

The Geography of Iranian Power

The most important facts about Iran go unstated because they are so obvious. Any glance at a map would tell us what they are. And these facts explain how regime change or evolution in Tehran -- when, not if, it comes -- will dramatically alter geopolitics from the Mediterranean to the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

Virtually all of the Greater Middle East's oil and natural gas lies either in the Persian Gulf or the Caspian Sea regions. Just as shipping lanes radiate from the Persian Gulf, pipelines will increasingly radiate from the Caspian region to the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, China and the Indian Ocean. The only country that straddles both energy-producing areas is Iran, stretching as it does from the Caspian to the Persian Gulf. In a raw materials' sense, Iran is the Greater Middle East's universal joint.

The Persian Gulf possesses by some accounts 55 percent of the world's crude oil reserves, and Iran dominates the whole Gulf, from the Shatt al-Arab on the Iraqi border to the Strait of Hormuz 990 kilometers (615 miles) away. Because of its bays, inlets, coves and islands -- excellent places for hiding suicide, tanker-ramming speed boats -- Iran's coastline inside the Strait of Hormuz is 1,356 nautical miles; the next longest, that of the United Arab Emirates, is only 733 nautical miles. Iran also has 480 kilometers of Arabian Sea frontage, including the port of Chabahar near the Pakistani border. This makes Iran vital to providing warm water, Indian Ocean access to the landlocked Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the Iranian coast of the Caspian in the far north, wreathed by thickly forested mountains, stretches for nearly 650 kilometers from Astara in the west, on the border with former Soviet Azerbaijan, around to Bandar-e Torkaman in the east, by the border with natural gas-rich Turkmenistan.

A look at the relief map shows something more. The broad back of the Zagros Mountains sweeps down through Iran from Anatolia in the northwest to Balochistan in the southeast. To the west of the Zagros range, the roads are all open to Iraq. When the British area specialist and travel writer Freya Stark explored Lorestan in Iran's Zagros Mountains in the early 1930s, she naturally based herself out of Baghdad, not out of Tehran. To the east and northeast, the roads are open to

Khorasan and the Kara Kum (Black Sand) and Kizyl Kum (Red Sand) deserts of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, respectively. For just as Iran straddles the rich energy fields of both the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, it also straddles the Middle East proper and Central Asia. No Arab country can make that claim (just as no Arab country sits astride two energy-producing areas). In fact, the Mongol invasion of Iran, which killed hundreds of thousands of people at a minimum and destroyed the qanat irrigation system, was that much more severe precisely because of Iran's Central Asian prospect.

Iranian influence in the former Soviet republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia is potentially vast. Whereas Azerbaijan on Iran's northwestern border contains roughly 8 million Azeri Turks, there are twice that number in Iran's neighboring provinces of Azerbaijan and Tehran. The Azeris were cofounders of the first Iranian polity since the seventh century rise of Islam. The first Shiite Shah of Iran (Ismail in 1501) was an Azeri Turk. There are important Azeri businessmen and ayatollahs in Iran, including current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself. The point is that whereas Iran's influence to the west in nearby Turkey and the Arab world has been well established by the media, its influence to the north and east is equally profound; and if the future brings less repressive regimes both in Iran and in the southern, Islamic tier of the former Soviet Union, Iran's influence could deepen still with more cultural and political interactions.

There is, too, what British historian Michael Axworthy calls the "Idea of Iran," which, as he explains, is as much about culture and language as about race and territory.¹ Iran, he means, is a civilizational attractor, much like ancient Greece and China were, pulling other peoples and languages into its linguistic orbit: the essence of soft power, in other words. Dari, Tajik, Urdu, Pashtu, Hindi, Bengali and Iraqi Arabic are all either variants of Persian, or significantly influenced by it. That is, one can travel from Baghdad in Iraq to Dhaka in Bangladesh and remain inside a Persian cultural realm.

