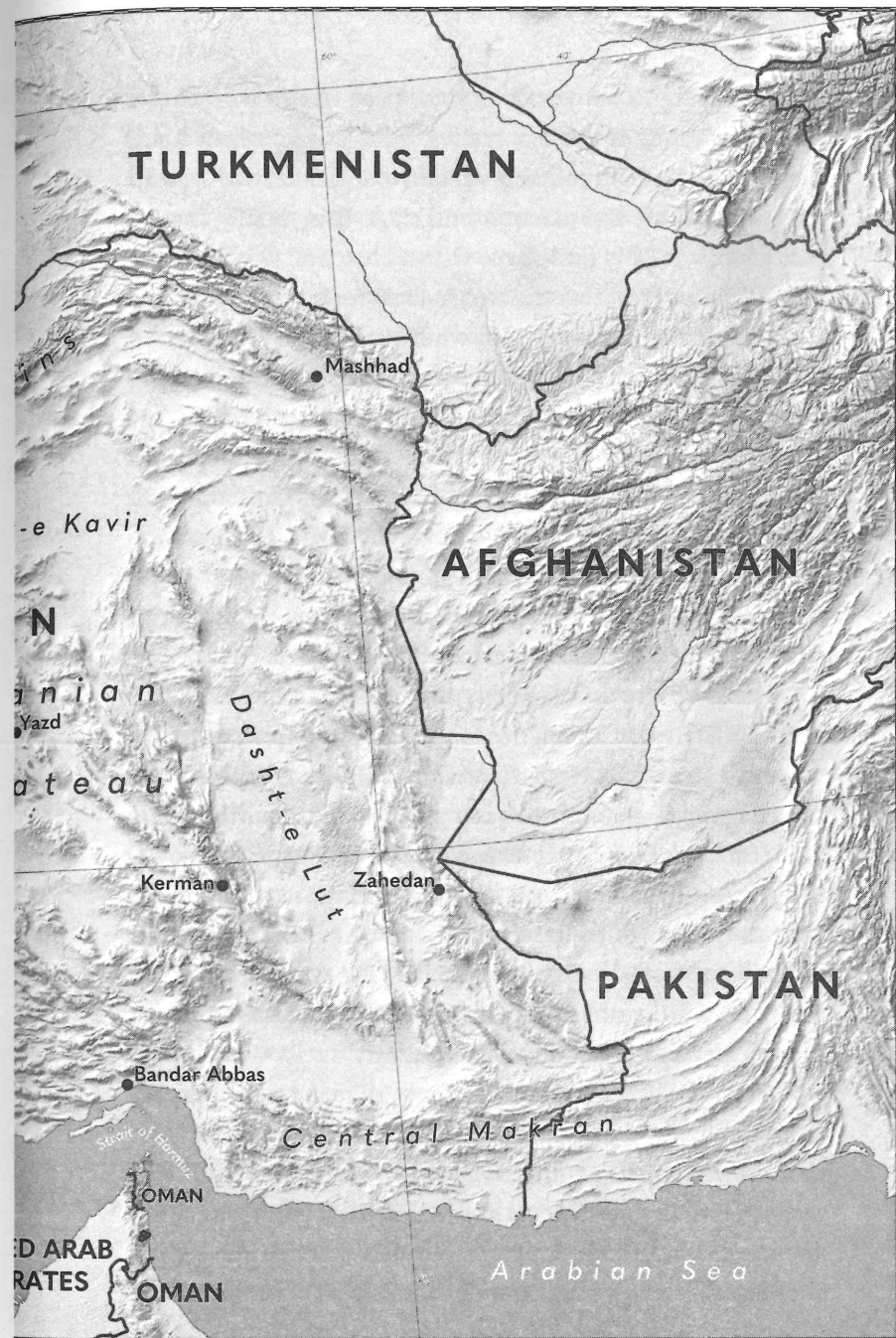


CHAPTER 2

IRAN

'Islam is political, or it is nothing.'

Ayatollah Khomeini, former Supreme
Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran



THE IRANIANS MAKE A VARIETY OF WONDERFUL breads; one of the best known is the crispy, wheat-based *nan-e-barbari*, which contains sea salt, is sprinkled with sesame and poppy seeds and eaten at breakfast. It is usually formed into a long, roughly oval shape with a crust and a few interior parallel lines cut across the top. Inadvertently, its appearance often resembles the country in which it is made.

Iran is defined by two geographic features: its mountains, which form a ring of crust on most of its borders, and the mostly flat salt deserts of the interior, along which run lower-range hills roughly parallel to each other. The mountains make Iran a fortress. Approaching it from most angles, you soon bump up against rising high ground which in many places is impassable. The mountains encircle the desolate interior wastelands of the Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut.

The Dasht-e Kavir is known as the Great Salt Desert. It's approximately 800 kilometres long and 320 kilometres wide – about the size of the Netherlands and Belgium combined. I've driven through parts; there's not much to see other than dull, flat scrubland. But it's not necessarily wise to try to find something to see. In some parts layers of salt on the surface conceal mud deep enough to drown in – and drowning in a desert seems a particularly stupid way to die. The other main desert may sound more attractive, until you learn that the Dasht-e Lut is known as the 'Plain of Desolation'.

This is why, even if you are of a warlike nature, you really don't want to invade Iran, especially in the modern era of large, professional armies controlled by strong states. The country is rarely out of the news: it's a key Middle East power; a repressive regime linked to terror and bloodshed across the region; a potential nuclear state in a tense stand-off with Israel and

regularly seems to be close to blows with the USA. And yet the Americans – and everyone else – are loath to send in the troops. Some of the hawks in the Bush administration of the early 2000s pushed the president to attack Iran; wiser heads prevailed. Secretary of State Colin Powell, a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued that air power alone would have limited success and the ensuing war might require 'boots on the ground'; he fell back on the old adage, 'We do deserts, we don't do mountains.' The USA and Iran have history, but Iranian history is littered with foreign soldiers dying in large numbers in the country's mountains.

For most of that history the land was known as Persia. It was only renamed Iran in 1935 in an attempt to represent the country's non-Persian minorities, which comprise about 40 per cent of the population. Its borders have shifted around through the centuries but the shape of the *nan-e-barbari* is the basic geographic frame.

To follow this, it's useful to go clockwise from the 1,500-kilometre-long Zagros Mountains, beginning on the coast along the Strait of Hormuz. The mountains run north along the parts of Iran which face Qatar and Saudi Arabia across the Gulf, then head further north along the Shatt al-Arab waterway, up the land borders with Iraq and Turkey, before swinging north-east along the frontier with Armenia. This is the wall which faces any enemy west of Iran almost as soon as it crosses the border. The exception is the Shatt al-Arab waterway, where, on the Iraqi side of the border, the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers meet. But even this is not necessarily a weak spot for Iran. It is the main gate out of Iran, leading to anywhere valuable for its leaders. A gate can be opened in either direction, and so the Persians have always sought to

advance out of it, close it, or create a buffer zone between the gate and potential enemies. On the Iranian side of the border much of the terrain is swampland, giving the defender a natural advantage; and even if an aggressor made it off the soft, low ground they would soon run into the Zagros Mountains a few kilometres inland.

