



TONY BLAIR
INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL
CHANGE

The Fundamentals of Iran's Islamic Revolution

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CO-EXISTENCE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“The Iranian people’s revolution is only a point in the start of the revolution of the great world of Islam.”¹ These words of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founding father of the Islamic Republic and leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, marked the beginning of a project: to inspire and enable an Islamist revival across the Muslim world.

Western policymakers have underestimated Iran’s commitment to upholding and exporting 1979’s revolutionary ideology. That commitment is held by leaders across the spectrum, from those perceived by the West as hardliners to those seen as moderates.

Four decades on, Khomeini’s words still resonate, and the ricochet effects of the Islamic Revolution are still felt in the region and beyond. Despite a crippled economy and domestic dysfunction, the Iranian regime continues to divert Iran’s critical resources—including billions of dollars—to proxies across the region. Support for militarised dissidents in the Islamic world is both an ideological and a constitutional commitment.

Yet material support for destabilising forces is just one weapon in Iran’s armoury. It is the entrenchment of a dogma, levelled against perceived enemies of Islam, that has been Iran’s most potent resource. The events of 1979—not just the revolution but also the

¹ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, speech to the people during the Imposed War, Tehran, Iran, 22 March 1989, <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/81494977>

storming of Islam's holy city of Mecca by extremist insurgents and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—set major powers in the Middle East on a knee-jerk path to religious conservatism and away from modernisation, altering the entire relationship between religion and politics in the Muslim world. The ideology of the Islamic Revolution bolstered Islamist groups and set an example that power through force was possible.

Western foreign policy towards Iran has consistently overlooked the power of the ideology born in the revolution. The totalitarian and divisive worldview legitimised by state leaders, which promotes repressive governance on religious lines and hostility to the West, has been a driving force of instability and violence for decades. It has claimed lives not only in intractable conflicts in the region, such as in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, where Hizbullah changed the face of the country, but also as far afield as Bulgaria and Argentina.

The lack of understanding means that Western policymakers have severely underestimated the extent of Iran's commitment to upholding and exporting 1979's revolutionary ideology. Despite episodes of rapprochement between Western powers and Iran, antipathy towards the United States (US) has become a greater focal point for the regime under Iran's incumbent supreme leader, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, than it was under Khomeini.

This report is a first step to understanding the effect and influence of Shia Islamism since 1979. Unpacking the ideology of Iran's revolution will not only help policymakers formulate better policy towards Iran; it will also give insight into the challenges the region and its leaders are facing. Ultimately, it will enable a more comprehensive approach to countering Islamist extremism—from both Sunni and Shia extremist groups that hijack a religion of billions for their own political and ideological ends. But it goes beyond that. Understanding the importance of the Iranian Revolution is a key to wider stability and peace in the region.

By analysing the constitution of the Islamic Republic and speeches of seven Iranian leaders from 1979 to the present, this report breaks down the ideology of Iran's revolutionary Shia Islamism into seven main themes. The report shows that rhetoric from the highest levels of the Iranian establishment has not changed since 1979.

Western policymakers have been intent on identifying moderates they can work with. Policymakers have tended to regard what Iran's leaders say to their followers as less representative of their true stance than what they might say to a Western audience. But the rhetoric analysed in this report is by no means empty. Tehran's role in conflicts across the region via proxy groups, and the billions of dollars the state has invested in this effort, shows a commitment to the expansionist ideology that is clear across the data.

KEY FINDINGS

- **A state-sanctioned Shia Islamist ideology unites Iranian 'hardliners' and 'moderates'.** Every leader analysed for this report—from the architect of Iran's revolution to figures seen by the West as more moderate—expressed support for Shia Islamist ideology. This worldview, which was at the heart of the Iranian Revolution, featured across all speeches analysed. Core major themes that comprise Shia Islamist ideology include hostility to the West, particularly the US and Israel, and an appeal to pan-Islamism as a vehicle for global social and political dissent. Although seen as a moderate compared with his predecessors, President Hassan Rouhani made anti-Western and anti-US references in 60 per cent of his speeches.
- **Iran is as committed to exporting the Islamic Revolution today as it was in 1979.** A pledge to exporting the revolution is enshrined in Iran's constitution. The public remarks of Iranian leaders indicate that Tehran has been consistently committed to spreading its ideology beyond Iran's borders since 1979. Khamenei discussed this theme in 80 per cent of speeches analysed, the same proportion as Khomeini. Sixty per cent of Rouhani's speeches from 2014 to 2018 contained pan-Islamist references highlighting support for Islamist militias abroad. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander Qasem Soleimani dedicates significant proportions of his public speeches to drawing the umbilical cord from Shia Islamist militias in Yemen and Iraq to the formative vision laid out by Iran's revolution.
- **Shia Islamism shares key ideological overlaps with Sunni Islamism.** The analysis indicates a notable juncture at which

Sunni Islamist ideology and Iran-sanctioned Shia Islamist ideology meet. Previous research by our Institute has shown that the core ideological components of Sunni Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS include a fixation with Israel and the US as a source of global Muslim hardship, an existential rift between the West and Islam, and a glorification of martyrdom in support of the oppressed.² All such themes are common in speeches by both hard-line and moderate Iranian leaders.

- **The 2015 international nuclear deal did not alter Iran’s anti-US stance.** The previous US administration’s signing of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran was seen as a stepping stone to better relations between Iran and the world. Yet despite the deal, anti-US sentiment—and anti-Western sentiment in general—continues to abound in the rhetoric of Iran’s leaders. For both Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, both of whom were involved in the negotiations, 60 per cent of their speeches featured explicit anti-US rhetoric.
- **A determination to eradicating Israel is entrenched across the Iranian establishment.** From hardliners to those perceived by the West to be moderates, Iranian leaders are fiercely opposed to Israel. Israel was the most-mentioned foreign country across the sample. Anti-Israel rhetoric featured in 66 per cent of the sample and was present in the speeches of all leaders analysed. Since 1989, Khamenei has referenced Israel more than any other theme in the analysis, with anti-Israel rhetoric featuring in 90 per cent of his sample. By contrast, anti-Israel discourse featured in 40 per cent of Khomeini’s speeches, suggesting that hostility towards Israel has become a greater ideological focal point for the regime. References to Israel as “a cancerous tumour that must be eradicated” feature prominently in Khamenei’s speeches but also appear in those of moderate figures such as Rouhani.³ Overall, 50 per cent of Rouhani’s

2 Emman El-Badawy, Milo Comerford and Peter Welby, “Inside the Jihadi Mind: Understanding Ideology and Propaganda”, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 6 October 2015, <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/inside-jihadi-mind-understanding-ideology-and-propaganda>.

3 Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, “Leader’s Speech to Government Officials”, speech to government officials on the occasion of the Prophet’s birthday anniversary, Tehran, Iran, 21 February 2011, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1425/Leader-s-Speech-to-Government-Officials>; Hassan Rouhani, speech at the Islamic Unity Conference, Tehran, Iran, 24 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/>

sample speeches were negative towards the “Zionist regime”.

INTRODUCTION

Standing before the Iranian people in 1979, only a few months after the revolution that had unseated the country's shah, then Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini asserted,

I have said time and time again that to build a society on the basis of the principles of Islam is an ideological choice, not just a religious one. Islam in fact is an ideology, in which religion represents one aspect.⁴

Time has proved that this was not merely revolutionary rhetoric. The Iranian government today and much of its policy, both internal and external, derive from the ideology of the Islamic Revolution. Understanding the broader ideology of the revolution is critical to understanding how and why Iran controls, and justifies its support for, a network of proxy militias across the Middle East. It is also key in understanding major geopolitical shifts in the region and beyond. Forty years on from 1979, this is still often misunderstood by Western policymakers.

Going back to 1979, there is also very little understanding of how the revolution began as an event that was supposed to end repression but wound up tightening it. Likewise, there is little awareness that originally the revolution was driven by an alliance between Islamists, communists and liberals but was soon co-opted by Khomeini and dominated by his ideology.

The ideology of the Islamic Revolution is more than just the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, the system of clerical guardianship that sees Iran's supreme leader above the whole system of government. In Khomeini's worldview, people were divided into oppressed and oppressors, and Islam was the answer to protect the former from the latter. This worldview believed in Islamic governance, revolutionary Shiism and pan-Islamism as well as hostility to Western imperialism, the US and the existence of Israel. Many of the values that Khomeini upheld resonated across the Muslim world at a time when struggles and insurgencies took root.

⁴ Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 39.

However, what really marked Khomeini's offering as different from other Islamist movements—such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir and Jamaat-e Islami—was that he was spreading a successfully tried, tested and implemented top-down Islamisation.

Before Khomeinism, Islamist movements had long disagreed on how to achieve an Islamic utopia. While the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt pushed for grass-roots, bottom-up and gradualist revolution, the likes of Hizb ut-Tahrir and Jamaat-e Islami chose to engage with the intelligentsia to encourage top-down change. Until 1979, neither group had realised the potential of the approach advocated by Khomeini and his supporters. Not only did the Iranian Revolution introduce a new path for social change in the Islamic world, but it was also evidence that Islamism was feasible in the modern world. This new direction gave hope to Islamists across the globe and transformed Islamism from ideal to reality. That same year, after the revolution, anti-monarchist Islamist insurgents seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca in an effort to force Saudi Arabia's ruling al-Saud family to relinquish its custodianship of the Holy Land.

The successors of Iran's Islamic Revolution galvanised pre-existing movements with new potential across the Muslim world. Yet, what was conveniently and not equally relayed was the subsequent disenfranchisement of the Iranian people on the receiving end of the Islamic Revolution's ideology. Western policymakers have not only paid less attention to domestic developments in that regard. In fact, policymakers have also tended to view much of Iranian political rhetoric as less of a reflection of what Iran's leaders think than what they might say to Western interlocutors.

Part of the problem is that, based on false assumptions about moderates and hardliners in Iran's government, Western policymakers have at times invented moderates while ignoring the real ones. When the Green Movement opposition protests had only just begun in 2009, the US suggested opposition figure Mir-Hossein Mousavi held the same beliefs as Ahmadinejad; Obama suggested in 2013 Rouhani was a breath of fresh air.⁵ Our analysis shows that

5 "Barack Obama sits on the fence by refusing to back Mousavi", Evening Standard, 17 June 2009, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/barack-obama-sits-on-the-fence-by-refusing-to-back-mousavi-6711513.html>

Ahmadinejad's and Rouhani's political rhetoric is aligned and ideological.

CONTEXT

This report is the second in a series of publications on Shia extremism that the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change will release throughout 2019.⁶ The series begins by understanding the role of Iran in the context of Shia militancy across the region. Future publications will study the ideological, structural and operational trends across Shia Islamist movements and groups, including those that are backed by Iran and those that are hostile to it. This research is key in understanding how far Shia nonstate actors—such as the Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen and the Shia militias in Syria, which make up 80 per cent of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces—are committed to Iran's expansionist ideology.⁷

The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change is committed to tackling the ideologies behind extremism so that people can co-exist peacefully. Our Institute's past research has shown that at least 121 violent Islamist groups inspire and orchestrate attacks around the world. In 2017, at least 84,000 people died because of this problem.⁸ Since the 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks on the United States, however, the focus of global efforts against Islamist terrorism has been on Sunni Islamist terrorists, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. While vital, this emphasis has left Shia Islamism to expand and grow via Iran's proxy groups and its IRGC. According to estimates, Iran has spent \$30 billion since 2011 on efforts in Syria alone.⁹ An estimated 11,000 Shia foreign fighters, 3,000 IRGC troops and 8,000 Hizbullah militants were on the ground in Syria by 2016.¹⁰

6 Ali Ansari and Kasra Aarabi, "Ideology and Iran's Revolution: How 1979 Changed the World", Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 11 February 2019.

7 Colin P. Clarke and Phillip Smyth, "Where Is Assad Getting His Fighters from? (It's Not Just Lebanon and Iraq)", RAND Corporation, 4 January 2018, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/01/where-is-assad-getting-his-fighters-from-its-not-just.html>.

8 "Global Extremism Monitor 2017", Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 13 September 2018, <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/violent-islamist-extremism-global-problem>

Although there are marked differences in ideology and tactics, the extremism espoused by Sunni and Shia Islamist extremists has striking similarities. Both Sunni and Shia Islamists believe in imposing a narrow rendering of Islam as state law. And Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, are the main victims of their terrorism.¹¹

SELECTION OF LEADERS

This report identifies the main themes of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution through qualitative and quantitative data analysis. A total of 70 speeches by seven Iranian leaders from across the political spectrum were analysed, spanning a time period from 1979 to 2018. These leaders are:

- former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini;
- current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei;
- former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad;
- IRGC Quds Force Commander Major-General Qasem Soleimani;
- former President Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani;
- current President Hassan Rouhani; and
- current Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

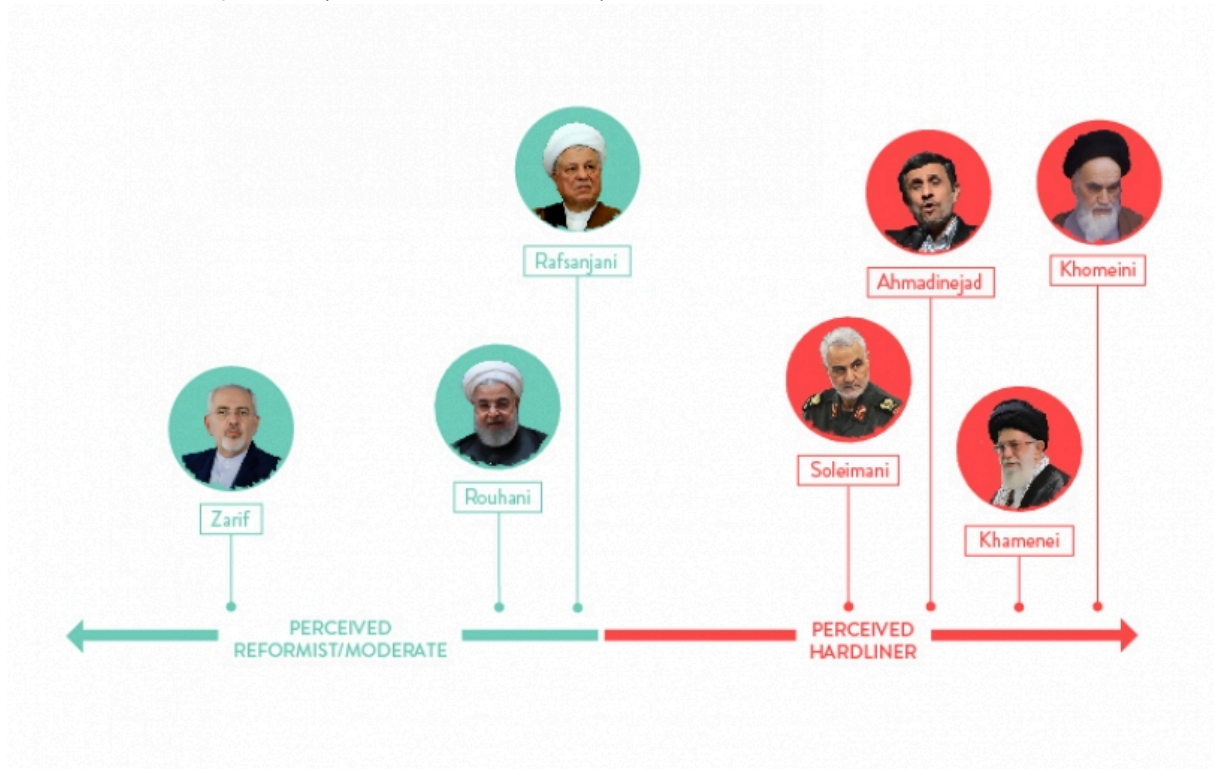
To gather the evidence base for this research, 70 speeches by Iranian leaders were coded and analysed. To gain a fuller picture of the regime's ideology, the report sought to go beyond analysing the speeches of 'typical' regime ideologues, such as the supreme leader. The seven officials were chosen because they represent what the West perceives as a spectrum of figures from hardliner to moderate (see figure 1). They also come from a wide range of positions, with officials in the government and the military.

9 Borzou Daragahi, "Iran Wants to Stay in Syria Forever", *Foreign Policy*, 1 June 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/01/iran-wants-to-stay-in-syria-forever/>.

10 Bret Stephens, "The Man Who Humbled Qassim Suleimani", *New York Times*, 11 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/11/opinion/gadi-eisenkot-israel-iran-syria.html>.

11 "Global Extremism Monitor 2017", Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

Figure 1: A Spectrum of Western Perceptions of Iranian Leaders



This was not an exercise in identifying moderates, but an analysis of the extent to which the ideology of the Islamic Revolution is evident in rhetoric of regime officials across a spectrum. The speeches selected provide a broad range and the most accurate picture of the leaders' views. All speeches were in Farsi and aimed at domestic and international audiences. There is scope for more detailed and broader research to expand on these themes.