Iran, furthermore, is not some 20th century contrivance of family and religious ideology like Saudi Arabia, bracketed as the Saudi state is by arbitrary borders. Iran corresponds almost completely with the Iranian plateau -- "the Castile of the Near East," in Princeton historian Peter Brown's phrase -- even as the dynamism of its civilization reaches far beyond it. The Persian

Empire, even as it besieged Greece, "uncoiled, like a dragon's tail ... as far as the Oxus, Afghanistan and the Indus valley," writes Brown.² W. Barthold, the great Russian geographer of the turn of the 20th century, concurs, situating Greater Iran between the Euphrates and the Indus and identifying the Kurds and Afghans as essentially Iranian peoples.³

Of the ancient peoples of the Near East, only the Hebrews and the Iranians "have texts and cultural traditions that have survived to modern times," writes the linguist Nicholas Ostler.⁴ Persian (Farsi) was not replaced by Arabic, like so many other tongues, and is in the same form today as it was in the 11th century, even as it has adopted the Arabic script. Iran has a far more venerable record as a nation-state and urbane civilization than most places in the Arab world and all the places in the Fertile Crescent, including Mesopotamia and Palestine. There is nothing artificial about Iran, in other words: The very competing power centers within its clerical regime indicate a greater level of institutionalization than almost anywhere in the region save for Israel, Egypt and Turkey.

Greater Iran began back in 700 B.C. with the Medes, an ancient Iranian people who established, with the help of the Scythians, an independent state in northwestern Iran. By 600 B.C., this empire reached from central Anatolia to the Hindu Kush (Turkey to Afghanistan), as well as south to the Persian Gulf. In 549 B.C., Cyrus (the Great), a prince from the Persian house of Achaemenes, captured the Median capital of Ecbatana (Hamadan) in western Iran and went on a further bout of conquest. The map of the Achaemenid Empire, governed from Persepolis (near Shiraz) in southern Iran, shows antique Persia at its apex, from the sixth to fourth centuries B.C. It stretched from Thrace and Macedonia in the northwest, and from Libya and Egypt in the southwest, all the way to the Punjab in the east; and from the Transcaucasus and the Caspian and Aral seas in the north to the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea in the south. No empire up to that point in world history had matched it. Persia was the world's first superpower, and Iranian leaders in our era -- both the late shah and the ayatollahs -- have inculcated this history in their bones. Its pan-Islamism notwithstanding, the current ruling elite is all about Iranian nationalism.

The Parthians manifested the best of the Iranian genius -- which was ultimately about tolerance of the cultures over which they ruled, allowing them a benign suzerainty. Headquartered in the northeastern Iranian region of Khorasan and the adjacent Kara Kum and speaking an Iranian

language, the Parthians ruled between the third century B.C. and the third century A.D., generally from Syria and Iraq to central Afghanistan and Pakistan, including Armenia and Turkmenistan. Thus, rather than the Bosphorus-to-Indus or the Nile-to-Oxus scope of Achaemenid Persia, the Parthian Empire constitutes a more realistic vision of a Greater Iran for the 21st century. And this is not necessarily bad. For the Parthian Empire was extremely decentralized, a zone of strong influence rather than of outright control, which leaned heavily on art, architecture and administrative practices inherited from the Greeks. As for the Iran of today, it is no secret that the clerical regime is formidable, but demographic, economic and political forces are equally dynamic, and key segments of the population are restive. So do not discount the possibility of a new regime in Iran and a consequently benign Iranian empire yet to come.