Where the Zagros end, the Elburz Mountains begin. Again, moving clockwise, the Elburz run briefly along the Armenian border before taking a sharp turn south, where they overlook the Caspian Sea. The coastline is 650 kilometres long and the 3,000-metre-high mountains are never more than 115 kilometres from it, usually much less. As in the west of the country, any hostile invading force cannot get far before hitting the mountain wall. The mountains then curve again, running along the Turkmenistan and Afghanistan borders. Lower mountains taper down almost to the Arabian Sea before meeting the Central Makran Range, which takes us back to the Strait of Hormuz. This means that if you want to invade and occupy Iran, you have to fight on marshland, over mountains and across deserts, or make an amphibious landing and do the same.

Overall, this terrain is a formidable obstacle for a would-be invader and occupier; the price to pay for breaking through the mountain wall is considerable, and the occupier ends up going home. However, this geography has not deterred all hostile forces during Persia/Iran's long history. Alexander the Great made headway, but within a few years of his death in 323 BCE Persia again controlled its own affairs. In the 1200s and 1300s the Mongols, and Tamerlane, arrived from across the vast Central Asian Steppe, wrecked the place and slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people, but didn't stay long enough

to significantly influence the Persian culture. The Ottomans ventured into the Zagros several times from the 1500s, but only skirted the periphery of the country. The Russians did the same, then the British arrived and decided the best bet was to co-opt some of the minority groups and buy their way to influence.

Conversely, this geography also restrains Iranian power. In past millennia the Persian Empire came down from the mountains and pushed outwards; but for most of its history it has been contained within the territory described above. On rare occasions it has dominated the plains to its west, but usually other powers – Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, British and most recently American – have been the controlling influence there, and some have used the territory to try to manipulate what happens inside Iran. This is one reason why Tehran is on constant guard against interference from outside.

Internally, the desolate and unforgiving landscape is why almost all Iranians live in the mountains. Because they are difficult to traverse, populated mountain regions tend to develop distinct cultures. Ethnic groups cling to their identities and resist absorption, making it harder for the modern state to foster a sense of national unity. Because of its mountains, Iran's main centres of population are widely dispersed and, until recently, poorly connected. Even now, only half of the country's roads are paved. So although the population are all Iranians, they are from many different ethnic groups.

Persian (Farsi) is spoken as a first tongue by about 60 per cent of Iranians and is the official language of the Islamic Republic. However, Kurds, Baluchs, Turkmen, Azerbaijanis (Azeris) and Armenians all use their own languages, as do a host of smaller groups such as the Arabs, Circassians and

the semi-nomadic Lur tribes. There are even a few villages in which Georgian is spoken. The tiny community of Jews (around 8,000) can be traced all the way back to the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century BCE.

This diversity, especially among the larger groups such as the Kurds and Azeris, means that the country's rulers have always attempted to have a strong, centralized and often repressive government in order to keep its minorities under control and ensure that no region can break away or assist outside powers. This is as true of the ayatollahs as it was of their predecessors.

The Kurds are one of the best examples of a mountain people retaining their culture in the face of the state's aggressive assimilation policies. Exact population numbers are difficult to pin down, as the government prefers not to disclose statistics on ethnicity; but most sources suggest that the Kurds form about 10 per cent of the population – perhaps 8.5 million people. They are the second-largest minority after the Azeris (16 per cent). Most live in the Zagros Mountains adjacent to the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, with whom many share a dream of an independent Kurdish state. Their ethnicity, language, independent spirit and the fact that most are Sunni Muslims in a Shia-dominated country have brought them into conflict with the central authorities for centuries. Amid the confusion at the end of the Second World War, a small Kurdish region declared independence, but survived less than a year once the central government had stabilized the country. Their most recent uprising, which followed the Islamic Revolution of 1979, took the Iranian military three years to crush.

The Azeris are concentrated in the northern border regions near Azerbaijan and Armenia; the Turkmen live close to the Turkish border, and the Arabs, of whom there are about

1.6 million, are clustered near the Shatt al-Arab waterway across from Iraq and on small islands in the Gulf.

Most Iranians live in urban areas, many of which are built on mountain slopes, concentrated in just one-third of the country. If you draw a line from the Caspian Sea, running west through Tehran and down to the Shatt al-Arab, the majority of people live to the left of it. Elsewhere, urban centres are few and far between. Tehran sits below the Elburz Mountains. It is a feature of Iranian towns that, due to their lack of water, many are at the feet of hills and get their water supply from tunnels dug on the mountain slopes which feed small canals running down into the urban areas. I fell into one once while being chased by the Tehran police – more of which later.

This lack of water is one of several factors which have held Iran back economically. About one-tenth of the land is cultivated, a mere third of which is irrigated. There are only three large rivers, and the Kārun alone is navigable and able to transport cargo. Air travel has enhanced internal and foreign trade, and there are now international airports in Tehran, Bandar Abbas, Shiraz, Abadan and Isfahan. In a country larger than the UK, France and Germany combined, air travel is the only way to connect quickly with the dispersed urban areas.

Given that Iran holds the world's fourth-largest reserves of oil and second-largest of gas, it should be a rich country; but the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88) saw the refining facilities in Abadan destroyed, and only recently has production recovered to pre-conflict levels. The country's fossil-fuel industries are notoriously inefficient, a situation exacerbated by international sanctions which make modern equipment difficult to access. The pool of foreign experts willing to work in Iran is limited, as is the number of countries willing to buy Iranian fuel.

Energy is Iran's most important export. Its oilfields are in the regions facing Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq, with a smaller field inland near Qom. The gas fields are mostly in the Elburz Mountains and the Persian Gulf. One of the main export routes is into the Gulf of Oman via the Strait of Hormuz. This is Iran's only way out to the open ocean lanes and at its narrowest is just 34 kilometres across. The width of the shipping lane in either direction is just over 3 kilometres, with a 3-kilometre buffer zone between them to avoid accidents. For Iran this is a two-edged sword. One of the reasons it has never been a sea power is because it can easily be prevented from reaching the ocean. However, the width of the strait means that Tehran can threaten to close it to everyone else. Given that one-fifth of global oil supplies pass through it, closure would mean a world of pain. It would hurt Iran as well, and probably mean war; but it's a card it can play, and the regime has invested in means by which to try and make it a trump card.

Iranian forces frequently practise 'swarming' large vessels using dozens of fast attack boats, some armed with anti-ship missiles. In the event of a full-scale conflict Iran might also use suicide squads as it did during the Iran-Iraq war. Its conventional naval forces, including a handful of submarines, would probably be quickly found and easily disabled, but a combination of shore-to-ship missiles, special forces operations to mine oil tankers, and the swarming tactics could be enough to both temporarily close the Strait and bleed an enemy to the point of retreat. It would also cause massive disruption to oil and gas shipments from Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, leading to a huge rise in energy prices and potentially a global recession. When Tehran feels under pressure, especially when its oil exports are threatened, it uses

a variation of a warning issued in 2018: 'We will make the enemy understand that either everyone can use the Strait of Hormuz or no one.'

