

# The Sources of Soviet Iranian Conduct:

## George Kennan's Lessons for Understanding and Dealing with Tehran

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Ever since the 1979 revolution that led to its birth, the Islamic Republic of Iran has bedeviled the United States, resisting both conciliation and coercion and working all the while to foil American ambitions in the Middle East. If twentieth-century Russia was to Winston Churchill a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, for observers of contemporary Iran, the Islamic Republic often resembles a villain inside a victim behind a veil.

Is Iran the “villain” motivated by an immutable ideological opposition to the United States, or is it the “victim” reacting to punitive U.S. policies? To paraphrase Henry Kissinger, is Iran a nation or a cause?

Seeking to understand their mysterious foe, American analysts most commonly invoke three historical analogies to explain its character and future trajectory: Red China, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union. The chosen metaphor usually dictates the proposed response, and most prescriptions for U.S. policy have come down to one of these three variations: attempt to moderate the Iranian regime via engagement; forget the diplomatic niceties and “pre-emptively” attack it to prevent or delay its acquisition of nuclear weapons; or contain it in hopes it will change or collapse under the weight of its internal contradictions.

While the Islamic Republic—a theocracy that increasingly resembles a military dictatorship—is no doubt *sui generis*, in order to draw the right policy lessons from the past it is useful

to discern which historical analogies are most, and least, appropriate.

For proponents of the China comparison—often foreign policy realists—the Iranian regime is fundamentally pragmatic, not ideological, and yearns for a rapprochement with the United States. Viewed through this relatively benign prism, Tehran’s support for militant groups like Hizbollah and Hamas; its alliances with radical leaders like Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, Iraq’s Moqtada al-Sadr, and Syria’s Bashar al-Assad; its Holocaust denial; and its weekly jeers of “death to America” are seen as defensive reactions to a hostile United States. The analogy implies that a bold U.S. gesture, à la President Richard Nixon’s famous 1972 trip to Beijing, could bring about a rapprochement with Tehran.

Many observers have noted that the propitious geopolitical circumstances fueling Nixon’s rapprochement with Chinese leader Mao Zedong—mutual concern about the looming Soviet threat—do not exist when it comes to today’s Iran. The China paradigm also underestimates the centrality of anti-Americanism to the identity of the Islamic Republic’s current leadership, particularly Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In three decades worth of writings and speeches, Khamenei’s contempt for the United States has been remarkably consistent and enduring. Whether the topic of discussion is foreign policy, agriculture, or educational

policy, he seamlessly relates the subject matter to the cruelty, greed, and sinister plots of what he calls American “global arrogance.” Former senior Iranian officials, including even a former president, confide that in private discussions Khamenei has stated that Iran “needs enmity with the United States.” A month before the June 2009 presidential election, Khamenei declared that Iran would face a national “disaster” if a candidate who attempted to “make nice” with America came to power.

While prospects for a swift reconciliation or “grand bargain” with Iran garnered special attention during the George W. Bush administration—when Washington shunned dialogue with Tehran—Obama’s unprecedented and unreciprocated overtures to Tehran—including two personal letters from the U.S. president to Khamenei—have undercut the narrative that Iran’s hard-liners, who, despite their own rhetoric, secretly aspire to cordial relations with the United States.

Indeed, underneath the ideological veneer, the anti-Americanism of Iran’s hard-liners derives in no small part from self-preservation. They are aware, as many Iran analysts have argued over the years, that a rapprochement with the United States could spur unpredictable political, economic, and social changes that would significantly dilute their current hold on power. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of the powerful Guardian Council, put it plainly in a 2009 interview with the newspaper Etemad: “If pro-American tendencies come to power in Iran we have to say goodbye to everything. After all, anti-Americanism is among the main features of our Islamic state.”

But if Iran is not ripe for accommodation like 1970s-era China, the opposite view—that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a latter-day Adolf Hitler and Iran is Nazi Germany—hits no closer to the mark. For some neoconservative thinkers, the Islamic Republic is incorrigibly fundamentalist, messianic, and hence, undeterrable. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu bluntly told a Los Angeles audience in 2006 that “it’s 1938,

and Iran is Germany.” Continued engagement, then, is tantamount to appeasement, and the use of military force might well be inevitable. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair recently added his name to the small but strident list of people who have endorsed this surprisingly persistent line of thinking.

Though the Iranian regime is often homicidal toward its own population and espouses a hateful ideology, there is little evidence to suggest it is also revanchist and genocidal. A recent report by the U.S. Defense Department described Iran’s military power—underwritten by a budget less than 2 percent the size of America’s—as largely deterrent in nature. What’s more, despite Ahmadinejad’s repugnant rhetoric and delusions of grandeur, his control over the Iranian state falls far short of the absolute power that Hitler wielded in Germany.

As with China and Nazi Germany, the distinctions between Iran and the Soviet Union are myriad. Among other things, the Soviet Union was an irreligious empire with nuclear weapons and global reach, while the Islamic Republic is an aspiring nuclear power whose influence outside the Middle East is limited. In broad terms, however, the characters of the two regimes have some intriguing similarities.

Similar to the former Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic is a corrupt, inefficient, and authoritarian regime whose bankrupt ideology resonates far more abroad than it does at home. And like the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic has a victimization complex and derives its internal legitimacy from its opposition to (and potential subjugation by) the United States.

The parallels between the natures of the Iranian and Soviet regimes become evident when reading George Kennan’s incisive and unapologetic 1947 essay, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.” The essay, published in *Foreign Affairs* under the name “X” because the author was a serving U.S. diplomat, set the tenor of U.S. foreign policy toward the Soviet Union until its collapse in 1991.

