

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN IN TRANSITION: TOWARD A SECURITY STATE. How War Accelerated the Normalization of a Revolutionary State

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The wars of 2025 and 2026 against Iran have drastically accelerated the erosion of the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) revolutionary identity, a process that began with the death of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleymani in January 2020, as the system is currently completing its transformation into a security state.

This transformation raises questions about its future implications for international relations. It necessarily calls into question the 'rogue state' paradigm that has shaped perceptions of Iran since 1979, as well as the renewal of the sources of Iranian foreign policy. It also calls into question the evolution of the regional security architecture, against a backdrop of the Gulf states' proven vulnerability and American discredit.

The Matrix of Revolutionary Ideology: The Prioritization of Cultural Security

Until then, the official matrix of IRI had been grounded in revolutionary and Islamic ideology. By the late 1990s, however, internal voices had begun to question the Khomeynist legacy. Over the following decades, the system gradually stabilized around two competing strategic narratives at the highest levels of the state.

On the one hand, the Revolutionary line, faithful to the original framework, elevates the state's revolutionary identity to an ideal that must be preserved, regardless of internal or external developments. It places cultural security—and its corollary, the struggle against Western hegemony—at the top of the hierarchy of priorities. On the other hand, the Economic line advocates closing the revolutionary cycle to stabilize the rentier economy, pursue economic diversification, and promote development. It favors the permanence of the Islamic Republic over the pursuit of permanent revolution.

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Politically, the Revolutionary line was supported by conservatives. The Economic line was championed by reformists, as well as by centrists culminating in the Nuclear Agreement of 2015.

Between 2003 and 2015, there was a growing convergence across the political spectrum around the Economic line. Even conservatives eventually came to support Hasan Rouhani's nuclear diplomacy and the idea of a deal with the "Great Satan." In 2012, a subgroup of conservative parliamentarians broke away under the leadership of [Ali Larijani](#) to explicitly position themselves in favor of normalization.

Nevertheless, at that time, the Economic line did not enjoy the support of the majority of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

The Rise of the Traditionnal Security-First Approach at the Expense of the Revolution

Trump's withdrawal from the Nuclear Agreement in May 2018 dealt an initial blow to the IRI system, leading to the ousting of reformist and centrist political currents, which had by then been discredited internally. At the same time, the escalation of tensions between Iran and the US beginning in 2019—fueled by Tehran's gradual disengagement from the terms of the Agreement—refocused the regime's priorities on the state and regime survival amid recurring domestic mobilizations. Under the presidency of Ebrahim Raisi (2021–24), this dynamic resulted in a depoliticization of foreign and security policies within the administration. In concrete terms, this period saw figures from the IRGC, such as Admiral [Ali Shamkhani](#), rally to the cause of normalization. Once opposed to any negotiations with the United States, these officers came to openly advocate the necessity of an agreement.

In response, a group positioned itself as guardians of the Revolutionary line and waged a destabilization campaign against these officials, accusing them of betraying the revolution. Politically embodied by the [Stability Front](#), this last revolutionary bastion experienced a brief resurgence before [being marginalized](#) by the security forces, now at the center of power following the assassination of Ali Khamenei on February 28, 2026.

The period of escalation between 2019 and 2024 was also marked by an unprecedented nuclearization of Iran's deterrence posture, revealing its perceived limits of its conventional aspect. In the summer of 2022, Iran declared its status as a threshold state, asserting its ability to build a nuclear bomb without intention to proceed. In April 2024, following an initial military confrontation with Israel, Iran declared the possibility of a nuclear option should Israel threaten Iranian nuclear facilities.

In practice, this new deterrence posture failed to prevent either the fall 2024 confrontation with Israel or the outbreak of war. One might also question the effectiveness of any conventional deterrence against Donald Trump who prioritizes brutality and intimidation—including toward allies—in the service of his narcissism, rather than the dialectic of wills in pursuit of political objectives. The war against Iran led Robert Kagan to write in *The Atlantic* that [the United States has become a rogue state](#).