For full details of the methodology, see appendix 1. For biographies of the seven Iranian leaders analysed, see appendix 2.

KEY THEMES IN THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

This research identified seven key themes that make up the ideology of the Islamic Revolution. These themes were drawn out using quantitative and qualitative data analysis and are dominant across the sample of leaders' speeches analysed. The seven themes can be grouped into two overarching categories: justice and injustice.

This distinction between justice and injustice derives from Khomeini's worldview, which differentiated between the *Mustakberin* (the oppressors and arrogant powers) and the *Mustazefin* (the oppressed and downtrodden). From this perspective, the oppressors are those who commit injustices against the Muslim people, who are depicted as the oppressed. Islam is painted as the solution to the oppression and as the way to bring justice to the oppressed Muslims.

This viewpoint is a basic premise of the Iranian Revolution's outlook, and still informs the regime today. This premise is evident in public remarks by Iran's leaders, in hard-power activity abroad and in the constitution of the Islamic Republic, which enshrined the state's commitment to the revolution.

JUSTICE

The following themes sit under the category of justice:

- **Islamic governance:** A belief in the desirability or superiority of governance defined by the boundaries of sharia, or Islamic religious law.
- **Velayat-e faqih:** A belief in the necessity of, and praise for, a system of clerical guardianship (*velayat-e faqih*) of the state and the leadership of a supreme clerical leader (*vali-e faqih*) until the return of the Twelfth Shia Imam, who Shia Muslims believe was withdrawn into occultation in 874.
- **Pan-Islamism:** A belief in solidarity among all Muslims, the championing of the ummah (global Muslim community) and attainment of a widespread Islamic order.
- **Revolutionary Shiism:** A belief in a political and ideological

interpretation of Shiism that is based on resistance, martyrdom and fighting for justice.

INJUSTICE

The following themes sit under the category of injustice:

- **Imperialism and the West:** A belief in a clash of civilisations between Islam and the West—with the view that Islam is incompatible with Western values—as well as the connection of unjust rule with colonial invaders, with a specific focus on the West.
- **Anti-Americanism:** A belief that the United States, as the chief representative of the oppressors, is the “Great Satan”—Islam’s ultimate enemy and the master of injustice that has subjugated the entire Muslim world.
- **Eradication of Zionism and Israel:** A commitment to eradicate Zionism, with the view that Israel is an illegitimate, oppressive and usurping entity created in the heartland of the Muslim world to enable the West, in particular the US, to achieve its ‘colonial goals’ throughout the Islamic world.

OVERLAP WITH SUNNI ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY

There is significant overlap between the Iranian regime’s Shia Islamist ideology and that of Sunni Islamist groups, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to ISIS. While these two broad branches of Islamism adhere to different theological interpretations, they share many ideological commonalities. The depiction of a clash of civilisations between Islam and the West, the belief that Islamic governance is the solution to the Muslim world’s problems and the aim of establishing a universal Islamic order based on sharia law are espoused by both Shia and Sunni Islamists.

Forty years on from the revolution, Iranian leaders still talk about, and act on, these ideas. More importantly, over the past four decades, Tehran has worked tirelessly to export its Shia Islamist ideology regionally and globally. Iran and its proxies are driving

violence and instability across the Middle East and beyond. And yet, while the international community has worked to combat Sunni Islamist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, Shia Islamists operate largely unhindered with Iranian support in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Western observers have overlooked Shia fundamentalism and extremism in comparison with Sunni Islamist extremism, in part because of a lack of attention to the ideology born out of Iran's Islamic Revolution 40 years ago. With the surge in armed Shia Islamist groups across the Middle East today, in particular in Syria and Iraq following the territorial defeat of ISIS, understanding the ideology that acts as the umbilical cord between Iran and these Shia extremists could not be more relevant. Concern over Iranian intervention in the Middle East is a key driver of the realignment of interests in the region.

Case Study: The Iranian Constitution

The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran makes clear the expansionist and Islamist nature of the country's 1979 revolution. Its preamble states, "The mission of the Constitution is to realise the ideological objectives of the movement and to create conditions conducive to the development of man in accordance with the noble and universal values of Islam" and explains that the document "provides the necessary basis for ensuring the continuation of the Revolution at home and abroad".¹²

The centrality of ideology in the Islamic Republic is clear from the outset. The constitution's preamble underlines, "The basic characteristic of this revolution, which distinguishes it from other movements that have taken place in Iran during the past hundred years, is its ideological and Islamic nature." The document claims that past movements in Iran failed due to their "lack of an ideological basis" and their "departure from genuine Islamic positions". Iran's Islamist ideology is therefore at the crux of the Islamic Republic and cannot be detached from the Iranian state.

¹² All quotations in the case study are taken from "Iran (Islamic Republic of)'s Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989", Constitute Project, accessed 1 February 2019, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/iran_1989.pdf?lang=en.

The Iranian constitution lays the foundations for the country's Islamic system of governance, with article 1 stating, "The form of government of Iran is that of an Islamic Republic." The article expands to include "the importance of submission to Allah (God)" and establish the "fundamental role" of "divine revelation" as the predominant source of law. The constitution states that Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* is the basis for the nation's Islamic system of government.

Pan-Islamist credentials are also championed in the constitution. The document invokes the ummah, stating that "all Muslims form a single nation" and that among the goals of the movement are to ensure that the framework "provides the necessary basis for ensuring the continuation of the Revolution at home and abroad" and to support other Islamic movements "to prepare the way for the formation of a single world community".

This desire to lead and support the world's Muslims is particularly significant given that Iran is a Shia-majority country and therefore a minority in the global Muslim landscape, which is predominantly Sunni. The constitution's non-sectarian, pan-Islamic appeal overcomes theological differences and seeks to exploit religious identity as a means for gaining traction beyond the Shia world.

JUSTICE

This chapter explores the four themes that come under the broader category of justice: Islamic governance, *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist), pan-Islamism and revolutionary Shiism. Together, these themes comprise the principles of how Khomeini's brand of Islamist populism would protect the 'oppressed' in the face of the 'oppressors', and how the revolution would expand its mission outside Iran's borders.

ISLAMIC GOVERNANCE

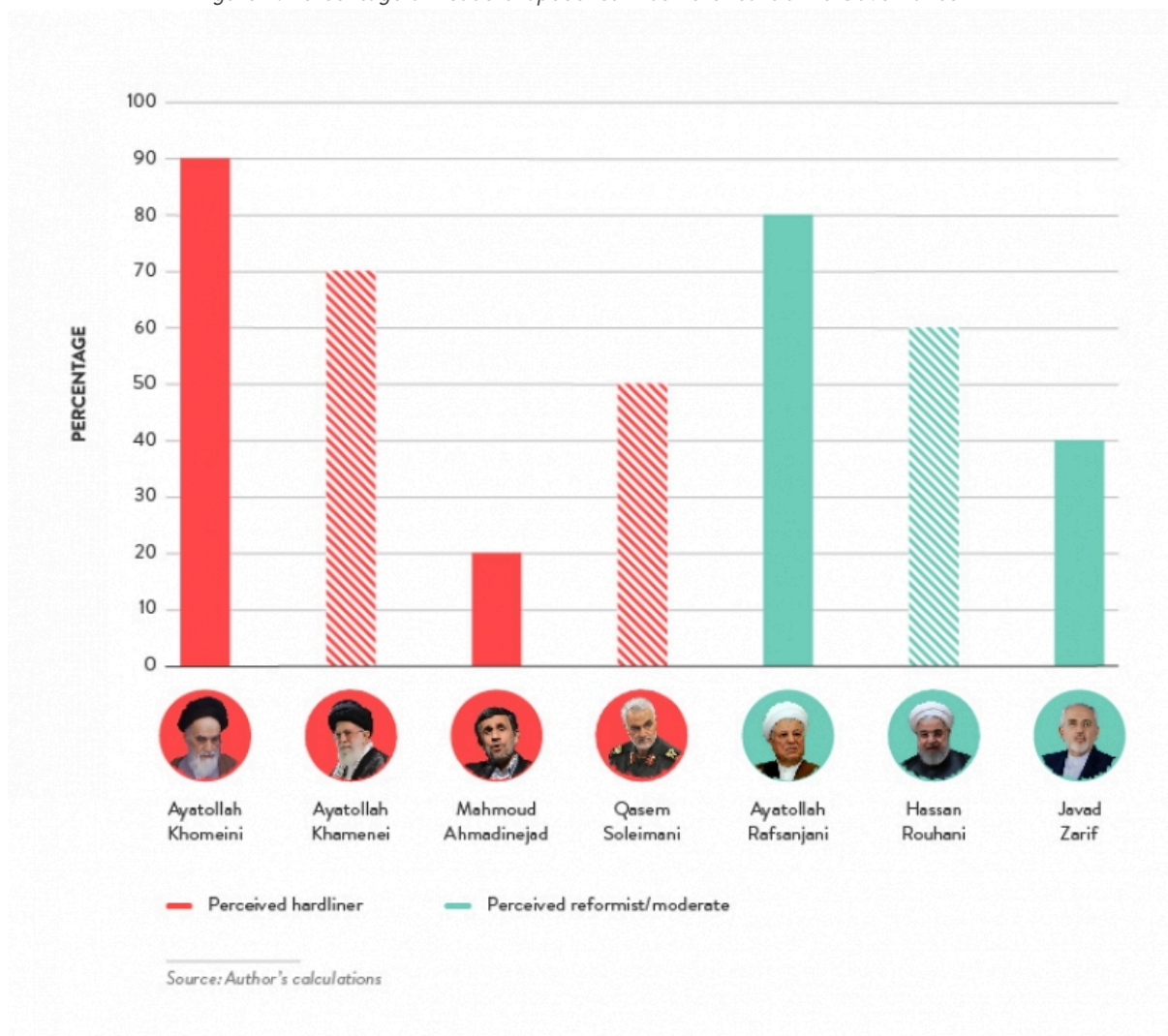
The core factor that unites all Islamists, both Iranian and non-Iranian, is the belief that Islam should govern the boundaries of all aspects of life—political, economic, social and cultural. Islamists believe God sent Islam to be implemented, hence the creation of sharia (Islamic) law. Islamism regards all other forms of rule, including secular, monarchical and democratic, as idol worship.

This belief system is at the centre of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution, which deems Islamic governance the only legitimate form of rule and authority. References to Islamic governance featured in 59 per cent of the leaders' speeches analysed. Islamic governance is a broad theme, and across the sample, examples of Islamic governance range from explicit references to the application of sharia law to inferences of God's absolute authority and sovereignty across political and social life.

Ninety per cent of Khomeini's sample referred to Islamic governance (see figure 2). Much of his messaging on this theme is populist, and presents Islamic governance as the solution to all of Iran's and the Muslim world's problems. In one speech, Khomeini stated that he views the Quran and the conduct of the Prophet Mohammad as a "prelude [to] the establishment of justice in the world".¹³

¹³ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, speech at a meeting with regime officials, Tehran, Iran, 10 November 1987.

Figure 2: Percentage of Leaders' Speeches That Refer to Islamic Governance



Iran's current supreme leader, Khamenei, has also consistently reiterated such views. Seventy per cent of his speeches idealised Islamic governance as the saviour for the Muslim world. Khamenei goes as far as to blame a "big portion" of "human sufferings" in the Muslim world on the lack of Islamic governance in the region.¹⁴

Belief in Islamic governance as the only method of rule is also espoused by Iranian leaders who have been seen as moderates. These include Rafsanjani, president of Iran from 1989 to 1997, and Rouhani, president since 2013. This theme featured in 80 per cent of Rafsanjani's speeches and 60 per cent of Rouhani's.

¹⁴ Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, speech, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1023/Leader-s-Speech-on-Eid-ul-Ghadir>

The commitment to Islamic governance goes beyond lip service and encompasses every article of the Iranian constitution. The opening sentence of the constitution affirms this commitment, stating that “cultural, social, political, and economic institutions of Iranian society” will be based on the “basis of Islamic principles and norms”.¹⁵ The constitution also states that God retains “exclusive sovereignty and the right to legislate” and highlights the “fundamental role” of “divine revelation” in setting forth the laws of the country.

Opposition to Secularism and Liberalism

Fierce opposition to secularism and liberalism, which Iran’s Islamists deem idolatrous, is another prominent feature in the Iranian regime’s vision of Islamic governance. In a speech in August 1984, Khomeini explicitly underlined that “he who says that religion is separate from politics, has denied God, denied the Prophet of Allah, has denied the Imams”.¹⁶

Opposition to secularism and liberalism stems from the belief that co-existence between the *dar al-Islam* (land of Muslims) and the *dar al-Harb* (land of the disbelievers) is impossible. In Islamic terms, this belief views the *dar al-Islam* in a permanent state of war, or jihad, with the *dar al-Harb*, and peace between Muslims and non-Muslims as unattainable.

In 1981, Khomeini reaffirmed this view, stating, “No Muslim should think peace is ever possible between Islam and disbelief or between Muslims and the disbelievers.”¹⁷ Thirty-three years later, in 2014, as nuclear negotiations were ongoing with Western powers, Iran’s president echoed Khomeini’s vision. Rouhani described the Islamic Revolution as a “victory for Islam against the global kuffar [disbelievers]”.¹⁸

Western policymakers often view figures deemed moderate—like Rouhani—as potential pioneers to open up Iran and liberalise the

15 “Iran’s Constitution”, Constitute Project.

16 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, speech to regime officials on Eid al-Ghadir, August 1984, <https://bit.ly/2Uxsl1w>.

17 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, speech to the Board of Review for the Imposed War, Tehran, Iran, 6 March 1981, <https://bit.ly/2DKKKIz>.

18 Hassan Rouhani, speech on anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, Tehran, Iran, 11 February 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYJX0xx6rMY>.

constraints in Iranian politics and society. The fundamental problem is that the West often invents moderates while ignoring the real ones. For example, former US President Barack Obama refused to support Iranian opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi in the 2009 Green Movement protests, claiming that Mousavi was no different from Ahmadinejad. But in 2013, Obama reached out to Rouhani on the basis that he was a moderate and a breath of fresh air.¹⁹ If anything, as the data behind this report reveal, Rouhani's worldview is far closer to that of Ahmadinejad than the West appreciates.

Notwithstanding these nuances, when the West speaks of moderates in the regime, it often overlooks the fact that all figures in the establishment are committed to Islamism and are vehemently opposed to liberal, secular values. This includes officials the West perceives as moderate, such as Zarif. In a speech before the Iranian parliament in August 2013, Zarif claimed that the "world faces the challenges of extremism and secularism".²⁰ The fact that he referred to secularism as a challenge on a par with extremism reveals his opposition to the separation of religion and state.

The idea that Islamic rule is the only legitimate form of governance is not restricted to Iran's clerical establishment but also includes non-clerical figures in the system. Fifty per cent of speeches by Soleimani included references to Islamic governance. In one speech, he said the country's Islamic system was akin to "heaven".²¹

Creation of an Islamic State

With Iran's revolution, Khomeini and his disciples succeeded in creating a state on Islamic principles and jurisprudence. The attainment of an Islamic state was not only a success for them; it was also a significant victory for Islamists outside Iran. The ayatollah had transformed a long-desired Islamist ideal into reality and proved that governance based on sharia was possible in the modern world. This galvanised Islamist movements across the Muslim world. While sectarianism in the region may have blurred the lines between Shia

¹⁹ "Barack Obama sits on the fence", Evening Standard.

²⁰ Mohammad Javad Zarif, speech to Iranian Parliament, Tehran, Iran, 13 August 2013.

²¹ General Qasem Soleimani, speech, 22 September 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87VRQ2m7WNI>.

and Sunni fundamentalism, both movements share the goal of achieving Islamic governance.

It is noteworthy that in a 2015 speech, the founding father of Iranian reformism, Rafsanjani, praised Palestinian Islamist organisation Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood “in Turkey and other Arab states” for their Islamic nature.²² This highlights the fact that Iran’s Shia Islamist leaders are much closer to Sunni Islamists in terms of ideas than many in the West appreciate.

By politicising religion, Iran’s leaders have been able to claim Islam as the basis for their legitimacy. In a speech in 2005, Rafsanjani went as far as to assert that the Islamic Republic had established “the best experience ever created for Islam” and that “even at the time of the Prophet . . . never have there been so righteous, devoted and compassionate people for Islam.”²³ The creation of an Islamic state enabled Iran’s leaders to claim a mandate from God and enforce a strict Islamic order on the nation. It also provided the regime with legitimacy to punish those who failed to observe Islamic practice.