Reading Kennan's essay with the Islamic Republic in mind, and replacing "Soviet Union," "Stalin," and "communism" with their Iranian equivalents, the parallels are quite striking. As the Obama administration contemplates U.S. strategy toward Iran, the following ten of Kennan's time-tested insights are well worth considering.

### **1. Iran's sense of siege is a self-fulfilling prophecy.**

"[I]deology, as we have seen, taught them that the outside world was hostile and that it was their duty eventually to overthrow the political forces beyond their borders. Then powerful hands of Russian Iranian history and tradition reached up to sustain them in this feeling. Finally, their own aggressive intransigence with respect to the outside world began to find its own reaction.... It is an undeniable privilege of every man to prove himself right in the thesis that the world is his enemy; for if he reiterates it frequently enough and makes it the background of his conduct he is bound eventually to be right."

### **2. The security apparatus designed to protect the state has begun to subsume it.**

"The security of Soviet the Islamic Republic's power came to rest on the iron discipline of the Party Supreme Leader, on the severity and ubiquity of the secret police Basij and Revolutionary Guards, and on the uncompromising economic monopolism of the state. The 'organs of suppression,' in which the Soviet Iranian leaders had sought security from rival forces, became in large measures the masters of those whom they were designed to serve."

### **3. The looming foreign enemy is needed to justify domestic suppression.**

"[T]here is ample evidence that the stress laid in Moscow Tehran on the menace confronting Soviet Iranian society from the world outside its borders is founded not in the reali-

ties of foreign antagonism but in the necessity of explaining away the maintenance of dictatorial authority at home."

### **4. Revolutionary ideology has not evolved.**

"Of the original ideology, nothing has been officially junked. Belief is maintained in the basic badness of capitalism liberalism, in the inevitability of its destruction, in the obligation of the proletariat downtrodden believers to assist in that destruction and to take power into its their own hands."

### **5. The Islamic Republic may make tactical offers of compromise, but its enmity toward the West is strategic.**

"It must inevitably be assumed in Moscow Tehran that the aims of the capitalist Western world are antagonistic to the Soviet regime Islamic Republic, and therefore to the interests of the peoples it controls. If the Soviet Iranian government occasionally sets its signature to documents which would indicate the contrary, this is to [be] regarded as a tactical maneuver permissible in dealing with the enemy (who is without honor) and should be taken in the spirit of *caveat emptor*. Basically, the antagonism remains."

### **6. The United States must focus on a long-term strategy, rather than short-term tactics.**

"Soviet Iranian diplomacy [is] at once easier and more difficult to deal with than the diplomacy of individual aggressive leaders like Napoleon and Hitler. On the one hand it is more sensitive to contrary force, more ready to yield on individual sectors of the diplomatic front when that force is felt to be too strong, and thus more rational in the logic and rhetoric of power. On the other hand it cannot be easily defeated or discouraged by a single victory on the part of its opponents. And the patient persistence by which it is animated means that it can be effectively countered not by sporadic acts which represent the momentary whims of

democratic opinion but only [by] intelligent long-range policies on the part of ~~Russia's~~ **Iran's** adversaries—policies no less steady in their purpose, and no less variegated and resourceful in their application, than those of the ~~Soviet Union~~ **Islamic Republic** itself.”

### **7. Ideological fatigue has set in.**

“The mass of the people are disillusioned, skeptical and no longer as accessible as they once were to the magical attraction which **Soviet Iranian** power still radiates to its followers abroad.”

### **8. The succession of power in the Islamic Republic is uncertain.**

“[A] great uncertainty hangs over the political life of the ~~Soviet Union~~ **Islamic Republic**. That is the uncertainty involved in the transfer of power from one individual or group of individuals to others.

This is, of course, outstandingly the problem of the personal position of ~~Stalin~~ **Khamenei**. We must remember that his succession to ~~Lenin's~~ **Khomeini's** pinnacle of pre-eminence ... was the only such transfer of individual authority which the ~~Soviet Union~~ **Islamic Republic** has experienced.... Thus the future of **Soviet Iranian** power may not be by any means as secure as **Russian Iranian** capacity for self-delusion would make it appear to the men of the ~~Kremlin~~ **Islamic Republic**.”

### **9. You can't reach an accommodation with a regime that needs you as an adversary.**

“It is clear that the United States cannot expect in the foreseeable future to enjoy political intimacy with the **Soviet Iranian** regime. It must continue to regard the ~~Soviet Union~~ **Iran** as a rival, not a partner, in the political arena. It must continue to expect that **Soviet Iranian** policies will reflect no abstract love of peace and stability, no real faith in the possibility of a permanent happy coexistence of the **Socialist Islamist** and **capitalist liberal** worlds, but rather a cautious, persistent pressure toward the disruption and weakening of all rival influence and rival power.”

### **10. U.S. policies can expedite, but not engineer, political change in Iran.**

“It would be an exaggeration to say that American behavior unassisted and alone could exercise a power of life and death over the **Communist Islamist** movement and bring about the early fall of ~~Soviet power~~ the **Islamic Republic** in **Russia Iran**. But the United States has it in its power to increase enormously the strains under which **Soviet Iranian** policy must operate, to force upon the ~~Kremlin~~ **Islamic Republic** a far greater degree of moderation and circumspection than it has had to observe in recent years, and in this way to promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the breakup or the gradual mellowing of **Soviet Iranian** power.”

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