From a Rogue State to a “State of Barbarism”: A Focus on Internal Challenges

Conversely, the continued designation of the IRI as a “Rogue state” since 1979—due to its perception as a threat to global security in terms of proliferation and terrorism—warrants reassessment. This label appears less convincing in a context where Iran’s conventional deterrence—based on drones and missiles, passive defense (including investment in [missile cities](#)), and above all, the strategic use of its geography—has gained credibility. From this perspective, the Strait of Hormuz constitutes, according to some experts, Iran’s “nuclear weapon.”

Compounding this, is an international environment profoundly transformed over the past decade: the weakening of the Non-Proliferation regime by NPT signatories—both NNWS and NWS—, the renewed interest by the latter in the nuclear sector besides Iran, the erosion of multilateralism, the resurgence of unrestrained imperialism, and a broader loss of moral bearings illustrated by the Gaza genocide and [the use of artificial intelligence in the chain of destruction](#) in Gaza and Iran. Taken together, these developments could contribute to normalizing the identity of the Iranian state in the years ahead.

While the regime is concentrating all its resources on its own survival—even at the cost of sacrificing the revolution—it will emerge from this period deeply weakened. Iranian experts already anticipate that, in the aftermath of the war, the authorities will prioritize internal risks and threats amid a climate of heightened mistrust. Between the Second and Third Gulf Wars, [the regime effectively lost the support of its traditional base](#), composed of the working class and lower middle class. The erosion of its legitimacy has fueled the rise of a pro-interventionist discourse, championed by Reza Pahlavi, within a segment of Iranian society.

The accumulation of economic, social, and political crises also produced an unprecedented convergence of discontent, culminating in a multidimensional and nationwide mobilization between December 28, 2025, and February 15, 2026—reaching even the Tehran Bazaar known for its conservative leanings. The scale of the repression—unprecedented in scope (7,007 documented deaths, 30,761 injured, 53,777 arrests, according to [HRANA](#), with 11,744 cases still under investigation) and in the methods employed (e.g., the “final shot” or attacks on hospitals)—points to a “Syrianization” of the regime. Noteworthy is the leading role of the empowered police command, FARAJA, in the crackdown. Of note, in 2021, the latter was elevated from a “force” to a “command” structure on par with the two armies.

National fragmentation, the declining legitimacy of an increasingly hardened regime, and the need to manage the collapse of the rial (1 euro now equivalent to 2 million rials, compared to roughly 40,000 in January 2012), alongside economic recovery and governance challenges, all constitute major issues for the post-war period.

What Foreign Policy for a Post-Revolutionary Iran?

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Iranian foreign policy is likely to become increasingly anchored in traditional security logics, serving the survival of the regime—or even specific factions—rather than ideological or developmental considerations. Within the framework of a rentier state, this implies a strategy of economic securitization. The primary objective is to free itself from the bottleneck posed by the Strait of Hormuz by strengthening [integration with the East](#)—a dynamic already initiated with the North–South Corridor (INSTC) and the Belt and Road Initiative.

In terms of alliances, balancing dynamics with states critical of the West may also intensify, particularly in Africa. In the Middle East, bandwagoning dynamics with Iran could replace previous balancing strategies against Iran, a country that will likely resume the normalization logic promoted by the economic line since the 1990s it's the first tangible outcome of which was the 2023 normalization agreement with Saudi Arabia. Before the war, Iran had already been directing its attention toward normalization with Egypt.

One long-term question remains: in a context marked by the relative decline of American power and the rise of China—the main buyer of Iranian oil—will Iranian elites continue to view Beijing as a benign power? Experts are debating Iran's place in China's grand strategy. The prevailing view holds that China will not replace the United States as a security provider for Middle Eastern states; instead, attention is focused on China's role as a mediator, even as it expands its economic influence in the region. However, the 1946 Azerbaijani Crisis reminds us that the United States initially presented itself as a mediating power in the Middle East before shifting toward a predatory logic and eventually, becoming a threat.