In another speech Rafsanjani stated, “In Islam, there is force, there are limits and punishments. [But] these are [measures that should be taken] after the strengthening of people’s faith and beliefs. Of course, we must confront the rebellious people.”²⁴ The system is fundamentally intolerant of those it considers disbelievers. This has led to the persecution, imprisonment and even execution of people who disagree with the premise of Iran’s Islamic government. In what has been described as the “year of shame”, in 2018, Iranian authorities cracked down on peaceful dissent, arresting more than 7,000 people. This reportedly included students, journalists, environmental activists, workers and human-rights defenders.²⁵

22 Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech at a roundtable of the editorial board of the Journal of International Studies, Tehran, Iran, 15 April 2015, <https://bit.ly/2G52NWb>.

23 Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech to Basjjs, Iran, 20 August 1986, <https://bit.ly/2Gb1BQW>.

24 Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech to the Assembly of Experts, Tehran, Iran, 9 March 2011, <https://bit.ly/2HIBI28>.

25 “Iran’s ‘year of shame’: More than 7,000 arrested in chilling crackdown on dissent during 2018”, Amnesty International, 24 January 2019,

Under this Islamic state, power also became an exclusive function of the clergy, as only they are trained in Islamic jurisprudence. The Islamist nature of the Iranian regime has empowered religiously conservative segments of the population to take the law into their own hands and enforce strict Islamic observance in society under what is known as promoting virtue and prohibiting vice.

The narrative Iranian leaders use to describe Islamic governance depicts it as just and promoting equality. This view regards Islamic rule as superior to all other 'morally bankrupt' ideologies and systems, such as capitalism and communism. The ideology of the Islamic Revolution is particularly critical of capitalism on the basis that it is unjust and exploitative, benefiting the rich at the expense of the poorer 'oppressed' classes. Only Islam can liberate the poor from the clutches of the 'oppressors', according to this perspective.

All of Iran's leaders are Islamists and claim their mandate to implement an Islamic order on the nation derives from God. All of the speeches analysed opened with a prayer in Arabic, something that was not a regular feature of Iranian political culture before 1979. The religious reference is used as a source of legitimacy for both the regime and individual leaders in the system. It reinforces the inseparable nature of Iran and Islam, and establishes from the outset of each speech that the country's leaders are ruling in the name of God.

VELAYAT-E FAQIH (GUARDIANSHIP OF THE ISLAMIC JURIST)

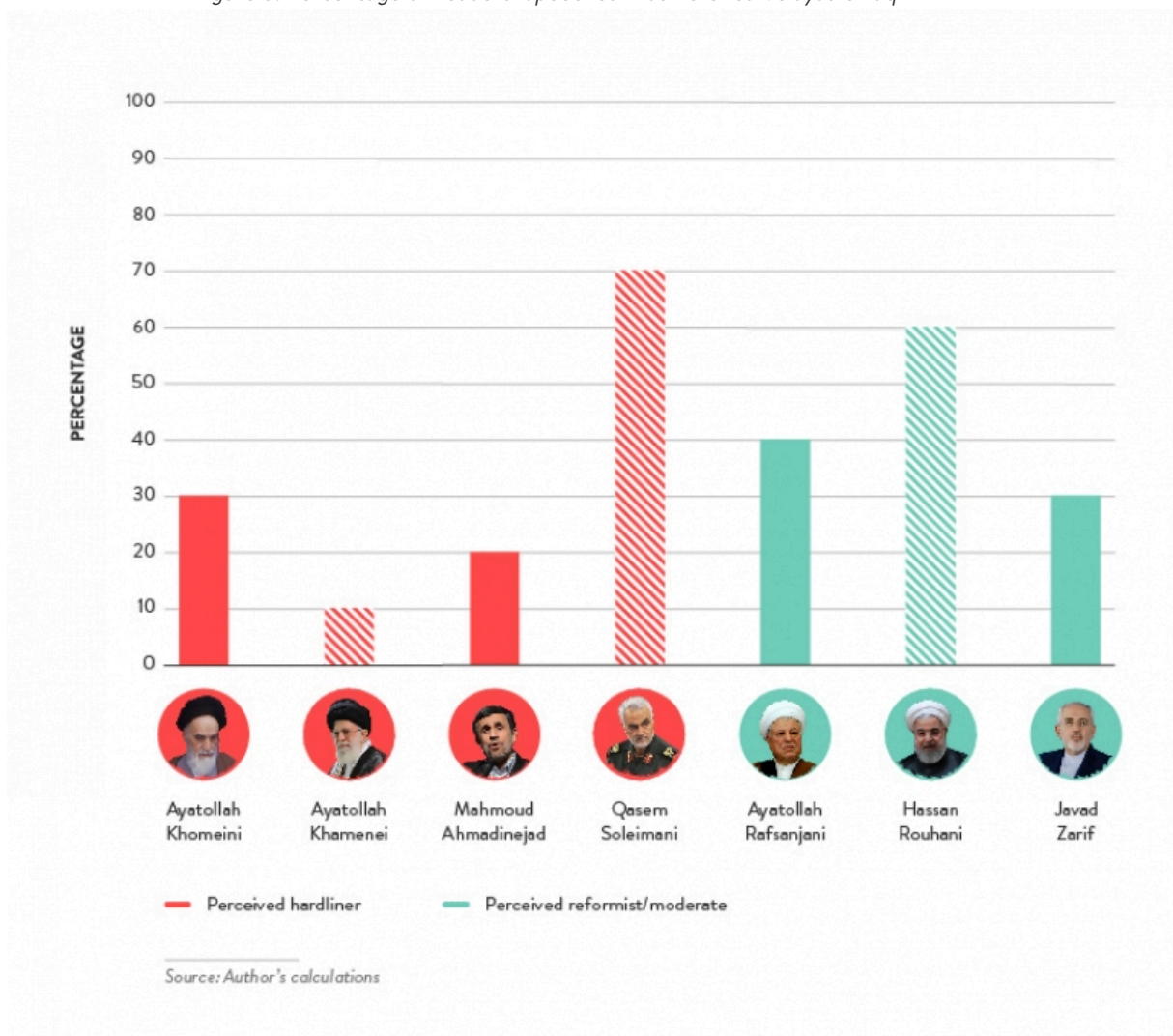
In the context of Iran and Shiism, it is the notion of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist) that makes Islamic governance possible. Under this concept, political and religious power is transferred to the clergy and all the state's key decisions are subject to approval by a supreme clerical leader, the *vali-e faqih* (guardian Islamic jurist). The theory of *velayat-e faqih* is based on the belief that clerical guardianship of the state is required until the return of the Twelfth Shia Imam, who Shia Muslims believe was withdrawn into occultation in 874. As Rafsanjani claimed in one of his speeches, "the government of the Islamic Revolution is linked to

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/01/irans-year-of-shame-more-than-7000-arrested-in-chilling-crackdown-on-dissent-during-2018/>.

the government of the [Twelfth] Imam”.²⁶ This central tenet underpins and enables the implementation of Iran’s ideology, both at home and abroad. *Velayat-e faqih* serves as the sole source of legitimacy for the political and religious authority of Iran’s supreme leader.

All the leaders in the data set make references to the need for *velayat-e faqih*, which often includes overwhelming praise for the supreme leader’s guidance (see figure 3). This both underlines the leaders’ support for rule by the clergy and highlights that all actors in the Iranian system depend on the supreme leader.

Figure 3: Percentage of Leaders’ Speeches That Refer to *Velayat-e Faqih*



²⁶ Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech to the Assembly of Experts, Tehran, Iran, 9 March 2011, <https://bit.ly/2HIBI28>.

Leaders in Ideological Alignment

Both Soleimani and Rouhani, two figures whom the West views as at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum in Iran from each other, referred to this theme and praised the supreme leader's authority in their speech samples. Soleimani did so in 70 per cent of cases, and Rouhani in 60 per cent.

Both officials express praise for the supreme leader's guardianship of the population and play into the belief that Khamenei is divinely ordained and infallible—that is, incapable of error and sin just like the 12 Shia imams who were the direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammad. In a speech in 2016, Soleimani referred to the “truth and wisdom” of Khamenei.²⁷ In another speech in the same year, he claimed that Iran's “success in the past 40 years” was because of the “enlightened leadership of the Supreme Leader”.²⁸ He added that the reason the Arab Spring in Egypt had failed to transform into an Islamic Revolution was because the Muslim Brotherhood lacked this kind of leadership. Soleimani underlined the importance of *velayat-e faqih* to the entire Iranian system in a speech in 2017, when he asked “God [to] take time away from [the population's] lives and [to] give it to the supreme leader”.²⁹

Like Soleimani, Rouhani makes similar references to the supreme leader's authority and leadership. In a speech in 2013, he told his audience, “We [the Iranian people] should be grateful for the Supreme Leader's leadership of the system.”³⁰ Three years on, in a speech to university students, Rouhani underlined that the success of his government was for the “leader of Iran”.³¹

27 General Qasem Soleimani, speech on the first anniversary of the martyrdom of Commander Hamedani, 5 October 2016, <https://bit.ly/2WxzNv9>.

28 General Qasem Soleimani, speech in Langarud, Iran, 21 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2MK1Pit>.

29 General Qasem Soleimani, speech at a gathering of imams, Tehran, Iran, 20 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/2Gk9CCJ>.

30 Hassan Rouhani, speech at the endorsement ceremony of the presidential decree, Tehran, Iran, 4 August 2013, <http://www.president.ir/fa/70471>.

31 Hassan Rouhani, speech at a meeting with regime officials, 5 May 2016, <http://www.president.ir/fa/93392>.

Other figures in the regime deemed moderates also appeal to the necessity of *velayat-e faqih* and Khamenei's supreme leadership. Such themes were present in 40 per cent of Rafsanjani's speeches and 30 per cent of Zarif's. In a speech in 2016, Rafsanjani said, "We [the clergy] do not see" anyone "better and more appropriate than Ayatollah Khamenei" who could "lead the country".³² This is particularly significant as the West has tended to view Rafsanjani—the forefather of Iranian reformism and a political heavyweight in Iran—as in tacit opposition to Khamenei, especially following the 2009 Green Movement riots.

Yet, that Rafsanjani, the most senior political cleric in the Islamic Republic after Khamenei, came out in full support of Khamenei's authority illustrates that Iran's moderates are not in competition with the regime hardliners. Rouhani underlined this in a 2016 speech when he dismissed claims that his government was at odds with the other bodies of the regime: "We have all the same views in preserving the revolution, maintaining the system, following the leadership."³³ This notion is often misunderstood by Western observers, who have an exaggerated perception of political competition in the regime. Aware of this, Iranian leaders like Rouhani and Zarif have played into the moderate-hardliner narrative as a means of gaining concessions from the West.

Understandably, Khomeini and Khamenei make fewer references to *velayat-e faqih* in their speech samples, with the concept occurring in 30 per cent and 10 per cent of speeches respectively, because their authority speaks for itself.

None of the actors in the Islamic Republic, apart from the supreme leader, is an independent centre of power; these actors do not have power in their own right and are not sovereign bodies. There is one centre of power in the Iranian regime: the supreme leader. All other actors depend on him and compete to influence his decisions. This helps explain why they dedicate part of their narrative to praising this figure.

32 Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech to the nation, Tehran, Iran, 12 February 2016.

33 Hassan Rouhani, speech at the endorsement ceremony of the presidential decree, Tehran, Iran, 4 August 2013, <http://www.president.ir/fa/70471>.

The 1989 amendments to Iran’s constitution bolstered clerical guardianship of the state by making the supreme leader’s authority and power “absolute”.³⁴ The transition to absolute *velayat-e faqih* sought to strengthen the supreme leader’s institutional authority, which Khomeini deemed necessary to preserve the regime. The 1989 amendments expanded the scope of the supreme leader’s powers to virtually all organs of the state.

Crucially, the supreme leader’s absolute authority was further consolidated in 2009, during the Green Movement riots. At that time, in declaring Ahmadinejad president amid accusations of electoral fraud and widespread protests, Khamenei reiterated his non-negotiable divine mandate. Opposition to the supreme leader was deemed to be disobedience to God.³⁵

PAN-ISLAMISM

While *velayat-e faqih* is distinctively Shia, pan-Islamism—a belief in Islamic homogeneity devoid of sectarian connotations—is also central to the Iranian regime’s ideology. This vision essentially calls for Muslim unity and the creation of a homogenous Muslim bloc, with an outlook that divides the world into us vs. them, Muslims vs. non-Muslims.

Pan-Islamists view the early years of Islam under the Prophet’s caliphate as a period in which Muslims were united. Throughout history, pan-Islamists—both Shia and Sunni—have appealed to this golden age as a means of creating a state, society and regional order determined by the rules and boundaries of Islam.

Pan-Islamists often champion their membership of the ummah, or global Muslim community. Iranian leaders take this one step further and lay claim to its leadership. Again, this pan-Islamist vision goes beyond mere rhetoric. Article 5 of the Iranian constitution underlines that during the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, “leadership of the ummah” will be devolved to Iran’s supreme leader.³⁶

34 “Iran’s Constitution”, Constitute Project.

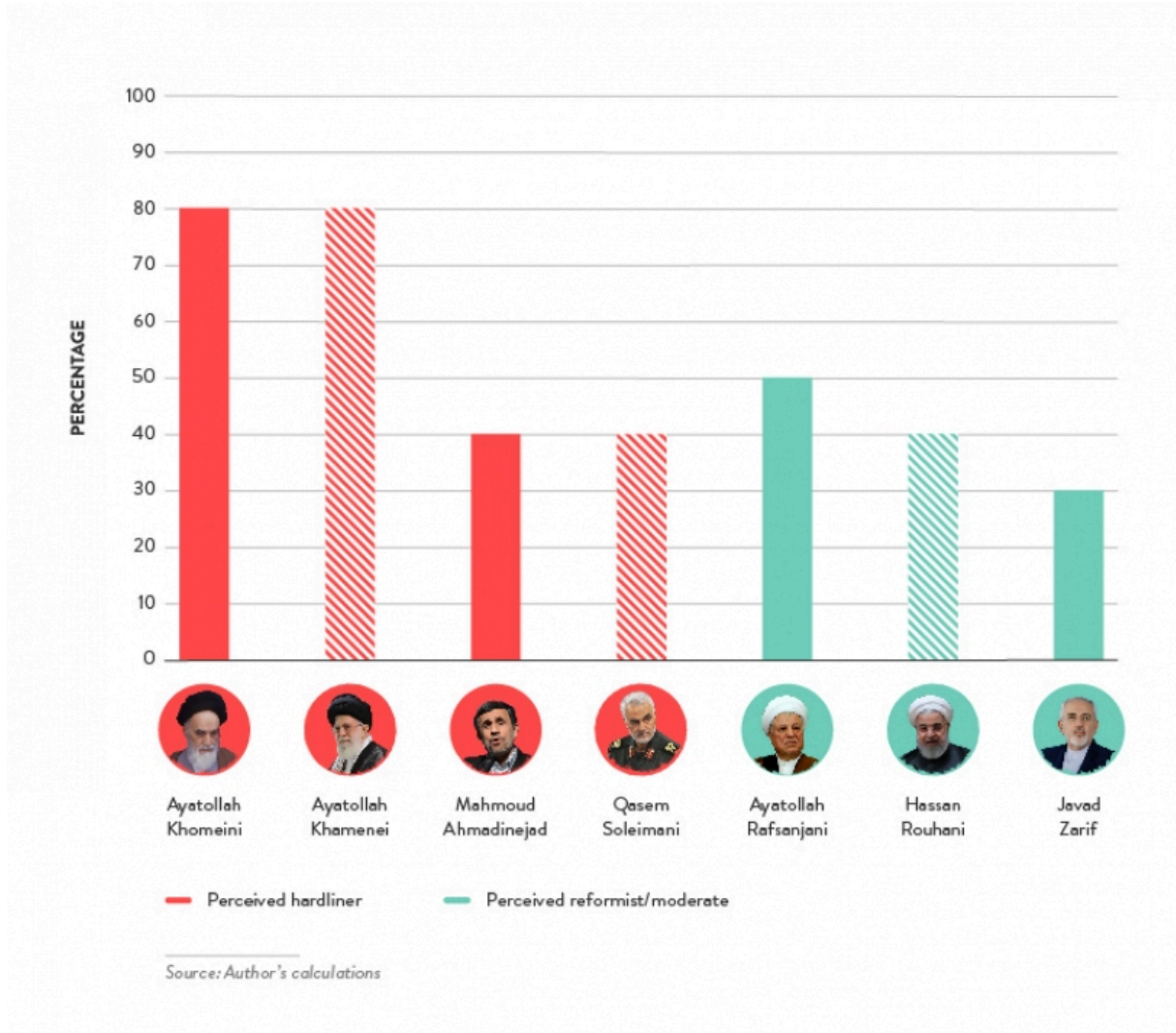
35 Ansari and Aarabi, “Ideology and Iran’s Revolution”.

36 “Iran’s Constitution”, Constitute Project.