It is not known if it would go that far, but that's the nature of gambling at this level. To hedge against it the Americans have advanced plans to try to wipe out as much of Iran's offensive capabilities as they can within hours of a major conflict breaking out, and the Gulf States have been building pipelines to take oil and gas to the Red Sea, from where tankers can access the Indian Ocean – hopefully without being targeted by the missiles Iran has given to their Houthi allies in Yemen.

Modern Iran is a troubled nation, but one with a great history. The Persian Empire was a leading civilization in the ancient world. Iranian history has a similarly glorious, magnificent and murderous sweep to that of Greece, so it's no surprise they collided, nor that Persia went on to clash with Rome. First, though, there was a little 'local difficulty'.

Persian origins begin about 4,000 years ago, with the migration of tribes from Central Asia. They settled in the southern Zagros Mountains adjacent to the Medes peoples, with whom they shared ethnic roots. It's a lot easier to come down the mountain and attack the plain than it is to climb up from the plain and attack the mountain, and in 550 BCE the Persian leader, Cyrus II, took over the Medes kingdom, merged it with the Persian Empire and announced the arrival of the Achaemenid Persian Empire on the world stage.

Cyrus created the greatest empire the world had known, reaching all the way across Mesopotamia (modern Iraq and Syria) and on to Greece, before coming to a sticky end in 529 BCE at the hands of a sort of 'Xena: Warrior Princess' figure named Tomyris. She was queen of a region in Central Asia

to which Cyrus had taken a fancy and was most put out when he captured her son. She warned him: 'Restore my son to me and get thee from the land . . . Refuse, and I swear by the sun . . . I will give thee thy fill of blood.' In a subsequent battle most of Cyrus's army were slaughtered, and he suffered the indignity of not only being killed, but having his head dunked in a skin filled with human blood. She did tell him.

Cyrus was succeeded by his son, who added Egypt and parts of what is now Libya to the empire before Darius I took over in 522 BCE and pushed the empire's borders into parts of what is now Pakistan and northern India, and up into the Danube Valley in Europe. He authorized the Jews in Israel to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem and encouraged the religious beliefs of Zoroastrianism. The world's first postal service was created via a network of relay horses, and he undertook a huge construction project that included paved roads running for thousands of miles.

He didn't have it all his own way. Irritated with some of the Greek kingdoms for not showing enough respect (or paying him protection money), he invaded mainland Greece. It went a bit wrong at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, a runaway victory for the Greeks. Darius died four years later and was succeeded by his son Xerxes, who also lost to the Greeks, marking the beginning of the end of the first Persian Empire 150 years later. Cyrus and Darius named themselves 'The Great', but their empire was destroyed by an even bigger name from history – Alexander the Great of Macedonia. In 331 BCE he smashed the Persian army and then burnt its capital, Persepolis.

It took almost 100 years before the next Persian Empire rose. The Parthians fought the Roman Empire for control of

Mesopotamia and to prevent it entering Persia from the north in modern-day Turkey and Armenia. This culminated in a victory – and a horrific ending to a career made famous by Laurence Olivier. In the film *Spartacus* (1960), General Crassus of the Roman Empire demands to know which man in the defeated slave army is Spartacus. He then crucifies everyone. What goes around comes around. In 53 BCE he took on the Parthians, lost, and because the Persians thought he was greedy, they poured molten gold down his throat.

Some 500 years on, the Parthians were overthrown from within by the Sasanians. They continued to fight Rome, and then the Byzantine Empire, leaving them exhausted and open to the next challenge which arose from the west – the Arabs, and Islam. The seventh-century Sasanian defeat was the result of unprecedented political weakness being vanquished by an enemy with the light of God in their eyes. Persia lost its buffer zone in Mesopotamia, and then most of its heartland. However, it took the Arabs twenty years to capture the urban areas; they never fully controlled the mountains, and there were frequent uprisings.

Eventually the Arabs lost, but Islam won. Zoroastrianism was suppressed, its priests murdered, and Islam became the dominant religion. Persia was incorporated into the Caliphate, but the sheer size of the country, and the strength of its cultures, meant that the people never assimilated and always thought in terms of the borders between them and the outsiders. This would be amplified several centuries later when Persia converted to Shi'ism.

Before this, we see waves of migration by Turkic and Mongol warriors. Again, invasion came after central power had collapsed and Persia was divided into small kingdoms. It was

only when the Safavids (1501–1722) united the country that it regained the strength to govern itself and defend its border.

The Safavids are a key turning point in history. In 1501 King Ismail announced that Shia Islam was the official religion. The origins of the Sunni–Shia split within Islam go back to the dispute over who should succeed the Prophet Muhammad following his death in 632 CE and the Battle of Karbala in 680. Many historians argue that King Ismail's motivation was mostly political. Just as Henry VIII needed to define his kingdom in opposition to Rome and created the Church of England, as we'll see in the UK chapter, so Ismail needed the Safavids to be defined in opposition to their arch-rival – the Sunni Ottoman Empire.

Its conversion to Shi'ism created deep hostility towards Persia, which helped form a nationalist identity, a strong central government and a suspicion of minorities which has been passed down through the centuries. It helped Iran become the country it is and contributes to the tensions in Lebanon, the wars in Yemen and Syria, and has been a factor in the clash between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. This is not to say that political state rivalries can be dismissed in these events, but the religious split was fundamental in forming identities, and Iranian religious identity goes back to the Safavids.

You may have seen footage of processions of shirtless Muslim men beating themselves on their chests and whipping their backs to draw blood. This is during the festival of Ashura, and they are feeling the pain of the martyred Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, killed at the Battle of Karbala. The remembrance of the Battle of Karbala goes deep in Iranian culture: you see it in poetry, music and plays, and it

is intrinsic to the people and their flag. In the centre of the flag you see a red tulip – a symbol of martyrdom. When Hussein was killed, it is said, a tulip sprang from his blood.

The Safavids were overthrown in 1722 by clerics on the grounds that only a learned religious man should rule, and they in turn were removed by an Afghan warlord who said that religion could control religion, but that 'politicians' had the power of taxation and lawmaking. This division of power between secular and religious institutions remains an issue in modern Iran as many people believe the clerics again wield far too much power in the political arena.

After the Safavids lost power, the next couple of centuries saw the cycle of internal weakness and foreign threats return. Persia's declaration of neutrality in the First World War didn't prevent British, German, Russian and Turkish forces using it as a battleground. In the aftermath, the Russians were pre-occupied by their revolution, the Germans and Ottomans were defeated, and that left the British.

Following the discovery of oil prior to the First World War, the British ensured that they won the exclusive rights to get the stuff out of the ground and sell it. As Winston Churchill wrote later, 'Fortune brought us a prize from fairyland beyond our wildest dreams.' The Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later BP) had been formed in 1909, and the British bought the controlling share. After the war London fully intended to make Persia a protectorate, but an officer from the Persian Cossacks Brigade had other ideas. In 1921 Reza Khan marched into Tehran at the head of 1,200 soldiers and effectively seized power. In 1925 the Iranian parliament, the Majlis, voted to depose the then shah, and Reza Khan was appointed Reza Shah Pahlavi.