The medieval record both cartographically and linguistically follows from the ancient one, though in more subtle ways. In the eighth century the political locus of the Arab world shifted eastward from Syria to Mesopotamia -- that is, from the Umayyad caliphs to the Abbasid ones -- signaling, in effect, the rise of Iran. (The second caliph, Omar bin al-Khattab, during whose reign the Islamic armies conquered the Sassanids, adopted the Persian system of administration called the Diwan.) The Abbasid Caliphate at its zenith in the middle of the ninth century ruled from Tunisia eastward to Pakistan, and from the Caucasus and Central Asia southward to the Persian Gulf. Its capital was the new city of Baghdad, close upon the old Sassanid Persian capital of Ctesiphon; and Persian bureaucratic practices, which added whole new layers of hierarchy, undergirded this new imperium. The Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad became more a symbol of an Iranian despotism than of an Arab sheikhdom. Some historians have labeled the Abbasid Caliphate the equivalent of the "cultural reconquest" of the Middle East by the Persians under the guise of Arab rulers.⁵ The Abbasids succumbed to Persian practices just as the Umayyads, closer to Asia Minor, had succumbed to Byzantine ones. "Persian titles, Persian wines and wives, Persian mistresses, Persian songs, as well as Persian ideas and thoughts, won the day," writes the historian Philip K. Hitti.⁶ "In the western imagination," writes Peter Brown, "the Islamic [Abbasid] empire stands as the quintessence of an oriental power. Islam owed this crucial orientation neither to Muhammad nor to the adaptable conquerors of the seventh century, but to the massive resurgence of eastern, Persian traditions in the eighth and ninth centuries."⁷

As for Shiism, it is very much a component of this Iranian cultural dynamism -- despite the culturally bleak and oppressive aura projected by the ruling Shiite clergy in these dark times in Tehran. While the arrival of the Mahdi in the form of the hidden Twelfth Imam means the end of injustice, and thus acts as a spur to radical activism, little else in Shiism necessarily inclines the clergy to play an overt political role; Shiism even has a quietest strain that acquiesces to the powers that be and that is frequently informed by Sufism.⁸ Witness the example set by Iraq's leading cleric of recent years, Ayatollah Ali Sistani (of Iranian heritage), who only at pivotal moments makes a plea for political conciliation from behind the scenes. Precisely because of the symbiotic relationship between Iraq and Iran throughout history, with its basis in geography, it is entirely possible that in a post-revolutionary Iran, Iranians will look more toward the Shiite holy cities of An Najaf and Karbala in Iraq for spiritual direction than toward their own holy city of Qom. It is even possible that Qom will adopt the quietism of An Najaf and Karbala. This is despite the profound differences between Shia of Arab descent and those of Persian descent.

The French scholar Olivier Roy tells us that Shiism is historically an Arab phenomenon that came late to Iran but that eventually led to the establishment of a clerical hierarchy for taking power. Shiism was further strengthened by the tradition of a strong and bureaucratic state that Iran has enjoyed since antiquity, relative to those of the Arab world, and that is, as we know, partly a gift of the spatial coherence of the Iranian plateau. The Safavids brought Shiism to Iran in the 16th century. Their name comes from their own militant Sufi order, the Safaviyeh, which had originally been Sunni. The Safavids were merely one of a number of horse-borne brotherhoods of mixed Turkish, Azeri, Georgian and Persian origin in the late 15th century that occupied the mountainous plateau region between the Black and Caspian seas, where eastern Anatolia, the Caucasus and northwestern Iran come together. In order to build a stable state on the Farsi-speaking Iranian plateau, these new sovereigns of eclectic linguistic and geographical origin adopted Twelver Shiism as the state religion, which awaits the return of the Twelfth Imam, a direct descendant of Mohammed, who is not dead but in occlusion.⁹ The Safavid Empire at its zenith stretched thereabouts from Anatolia and Syria-Mesopotamia to central Afghanistan and Pakistan -- yet another variant of Greater Iran through history. Shiism was an agent of Iran's congealment as a modern nation-state, even as the Iranianization of non-Persian Shiite and Sunni minorities during the 16th century also helped in this regard.¹⁰ Iran might have been a great state

and nation since antiquity, but the Safavids with their insertion of Shiism onto the Iranian plateau retooled Iran for the modern era.