Consistency Across the Political Spectrum

Of all the leaders analysed in this report, Khomeini and Khamenei made the most references to pan-Islamist themes, with 80 per cent of their speeches featuring these topics (see figure 4). Khamenei said in 2017, “Religious differences, like the Shia-Sunni issue and other such issues, have always been used by the enemies of Islamic nations to foment discord.”³⁷

Figure 4: Percentage of Leaders’ Speeches That Refer to Pan-Islamism



The appeal to pan-Islamism is not restricted to hardliners. Those seen as moderate also lay claim to pan-Islamic aspirations, with figures such as Rafsanjani, Rouhani and Zarif peddling these

³⁷ Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, speech, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/5084/I-have-close-friendships-with-many-Sunni-scholars-Imam-Khamenei>.

narratives, albeit less frequently than some of the more expected leaders. In the speeches analysed, pan-Islamist references featured in 50 per cent of Rafsanjani's content, 40 per cent of Rouhani's and 30 per cent of Zarif's. While they may make fewer references to pan-Islamism than Khomeini and Khamenei, the moderates' vision on this theme is almost identical to the hardliners'.

In one speech, Rafsanjani stated that "Muslim divisions are the best gift to the global kuffar and enemy of Islam".³⁸ Similarly, in a speech in 2018, Rouhani claimed that the "world of Islam is on its own and Muslims must join hands".³⁹ Zarif, who was educated in the US, makes similar assertions. In a 2018 speech, he stated that "what makes the Zionist enemy more courageous is our [Muslim] lack of unity".⁴⁰ In remarks in 2017, Zarif outlined practical steps for the attainment of such pan-Islamist aspirations on the international stage, calling for Muslims nations to speak with "one voice to the international community, in particular the United Nations Security Council" and demand an end to the "criminal culture of the Israeli regime".⁴¹

Iranian leaders across the spectrum often leverage the fight against Israel (see next chapter) to unite Muslims under a homogeneous Islamist flag. References to the world of Islam and the ummah were commonplace in the rhetoric of all Iranian leaders in the sample.

In today's context, while the rise in regional sectarianism has muddied the Islamic Revolution's pan-Islamic layer, there are far more similarities than differences between the ideology of the Iranian regime and that of Sunni political Islamist movements ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to ISIS. The Sunni pan-Islamist ambition to create a caliphate—such as ISIS's so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq—resonates with the Shia pan-Islamist claim for widespread Islamic Revolution. By achieving an Islamic

38 Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech at the opening ceremony of the 21st Islamic Conference of Islamic Unity, Tehran, Iran, 4 May 2008, <https://bit.ly/2CUK7UU>

39 Hassan Rouhani, speech at the Islamic Unity Conference, Tehran, Iran, 24 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2DMZ7WL>.

40 Javad Zarif, speech to the ambassadors of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Istanbul, Turkey, 18 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/2MM9nkJ>.

41 Javad Zarif, speech to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, 1 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/2G19gRT>.

Revolution in Iran, Khomeini in effect transformed this pan-Islamic aspiration into reality. In doing so, the ayatollah sought to position Iran as the vanguard of pan-Islamism and an Islamic order. As Khomeini once said, “Islam is a sacred trust from God to ourselves and the Iranian nation must grow in power and resolution until it has vouchsafed Islam to the entire world.”⁴²

From this perspective, the creation of an Islamic regime in Iran is not an end in itself. It is a means to achieving an Islamic order in the region. Khomeini sought to trigger an era of Islamic struggle that would overturn the status quo in favour of an Islamic regional order with Iran at its core. One hundred per cent of speeches analysed referred to the 1979 revolution as an “Islamic” rather than an “Iranian” revolution. Indeed, a point often overlooked or misunderstood in the West is that for Iran’s leaders, the creation of an Islamic state in Iran was a first step to establishing a broader pan-Islamic order. The Iranian state serves the revolution, not the other way around.

Exporting the Revolution

To achieve this pan-Islamic aspiration, in many ways similar to the ambitions of Sunni Islamist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and ISIS for an Islamic caliphate, the Iranian revolutionaries incorporated the notion of exporting the Islamic revolution into the new state’s constitution. As Khomeini put it,

*We should set aside the thought that we do not export our revolution, because Islam does not regard various Islamic countries differently.*⁴³

The preamble to the constitution explicitly underlines Iran’s commitment to exporting the Islamic Revolution overseas, stating, “the Constitution provides the necessary basis for ensuring the continuation of the Revolution at home and abroad”. According to article 154, Iran “supports the just struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors in every corner of the globe”, which effectively legitimises Iran’s influence beyond its borders.⁴⁴In this

⁴² Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, speech cited in Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (London: Macmillan, 2006), 19.

⁴³ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, speech on eve of the Iranian New Year, Tehran, Iran, 21 March 1980, <https://bit.ly/2t9fM0I>.

⁴⁴ “Iran’s Constitution”, *Constitute Project*.

view, Iran actively encouraged all Muslims to rise against their corrupt, pro-Western regimes. This notion was particularly aimed at Saudi Arabia's leaders, to whom Khomeini referred as illegitimate disbelievers who had usurped the holy mosque of Mecca. It is under the premise of supporting the 'oppressed' that Iran justifies its involvement in regional conflicts and support for Islamist proxy groups, such as in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

In 1980, one year after the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini announced, "We should try hard to export our revolution to the world, and should set aside the thought that we do not export our revolution, because Islam does not regard various Islamic countries differently and is the supporter of all the oppressed people of the world."⁴⁵

However, while conventional Western opinion often associates support for the concept of exporting the revolution and malign activities with hard-line individuals in the Iranian regime, those seen as moderates also endorse this policy. In a 2014 speech less than a month after Iran received some preliminary sanctions relief following the signing of an interim nuclear agreement with Western powers, Rouhani said that Iran had "helped the oppressed and will continue to help the oppressed" and stated that Tehran was winning the wars in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan and Gaza.⁴⁶

Similarly, in a speech to the Iranian parliament in 2017, two years after the nuclear deal was signed, Zarif underlined that "supporting the oppressed against the oppressors" was the "secret of the authority and influence of this country [Iran]."⁴⁷

Such statements, coupled with Iran's actions in the region under Rouhani's presidency, underline the fact that support for Iran's regional activities—which include arming, financing and training Islamist proxy groups—is universally recognised across the political spectrum of the Iranian regime.

45 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, speech on eve of the Iranian New Year, Tehran, Iran, 21 March 1980, <https://bit.ly/2t9fM0I>

46 Hassan Rouhani, speech to the ceremony of the parade of the armed forces at the beginning of the Holy Defence Week, Tehran, Iran, 22 September 2014, <http://www.president.ir/fa/81060>.

47 Javad Zarif, speech to the Iranian Parliament, Tehran, Iran, 16 August 2017, <http://mfa.ir/index.aspx?pageid=176&newsview=470622>.

No Change in Stance After the Nuclear Deal

This worldview in part made the failure of the 2015 nuclear agreement (formally the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) inevitable. Western officials had hoped sanctions relief would alter Tehran's regional approach and lead to a softening of its regional policy. The theory behind this hope stemmed from a belief that signing the JCPOA would embolden figures the West saw as moderates, such as Rouhani, at the expense of hardliners. This, Westerners believed, would result in Iran moderating its regional behaviour. But this did not occur. According to our data, neither the hardliners nor the so-called moderates changed their stance. Data analysed for this report show their position did not alter in relation to their pan-Islamist aspirations to export the revolution after the 2015 nuclear agreement.

Between 2014 and 2018, 100 per cent of Khamenei's speeches cited such pan-Islamist objectives, with specific reference to Iran's continual support for the 'oppressed'.⁴⁸ In a speech delivered just 13 days after the 2015 nuclear deal was signed, Khamenei explicitly underlined that regardless of the agreement, the Iranian regime would never alter its regional policy:

*Whether this document [the JCPOA] is ratified or not, we will not we will not abandon our regional friends: the oppressed people of Palestine, the oppressed people of Yemen, the people and government of Syria, the people and government of Iraq, the oppressed people of Bahrain and the sincere mujahids of the Resistance in Lebanon [Hizbullah] and Palestine [Hamas and Islamic Jihad]. These people will always enjoy our support.*⁴⁹

Crucially, Rouhani's stance on Iran's regional approach was also unchanged, despite the signing of the JCPOA. Sixty per cent of Rouhani's speeches from 2014 to 2018 contained pan-Islamist references that highlight his support for Iran's continued support for Islamist militias in the region (see figure 5). In a speech in 2014,

⁴⁸ The timeframe analysed starts with 2014 because this was the year when Iran received some sanctions relief as part of the interim agreement. The nuclear deal was signed in 2015.

⁴⁹ Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, second sermon speech at Eid ul-Fitr Prayers, Tehran, Iran, 18 July 2015, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/2102/Leader-s-sermons-at-Eid-ul-Fitr-prayers>.

after the interim nuclear agreement and during ongoing negotiations on the final accord, Rouhani asserted,

*We are all united and coherent in seeking to flourish the flag of tawhid [monotheism in Islam], Islam, independence and resistance throughout the Islamic world and against the oppressors, and we have no doubt that if we continue to stand, the ultimate victory will be ours.*⁵⁰

Similarly, in a 2016 speech, after all nuclear-related sanctions on Iran had been lifted, Rouhani announced that “we are proud that under the guidance of the Supreme Leader, we have and always will defend the oppressed”.⁵¹

Such assertions are more than empty rhetoric. This is a major challenge for policymakers not only in relation to the nuclear agreement but also, significantly, for peace and stability in the Middle East. Since the nuclear deal was signed, Tehran has become more involved in the region and continues to support proxy groups. In Syria alone, it is estimated that the regime has spent at least \$30 billion since the start of the conflict in 2011 and now spends at least \$6 billion every year.⁵² As the speech analysis reveals, Tehran’s moderates are just as supportive as the hardliners of Iran’s regional involvement and support for proxy groups, a concept at the heart of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution.

Like antipathy towards Israel, the ideological commitment to pan-Islamism has served Iran’s regional interests. Through positioning itself as the vanguard of Islamic causes, particularly on the issue of Palestine, Iran has sought to overcome its non-Arab, non-Sunni identity and end its strategic loneliness. Pan-Islamism has also enabled Tehran to tap into the Arab street for support. This has enabled Tehran to position itself as the voice of Muslims in the face of what Iran portrays as inept, autocratic Sunni Arab monarchies in

50 Hassan Rouhani, speech to the ceremony of the parade of the armed forces at the beginning of the Holy Defence Week, Tehran, Iran, 12 September 2014, <http://www.president.ir/fa/81060>.

51 Hassan Rouhani, speech to regime officials and the supreme leader, Tehran, Iran, 5 May 2016, <http://www.president.ir/fa/93392>.

52 Daragahi, “Iran Wants to Stay in Syria Forever”; “Military Leaders Respond To Criticisms Of Syrian War Cost”, Radio Farda, 19 February 2018, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-military-leaders-syria-war-cost/29048397.html>.

the region, in particular Saudi Arabia. In a speech in 2018, Rouhani announced,

*We are ready with all our might to defend the interests of the people of Saudi Arabia against terrorism, the aggressors and the superpowers and just as we went to help the people of Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen, we are prepared to blindly support them.*⁵³

Case Study: The 1979 Siege of the Grand Mosque of Mecca

On 20 November 1979, just ten months after Iran's Islamic Revolution, a group of radical Sunni-Islamist insurgents seized the Grand Mosque of Mecca, in a direct challenge to the House of Saud's leadership of the Holy Land. The seizure was motivated by a desire to depose the House of Saud and restore Islamic rule over the birthplace of the Prophet Mohammad. The group denounced the Saudi clergy's quietism, which the group saw as a betrayal of Islam. Only a return to Islam and the prophet's way of life could save the Holy Land from corruption and Western imperialism.⁵⁴

Although the zealots who seized the Grand Mosque were Sunni rather than Shia, their narrative, which was pan-Islamic, politically activist, anti-monarchist and anti-Western, mirrored that of Khomeini. The Iranian Revolution galvanised a broad spectrum of political Islamists, both Shia and Sunni.

It is important to highlight that the Saudi leadership had initially welcomed the Iranian Revolution, at least on the surface. Soon after the Islamic Republic was established, King Khalid of Saudi Arabia congratulated Khomeini on building a state on the "principles of Islam" and expressed hope that "Islamic solidarity" could bring the two countries closer together.⁵⁵ In truth,

⁵³ Hassan Rouhani, speech at the Islamic Unity Conference, Tehran, Iran, 24 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2DMZ7WL>.

⁵⁴ Michael Axworthy, "Sunni vs Shia: the roots of Islam's civil war", *New Statesman*, 29 August 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/middle-east/2017/08/sunni-vs-shia-roots-islam-s-civil-war>.

⁵⁵ Florence Gaub, "War of words: Saudi Arabia v Iran", European Union Institute for Security Studies, February 2016, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_2_Saudi_Arabia__Iran_01.pdf; Lawrence Rubin, *Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2014), 52.

however, the Saudi rulers feared Khomeini's discourse would spark an Islamic uprising across the Arabian Peninsula. With Khomeini openly calling for the downfall of the House of Saud, using the hajj to stir unrest in the kingdom, the Saudi leadership began to fear that it would suffer the same fate as the shah.

If Saudis had any doubts about the potency of Khomeini's pan-Islamic message, the seizure of the Grand Mosque, Islam's holiest site, put them to rest. The nature of the Islamist threat was real, and the Saudis recognised they had to act fast.

Learning from the shah's mistakes, the Saudi monarchs immediately took measures to embrace Islam more visibly as a means to preserve their kingdom and deter Khomeini's pan-Islamist threat. This meant returning to a strict Islamic and conservative social order. The Saudis also sought to confront Khomeini and his Islamic revolutionary ideology, which was fomenting unrest among the Shia populations of the Arabian Peninsula. To achieve this, the Saudi government ramped up its efforts to promote Wahhabism.⁵⁶ This battle of ideas between Shia and Sunni extremism eventually manifested itself in violent extremism and sectarian bloodshed across the region.

REVOLUTIONARY SHIISM

If Islam is akin to justice for Iran's leaders, then Shiism is the safeguard against injustice. Historically, the fact that Shias had been a marginalised minority struggling against a repressive Sunni caliphate enabled and emboldened Khomeini's oppressed-oppressor narrative. Although the Iranian regime places greater emphasis on pan-Islamism, revolutionary Shiism acts as the credal umbilical cord between Iran and the network of Shia militia groups in the region and beyond.