The country was on its knees. Centuries of weak misrule had left it on the verge of disintegration and so when this military man arrived in the capital, talking about restoring Persian power, people listened. In 1935 he renamed it Iran to reflect the country's many ethnic groups. His mission was to drag it into the twentieth century, and he embarked on a building programme that included a cross-country rail network connecting some of the major cities. However, what Reza Shah Pahlavi did not do was take control of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, and as long as the British controlled that they still had a huge say in Persian affairs. The British had built the world's biggest refinery at the port of Abadan, and from it flowed cheap oil for the British Empire.

In the Second World War Iran again attempted to be neutral, but once more fell victim to outside powers. On a pretext about the shah's pro-Nazi sentiments the British and Soviets invaded and, after forcing him to abdicate, achieved their aim of securing the oilfields, constructing a supply line to Russia. He'd built the railway system; they wanted to play with it.

The shah was replaced by his twenty-one-year-old son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. In 1946, with foreign troops gone, the young man set about trying to continue the economic reforms, but in foreign policy threw his lot in with the British and Americans to establish Iran as an ally in the developing Cold War.

But these were new times. The winds of anti-colonialism were blowing and turned into a storm over what was now called the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Demands for it to be nationalized grew, and in 1951 a vehement supporter of nationalization, Mohammad Mossadegh, became prime minister. A bill was soon passed as a result of the promise that money from Iranian oil would now go only to Iran.

The reaction was swift. Iranian assets in British banks were frozen, goods destined for Iran were held back, and technicians at the Abadan refinery were withdrawn. To no avail: the Iranians held firm. In 1953 London and Washington sent in MI6 and the CIA to help organize a military coup, the trigger for which came when Mossadegh dissolved parliament, intending to rule by decree and effectively stripping the shah of power. It's often said that the British and Americans overthrew Iranian democracy; it is fairer to say that they helped Iranian factions overthrow a democratically elected government. American motives were driven by fears that the chaos in Iran could lead to a communist takeover; British profits from Iranian oil were not high on their list of priorities. The shah, who had run away to Italy, returned, and all was right with the world. Except it wasn't.

To some the coup seemed a success, but it threw a long shadow. Iran's emerging democracy was halted in its tracks as the shah spun into a spiral of increasing repression. He soon faced opposition from all quarters. Conservative religious groups were enraged when he granted non-Muslims the vote; the Moscow-sponsored communists worked to undermine him; the liberal intelligentsia wanted democracy; and the nationalists felt humiliated. The coup had reminded people of what happened when the country was subject to outside influence. The result of the nationalization of oil meant more revenue for the state, but little of it trickled down to the masses. The coup was a fork in the road of Iranian history, and the country accelerated towards the revolution of 1979.

The current regime likes to tell a tale about masses of fervently religious people taking to the streets desperate for a new age when the ayatollahs would rule the land. It wasn't quite like that. The demonstrations in the lead-up to the shah's

overthrow involved secular groups, the communists, trade unions, and the religious establishment centred on Ayatollah Khomeini. The latter quickly murdered thousands of the former, and thus got to tell the story.

Khomeini was a well-known figure. In 1964 he'd accused the shah of reducing 'the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog'. For his troubles he was banished, living first in Iraq and then in France. By 1978 there were massive demonstrations across the country. The shah reacted with savagery, and the SAVAK (secret police) became a byword for torture and murder. At the year's end, after hundreds of demonstrators had been killed, martial law was declared. The demonstrators kept coming and in January 1979 Reza Pahlavi fled the country. He was the last of the shahs, and the last Iranian leader influenced by the Americans. They quickly switched their support to Iraq.

Khomeini had been busy during exile. Broadcasts on the BBC's Persian Service meant his voice was familiar to many, and thousands of cassette tapes had been smuggled into Iran to be played in mosques. Two weeks after the shah fled, the ayatollah arrived to a rapturous welcome as more than a million people lined the streets to greet him. What most did not know was that they had exchanged the crown for the turban.

Those who did not understand revolutionary Islam assumed the elderly ayatollah would be a hands-off figurehead helping to guide the country towards a less repressive future. They were soon put right. The radical Egyptian intellectual Sayyid Qutb, who was executed in Cairo in 1966, may have been a Sunni Muslim but his writings influenced the religious Shia revolutionaries in Iran. His seminal work *Milestones* had been translated into Farsi and fed into the idea that the answer

to the problems in the Muslim world was Islam. Qutb had more influence in Arab countries, where the systems of royalty, nationalism, socialism and secular dictatorship had failed to better people's lives, but when Khomeini declared that 'Islam is political, or it is nothing', he was saying what Qutb's followers in the Muslim Brotherhood had been promulgating for more than a decade. Qutb believed in violent jihad to defeat 'Crusaders and Zionists'; this, fused with the strain of martyrdom in Iranian Shia culture, was central to the fanaticism that gripped the religious masses during and after the revolution.

The secular intellectuals, dazzled by the sombrelly charismatic figure of Khomeini, put aside their disdain for the religious establishment and joined forces to oust the shah. As so often in revolutions, the liberals failed to understand that what the true believers said, they meant. On the day he landed in Tehran Ayatollah Khomeini informed the people: 'From now on it is I who will name the government.' Almost before anyone could say, 'Who voted for you?' the terror began.

Ten days after the crowds welcomed Khomeini, the military declared neutrality. The prime minister went into hiding before making his way to France, where he was assassinated in 1991. Minor religious groups, and the communists, were swept aside amid waves of torture, executions and disappearances. To ensure that there was no counter-revolution, Khomeini set up the IRGC – the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. This thuggish militia excelled at intimidating opponents. It has become the country's most formidable military force, while its senior personnel have grown wealthy since it branched into construction and other businesses.

Desperate to reverse freedoms for women, the new regime banned co-educational schools, protections within marriage

were reduced, and gangs of 'Komitehs' – committees – roamed the streets enforcing the wearing of hijab. Religious freedoms for minorities such as Jews and Christians were maintained in law but came to an end in spirit, and people of the Baha'i faith were subjected to particularly harsh persecution.

Those in the liberal middle class who could afford to leave did so in a hurry, followed by hundreds of thousands of others in a massive brain drain. Among them were about 60,000 of the country's Jewish population after the Republic became Israel's most virulent, and usually deeply anti-Semitic, critic.

The new leaders were not keen to win friends, but they did influence people to regard Iran as a pariah state. As well as the repression at home there were terror attacks abroad, and the infamous fatwa was placed on the British author Salman Rushdie over his book *The Satanic Verses*.

