] Washington requires that any transaction in dollars go through a clearinghouse on U.S. soil, thus applying U.S. law to such transactions.

recalling that 5,200 U.S. soldiers and nearly 5,000 Coalition troops still operate in Iraq (providing training and combat assistance).

The killing of General Soleimani was a setback for the Pasdaran Corps, compounded by their accidental shooting down of a Ukrainian civilian airplane on January 8, causing 176 deaths, mostly Iranians and Canadian-Iranians. The regime's core thus shows signs of weakness even as all official and unofficial reports point to the swift "effectiveness" of the U.S. "maximum pressure" policy and "zero hydrocarbon exports" in terms of Iran's sharp economic downturn (the rial collapsed, inflation soared, and Iran's poor fiscal system cannot offset the lack of investments), as well as growing internal unrest. Reconfigurations within the Iranian regime should be expected, bearing in mind that while the regime suffers from factional power struggles, it remains unified on the essentials: preserving the Islamic character of the republic with a significant decision-making role for the clergy, and maintaining consolidated military defense capabilities (conventional, asymmetric, hybrid). What could change is a shift in favor of reformists who can now argue the need to return to the negotiating table with Washington. Indeed, even conservatives may understand that if sanctions persist and worsen, the entire regime would be at risk.

### *Conclusion*

It is likely that the Iranian leadership will eventually choose to implement necessary top-down structural reforms, notably: the conventional normalization of the armed forces (depoliticization, technocracy, privileged military-to-military foreign relations at the expense of ties with sub-state groups, etc.); the divestment of military actors (especially the Pasdaran) and religious foundations (bonyads) from key economic sectors (these two types of entities control between 60 and 80% of Iran's economy). This "self-reform" will inevitably take place in the context of reshaping strategic foreign action to mitigate perceptions of interference in neighbors' internal affairs and of circumstantial allies in the region.

The contradiction the regime must overcome is that it can only reproduce itself if sanctions are lifted: popular support cannot be guaranteed amid a generalized socio-economic crisis; the country cannot modernize without foreign investment and technology transfers (to access the capacities of the information and intelligence revolution and build a "knowledge-based" society); and the armed forces themselves can only modernize in the context of technological investments and organizational rationalization (technocracy).

One might think that the current crisis is drawing a line between defending the regime and defending the country in the eyes of the Iranian population, especially among the rising elites. Only a reformed regime moving toward democratic transition, involving a gradual exit from the theocratic-military governance, could generate unwavering support for a strategy of regional and global power projection.

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*To quote the article:* Saïda Bédar, « Iran's Geostrategy beyond Regime Defense », *Studies & Analyses*, January 2020, https://www.geostrategie-analyses.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/STUDIES-ANALYSES-January-2020-Irans-Geostrategy.pdf