Revolutionary Shiism refers to a relatively new interpretation of Shia Islam that emerged in the 1960s and was heavily influenced by global anti-colonial movements. This interpretation sought to transform Shia Islam from a religion into a revolutionary ideology

⁵⁶ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 155–157.

centred on resistance against oppression. This Shia historiography focused on Shia warriors and martyrdom rather than scholarly debates and mysticism. The writings of Ali Shariati, who is often referred to as the Islamic revolution's ultimate ideologue, are very important in this context. Shariati, a non-cleric, Western-educated intellectual with strong Marxist leanings, became convinced that only a revolutionary ideology could oust Iran's monarchy and liberate Iranians from the evils of Western imperialism.⁵⁷

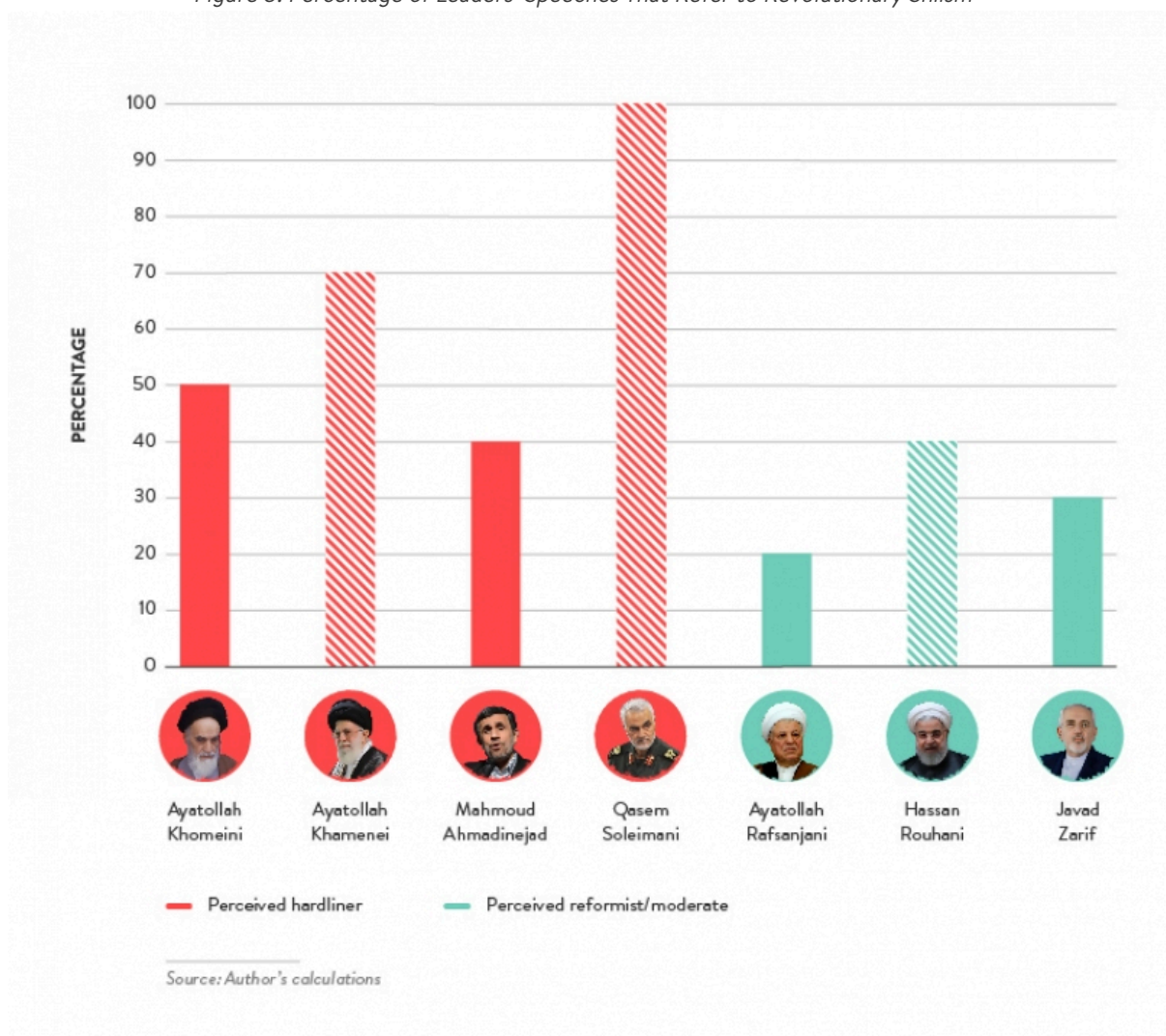
Western policymakers have not paid enough attention to revolutionary Shiism in today's context, with the result that it is less well understood than Sunni extremism. This is in part because since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the international community has turned its attention to Sunni jihadi groups like al-Qaeda. It is vital this changes to allow policymakers to forge the right solutions to today's challenges.

Martyrdom of Imam Hussain

In the speeches analysed, Iranian leaders consistently referred to resistance, martyrdom and liberation. Fifty per cent of the speeches contained references to revolutionary Shiism, and all were framed by a revolutionary Shia narrative (see figure 5).

⁵⁷ Ali Shariati, *Tashayyo*.

Figure 5: Percentage of Leaders' Speeches That Refer to Revolutionary Shiism



At the heart of this narrative lies the story of Imam Hussain's martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala in 680. Imam Hussain, the son of Ali ibn Talib, the first infallible Shia imam, was martyred at Karbala after he and 72 followers rose against the oppressive and morally corrupt Umayyad caliphate of Yazid I. Although Hussain and his followers ultimately lost the battle against Yazid's army, Hussain's courageous resistance and willingness to sacrifice himself against tyranny was enshrined in Shia philosophy. For Shias, Hussain's martyrdom symbolised that justice was greater than life itself. To this day Shias continue to commemorate the Battle of Karbala during the annual Ashura processions, with some Shia men flagellating themselves to commemorate the martyrdom of Hussain.

Since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, Tehran has politicised Imam Hussain's martyrdom, using it to arouse and legitimise resistance against the 'oppressors'—the enemies of the Iranian regime—both inside and outside Iran. Iranian leaders have also framed the story of Hussain's battle in a way that not only glorifies martyrdom but also encourages it under the premise that it is the ultimate reward. Iran's leaders have used the Karbala metaphor to inspire and encourage resistance against the shah in 1979, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980, Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Green Movement riots of 2009 and, more recently, conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

A Network of Shia Militias

One hundred per cent of General Soleimani's sample speeches contained references to revolutionary Shiism. In a 2017 speech, Soleimani called promoting the "culture of sacrifice and martyrdom" a "national duty".⁵⁸ He went on to say that the nation had a responsibility to "plant the seeds of sacrifice" everywhere, particularly among Iranian youth.

Given Soleimani's role as commander of the IRGC Quds Force, Iran's extraterritorial military, it is perhaps expected that revolutionary Shiism features in his speeches. His men are the individuals who carry out the necessary 'martyrdom' for the Iranian regime. In every speech analysed, Soleimani drew parallels between the Iranian fighters killed in Iraq and Syria and the martyrdoms of the infallible Shia imams, in particular Hussain's at Karbala. In a speech in 2016, Soleimani explicitly underlined that "Karbala and Ashura have significant effects on the [Shia battle] fronts of Iraq and Syria".⁵⁹ In another speech in 2015, he reassured his audience, which mainly comprised Iranian military personnel fighting in Syria (known as the "defenders of the Holy Shrines"), that they were following the path of Imam Ali, that "God likes those who chose the path of jihad" and that "martyrdom is the highest order" of God.⁶⁰

58 General Qasem Soleimani, speech in Langarud, Iran, 21 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2MK1Pit>.

59 General Qasem Soleimani, speech on the first anniversary of the martyrdom of Commander Hamedani, 5 October 2016, <https://bit.ly/2WxzNv9>.

60 General Qasem Soleimani, speech to the Defenders of the Holy Shrine, 2 November 2015, <https://bit.ly/2DN08OH>.

While revolutionary Shiism understandably features more frequently in the discourse of the Iranian military than in that of other figures, it is central to the worldview and rhetoric of Iran's political leaders across the spectrum. References to this theme feature in 40 per cent of both Ahmadinejad's and Rouhani's sample of speeches. Like hard-line figures in the regime, those seen by the West as moderate, such as Rafsanjani and Rouhani, also politicise the story of Karbala as a means of glorifying martyrdom and resistance, with Rouhani even claiming "we [Iranians] learnt martyrdom from Imam Hussein".⁶¹

Since 1979, revolutionary Shiism has linked Tehran with a network of Shia militia groups in the region. These include Hizbullah in Lebanon, the Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, the Shia militias in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen. Soleimani underlined this connection in a speech delivered to military personnel in 2016. He stated that in the early years of the revolution, the "culture of [Imam] Hussein" had only "one branch", which was Iran, but that today this culture has "other branches, with the Ansurallah (Houthis) in Yemen and the Hashd al-Shaabi following Hussein's path".⁶² Tehran's influence extends globally, with Iran playing a role in reported terrorist attacks as far afield as Bulgaria, Argentina and Thailand.⁶³

This aspect of the regime's ideology specifically taps into Islam's sectarian divide as a means of galvanising Shia populations across the Muslim world under the flag of the Islamic revolution. It stems from a belief that Shiism is on the 'right side' of Islam's confessional divide. It is also directly connected to *velayat-e faqih* in that it seeks to position Khamenei as the supreme guide for all Shia Muslims.

Rouhani, Soleimani and Zarif all use sectarian terminology to describe the Sunni groups the regime and its proxies are fighting in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. All three leaders make reference to the *takfiris*—a sectarian term used by Muslims to declare other Muslims

61 Hassan Rouhani, speech at the Presidential Endorsement Ceremony, Tehran, Iran, 3 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/2DgLoWu>.

62 General Qasem Soleimani, speech on the first anniversary of the martyrdom of Commander Hamedani, 5 October 2016, <https://bit.ly/2WxzNv9>.

63 Matthew Levitt, "Hizballah and the Qods Force in Iran's Shadow War with the West", policy focus 123, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus123.pdf>.

apostates—whom Iran is fighting overseas. The term *takfiri* features in 30 per cent of Zarif’s sample of speeches. In a speech in 2017, the foreign minister implicitly attacked Saudi Arabia’s strand of Islam, branding it “*takfiri* ideology” that has “nothing to do with Islam” and is based on “separation, hatred and elimination”.⁶⁴

In a similar vein, Soleimani not only uses the term *takfiri* to describe the forces his men are fighting, but in a 2016 speech he also openly stated, “We are proud of being a Shia whose herd is above all religions.”⁶⁵ The regime’s use of such terminology is significant as it seeks to justify its military actions through a religious lens that is entirely sectarian, claiming religious superiority just as ISIS does in relation to the Shias. The fact that Soleimani, the IRGC commander in charge of Iran’s network of Shia proxies in the region, uses sectarian terms when talking to Iranian and Shia personnel indicates that the Shia Islamist groups in the region are fighting in part on sectarian terms.

Such divisive connotations feed into sectarianism between Sunnis and Shias. This is destabilising for the Middle East and beyond. Data from our Institute’s 2017 Global Extremism Monitor revealed that sectarianism mobilises the deadliest and most active Islamist extremist groups.⁶⁶ Sectarianism is a key part of the worldviews of both Shia and Sunni Islamists, even if this may seem to contradict the pan-Islamist element of their ideologies.

Case Study: Religious Nationalism

While the ideology of the Islamic Revolution is inherently Islamist, Iran’s revolutionary leaders understood the power of nationalism to further their cause. Therefore after 1979, Iran’s leaders set out to synthesise Iranian identity with Islam to evoke religious nationalist sentiments. This meant reviving the link between Shiism and Iranian identity, which had significantly eroded as a result of the Pahlavi dynasty’s emphasis on Iran’s pre-Islamic identity.

64 Javad Zarif, speech at the Munich Security Conference, Munich, Germany, 19 February 2017, <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82436959>.

65 General Qasem Soleimani, speech on the first anniversary of the martyrdom of Commander Hamedani, 5 October 2016, <https://bit.ly/2WxzNv9>

66 “Global Extremism Monitor 2017”, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

Of all the Iranian regime figures analysed, Khomeini speaks about this the most, with 70 per cent of his speeches focusing on the topic. Khomeini and his followers recognised that by evoking nationalist sentiments under a religious veneer, they could further advance their ideological potential. Although Khomeini had rejected what he referred to as “nation worshipping” and dismissed the notion of the nation-state as an unholy creation of “weak human minds”, he understood the asset that nationalism was to realise his vision.⁶⁷

The use of religious nationalism became a highly effective tool for Khomeini to rally the nation behind the flag. More importantly, religious nationalism has enabled the Iranian regime to placate the population through years of self-damaging policies. Ahmadinejad’s use of religious nationalism on Iran’s nuclear defiance is the perfect example.

While the religious-nationalist narrative has been an effective driver for the Iranian regime, the marriage between Islamism and nationalism has not been without its difficulties. There is an underlying tension between the ideology of the Islamic revolution and Iran’s pre-1979 monarchical history. To overcome this, the ruling establishment has sought to cleanse Iran of its pre-Islamic and imperial past. Just as ISIS sought to destroy the region’s pre-Islamic archaeological sites with bulldozers, in the early years of the revolution, Iran’s Islamists brought bulldozers to the Tomb of Cyrus and the ancient remains of Persepolis in attempt to erase the country’s pre-Islamic culture. But they were stopped in their tracks by the Iranian population. More recently, the Iranian regime has banned people from celebrating the annual commemoration of Cyrus the Great and arrested scores for gathering around the Tomb of Cyrus in the ancient city of Pasargadae. In many ways, for the regime, Iran’s history begins in 1979.

Given the secular nature of Persian nationalism, ordinary Iranians often invoke such sentiments as a means of rejecting the worldview espoused by the clergy, which identifies Iran’s interests as identical to those of the ummah. Today, Persian

⁶⁷ Ruhollah Khomeini, *Kashf-e Asrar (Unveiling of Secrets)* (Tehran, 1943), 45.

nationalism espouses an 'Iran first' policy, which, since 1979, has been particularly critical of Iran's Islamic revolutionary foreign policy. Accordingly, Iran's ruling clerical establishment increasingly views Persian nationalism as a threat rather than a benefit.

INJUSTICE

Having explored the themes that make up the justice component of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution, this report now dissects the key themes that come under injustice. The concepts of imperialism and the West, antipathy towards the United States, and the eradication of Zionism and Israel encompass the areas where the worldview of the revolution assigns blame for oppression. In this ideological framework, the West—particularly the US and Israel, identified from the outset as enemies—is the root of the problems faced by Iran and the Muslim world.

IMPERIALISM AND THE WEST

Just as the ideology of the Islamic Revolution regards Islam as a solution, so it views imperialism and the West as the root of all the Muslim world's problems. Iran's leaders see imperialism and the West as two sides of the same coin and as the source of oppression against Islam. This worldview propagates the idea of a clash of civilisations between Islam and the West, with Western values culturally and morally incompatible with Islam. It also draws a connection between unjust rule and what it regards as colonial invasion. From this perspective, the West's relationship with Muslims will always be based on exploitation.

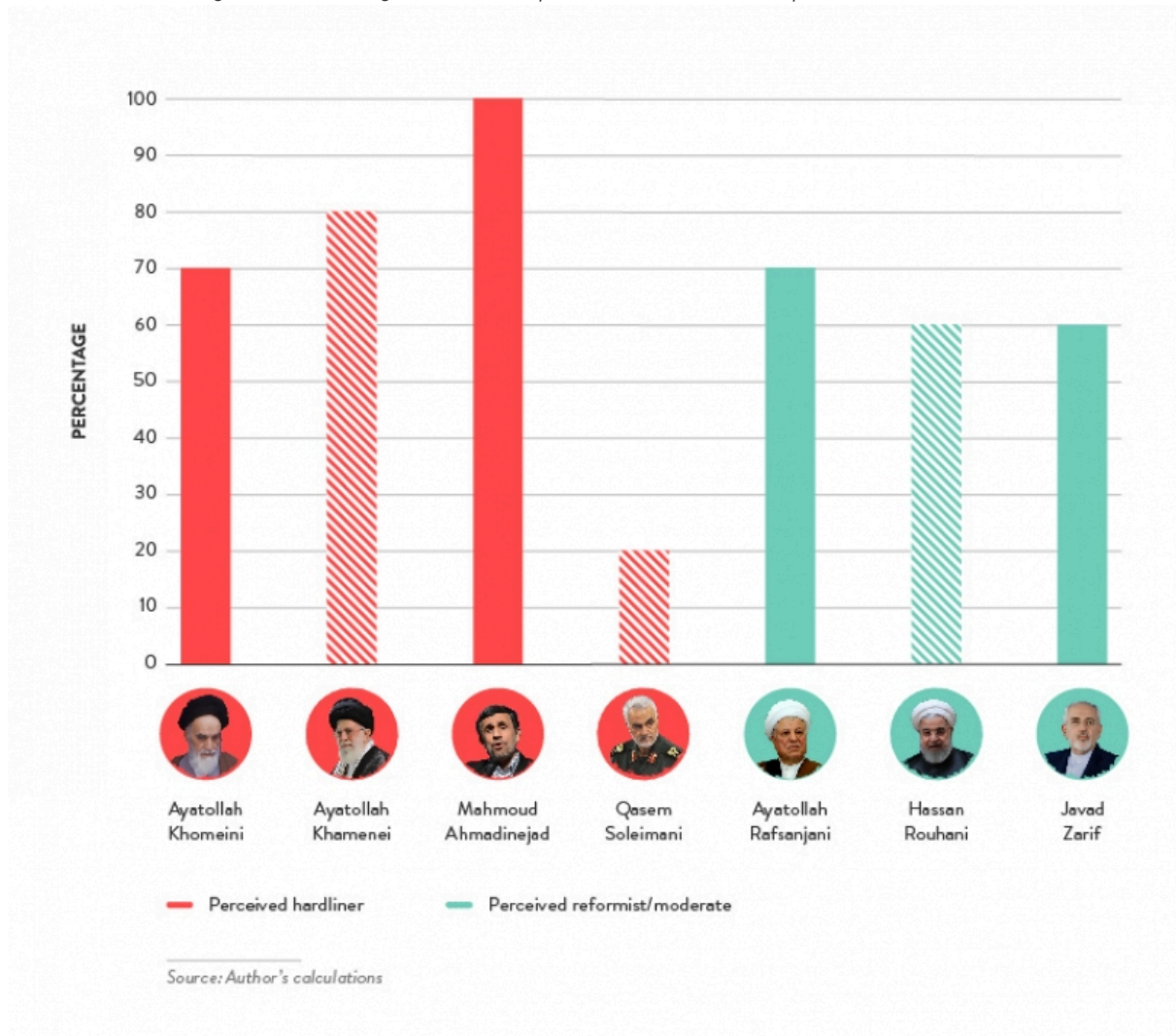
The centrality of this theme to the ideology of the state is underscored by the fact it is enshrined in the constitution. Article 3(5) of the constitution states that “the complete elimination of imperialism and the prevention of foreign influence” is one of the objectives of the regime.⁶⁸

Sixty-six per cent of the speeches by key Iranian leaders since 1979 contain rhetoric that is both against imperialism and critical of the West. Of the sample, the leader who focused most on these themes was Ahmadinejad, president from 2005 to 2013. The ultra-hardliner, whose open hostility to the West and Israel made him infamous on the world stage, mentioned these themes in 100 per cent of his speeches (see figure 6). By contrast, they feature in 60 per cent of Rouhani's speeches. The rate at which Rouhani mentions

68 “Iran's Constitution”, Constitute Project.

these two themes may be lower, but analysis shows his position on these themes is aligned with Ahmadinejad's and with the ideology of the revolution.