Justification lay in Khomeini's concept of *Velayat-e faqih* – guardianship of the religious jurist. The idea, embedded within Shia belief, is that the most learned religious man should have political and religious control. So Khomeini became Supreme Leader, a position enshrined in the constitution. Subsequent leaders would be selected by an Assembly of Experts made up of senior clerics. In a way, the system of choosing the top figure is not dissimilar to the way in which the Roman Catholic Pope is elected, but the Pope doesn't get to be commander-in-chief of a country's armed forces, nor does he have the power to declare war – a task the Ayatollah had to undertake a year after he came to power.

In Iraq, the secular dictatorship of Saddam Hussein saw the creation of a Shia Islamic republic next door as both a threat and an opportunity. He was alarmed by Khomeini's call for Islamic revolutions in Arab countries and cracked down on

Iraq's already embattled Shia majority. He then tried to invade Iran – which, as we saw at the beginning of the chapter, is not a good idea.

Saddam hoped to use the chaos of the revolution to make a land grab of the east bank of the Shatt al-Arab waterway and the oil-producing, ethnically Arab province of Khuzestan. What he didn't want was an eight-year bloodbath ending with each side where they started. Declassified recordings of Saddam and his advisers on the eve of war show that he felt he could get away with a brief conflict and hoped the Iranians 'do not go further than what we want, dragging both of us into a situation that neither we nor they possibly wants'. Instead he wanted 'to bombard military targets, twisting their arm until they accept the legal facts . . . However, if it becomes a full-scale war, then we will land wherever we need to.'

It was carnage. Saddam expected a quick victory, a disastrous miscalculation contributing to more than 1 million deaths. The Iraqi army advanced along a 644-kilometre front and made early gains, including the city of Khorramshahr, where they used mustard gas against the defenders. But they failed to capture the oil port of Abadan, and the assault ground to a halt within weeks. Nowhere were the Iraqis able to penetrate further than about 100 kilometres before they ran into the Zagros Mountains and out of morale. Within a few months a counter-offensive drove the Iraqi forces back across the border. Both capital cities were hit with air raids as the Iranians pushed on into Iraq in a bid to capture Shia strongholds such as Karbala. In 1988 Iraqi counter-offensives reversed Iranian gains and Khomeini, realizing his country was exhausted, accepted UN-brokered ceasefire terms. The two sides withdrew to their pre-war positions.

The Supreme Leader died the following year, and the position passed to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Limited economic progress was made, but the clerics retained an iron grip on society as they determined to bring the revolution into every aspect of people's lives. The political system was rigged. To run for parliament (the Majlis) you must be approved by the twelve-member Council of Guardians, half of whom are chosen by the Supreme Leader. A list of some of the parties represented in the Majlis gives a clue as to how to get on the ticket – they include the Militant Clerics Society and the Society of Pathseekers of the Islamic Revolution. With that lot in front of them, you can see how the Pervasive Coalition of Reformists would have trouble finding their way. When the Majlis passes legislation, it must be approved by a majority of the Council.

So in 1997 the hardliners were shocked when a relatively moderate religious scholar, Mohammad Khatami, won the presidency in a landslide. During his term the clerics vetoed more than one-third of the bills proposed, most of them liberal measures that Khatami and his supporters had been elected to introduce. The ultra-conservatives also continued their campaign of terror to destroy 'counter-revolutionaries'. Liberal media outlets were closed down and journalists jailed. Reform-minded intellectuals were murdered, and when students protested they were beaten off the streets, chased into their dormitories and beaten again.

Over the next decade the economy still struggled, the religious thugs still enforced their beliefs on society, and Iran's confrontational attitude on the international front ensured isolation. In 2005 Khatami lost power to the former Revolutionary Guard Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but in the 2009 election campaign another reformist emerged: Mir Hossein Mousavi. After

a record turnout, and amid concerns over voting irregularity by the authorities, Mousavi made the first move and said he'd been informed by the Interior Ministry that he'd won. Almost immediately there was an announcement on state media channels contradicting him. Ahmadinejad was declared the victor. The streets erupted in violence.

I'd managed to get a rare journalist visa to report on the election and the following day was on the streets of the capital with an Iranian colleague. As we walked down one of the boulevards, I noticed several people murmuring something under their breath as they passed. 'What's going on?' I enquired. My colleague explained that people were saying the name of a particular street, and a time of day. At the time of day, on a particular street, I watched as dozens of people began to gather, then hundreds. As they gained confidence, anti-government chanting broke out, and within a few minutes thousands of people had arrived. So did the riot police and thugs from the Basij militia. Scuffles turned into fights, bottles and stones began to be thrown by both sides, and the battle lines were drawn.

The riot police had adopted a successful tactic of riding two to a motorbike with the passenger carrying a large club. When a group of these accelerated into a crowd it quickly scattered. As I phoned in live reports, I found myself between the lines as several motorbikes readied for another charge. As they came down the road I stepped up onto the pavement, only to find one of the bikes mounting it and heading straight for me. There was no escape. As an officer lifted his baton in the air, I raised my hands in the surrender pose. Just as he began to swing for my head, he stopped – I can only assume because he saw a foreigner who perhaps had been caught in the chaos. I've never been so grateful for having freckles. The bike sped past,

the officer whacking other less fortunate people with fewer freckles, before roaring back to the police lines.

I dived into the crowd for cover as they began attacking symbols of the regime, including a Bank of Iran building which had its windows smashed. Again, I found myself at the front of the crowd as another police charge began. As I turned to run, a large rock, thrown by the security forces, hit me in the back with enough force to send me tumbling into one of the narrow water canals that run through the city, scraping the skin off the entire length of a leg as I went down. A group of protestors dragged me out and I staggered into a side street before deciding that was quite enough live reporting for one day. 'That's the last time I'm turning my back on a policeman,' I thought. Five years later I received very minor injuries when shot with bird pellet in the back in Cairo. By a policeman. But that's another story.

The demonstrations continued for several days, during which dozens of people were killed; but the regime's grip was easily strong enough to ensure that Ahmadinejad served a second term. However, the fault lines had not gone away; indeed, they are magnified each year as the population grows younger, and enough of the youth grow up wanting change. This was reflected in the 2013 election when a moderate cleric, Hassan Rouhani, won power by a margin the establishment realized was too big to change.

This was not entirely because everyone longed for a liberal Iran, although that was a major factor. 'It's the economy, stupid' translates into many languages, including Farsi, and the 2013 vote was also a rebuke to the wasted years under Ahmadinejad, who had increased the country's international isolation and witnessed the economy shrink yet further.