Indeed, revolutionary Iran of the late 20th and early 21st centuries is a fitting expression of this powerful and singular legacy. Of course, the rise of the ayatollahs has been a lowering event in the sense of the violence done to -- and I do not mean to exaggerate -- the voluptuous, sophisticated and intellectually stimulating traditions of the Iranian past. (Persia -- "that land of poets and roses!" exclaims the introductory epistle of James J. Morier's *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*.¹¹) But comparison, it is famously said, is the beginning of all serious scholarship. And compared to the upheavals and revolutions in the Arab world during the early and middle phases of the Cold War, the regime ushered in by the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution was striking in its élan and modernity. The truth is, and this is something that goes directly back to the Achaemenids of antiquity, everything about the Iranian past and present is of a high quality, whether it is the dynamism of its empires from Cyrus the Great to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Who can deny the sheer Iranian talent for running militant networks in Lebanon, Gaza and Iraq, which is, after all, an aspect of imperial rule!); or the political thought and writings of its Shiite clergy; or the complex efficiency of the bureaucracy and security services in cracking down on dissidents. Tehran's revolutionary order constitutes a richly developed governmental structure with a diffusion of power centers; it is not a crude one-man thugocracy like the kind Saddam Hussein ran in neighboring Arab Iraq.

Again, what makes the clerical regime in Iran so effective in the pursuit of its interests, from Lebanon to Afghanistan, is its merger with the Iranian state, which itself is the product of history and geography. The Green Movement, which emerged in the course of massive anti-regime demonstrations following the disputed elections of 2009, is very much like the regime it seeks to topple. The Greens were greatly sophisticated by the standards of the region (at least until the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia two years later), and thus another demonstration of the Iranian genius. The Greens constituted a world-class democracy movement, having mastered the latest means in communications technology -- Twitter, Facebook, text messaging -- to advance their organizational throw weight and having adopted a potent mixture of nationalism and universal moral values to advance their cause. It took all the means of repression of the Iranian state, subtle and not, to drive the Greens underground. (In fact, the Iranian regime was far more surgical in its

repression of the Greens than the Syrian regime has thus far been in its own violent attempt to silence dissent.) Were the Greens ever to take power, or to facilitate a change in the clerical regime's philosophy and foreign policy toward moderation, Iran, because of its strong state and dynamic idea, would have the means to shift the whole groundwork of the Middle East away from radicalization, providing political expression for a new bourgeoisie with middle-class values that has been quietly rising throughout the Greater Middle East, and which the American obsession with al Qaeda and radicalism obscured until the Arab Spring of 2011.¹²

To speak in terms of destiny is dangerous, since it implies an acceptance of fate and determinism, but clearly given Iran's geography, history and human capital, it seems likely that the Greater Middle East, and by extension, Eurasia, will be critically affected by Iran's own political evolution, for better or for worse.

The best indication that Iran has yet to fulfill such a destiny lies in what has not quite happened yet in Central Asia. Let me explain. Iran's geography, as noted, gives it frontage on Central Asia to the same extent that it has on Mesopotamia and the Middle East. But the disintegration of the Soviet Union has brought limited gains to Iran, when one takes into account the whole history of Greater Iran in the region. The very suffix "istan," used for Central and South Asian countries and which means "place," is Persian. The conduits for Islamization and civilization in Central Asia were the Persian language and culture. The language of the intelligentsia and other elites in Central Asia up through the beginning of the 20th century was one form of Persian or another. But after 1991, Shiite Azerbaijan to the northwest adopted the Latin alphabet and turned to Turkey for tutelage. As for the republics to the northeast of Iran, Sunni Uzbekistan oriented itself more toward a nationalistic than an Islamic base, for fear of its own homegrown fundamentalists -- this makes it wary of Iran. Tajikistan, Sunni but Persian-speaking, seeks a protector in Iran, but Iran is constrained for fear of making an enemy of the many Turkic-speaking Muslims elsewhere in Central Asia.¹³ What's more, being nomads and semi-nomads, Central Asians were rarely devout Muslims to start with, and seven decades of communism only strengthened their secularist tendencies. Having to relearn Islam, they are both put off and intimidated by clerical Iran.