Figure 6: Percentage of Leaders' Speeches That Refer to Imperialism and the West



The importance of anti-imperialist and anti-Western sentiment to the regime's ideology is further underlined by the fact it featured in 70 per cent of the speeches by the founding father of Iran's Islamic Revolution. Throughout these speeches, Khomeini's narrative made consistent references to Iran's exploitation by imperial powers and the "shameful treaties" they imposed on the country.⁶⁹ He portrayed a sense of Iran's victimisation and depicted pro-Western governments, particularly the former shah of Iran, as imperialist

⁶⁹ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, speech at Behesht Zahra, Tehran, Iran, 1 February 1979, <https://bit.ly/2sWmYx0>.

stooges. Khomeini referred to the shah as being “installed by foreign powers” and claimed his modernisation plans confirmed Iran was under the “dominance of colonialism”.⁷⁰

Anti-imperialist and anti-Western sentiments play on populist notions that establish a binary of us vs. them. This creates a sense of victimisation that creates community around a common enemy. At the time of the revolution, this ‘enemy abroad’ narrative was fundamental for gaining support from a broad spectrum of political stances, but over the years its effectiveness has waned. Nevertheless, it remains a key part of the regime’s ideology, as manifested by the speeches analysed.

A Marxist Reading of Iranian History

The anti-imperialist and anti-Western vision appropriated by Khomeini shared as much with secular leftist ideologies as with Islam. Like other Iranian officials, Khomeini drew on a Marxist, post-colonial reading of Iranian history, with frequent references to the enslavement of Islam and Iran at the hands of the exploitative imperial powers, particularly the West. This vision was heavily influenced by Marxist thought and the surge in protest movements in developing countries after the Second World War. Events such as the Suez Crisis (1956), the Algerian war of independence (1954–1962) and the Cuban Revolution (1959) were highly significant in this regard.

By drawing on Iran’s history through a Marxist, post-colonial lens, Khomeini sought to identify Iran as part of the subjugated third world that was fighting for its independence from the oppressive imperial forces of the West. This historical timeline begins in the 19th century and pinpoints key events—such as the Tobacco Concessions of 1890, which granted British control over the growth and sale of Persian tobacco; the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941; and the 1953 US-backed Iranian coup d’état—as evidence of the West’s imperial abuse of Iran. In essence, this worldview blames the West not only for all of Iran’s problems but also for those of the entire Muslim world.

⁷⁰ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, speech at the Review Conference of US Intervention in Iran, Tehran, Iran, 22 May 1980, <https://bit.ly/2RwVkjX>; Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, speech at Behesht Zahra, Tehran, Iran, 1 February 1979, <https://bit.ly/2sWmYx0>.

At the same time, this historical account depicts the clergy as defenders of Iran, Islam and the people. The role the clergy played in opposing the creation of parliamentary democracy in 1906, or in aiding Anglo-American forces to bring down the government of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in the 1953 coup, is conveniently absent from the official history.⁷¹

Westoxification

It is important to highlight that anti-Western and anti-imperialist sentiment predates the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In many ways, Khomeini was himself a product of this time and the discourse that brought it about.

Undoubtedly, the works of leftist Iranian intellectuals—most notably Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati—shaped the Islamic Revolution’s radical antipathy towards imperialism and the West.⁷² A leftist scholar and former member of Iran’s communist Tudeh Party, Al-e Ahmad claimed that the West was intoxicating and eradicating Iran’s society and sovereignty through cultural hegemony—a process he referred to as *gharbzadegi* (Westoxification). He argued that Westoxification was akin to an invisible disease that had impaired Iranian and Muslim populations’ consciousness and their ability to detect Western political domination and exploitation.

Westoxification became an increasingly popular concept among Iranian dissident clerics who would later topple the shah in 1979. Al-e Ahmad’s thesis and the idea of impure Western values became a prominent part of Khomeini’s political language. As an example, in a speech on his return to Iran on 1 February 1979, the ayatollah berated the shah for the Westoxified, un-Islamic society he had created. “This man”, Khomeini announced, “established centres of prostitution; the television is a centre of prostitution; most of the radio stations are centres of prostitution.”⁷³

71 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 30.

72 Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam & Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran*: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 167–188.

73 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, speech at Behesht Zahra, Tehran, Iran, 1 February 1979, <https://bit.ly/2sWmYx0>.

The founding father of the Islamic Revolution applied *gharbzadegi* to berate those who had accommodated the West and, in doing so, had betrayed Islam, including the shah and the Gulf monarchs. As Khomeini asserted,

*The poisonous culture of imperialism [is] penetrating to the depths of towns and villages throughout the Muslim world, displacing the culture of the Quran, recruiting our youth en masse to the service of foreigners and imperialists.*⁷⁴

Khomeini's narrative suggests there is an irreconcilable clash of civilisations with the West and that the Iranian people must unite against it. Khomeini made antithetical assertions about imperialism and the West in 70 per cent of his sample of speeches. Khomeini did so in 80 per cent of his. This indicates that such a sentiment has been a consistent and enduring feature in the worldview of Iran's highest echelons of power since 1979.

Hostility towards what the Iranian regime perceives as the arrogant powers is not restricted to ideologues in the system. Anti-imperialist and anti-Western references are also noticeably present among so-called reformist figures of the Islamic Republic, such as Rouhani and Rafsanjani. Although these leaders are often portrayed in the West as belonging to a more moderate political camp than Khomeini, anti-imperialist and anti-Western themes featured in 70 per cent of Rafsanjani's speeches analysed. In one speech, he referred to the Iranian liberals during the revolution as being "Westoxified" and "infected by the West centric lens".⁷⁵

Analysis of Rouhani's and Zarif's speeches from 2014 to 2018 highlights that the 2015 Iran nuclear deal did little to alter their anti-imperialist and anti-Western rhetoric. During this period, 80 per cent of Rouhani's speeches contained references that were antithetical towards imperialism and the West. For example, in a speech in 2014—the year Iran received sanctions relief as part of the interim nuclear deal—Rouhani asserted that the West profited

⁷⁴ "Message to the Pilgrims", message sent to Iranian pilgrims on hajj in Saudi Arabia from Khomeini in exile in Najaf, 6 February 1971, in Imam Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (1981), 195.

⁷⁵ Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech in Tehran, Iran, 4 November 1986, <https://bit.ly/2RxSuvC>.

from “the blood of other nations”.⁷⁶ Similarly, in a 2018 speech, Rouhani spoke of the imperialist, bullying nature of the West, claiming that the West believed its “access to more superior, more deadly and destructive weaponry” gave it the right to rule over others. Iran’s differences with the West, he added, had been “long-term, over the course of centuries”, but the regime’s position had always been rooted in “justice, fairness and the respect for the rights of all”.⁷⁷

Likewise, from 2014 to 2018, 80 per cent of Zarif’s speeches analysed contained material that was hostile towards imperialism and the West. In a speech in 2014, when Zarif was negotiating the nuclear deal, the Iranian foreign minister claimed the West had been intent on spreading “Islamophobia and Iranophobia”, but that the nuclear negotiations proved they had been “defeated”.⁷⁸ In another speech in February 2017, the minister told his audience that for Iran and the Middle East, “blaming the West as the main culprit for all our problems is very simple”.⁷⁹

This research shows that although Rouhani and Zarif were willing to negotiate with the five permanent United Nations (UN) Security Council members plus Germany (P5+1) and the European Union (EU), at home their position towards the West did not shift—certainly not when it came to what they said in public. Antipathy towards the West might have been expected after US President Donald Trump pulled out of the agreement in May 2018, but it was not a new feature of Rouhani’s discourse. Even while his government was negotiating the deal, he was repeating the same positions at home.

The data indicate that figures like Rouhani peddle similar ideology to that of Khomeini, Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. This reveals that figures seen as moderates compared with their predecessors are closer to the ideology of the revolution than Western policymakers

76 Hassah Rouhani, <http://www.president.ir/fa/81060>.

77 Hassan Rouhani, speech at the Islamic Unity Conference, Tehran, Iran, 24 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2DMZ7WL>.

78 Javad Zarif, speech at the Nuclear Diplomacy Conference, Tehran, Iran, 2 December 2014, <https://bit.ly/2G3dmsL>.

79 Javad Zarif, speech at the Munich Security Conference, Munich, Germany, 19 February 2017, <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82436959>.

appreciate. It also points to the fact that political language in Iran is virtually inseparable from the revolution's worldview.

Case Study: Russian-Iranian Relations

While the Islamic Revolution's ideology claims to be anti-imperialist, there is little doubt that what it frames as anti-imperialist is specifically skewed towards the West. Iran's relationship with Russia, which has significantly improved in the past 40 years to the point of alliance, is perhaps the greatest testimony of this.

The Iranian regime often justifies its anti-Western posture through a historical narrative that portrays Iran as a victim of imperialism and colonial exploitation. Historical events such as the 1872 Reuter concession, a contract between a British banker and the king of Persia; the 1892 Tobacco Revolt, a protest against a tobacco concession granted by Persia to the UK; and the 1953 US-backed coup d'état have become part of the Islamic Republic's discourse. The regime has deployed this discourse as a means of cultivating anti-Western sentiment, as well as providing justification for the Islamic Republic's hostility towards the West, the US in particular.

Yet a point often overlooked is that Russia has, historically speaking, exploited and violated Iranian sovereignty. The Treaties of Gulistan and Turkmenchay, in the early 19th century, were perhaps the most humiliating and greatest foreign impositions on Iran (or Persia, as it then was). In both instances, Russia conquered Persian territory in the north, and the Persian monarch was forced to concede significant land to the Russian Empire, including all its Caucasian territories. More recently, the Soviet Union was one of Saddam Hussein's largest arms suppliers during the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War, a fact that Iranian officials have deliberately overlooked despite their condemnation of Western support for Saddam during the eight-year conflict.

Yet, despite Russia's imperial legacy in Iran, Tehran has maintained close and friendly ties with the Russian Federation, particularly since the Syrian Civil War began in 2011. In an unprecedented move, the Iranian leadership allowed the Russian

Air Force to use Iranian airbases to launch airstrikes against forces fighting President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

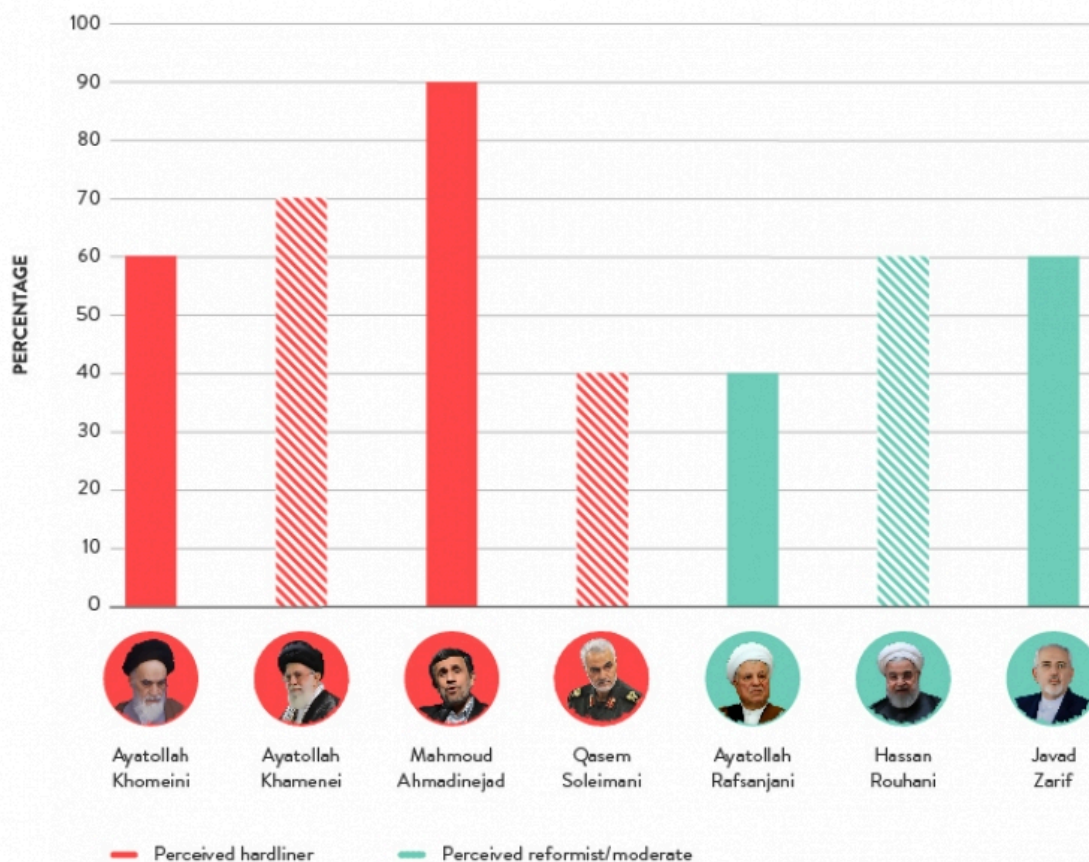
ANTIPATHY TOWARDS THE UNITED STATES

Alongside a general antipathy to the West, specific hostility towards the US has been an enduring feature in Iran's discourse. After Israel (see next section), the US was the foreign country most cited in the sample. Across the entire data set, 60 per cent of speeches contained anti-American themes. The anti-American sentiment in the ideology of the Islamic Revolution is rooted in a belief that the US is the chief representative of the 'oppressors'. As Khomeini underlined, "The oppressors [are] headed by the criminal America and its extremely immoral servant, which is Israel."⁸⁰

Iran's leaders have consistently used hostile language against the US over the course of the Islamic Republic's lifetime (see figure 7). This includes leaders who would be expected to employ such rhetoric, such as Ahmadinejad, who slammed the US in 90 per cent of his speeches analysed. However, it also includes figures whom the West has deemed moderate and more friendly, such as Rafsanjani. A total of 40 per cent of his speeches included such rhetoric. Rafsanjani's figure is relatively low, but the rhetoric is present and his messaging is just as hostile as that of more hard-line figures.

⁸⁰ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, speech to the nation, Qom, Iran, 17 August 1979, <https://bit.ly/2Ge96WK>.

Figure 7: Percentage of Leaders' Speeches That Include Antipathy Towards the United States



Source: Author's calculations

The Great Satan

Forty years on from the revolution, rhetoric from Iran's leaders continues to refer to America as the "Great Satan". Beyond this, the revolutionary slogan "Death to America" has become part and parcel of Iran's regime's political dialect and a significant element of its identity.

For Khomeini and his followers, the "Great Satan" was the root of all evil and corruption across the world. As early as 1963, Khomeini had asserted, "All the troubles of the Iranian and Muslim nations originate from the foreigners, from America." This view saw, and continues to see, America as the master of injustice, a force of imperialism that had subjugated not only Iran but also the entire

Muslim world. Again, the story of the 1953 US-sponsored coup against Mosaddegh is frequently cited by Iran's leaders as evidence of the exploitative nature of the "Great Satan".

This doctrine views American values as incompatible with Islam, and sees America as the greatest threat to Islam's existence. This stance has been adopted by political Islamists across the board—both Shia and Sunni—and has effectively sought to transform Islam from a religion into an anti-Western, anti-American ideology.

Accordingly, Khomeini and his disciples—including Khamenei—have positioned themselves in a way that defines all they do as against the US, despite the two countries having certain economic and political interests in the Middle East that align in theory. For example, both Tehran and Washington had an interest in removing Saddam in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Tehran did cooperate in removing the latter, but in both cases it quickly became apparent that Iranian and US interests diverged when it came to the futures of these two countries.

The data analysed reveal that antipathy towards the US has become a greater focal point for the regime under Khamenei than it was under Khomeini. While 60 per cent of Khomeini's speeches contained anti-US rhetoric, this figure was 70 per cent for Khamenei. Since he assumed office in 1989, Khamenei has been consistent in his attitude towards the "Great Satan", describing the US as Iran's "number one enemy", even during periods of rapprochement such as when the nuclear agreement was concluded in 2015. In a speech on 18 July 2015—less than two weeks after the nuclear deal was signed—Khamenei announced that despite the negotiations and the agreement, the regime's "policy towards the arrogant government of America will not change in any way".⁸¹

The fact that Iran's supreme leader made these comments after two years of negotiations with the US and only 13 days after the agreement was signed underlines that while the deal was signed in good faith, the conciliatory strategy adopted by then US President Barack Obama towards Iran—and the lifting of sanctions on

81 Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, second sermon speech at Eid ul-Fitr Prayers, Tehran, Iran, 18 July 2015, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/2102/Leader-s-sermons-at-Eid-ul-Fitr-prayers>.