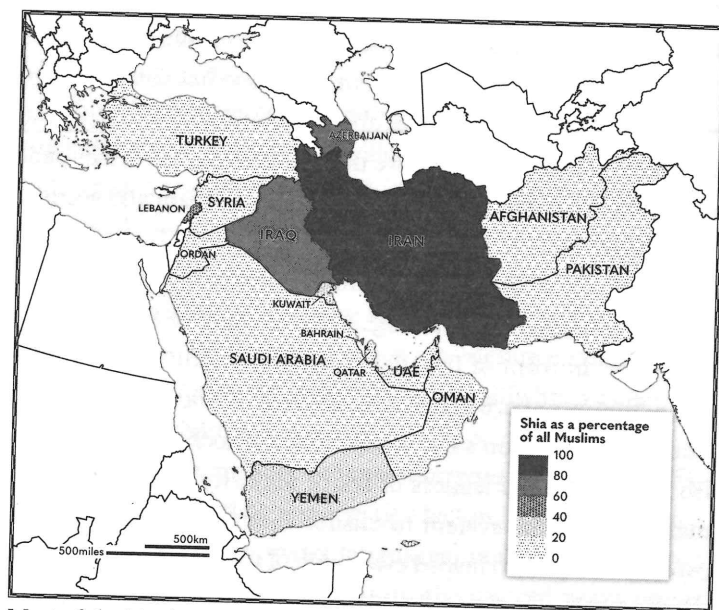
Rouhani won again in 2017, but then for the election of 2020 the fix was in months before the vote. The Council of Guardians flexed its robes and disqualified almost 6,000 candidates from running, among them ninety sitting members of the Majlis. Millions of Iranians asked themselves, 'What's the point?' and on election day stayed at home. The lowest turnout since 1979 resulted in a landslide for the conservatives in the shape of the cleric and former head of judiciary Ebrahim Raisi. The message was clear: one way or another, the ayatollahs and the Revolutionary Guard are staying in charge.

Which brings us to the present. Its leadership sees Iran as an isolated country beset by enemies. They're not wrong. Some of the ideologues talk about a 'Sunni circle' surrounding Iran, with countries such as Saudi Arabia, encouraged by the Americans, actively working to undermine the Islamic Republic from within and without. This also has some validity, which is why the ayatollahs and Revolutionary Guard commanders could scarcely believe their luck when the Americans unknowingly delivered the historic Persian dream and secured their western flank by invading Iraq in 2003.

The USA removed the Sunni-dominated regime that had invaded Iran, and now once again the flat land of Mesopotamia is a buffer in front of Iran deterring potentially hostile forces and acting as a space within which force can be projected. The Bush administration's naïve belief that democracy would flourish resulted in the leaders of Iraq's majority Shia population manipulating the system to ensure they now dominated the country. They were helped every step of the way by Iran, which drove out foreign forces by backing a variety of Shia militias in the civil war following the invasion. The roadside bombs which killed so many US and British troops were often made

in Iran, and the militias were financed, armed and trained by Tehran. Iraq is not an Iranian poodle, but now its leadership often looks sympathetically towards its neighbour to the east.

It was a major step in Iran's ongoing battle with many of the Arab states. The ebb and flow of history has left many Arab countries with large Shia minorities, notably Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Yemen, although there are also sizeable communities in Syria, Kuwait and the UAE. Often, they are less well off than the majority Sunni populations and many feel discriminated against. Iran has sought to use this to gain influence throughout the region. In Yemen's civil war, for example, it sided with the Shia Houthi faction against Saudi-backed Sunni forces. And Tehran has spent twenty years creating and



Most of the Muslim-majority countries surrounding Iran have Sunni majorities; however, Iran is sometimes able to look for allies within the Shia minorities in these countries.

holding a corridor to the Mediterranean, giving it access to the sea and allowing it to supply its proxy – Hezbollah. In Baghdad it now finds a Shia-dominated government; in Damascus it dominates President Assad, who is from the Alawite minority, an offshoot of Shia Islam. Iran came to his rescue in the Syrian civil war to keep this corridor open. From there it is a short hop to the Lebanese capital, Beirut, where the strongest military force is not the Lebanese army but the Iranian-financed Hezbollah militia. Hezbollah controls the Bekaa Valley, south Beirut and most of southern Lebanon all the way to the Israeli border. This is the Islamic Republic's way to project its force in Mesopotamia and the Levant, just as its predecessors in previous centuries had done.

While Iran clashes with the Sunni-led states, the country it despises most is Israel. Prior to the 1979 revolution Iran had a cordial relationship with Israel and was not noted for its anti-Semitism. Since then it has engaged in a forty-year campaign of hate against not just the state of Israel but Jews in general. There is a steady stream of anti-Semitic rhetoric in which the hand of the 'Zionists' is seen everywhere, and the mainstream Iranian media routinely publishes cartoons featuring the sort of stereotypical caricatures used by Nazi Germany. World leaders are frequently depicted with a Star of David on their sleeves, suggesting they are operating on behalf of their Jewish masters. Tehran has sent death squads to Argentina, Bulgaria, Thailand, India, Kenya and many other countries to kill Jews, the worst attack being the murder of eighty-seven Argentinians in a Jewish community centre in 1994.

It is useful for the Islamic Republic's leaders to blame Israel and Jews for the world's woes in order to deflect from their own shortcomings, but it seems likely their hatred runs

deeper than politics. As early as the 1960s Ayatollah Khomeini demonized Jews, calling them 'impure creatures' and saying that they 'have faces that manifest debasement, poverty, indigence, beggarliness, hunger, and wretchedness . . . This is nothing but their inner poverty and spiritual abasement.' He also enjoyed suggesting to the Iranian people that the shah was a Jew. His successor as Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has said: 'Israel is a malignant cancer gland that needs to be uprooted.' These rantings suggest a pathological loathing, one rooted in religion, and dangerous not just because they are made by people in power, but because despite being led by Shia, the Iranian Revolution has inspired people with similar views in the Sunni Arab world to believe that they too can achieve power through religious violence.

In the minds, and indeed voices, of the Iranian leadership, the USA is almost always linked with Israel and portrayed as a puppet of Israel. Iran's hardliners believe the American role in their region is to keep its decadent Satanic jackboot on the heart of the Muslim world in order to steal its wealth and protect the evil Zionists, who are behind every dastardly plot against them. Although they do sometimes get a bit mixed up as America is known as the 'Great Satan', and Israel as 'Little Satan'. In 2001 President George Bush engaged in his own labelling, describing Iran as part of an 'axis of evil', and claiming that its nuclear energy facilities were a cover for building a nuclear weapons arsenal. Tehran already had missiles capable of reaching targets more than 5,000 kilometres away, so the idea that they might be nuclear-tipped alarmed everyone within range.

In 2002 an Iranian dissident group revealed that Tehran was building a uranium-enrichment complex and a heavy-water

facility, both of which can be used to make nuclear weapons. The government insisted its nuclear activity was only for peaceful purposes. Few in the international community were convinced, especially after an International Atomic Energy Agency report said that the enrichment process suggested Iran was seeking weapons-grade material. UN, EU and US sanctions followed, limiting Iran's ability to produce and sell oil or gas.