Of course, there have been positive developments from the viewpoint of Tehran. Iran, as its nuclear program attests, is one of the most technologically advanced countries in the Middle East (in keeping with its culture and politics), and as such has built hydroelectric projects and roads and railroads in these Central Asian countries that will one day link them all to Iran -- either directly or through Afghanistan. Moreover, a natural gas pipeline now connects southeastern Turkmenistan with northeastern Iran, bringing Turkmen natural gas to Iran's Caspian region, and thus freeing up Tehran's own natural gas production in southern Iran for export via the Persian Gulf. (This goes along with a rail link built in the 1990s connecting the two countries.)

Turkmenistan has the world's fourth-largest natural gas reserves and has committed its entire natural gas exports to Iran, China and Russia. Hence, the possibility arises of a Eurasian energy axis united by the crucial geography of three continental powers all for the time being opposed to Western democracy.¹⁴ Iran and Kazakhstan have built an oil pipeline connecting the two countries, with Kazakh oil being pumped to Iran's north, even as an equivalent amount of oil is shipped from Iran's south out through the Persian Gulf. Kazakhstan and Iran will also be linked by rail, providing Kazakhstan with direct access to the Gulf. A rail line may also connect mountainous Tajikistan to Iran, via Afghanistan. Iran constitutes the shortest route for all these natural resource-rich countries to reach international markets.

So imagine an Iran athwart the pipeline routes of Central Asia, along with its sub-state, terrorist empire of sorts in the Greater Middle East. But there is still a problem. Given the prestige that Shiite Iran has enjoyed in sectors of the Sunni Arab world, to say nothing of Shiite south Lebanon and Shiite Iraq -- because of the regime's implacable support for the Palestinian cause and its inherent anti-Semitism -- it is telling that this ability to attract mass support outside its borders does not similarly carry over into Central Asia. One issue is that the former Soviet republics maintain diplomatic relations with Israel and simply lack the hatred toward it that may still be ubiquitous in the Arab world, despite the initial phases of the Arab Spring. Yet, there is something larger and deeper at work, something that limits Iran's appeal not only in Central Asia but in the Arab world as well. That something is the very persistence of its suffocating clerical rule that, while impressive in a negative sense -- using Iran's strong state tradition to ingeniously crush a democratic opposition and torture and rape its own people -- has also dulled the linguistic and cosmopolitan appeal that throughout history has accounted for a Greater Iran in a cultural

sense. The Technicolor is gone from the Iranian landscape under this regime and has been replaced by grainy black and white. Iran's imperial ambitions are for the time being limited by the very nature of its clerical rule.

Some years back I was in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, from whose vantage point Tehran and Mashad over the border in Iranian Khorasan have always loomed as cosmopolitan centers of commerce and pilgrimage, in stark contrast to Turkmenistan's own sparsely populated, nomadic landscape. But while trade and pipeline politics proceeded apace, Iran held no real magic, no real appeal for Muslim Turkmens, who are mainly secular and are put off by the mullahs. As extensive as Iranian influence is by virtue of its in-your-face challenge to America and Israel, I don't believe we will see the true appeal of Iran, in all its cultural glory, until the regime liberalizes or is toppled. A democratic or quasi democratic Iran, precisely because of the geographical power of the Iranian state, has the possibility to energize hundreds of millions of fellow Muslims in the Arab world and Central Asia.

Sunni Arab liberalism could be helped in its rise not only by the example of the West, or because of a democratic yet dysfunctional Iraq, but also because of the challenge thrown up by a newly liberal and historically eclectic Shiite Iran in the future. And such an Iran might do what two decades of post-Cold War Western democracy and civil society promotion have failed to -- that is, lead to a substantial prying loose of the police state restrictions in former Soviet Central Asia.

With its rich culture, vast territory and teeming and sprawling cities, Iran is, in the way of China and India, a civilization unto itself, whose future will overwhelmingly be determined by internal politics and social conditions. Unlike the Achaemenid, Sassanid, Safavid and other Iranian empires of yore, which were either benign or truly inspiring in both a moral and cultural sense, this current Iranian empire of the mind rules mostly out of fear and intimidation, through suicide bombers rather than through poets. And this both reduces its power and signals its eventual downfall.