Iran—did not alter the regime’s stance towards the US. This example highlights that Tehran’s hostility towards Washington is deep rooted. It is about more than just sanctions, as has often been portrayed since Trump reimposed nuclear-related economic restrictions on Iran.

Pragmatists, not Moderates

Although all the members of the Iranian regime are united against the US and view Washington as Iran’s permanent enemy, not all the leaders in the system are on the same page in terms of tactics towards the “Great Satan”. The more pragmatic camp, which includes Rafsanjani, Rouhani and Zarif, realised the economic damage caused by Iran’s militancy towards the US during the first decade of the Islamic Republic (1979–1989).⁸² For the sake of Iran’s economy, fundamental for the regime’s survival, they prescribed economic cooperation with Washington. The rationale behind this policy was best described by Rafsanjani when he said he was “opposed to completely breaking [Iran’s] ties with the US” because Washington provided Iran with “much needed spare parts and we sell them petrol”.⁸³

Yet, despite advocating engagement, these individuals maintained their ideological hostility towards the US. Hostile references to the US featured in 60 per cent of Rouhani’s speeches, 40 per cent of Rafsanjani’s and 60 per cent of Zarif’s. For example, in a speech in 2018, Rouhani said, “What the United States wants from the region and the world is enslavement, and this is the difference between us and them.”⁸⁴ Figures in the pragmatic camp understand that preserving the regime and its ideology depends in part on pursuing a relationship with their ideological enemy, the US, for economic reasons. Rouhani and Zarif’s approach towards Iran’s nuclear programme, which led to the 2015 agreement, was agreed in this context.

82 This militancy includes the US embassy siege and hostage takings in Lebanon.

83 Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech cited in Hesam Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Evolution and Roles of the Revolutionary Guards* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 175.

84 Hassan Rouhani, speech at the Islamic Unity Conference, Tehran, Iran, 24 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2DMZ7WL>.

The anti-US rhetoric maintained by figures such as Rafsanjani, Rouhani and Zarif indicates that these individuals were never ideologically moderate, even though their actions—such as the negotiation of the nuclear deal—were perceived as moderate by Western counterparts. When it comes to policymaking, this is a vital lesson to learn. What sets these figures apart from the hard-line ideologues of the regime, such as Ahmadinejad, is that they understand that an unhealthy Iranian economy constrains the state’s ability to function. This, in turn, damages the implementation of Iran’s ideological objectives, both at home and overseas, as laid out in the constitution. Rafsanjani best summed up this approach when he said that Iran “should act in a way that could achieve our objectives and maintain our ideals without seriously damaging our country”.⁸⁵ These figures are more pragmatic ideologues than moderates or reformists.

Case Study: The Seizure of the US Embassy and Hostage Crisis

On 4 November 1979, eight months after the overthrow of the shah, a pro-Khomeini militia stormed the US Embassy in Tehran and held 52 American civilians captive for 444 days. The hostage crisis became the longest to date and would consolidate the Islamists’ power in post-revolutionary Iran. Rafsanjani, one of the founding fathers of the Islamic Republic, called the crisis Iran’s “second revolution”.⁸⁶

The hostage crisis was the single most important incident for Khomeini and his Islamist followers, perhaps even more than the 1979 revolution that toppled the shah. As Rafsanjani explained in one of his speeches, the “first step was the removal of the Pahlavi regime”, the “second step was the removal of the foreign masters who were the base of the Pahlavi regime”, namely the US, and the “third step” was the “total exodus of the liberals from the field of politics”.⁸⁷ The hostage crisis, as Rafsanjani states, was instrumental in achieving the latter two steps.

⁸⁵ Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech cited in Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, 177.

⁸⁶ Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech in Tehran, Iran, 4 November 1986, <https://bit.ly/2RxSuvC>.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Having ousted the shah in February 1979, Khomeini and his disciples set out to take over the revolution and impose their Islamist ideology on post-revolutionary Iran. A combination of insurgency and bloodshed enabled the Islamists to do this. With the ayatollah's backing, armed mosque-oriented gangs and the IRGC consolidated Khomeini's hold over the state. There were, of course, barriers to achieving the Islamisation of the state, namely the interim government that was headed by the liberal Mehdi Bazargan. But Khomeini's Islamists were well equipped to overcome such roadblocks.

The siege of the US Embassy on 4 November 1979 was central in this regard. The ayatollah knew that Bazargan and the provisional government would not tolerate the siege and that it would therefore lead to the collapse of the interim government. Beyond this, the fallout over the hostage crisis with Washington would cause irreparable damage and would thus enable the permanent departure of America, the Islamists' ideological enemy, from Iran. When Khomeini refused to condemn the Islamist student who had taken over the embassy, Bazargan resigned.

The siege was the beginning of what many have referred to as the "clerical coup"—the moment when the Khomeinists took over the revolution and began ousting rival groups.⁸⁸ Forty years on from the 1979 revolution, Iran's leaders retain a negative view of the US Embassy in Tehran, which they still refer to as the "Den of Spies".⁸⁹

THE ERADICATION OF ZIONISM AND ISRAEL

Vehement opposition to Zionism and the existence of the State of Israel, which every Iranian leader in the sample has referred to as the "Zionist regime", is at the heart of the Islamic Revolution's ideology. This worldview is committed to eradicating Zionism, based on the view that Israel is an illegitimate, oppressive and usurping

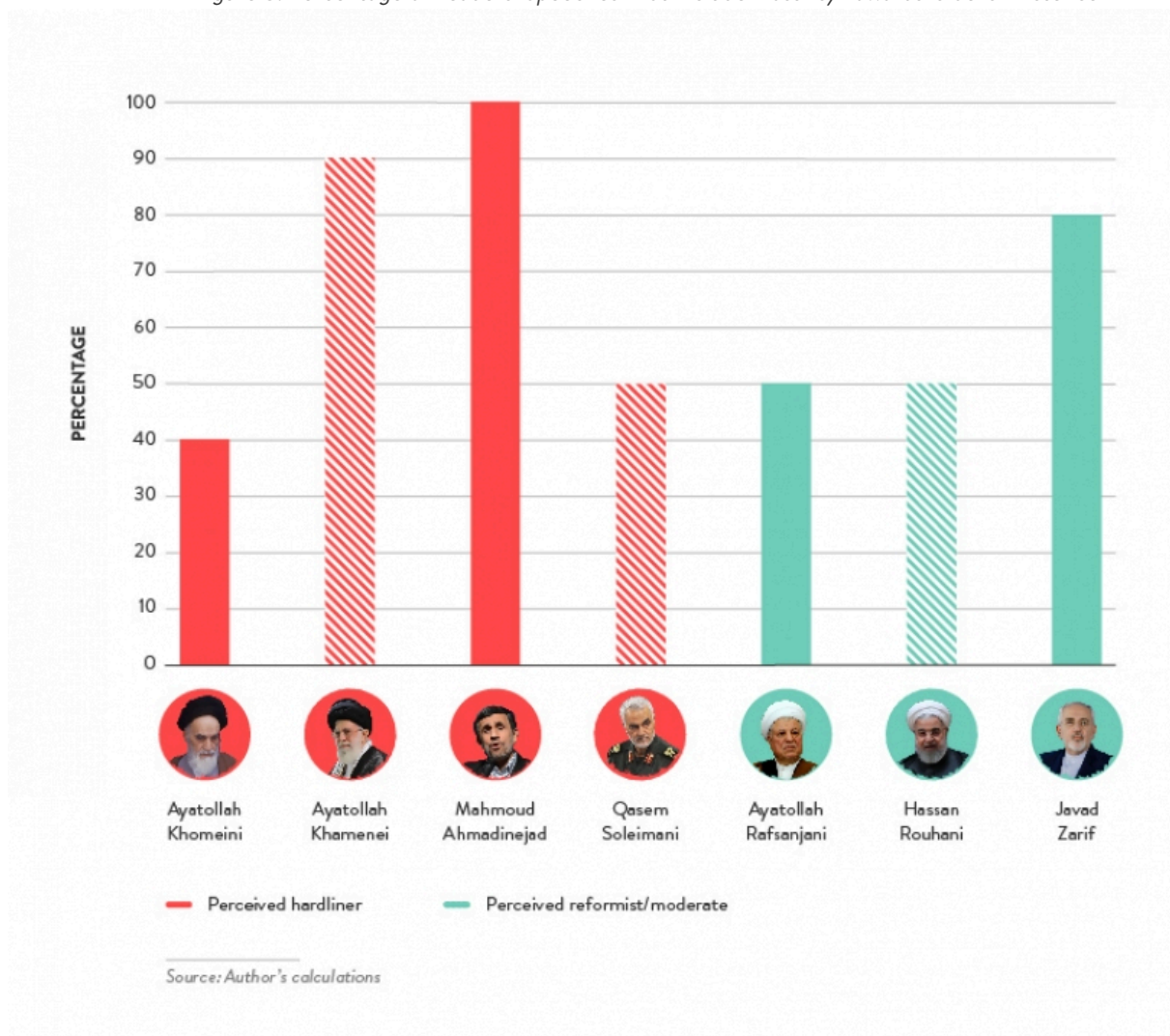
88 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 61

89 Muhammad Lila, "Inside Iran: ABC News Goes Inside The 'Den of Spies'", ABC News, 4 November 2013, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/inside-iran-abc-news-inside-den-spies/story?id=20775863>.

entity that was created in the heartland of the Muslim world to enable the West, the US in particular, to achieve its 'colonial goals' throughout the Islamic world.

Israel is the foreign country that was most discussed in the sample of speeches analysed. Anti-Israel rhetoric featured across 66 per cent of all speeches and was present in the content of all the figures analysed (see figure 8). Given that hostility towards Israel and Zionism is one of the defining ideological principles of the Iranian regime, it is hard to imagine the Islamic Republic softening its stance towards the Jewish state.

Figure 8: Percentage of Leaders' Speeches That Include Hostility Towards Israel's Existence



The Iranian regime's line on Israel goes much further than that of other countries in the Arab and broader Muslim world. There have

been official attempts by some of these states to play a more productive role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the 2002 Saudi-backed Arab Peace Initiative is one example. Meanwhile, Iran has focused solely on funding Islamist terrorist groups that are responsible for the vast majority of attacks on Israel. Even Qatar, which has supported Hamas, is now playing a more productive role in Gaza.

In recent years, in part due to the rise of Iranian influence, many Arab leaders have shifted their views on Israel—even if mostly behind the scenes. But Iran’s vitriolic hatred of Israel has remained unchanged for 40 years. Iran’s continuous refusal to use the name of the country, Israel, is a symbol of Tehran’s rejection of the Jewish state’s right to exist.

Of all the themes discussed in this report, Khamenei has spoken most about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since becoming supreme leader in 1989. He referenced the issue in 90 per cent of his speeches, describing Israel as the “Zionist regime” and a “cancerous tumour that must be eradicated”.⁹⁰ Khamenei’s discourse on Israel is particularly damning. Across his speeches analysed, he describes Israelis as “wolf-like”, “savages” and “creatures who have no human qualities”, as well as referring to the Israeli government as the “terrorist child-killing government of Zionism”.⁹¹

As seen with the two themes of Western imperialism and antipathy towards the US, rhetoric against the existence of Israel is not restricted to individuals in Iran the West commonly identifies as regime hardliners. All of Iran’s presidents, excluding Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), have openly referred to Israel as a tumour in the Middle East. This includes Rouhani: 50 per cent of Rouhani’s speeches are negative towards Israel, which he too refers to as the

90 Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, “Leader’s Speech to Government Officials”, speech to government officials on the occasion of the Prophet’s birthday anniversary, Tehran, Iran, 21 February 2011, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1425/Leader-s-Speech-to-Government-Officials>.

91 Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, sermon during Eid ul-Fitr Prayers, Tehran, Iran, 9 August 2013, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1814/Leader-s-Sermons-during-Eid-ul-Fitr-Prayers>; Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, speech to Basijis and Salehin activists, Iran, 21 November 2012, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1727/Leader-s-Speech-to-Basijis>; Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, second sermon speech at Eid ul-Fitr Prayers, Tehran, Iran, 18 July 2015, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/2102/Leader-s-sermons-at-Eid-ul-Fitr-prayers>.

“Zionist regime”.⁹² As for Khatami, while he did not use this phrase, he did refer to Israel as a “parasite in the heart of the Muslim world”.⁹³

Today, Iranian leaders continue to propagate a religious dimension to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Khomeini and his followers depicted the destruction of Israel and the liberation of Palestine as an Islamic duty, and this has not changed since 1979. Iran’s chief diplomat, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who was key in negotiating the 2015 nuclear deal, has referred to “cooperation among Muslims in confronting Zionism, supporting the [Palestinian] resistance . . . and restoring the issue of Palestine as the first issue the Islamic world” as the “secret of regional unity”.⁹⁴

In fact, 80 per cent of Zarif’s sample of speeches contained anti-Israel discourse, with reference to Israel as an “apartheid”, “wild and outlaw” and “illegitimate” regime.⁹⁵ In a speech in 2014, Iran’s foreign minister even blamed the “Zionists” for “Iranophobia, Islamophobia and anti-Shia” sentiment.⁹⁶

The Islamic Republic is heavily invested in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for both ideological and geopolitical reasons. Ideologically, Tehran views the creation of the State of Israel as the ultimate manifestation of injustice against the Muslim world. Israel joins the dots between the “Great Satan” and Western imperialism. As Rouhani put it in a 2018 speech, “After World War II, a cancerous tumour was formed in the region called the Zionist regime and [the West] tried to secure its interests in the region through this fake regime.”⁹⁷

92 Hassan Rouhani, speech at the Shaheed Chamran Khoei Stadium, 11 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2GhZcEv>; Hassan Rouhani, speech at a meeting with regime officials, 5 May 2016, <http://www.president.ir/fa/93392>

93 Jeffrey Goldberg, “In the Party of God”, *New Yorker*, 14 October 2002, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/10/14/in-the-party-of-god>

94 Javad Zarif, speech to the Iranian parliament, Tehran, Iran, 16 August 2017, <http://mfa.ir/index.aspx?pageid=176&newsview=470622>.

95 Javad Zarif, speech to the ambassadors of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Istanbul, Turkey, 18 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/2MM9nkJ>; Javad Zarif, speech to the Tehran Security Conference, Tehran, Iran, 13 January 2018, <https://bit.ly/2t5prFd>.

96 Javad Zarif, speech at the Nuclear Diplomacy Conference, Tehran, Iran, 2 December 2014, <https://bit.ly/2G3dmsL>.

For Iran's leaders and political Islamists more broadly, Zionism and imperialism were two sides of the same coin. As Khomeini said,

*The superpowers' aim in creating Israel does not end in the occupation of Palestine. They plan, heaven forbid, to extend the fate of Palestine to all Arab countries.*⁹⁸

In turn, one of the utmost objectives of this normative ideology has been the 'liberation' of Palestine, in particular Jerusalem. As Khamenei has contended, "We consider supporting the Palestinians one of our major Islamic duties."⁹⁹

Support for the Palestinian cause has been ingrained in the regime's identity. Testimony of this is the fact that since 1979, the Palestinian keffiyeh scarf has become a sacrosanct symbol of the Islamic Revolution. It is worn by the most devout adherents of the revolution's ideology, most notably Khamenei and the Basij, the regime's paramilitary organisation.

Holocaust Denial

One hundred per cent of Ahmadinejad's sample of speeches contained hostile rhetoric against Israel, which he called the "criminal Zionist regime".¹⁰⁰ Ahmadinejad often invoked anti-Semitic themes to attack the creation of Israel. In 30 per cent of speeches analysed, Ahmadinejad denied the Holocaust, claiming it had been made up as an excuse to occupy Palestinian land. In a 2009 speech, for example, he argued that the Zionists and the West "took advantage of the Holocaust excuse to construct a racist nation [Israel]".¹⁰¹

While much attention been given to Ahmadinejad's stance on Israel, the same has not applied to figures understood as moderate. But the focus on Israel and call for its destruction is universally espoused across the Iranian political establishment. While Rafsanjani

97 Hassan Rouhani, speech at the Islamic Unity Conference, Tehran, Iran, 24 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2DMZ7WL>.

98 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/n18195/Imam_Khomeini_raised_Palestinian_issue_on_international_arena

99 Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/5374/Ayatollah-Khamenei-s-statements-on-U-S-and-Zionist-regime-s>

100 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, speech on the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, Tehran, Iran, 11 February 2010, <http://dolat.ir/detail/186918>.