Rouhani did make efforts to establish an international agreement on Iran's nuclear programme, leading to a deal with global leaders in 2015. He even had contact with President Obama – the first direct dialogue between the countries' political leaders in almost forty years. This was not well received by the hardliners of the Islamic Revolution. Diplomatic relations between Iran and the USA were cut in 1980 and have yet to be restored following the taking of hostages at the American Embassy in Tehran, the event which set the course of the relationship. A mob attacked the embassy in November 1979 and took over fifty Americans hostage. The 444-day crisis haunted President Jimmy Carter and helped usher in the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

Tensions between Iran and the USA have been a constant, but there was a temporary 'ceasefire' of sorts during the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria that was linked to the nuclear deal of 2015. Tehran realized that the more powerful ISIS became in the region, the greater the risk of Iranian influence being blocked. If ISIS defeated either the Iraqi Shia government or Assad in Syria, the corridor to the Mediterranean would be cut off. The Americans, exhausted by their losses, could get Iran to do some of the fighting against ISIS in Iraq. Tehran knew that agreeing to the nuclear deal would open the door to discreet co-operation with the Americans; President Obama desperately

wanted a foreign-policy success – and the nuclear deal could provide it. So Iran agreed to give up 98 per cent of its highly enriched uranium. It was an example of how a marriage of convenience to solve a short-term problem can override deeper differences – temporarily.

ISIS was on the back foot, but tensions quickly returned, especially after Donald Trump came to power amid fears of war. He took the USA out of the nuclear deal, reimposed sanctions and bullied European companies so that they were too wary to do deals with Iran. There followed a series of incidents that raised the temperature. Two oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz were mined and suspicion quickly fell on Tehran. There was no solid proof of who was responsible though, and the Iranians had what diplomats call ‘plausible deniability’. Nobody wanted a shooting match in the Strait of Hormuz, so no action was taken. It was the same when missiles hit a Saudi oil refinery; the Houthis in Yemen said they fired them, but the evidence suggested the most likely finger on the trigger was Iranian. It looked as if the Iranians were probing the USA’s tolerance levels. In 2019 they almost went too far. A US spy drone was shot down and the US Air Force was readied for air strikes, which were called off at the last minute. When Trump came to office some analysts made a number of interesting claims, among them that he’d never wanted to be president, that he’d resign within months, that he’d be impeached and out of office within two years, and that he would start wars. They were all something of a stretch, but the idea that in 2019, with a year to go before the presidential election, he actively wanted a war which could trigger a global recession was beyond elastic.

And that’s not the only reason why a war was unlikely. The USA’s losses in Iraq and Afghanistan are among the

factors reducing the American public’s tolerance of military adventures. Iran knows this and so can gamble on pushing back against what it sees as unwarranted American aggression to a certain, but unknown, level. Tehran knows that if tensions boil over Iran might suffer air strikes, but the Americans are not coming to the Zagros Mountains from Iraq, nor going ashore in force from their ships in the Gulf. Iran’s military may be poorly equipped, but it can draw on millions of men who have been through conscription and 600,000 active personnel, including 190,000 in the Revolutionary Guard Corps.

However, none of this alters the effects of sanctions on Iran. The economy nosedived, unemployment and inflation rose, and as winter approached in late 2019 the Iranian government raised fuel prices, triggering more huge nationwide demonstrations. The establishment had been surprised by previous protests; now they were shocked and nervous.

What particularly worried them was that the bulk of protestors were often no longer students and the liberal classes: now the working class, the backbone of the 1979 revolution, was coming out against them. Chants of ‘Death to Khamenei’ were heard, and in a rebuke to Iran’s foreign policy crowds shouted, ‘Not Gaza, not Lebanon, my life for Iran’, and ‘Get out of Syria’. People were signalling that they were sick of their young men being sacrificed in Arab civil wars. It was also noted that when the authorities painted huge American flags on roads and squares, demonstrators went out of their way not to tread on them and so disrespect the USA.

There was a respite after the USA assassinated Qasem Soleimani, commander of the elite Revolutionary Guard’s Quds Force, in early 2020 as he arrived in Baghdad to meet a militia leader. He was a nationally known figure who had orchestrated

Iran's involvement in Syria. A few days later Iran retaliated by firing missiles at Iraqi military bases hosting US troops; but on the same night, while on high alert for US air strikes, it accidentally shot down a civilian passenger jet leaving Tehran airport, killing all 176 people on board. After denying involvement the government eventually accepted responsibility, sparking another wave of protests. It had squandered any political capital it might have made in uniting the country over Soleimani's killing.

Then came Covid-19, and respect for the government took another blow. President Rouhani's administration consistently played down the threat of the virus and, when it spread, covered up the number of cases and botched public-health messages. The Revolutionary Guard didn't help. Its chief claimed the Guard had invented a device that could detect coronavirus symptoms from 100 metres away. Amid nationwide hilarity, the Physics Society of Iran ridiculed the idea as a 'science-fiction story'. The clerics played their part. The learned Ayatollah Hashem Bathaei-Golpaygani announced he'd tested positive but had cured himself using an Islamic remedy. He died two days later. Another ayatollah told his followers to eat onions and brush their hair more to ward off the virus. There's a large market in Iran for the remedies of 'Islamic medicine', but probably a bigger one which subscribes to the idea that laughter is a good tonic. The clerics were thoroughly ridiculed on social media with a variety of memes, jokes and cartoons which spread more quickly than the virus itself.

This is dangerous for the regime because laughing at the revolutionaries is a revolutionary act in itself, and one it cannot prevent. However, this does not mean the fall of the regime is necessarily imminent, nor that, when it does fall, what follows

will be an enlightened democracy. That said, as a highly educated and sophisticated country, with borders not drawn by Europeans, Iran has a better chance of becoming a genuine democracy than most other countries in its neighbourhood, but probably not for some time.

We must look at the internal challenges facing the regime and the power it has to meet them. Economically it is in a hole which may yet get deeper, but the government appears to have officials with doctorates in getting around sanctions, and the economy staggers on year after year. Iran has forged good economic relations with China, which is more willing than many countries to ignore a number of the sanctions, as indeed is Russia. There will be more demonstrations, but the regime has shown a willingness to slaughter its people in their thousands to suppress dissent, and when you've gone that far, it's hard to turn back.

The Kurds have risen up in the past, but are unlikely to make a move as long as the regime's grip remains tight. In the south-west the Arab minority of Khuzestan are angry that Iran's oil riches have not made their lives better. They are among the poorest of the minority groups, and low-level resentment of this has resulted in occasional bomb attacks against government targets. In the south-east the huge province of Baluchistan is restive. Its 1.5 million population is mostly Sunni and poor, and many identify more with the Baluchs next door in Pakistan than with Iran. It is a busy drug- and people-smuggling route from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Europe; there have been bomb attacks against the Revolutionary Guard and government officials, but neither Khuzestan nor Baluchistan is an existential problem for the regime so long as it ensures that foreign powers are not organizing a revolt.

What of the middle class, the intelligentsia and the arts? They continue a low-level campaign to retain an alternative civic culture in the country and are the inheritors of the centuries-long struggle to wrest control of power from royalty and religion. Music and films continue to be outlets for ideas and social commentary, and many younger people are no longer prepared to tolerate the hurtful interferences in their lives, such as how much of their hair they can show. During some of the recent anti-government demonstrations an incendiary chant has been heard on the streets: 'O Shah of Iran, return to Iran'. It doesn't mean there is a genuine yearning for a return to rule by the old system – the liberal struggle has always been to escape the grip of royalty and religion – but it is one of many signs of discontent. Such protest worries the establishment; it chips away at their authority, but it has its limits. It is magnificent to see a young woman atop a monument, waving her headscarf in the air and challenging the police to stop her. It makes YouTube, it makes a difference – but it doesn't yet make a counter-revolution. Eventually there will either be an uprising which replaces the current establishment, or the establishment will slowly wither, but at the moment the authorities still have the upper hand.

