



10 Things you need to know about Iran

Matters have escalated since Saudi Arabia's execution of Nimr al-Nimr on 2 January 2016. In response Iranian officials largely stood by as the Saudi embassy in Tehran was ransacked by hundreds of people. This whole conflagration is being presented by the global media just the latest episode of the Sunni-Shi'ah schism. With this in mind, there are 10 key issues that should be kept in mind, regarding Iran.

1. Iran presented the execution of Nimr al-Nimr as an attack Shi'ah globally, this is why Ayatollah Ali Khamenei highlighted the spilling of his blood will lead to divine revenge. But despite Iran's avowed claims of being an Islamic state based upon Shi'ah fiqh, this is all rhetoric. In practice Islam plays a secondary role in Iran, whilst is nationalist interest on Iran being a power in the region is what primarily drives the countries leadership. Iran like Saudi Arabia uses the veneer of Islam to give itself credibility in the eyes of the Muslims in the region.

2. The 1979 Revolution is usually cited as being an attempt to resurrect a true Islamic government in the Middle East. Despite the revolution being considered an Islamic one, the groups involved were mostly non-Islamic and included communists, academics, leftists, unions and many others who were not looking for an Islamic revolution. Once in power Islam was the last thing on Khomeini's mind, despite much hope for change amongst the people. Ayatollah Khomeini came to symbolise 'change.' What united the people of Iran around the revolution was everyone wanted change, the Shah had not delivered on his promises, and any person could have become the leader, as long as they condemned the Shah. The revolution marked a change from one extreme to another.

3. Once in power, there was very little Islam from Ayatollah Khomeini, despite his volume of books on Wilatul Faqhi. What began as an authentic and anti-dictatorial popular revolution based on a broad coalition of all anti-Shah forces was soon transformed into a power grab. Khomeini's core supporters took positions in important offices whilst many of those who had sacrificed to bring Khomeini to power found they were exiled, imprisoned or side-lined. Khomeini and subsequent clerics created a political framework which has allowed them to dominate Iran and its politics ever since. At the apex of this system is the most powerful individual, the supreme leader, a position that has thus far been held by only two individuals. The first was the founder of the republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, who held the post from 1979 until his death in 1989. He was succeeded by his key aide and a former two-term president, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has been supreme leader for the past two decades and is currently still in authority.

4. Iran and Persia before it have always been influential in the region, just like its history, Iran wants to dominate the region today. This has been outlined by various politicians in Iran. Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, said in 2009: *"Iran is emerging as a regional superpower given the increased role Tehran plays in international affairs."* Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said: *"We are rapidly becoming a superpower. Our strength does not come from military weapons or an economic capability. Our power comes from our capability to influence the hearts and souls of people, and this scares them."* Iran has worked to expand its influence throughout the

Middle East and developed a whole host of strategies to achieve this. Iran established Hezbollah in Lebanon in the early 1980's and continues to extend its support through training and arms. Similarly in Palestine the Iranian regime has armed Hamas. The clerical regime has deepened relations with the Alawwi regime in Syria and is today propping it up, when the people turned against it.

5. Iran uses the Sunni-Shi'ah schism as a pretext to interfere in other nations and has made itself the official protector of the global Shi'ah in order to achieve its aim of dominating the region. Through this strategy, Iran made links with countries with Shi'ah populations such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Afghanistan and the other Gulf states in the Persian Gulf. This is the key strategy Iran uses to deal with Saudi Arabia. As Saudi Arabia's Eastern provinces are where the Shi'ah mainly reside and are also the areas that contain Saudi's oil fields Iran has on a number of occasions supported uprisings in order to weaken Saudi Arabia. A similar policy has been used in Bahrain where a Sunni minority rules over a Shi'ah majority. One of the reasons Saudi immediately sent its troops into Bahrain during the Arab spring was due to the fact that Iran would use the instability to weaken the rulers of Bahrain. The reason why Iran's Shi'ah policy is a means to an end rather than an end in itself is because in reality Iran does not extend support to all Shi'ah globally but only to those that will aid it to achieve its dominance of the region. Iran has not extended support to the Shi'ah in Azerbaijan or Tajikistan even though they are oppressed as they do not achieve its objectives, whilst the Shi'ah in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia receive considerable support as they are central to Iran's aims of dominating its region.