101 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, speech, 4 May 2009, <https://bit.ly/2SdJP67>

referenced Israel in only 50 per cent of his sample, these references were condemnatory. As a figure seen by the West as the forefather of reformism in the Islamic Republic, Rafsanjani minces no words when speaking about Israel. In fact, he goes further and uses anti-Semitic discourse to attack the Jewish state and explicitly refers to the “Jews” rather than the Zionists or Israelis.¹⁰² In a speech in 2015, Rafsanjani claimed that the creation of the State of Israel had been made possible as the “Jews were a serious group in Europe because they had money, representatives, newspapers and everything”. Rafsanjani added that “typically, they [the Jews] are specialists at collecting money”.¹⁰³ In the same speech, he denied that 6 million Jews had been murdered in the Holocaust.

Since 1979, the Iranian state has played an active role in leading global Holocaust revisionism efforts. Iranian leaders have invited Holocaust deniers to Iran, such as the former head of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, in 2006 and the leader of the religious group Nation of Islam, Louis Farrakhan, in 2018. In 2006, Tehran hosted a two-day conference entitled the “International Conference to Review the Global Vision of the Holocaust”. While this conference appears to have been a one-off event, the regime’s efforts to discount the Holocaust has remained an enduring feature. In 2016, during Rouhani’s presidency, Tehran held its third Holocaust International Cartoon Contest. These examples indicate that the Iranian regime’s ideological commitment to eradicating Israel is deep rooted and inherently anti-Semitic.

IRGC Quds Force

Beyond rhetoric, the regime has taken practical steps towards its ideological commitment against Israel. The IRGC Quds Force was formed in the early 1980s essentially to ‘liberate’ Palestine from the Zionist regime. The force has since helped establish, arm and train Islamist proxy groups in the region that have attacked Israel, such as Hizbullah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. These groups have enabled the Iranian regime to strike Tel Aviv and establish a permanent position on Israel’s borders. Rafsanjani contended in a 2016 speech that the “Zionist regime is extremely weak in terms of

102 .Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech at a roundtable of the editorial board of the Journal of International Studies, Tehran, Iran, 15 April 2015, <https://bit.ly/2G52NWb>.

103 Ibid.

security” because “all the regions of the Zionist settlers are in the range of Palestinian missiles”.¹⁰⁴

More recently, the IRGC’s involvement in the Syrian Civil War has allowed Tehran to open another potential front on the Israeli border. According to reports, the IRGC has established ten military bases in Syria, with two alongside Israel’s northern border.¹⁰⁵ The Israeli military views Iran and Hizbullah’s increasing presence in Syria as the biggest threat to Israel’s security.

Iran’s position is manifested most clearly through these practical military measures but is compounded by the IRGC’s discourse. Anti-Israel references feature in 50 per cent of Soleimani’s speeches. Throughout, he is particularly condemning of the Arab states’ betrayal of Islam through their reconciliation with Israel. In a speech in 2016, he claimed former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat “stabbed the sword into the back of Muslims” by signing the “disgraceful” Camp David Peace Accords with Israel in 1978.¹⁰⁶ Sadat was assassinated in 1980 by Islamist extremists led by Khalid al-Islambouli. Khomeini gave Islambouli the status of a martyr and named a street in Tehran after him following his execution by the Egyptian state in 1982.

Similarly, speaking to military personnel in 2017, Soleimani condemned former Palestinian political leader Yasser Arafat for “putting down the weapon” and pursuing a diplomatic approach with Israel.¹⁰⁷ In the same speech, he added that diplomacy would not work with the Zionists and that “the Palestinian people cannot take Palestine without war and jihad and must sacrifice in this way”.

Arab Street Policy

104 Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech to the Islamic Unity Conference, Tehran, Iran, 4 May 2008, <https://bit.ly/2CUK7UU>.

105 Michael Bachner, “Iran has 10 military bases in Syria, two near Israel border — analyst”, Times of Israel, 19 February 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-has-10-military-bases-in-syria-two-near-israel-border-analyst/>.

106 General Qasem Soleimani, speech on the first anniversary of the martyrdom of Commander Hamedani, 5 October 2016, <https://bit.ly/2WxzNv9>.

107 General Qasem Soleimani, speech in Langarud, Iran, 21 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2MK1Pit> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMNdf_-n-bg.

Geopolitically, enmity towards Israel has enabled Tehran to extend its reach beyond its immediate neighbourhood to areas in which it previously had little influence, such as the Levant and the wider Muslim world. This tactic, which has been dubbed Iran's "Arab street" policy, has been particularly successful in undercutting pro-Western Arab regimes in the Middle East.¹⁰⁸ Tehran's pro-Palestinian posture and animosity towards Israel has bought Iran considerable popularity and influence among Arab populations.

This tactic was perhaps most effectively used by Ahmadinejad. His overt support for Hizbullah during its 2006 war against Israel harnessed significant support for Iran on the Arab street. Opinion polls conducted in Egypt—a Sunni Arab state that has historically had poor relations with Iran—in the wake of the 33-day war placed Ahmadinejad as the second most popular leader among Egyptians.

Iran's antipathy towards Israel goes even beyond opposition to its existence. All the leaders analysed who hold office today—Khamenei, Soleimani, Rouhani and Zarif—claimed ISIS was created by Israel and the West. In a 2016 speech, Khamenei argued that ISIS was the "work of intelligence services – particularly the dangerous hands of American, Zionist and English intelligence services – which have cultivated terrorism".¹⁰⁹ In a speech in 2017, Soleimani referred to ISIS as a "cancerous tumour that was created by America and Israel".¹¹⁰ In the same year, Zarif alluded to how "the Zionists" had "created and supported ISIS".¹¹¹

108 Frederic Wehrey, David E. Thaler, Nora Bensahel, Kim Cragin, Jerrold D. Green, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Nadia Oweidat, Jennifer Li, "Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East", RAND, 2009, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG781.pdf.

109 Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, second sermon at Eid ul-Fitr Prayers, Tehran, Iran, 6 July 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Gan6BB>.

110 General Qasem Soleimani, speech in Langarud, Iran, 21 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2MK1Pit> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMNdf_-n-bg.

111 Javad Zarif, speech at the Nuclear Diplomacy Conference, Tehran, Iran, 2 December 2014, <https://bit.ly/2G3dmsL>.

CONCLUSION

Forty years on from Iran's Islamic Revolution, those holding the reins of power in Iran appear no less ideologically driven. Analysis of speeches by key leaders from 1979 on, and of the country's constitution, shows that the ideas espoused by Iran's founding father, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, continue to feature heavily across political rhetoric. These ideas still drive Tehran's behaviour domestically and abroad.

This analysis has dissected the ideology of the Islamic Revolution and, in doing so, identified seven key themes that make up this worldview. It reveals that those figures seen by the West as moderates in the system, such as Rouhani and Zarif, are much closer to the ideology of the revolution than commonly believed, and that political language in Iran is virtually inseparably from the revolution's worldview. Western policymakers have tended to see such language as less indicative of what government figures believe than what they might say to their Western counterparts. Beyond language, however, over the course of the past four decades, Tehran has been actively implementing its ideological vision both at home and overseas. There is almost no difference between what Iranian leaders preach, as seen in the sample of speeches analysed, and the well-documented actions of the state at home and overseas.

Domestically, since 1979, the clerical establishment has strengthened its grip on power, enforcing a strict Islamic system of governance while hiding under the veneer of meaningless elections. In the region, Iranian forces are present in virtually every conflict in the Middle East, from Yemen to Syria to Israel and Palestine. The IRGC has effectively become a franchise-maker for Islamist extremist groups across the Muslim world that peddle the same ideological views as Tehran. And Iran's leaders continue to call for Israel's destruction while allocating billions of dollars to its proxy groups under the notion of supporting the so-called oppressed.¹¹²

Internationally, despite negotiating a nuclear deal with the US and European powers in 2015, Iran's leaders continue to view the US as the "Great Satan" and the West as an enemy of Islam. An alliance

112 Daragahi, "Iran Wants to Stay in Syria Forever".

with Russia has changed the face of the Middle East and entrenched conflict in Syria. And while Western policymakers have tried to identify moderates in the government they can work with, they have underestimated the centrality of an ideological worldview to state structures and government figures. Our analysis shows that the 2015 nuclear agreement did not alter what Iranian leaders say about the West or the US.

This divisive worldview, which espouses a clash of civilisations between Islam and the West, has had far-reaching consequences beyond Iran's borders. The success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran galvanised both Shia and Sunni fundamentalists and extremist Islamist movements. They sought to emulate Khomeini's success in establishing a state defined by the boundaries of Islam. This analysis found significant overlaps between Iran's worldview and that of Islamist groups worldwide.

While there is a wealth of knowledge about Salafi-jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, little is known about the surge in Shia extremist groups throughout the Islamic world. Little attention is paid to the destabilising effect they have on the region and beyond. Such groups are often described as Iranian proxies without a clear understanding of the extent to which they are aligned with the Iranian regime's ideology. But Tehran puts its money where its mouth is, spending billions on military support for groups like the Houthis via the IRGC.

It is impossible to understand Shia extremism in the Middle East without understanding Iran and its ideology. And without comprehending Shia extremism, policymakers cannot stop the blood spilled by the Islamist extremist movement. This report, which forms part of our Institute's ongoing series on Shia extremism, is a first step to understanding the extent to which the values and principles of Shia nonstate actor groups across the region align with Iran's Islamist ideology.

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

This report is the result of a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of a total of 70 speeches by seven leaders in Iran:

- former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini
- current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei
- IRGC Quds Force Commander Major-General Qasem Soleimani
- former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
- former President Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani
- current President Hassan Rouhani
- current Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif

These leaders were chosen as they cover a significant period of time, from 1979 to 2018, and represent authority, comprising two supreme leaders, an IRGC commander, three presidents and a foreign minister. These individuals also represent a broad ideological spectrum in terms of how they are perceived by the West, from hard-line to moderate.

The seven figures are important in the historical development of Iran's revolution. Khomeini was the figurehead of the Islamic Revolution and Iran's first supreme leader. Khamenei is the second person to take up the mantle of supreme leadership. Both are typically seen by Western interlocutors as representing a hard-line position. Soleimani, commander of the IRGC Quds Force, is associated with Iran's hard-power policy in the region and is also perceived by the West as a hardliner. Ahmadinejad, president from 2005 to 2013, is arguably the figure most associated with the hard-line establishment for a Western audience.

Rafsanjani, one of the founding fathers of the Islamic Republic and Iran's first president (from 1989 to 1997), has often been seen as the forefather of pragmatism and reformism in the Islamic Republic. Rouhani, Iran's incumbent president, is viewed by the West as a moderate in the system, not least because of his engagement over Iran's nuclear programme, which resulted in the 2015 international nuclear agreement. Of all the leaders in the sample, Zarif, Iran's current foreign minister, is perceived to be the most moderate. Zarif led the nuclear negotiations and was regarded

by the West as instrumental in finalising the nuclear accord. Both Rouhani and Zarif were educated in the West.

In the research it was key that the leaders analysed were unequivocally seen as representing the Iranian establishment. This is because the aim was to understand official rhetoric that has been representative of the regime. As an example, Mohammad Khatami, Iran's second president (from 1997 to 2005), and Mir-Hossein Mousavi, a former prime minister (from 1981 to 1989) and leader of Iran's 2009 Green Movement uprising, were not included because today, the West does not perceive their views as representative of the regime. In Iran itself, the regime in no way sees these two figures as officially representative. The former is subject to a ban on public appearances that includes media coverage of him. The latter has been under house arrest since the Green Movement.

The research involved watching recorded speeches in Farsi, as well as reading transcripts in Farsi. This ensured that the speeches were coded accurately. Ten speeches by each leader were coded for the presence of seven themes: Islamic governance, *velayat-e faqih*, pan-Islamism, revolutionary Shiism, anti-Imperialism and antipathy towards West, antipathy towards the US, and the eradication of Zionism and Israel. These themes were then grouped under the two broad categories of justice and injustice. All seven themes are central aspects of the ideology of the Iranian regime. The constitution was analysed in translation.¹¹³

The speeches were intended for both domestic and international audiences. They were all delivered in Farsi, although some have been translated into English since. They included addresses to the military, paramilitary, regime officials, the clergy, parliamentarians, the general population, foreign diplomats, heads of state and representatives of nonstate actors, among other audiences. The speeches took place at locations such as religious congregations, Iran's parliament, military parades and conferences both inside and outside Iran. The speeches varied in length.

There is scope for a broader and more detailed speech analysis to delve further into the themes explored in this report. To conduct

113 All quotations of the constitution throughout the report are taken from "Iran's Constitution", Constitute Project.

further research, a larger sample of speeches by additional Iranian officials could be analysed.

APPENDIX 2: BIOGRAPHIES OF LEADERS ANALYSED

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini

Founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was the leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution that toppled the shah of Iran. Before returning to Iran, Khomeini spent most of his years abroad in exile. It was in exile in Iraq that he published a book entitled *Islamic Government* and formulated his theory of clerical guardianship of the state, *velayat-e faqih*. The ayatollah was known for his anti-Western, anti-Israel views and his call for the creation of an Islamic state that would encompass the entire Muslim world. Khomeini became supreme leader of Iran—the highest-ranking political and religious authority of the nation—a position he held until his death in 1989.

Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei

Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei has been Iran’s supreme leader since 1989. Before succeeding Khomeini as guardian of the revolution, Khamenei served as president of Iran from 1981 to 1989, when the constitution was amended to bolster the supreme leader’s authority and power. He is the second-longest-serving leader in the Middle East. Ideologically, Khamenei is hard line and known for his vehement opposition to the United States and Israel, which he has referred to as a “cancerous tumor that needs to be eradicated”.¹¹⁴

General Qasem Soleimani

General Qasem Soleimani is the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’s Quds Force, the force responsible for Iran’s extraterritorial activities. Soleimani is in charge of Iran’s overseas ventures, which include financing, arming and training Shia Islamist militia groups across the Middle East. Soleimani is ideologically hard line. Many believe the general may have an appetite for entering politics after he steps down from his military position.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

114 Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, “Leader’s Speech to Government Officials”, speech to government officials on the occasion of the Prophet’s birthday anniversary, Tehran, 21 February 2011, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1425/Leader-s-Speech-to-Government-Officials>.

In office from 2005 to 2013, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was Iran's third and most controversial president. Ahmadinejad is known as the most hard-line Iranian figure to assume the presidency. He was best known for his international defiance on Iran's nuclear programme, crushing of the 2009 Green Movement riots and vehement opposition to Israel, with his call to "erase" the Jewish state from the "page of time".¹¹⁵

Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani

Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani was the first president of Iran, serving from 1989 until 1997. He was one of the founding fathers of the Islamic Republic and until his death in 2017 was the second most powerful Iranian political cleric. He was the head of the Assembly of Experts from 2007 until 2011, when he decided not to nominate himself for reappointment. He was also the chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council. Rafsanjani has been described as the forefather of pragmatism in the Iranian regime and the leader of the reformist movement.

Hassan Rouhani

Elected in 2013, Hassan Rouhani is Iran's incumbent president. As a self-proclaimed moderate, Rouhani, a PhD graduate of Glasgow Caledonian University, is perhaps best known for securing the 2015 nuclear agreement with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) and the EU. Before assuming the presidency, Rouhani was the secretary of Iran's national security council, the body that formulates Iranian foreign policy. Ideologically, the West has perceived Rouhani to be part of the moderate political camp in the Islamic Republic and has referred to him as the "diplomat sheikh".¹¹⁶

Mohammad Javad Zarif

Mohammad Javad Zarif, the US-educated Iranian foreign minister, has been Rouhani's chief diplomat since 2013. Zarif is perhaps best known for negotiating the 2015 nuclear deal with Western powers.

¹¹⁵ Ali Ansari, *Iran under Ahmadinejad: The Politics of Confrontation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

¹¹⁶ "Profile: Iran's President Hassan Rouhani", *AlJazeera*, 21 May 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/06/2013616191129402725.html>

He served as Iran's representative to the UN from 2002 to 2007. Nicknamed the "smiling diplomat", Zarif is perhaps the Iranian regime's most polished emissary.¹¹⁷ Of all the leaders in the sample, Zarif, is perceived to be the most moderate. Zarif led the nuclear negotiations and was regarded, by the West, as being instrumental in finalising the JCPOA.

117 Ariane Tabatabai, "The 'Smiling Minister' and the Quds Commander: The Two Faces of Iran", Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 10 April 2015, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/smiling-minister-and-quds-commander-two-faces-iran>

Western policymakers have underestimated Iran's commitment to upholding and exporting 1979's revolutionary ideology. That commitment is held by leaders across the spectrum, from those perceived by the West as hardliners to those seen as moderates.

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