I've seen at first hand the incredible bravery of young Iranians in challenging their tormentors, and the concept of martyrdom runs deep in their culture; but there are limits to how many people will sacrifice themselves. The dynamic would change if enough young soldiers and militia members were no longer willing to open fire on protestors. So far, the true believers, especially in the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij, appear to be holding firm. The regime keeps close watch on its armed forces, the secret police are inside law-enforcement agencies,

and units of the Revolutionary Guard accompany the army when it is deployed.

Finally, there are the reformers working from the inside. For twenty years they have been trying to use elected institutions which were set up to give the appearance of democracy to counterbalance the real power – that of the clerics and Revolutionary Guard. They have tried to preserve the country's strong Islamic traditions and at the same time build a democracy. It remains a work, but not in progress.

In 2020, versions of a new phrase began to do the rounds. Instead of power flowing from the 'crown to the turban' it was seeping from the 'turban to the boots', meaning the military – specifically the Revolutionary Guard. The Majlis is full of ex-Guards, as are the boards of some of the big companies. Chief executives know that with a Guard on board, a contract might follow – after all, the elite force is not just full of influential generals, it is itself a major company. Its construction wing is called Khatam al-Anbia, and in addition to many other projects it built parts of the Tehran Metro. This is akin to the Royal Marines making profits from extending the Northern Line of the London Tube, or perhaps the US 82nd Airborne Division moving into manufacturing cars. The Guards talk the revolutionary talk and walk the money-making walk.

The Revolutionary Guard even has its own media arm, which runs dozens of newspapers, TV and radio stations, social-media outlets and film production companies. Over the past few years, by no coincidence, all seem to follow three broad narratives: that the Revolutionary Guard and the Supreme Leader are really great guys and anyone who disagrees is a very bad person; that any economic or political failure or security excess is the fault of the reform administrations;

and that outside forces are, at every waking moment, working to destroy the great nation of Iran.

Too often foreign news reports from Iran feature interviews with English-speaking university students and portray them as the voice of the youth. Things are far more complicated than that, as shown by the fact that many young people volunteer to join the Basij and the Revolutionary Guard. The reports should also point out that for every young dissident they find, there are other educated youngsters queuing up for jobs as graphic designers, script writers, video editors and film production roles at Revolutionary Guard-related companies. They pay well. If this side of Iran is not explained, the viewer might have trouble understanding why, when they've seen all these young people demanding change, change isn't happening. This is not to say that people employed by the Revolutionary Guard necessarily support the system, but it does show how the system is co-opting everyone it can in order to survive. Some of the tech-savvy younger generation are at the forefront of Iran's cyber-warfare project and are busy trying to spread Iran's point of view across the world or attempting to hack into hostile powers' military, commercial and political computer systems. They're quite good at it.

This is how you do joined-up government: the Revolutionary Guard media arm employs thousands of people and keeps an eye on them via its intelligence wing. It sells its programmes to the state broadcaster to amplify its message. It links its media operation with that of the Basij militia. And one of its biggest media outlets, Martyr Avini, is headed by the Supreme Leader's representative in the Basij, which is subordinate to the Revolutionary Guard. Nice work, and they get it.

This doesn't mean the Revolutionary Guard intends to

take over; it's more fun pretending you are not in politics, but it's an example of how intertwined it is with the state, and how, should the clerics have to retreat, it is an alternative, with guns. The Revolutionary Guards could 'course-correct' the revolution, but their name tells you what their job is, and their name and their job are why the regime has not bent despite four decades of internal and external pressure.

One of the most important aspects of the Iranian regime is often the one which is not taken as seriously as it should be. It was, is, and will remain a revolutionary theocracy. As such, it has fundamentalist principles and cannot change them without undermining itself. Imagine a French president declaring that he or she is no longer in favour of the equality part of the country's national motto, 'Liberté, égalité, fraternité'. It's not going to happen. Now imagine that the ayatollahs, whose ideology is that Iran's Shia Islam is the manifestation of God's plan for humanity, announce a massive compromise with the 'Great Satan' and a tolerance of sexual freedoms, conversion to other faiths, and a genuinely pluralistic political system. If you think you are enforcing God's will on Earth – that's not going to happen either.

Every American president since the 1979 revolution has tried the stick-and-carrot approach to achieve a 'grand bargain' with the Islamic Republic. Such a deal would require each side to make what they would regard as huge compromises. Iran would have to allow robust UN verification that it was not building nuclear weapons, limit its ballistic-missile programme, stop funding terrorist groups, end what the USA regards as destabilizing behaviour in Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, and no longer oppose a negotiated settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict. That's a 'big ask'. Iran prides itself

on being revolutionary and has always sought to export its revolutionary principles, to become the leader of like-minded movements. However, there is a scenario in which it might abandon that role in order to save the revolution at home. In return the USA would guarantee that it was not seeking regime change in Iran, end its unilateral sanctions, and, after diplomatic relations were restored, work with Iran economically to modernize its energy industry, and diplomatically to ensure regional stability.

It sounds great, but tentative moves towards even agreeing a framework of how to achieve these aims are consistently undermined by hardliners on each side and mutual suspicion of each other. Barack Obama opened a few doors in his presidency but is accused of allowing the Iranians to continue working on a nuclear bomb due to the perceived weaknesses in the nuclear deal of 2015. President Rouhani walked through some of those doors, but was hammered by the hawks in Tehran.

Under President Joe Biden the Americans, and others, have given up on 'regime change' and instead seek to simply 'change regime behaviour'. The ayatollahs can hold on to 'Fortress Iran' as long as they let go of ideas of becoming a nuclear-armed state and pull back from the Arab world. The Arab governments may never warm to Tehran, but if it no longer interfered in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Bahrain, they could come to terms with it. Conversely, if Iran looks to be close to having nuclear weapons, the Arab states will close ranks against it, seek ever closer ties to the USA, and failing that, shelter under the umbrella of a future nuclear-armed Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic Republic, under its current system, is stuck in a Catch-22 situation. It cannot liberalize, as that undermines

the foundations of what legitimacy it has left among the millions of people who still support it. But if it does not, as each year passes the increasingly young population will chafe against a system more in tune with the sixteenth century than the twenty-first.

The class of 1979 know that time and demographics are against them, but they have many cards to play. The nuclear issue remains live and the Strait of Hormuz remains narrow. They have a range of proxy actors in the region they can call on in the worlds of politics and terrorism. To counter internal subversion organized from within and without they have much-feared and brutal security services. And they are doing God's work. Therefore, to compromise is sin, to resist is divine. The religious revolutionaries do not intend to give up their revolution.