6. Whilst Iran has always presented the US as the devil and constantly makes aggressive statements against it, this in reality conceals the fact that on all key strategic issues Iran has consistently worked with the US. In a BBC documentary in 2009 on the 30th anniversary of the Iranian revolution Muhammad Khatami outlined the various attempts by his administration to normalise relations between Iran and the US. Khatami outlined Iran's sharing of intelligence with the US on targets in Afghanistan after the US led invasion. Khatami highlighted Iran's central role to the Northern alliance taking over Kabul and the help Iran gave the US to create the new government in Kabul. On the issue of Iraq, Khatami said: *"Saddam Hussein was our enemy, we wanted him destroyed, let's repeat the Afghanistan experience in Iraq, let's make it 6 plus 6, the six countries bordering Iraq and America and the Security Council members and Egypt - look at Iran as a power that can solve problems rather than as a problem itself."* The US did not take this offer and Iran watched from the side-lines as America's military machine invaded Iraq.

7. With the Iraq war, America became deeply entrenched in an insurgency being led by many Shi'ah groups in the South of Iraq, which Iran established during the Saddam Husain era in order to influence Iraq. When the US began setting up its political architecture, Iran wanted to ensure it dominated this new political system as this would give it influence in Iraq. It was Iran's patron the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), a group created in Tehran in 1982 that gathered the Shi'ah factions to join in the US constructed political system. This then allowed US forces to concentrate on the insurgency in central Iraq. Sayyid Ali as-Hussayni al-Sistani brought Sadr, Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and da'wah factions together to form the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) that gained a large number of parliamentary seats in the 2005 elections. The group similarly won substantial seats in the 2010 parliamentary elections. Without Iran the US would never have resolved the quagmire of Iraq.

8. Iran has all but given up its nuclear programme, despite its rhetoric to the contrary. Iranian president Hassan Rouhani presented his compromises in July 2015 as a victory for Iran, but in return for the removal of sanctions Iran's leadership made compromises that can only be described as capitulation. It is actually astonishing the terms Iran agreed to. Iran accepted the imposition of numerous restrictions including ridding itself of 98% of its stockpile of enriched uranium and a complete ban on the export nuclear fuel and building reactors that function with heavy water. It agreed to inspections from the International Atomic Power Agency to all suspected sites. It also agreed to the prevention of Iran undertaking scientific research related to treating nuclear fuel for a period of 15 years! Despite spending billions on its nuclear programme in one stroke, for virtually nothing in return Iran has accepted and capitulated to US terms, for just the removal of some sanctions.

9. Domestically the clerical regime has done a huge disservice to Islam. Rather than implement Islam and present this as a beacon for the world, the clerical establishment has only thought about itself, its position and is marred in corruption. Much of Iran's wealth, is in the hands of the very people in charge of maintaining social justice. Clerical leaders, together with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), have engineered a system where it is largely they, their family members and their loyal cronies who prosper. When Ayatollah Ali Khamenei became supreme leader in 1989, he built his own system of patronage by building a network with the IRGC, The corps also runs large parts of the economy. Since 2006 Al-Monitor reported, it has been awarded at least 11,000 development projects, from construction and aerospace to oil and gas.

10. Clerical establishment has proven itself incompetent in dealing with the most pressing issues of Iran. Iran suffers from numerous social issues, despite it attempts to project power abroad. Iran has a huge alcohol problem, the World Health Organization estimates for people who drink 35 liters or more alcohol over the course of a year, Iran comes in at 19th in the world. In other words, the number of alcoholics per capita puts Iran ahead of Russia (ranked 30), Germany (83), Britain (95), the United States (104) and Saudi Arabia (184). Iran also has the highest per capita number of opium addicts in the world. Iran's energy infrastructure is largely over 100 years old and crumbling and despite numerous promises by the clerical regime to modernize, nothing has transpired. Iran today is a country where over 80% of its population are under the age of 35 and so did not witness the 1979 Revolution, but are ruled by clerics who are all over the age of 60. This demographic schism will only led to more protests against the incompetent clerical establishment that uses Islam to give itself cover.

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