Yet, if one were to isolate a single hinge in calculating Iran's fate, it would be Iraq. Iraq, history and geography tell us, is entwined in Iranian politics to the degree of no other foreign country. The Shiite shrines of Imam Ali (the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law) in An Najaf and the one of

Imam Hussain (the grandson of the Prophet) in Karbala, both in central-southern Iraq, have engendered Shiite theological communities that challenge that of Qom in Iran. Were Iraqi democracy to exhibit even a modicum of stability, the freer intellectual atmosphere of the Iraqi holy cities could eventually have a profound impact on Iranian politics. In a larger sense, a democratic Iraq can serve as an attractor force of which Iranian reformers might in the future take advantage. For as Iranians become more deeply embroiled in Iraqi politics, the very propinquity of the two nations with a long and common border might work to undermine the more repressive of the two systems. Iranian politics will become gnarled by interaction with a pluralistic, ethnically Arab Shiite society. And as the Iranian economic crisis continues to unfold, ordinary Iranians could well up in anger over hundreds of millions of dollars being spent by their government to buy influence in Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere. This is to say nothing of how Iranians will become increasingly hated inside Iraq as the equivalent of "Ugly Americans." Iran would like to simply leverage Iraqi Shiite parties against the Sunni ones. But that is not altogether possible, since that would narrow the radical Islamic universalism it seeks to represent in the pan-Sunni world to a sectarianism with no appeal beyond the community of Shia. Thus, Iran may be stuck trying to help form shaky Sunni-Shiite coalitions in Iraq and to keep them perennially functioning, even as Iraqis develop greater hatred for this intrusion into their domestic affairs. Without justifying the way that the 2003 invasion of Iraq was planned and executed, or rationalizing the trillions of dollars spent and the hundreds of thousands of lives lost in the war, in the fullness of time it might very well be that the fall of Saddam Hussein began a process that will result in the liberation of two countries; not one. Just as geography has facilitated Iran's subtle colonization of Iraqi politics, geography could also be a factor in abetting Iraq's influence upon Iran.

The prospect of peaceful regime change -- or evolution -- in Iran, despite the temporary fizzling of the Green Movement, is still greater now than in the Soviet Union during most of the Cold War. A liberated Iran, coupled with less autocratic governments in the Arab world -- governments that would be focused more on domestic issues because of their own insecurity -- would encourage a more equal, fluid balance of power between Sunnis and Shia in the Middle East, something that would help keep the region nervously preoccupied with itself and on its own internal and regional power dynamics, much more than on America and Israel.

Additionally, a more liberal regime in Tehran would inspire a broad cultural continuum worthy of the Persian empires of old, one that would not be constrained by the clerical forces of reaction.

A more liberal Iran, given the large Kurdish, Azeri, Turkmen and other minorities in the north and elsewhere, may also be a far less centrally controlled Iran, with the ethnic peripheries drifting away from Tehran's orbit. Iran has often been less a state than an amorphous, multinational empire. Its true size would always be greater and smaller than any officially designated cartography. While the northwest of today's Iran is Kurdish and Azeri Turk, parts of western Afghanistan and Tajikistan are culturally and linguistically compatible with an Iranian state. It is this amorphousness, so very Parthian, that Iran could return to as the wave of Islamic extremism and the perceived legitimacy of the mullahs' regime erodes.¹⁵

¹ Michael Axworthy. *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind*, Basic Books, New York, 2008, p. 3.

² Brown. *The World of Late Antiquity*, p. 163.

³ W. Barthold, *An Historical Geography of Iran*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, (1903) 1971 and 1984, pp. x-xi and 4.

⁴ Ostler, *Empires of the Word*, p. 31.

⁵ Axworthy, p. 78.

⁶ Philip K. Hitti, *The Arabs: A Short History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1943, p. 109.

⁷ Brown, pp. 202-03.

⁸ Hiro, *Inside Central Asia*, p. 359.

⁹ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, translated by Carol Volk, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992 and 1994, pp. 168-70.

¹⁰ Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, p. 168.

¹¹ James Morier, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, John Murray, London, 1824, p. 5 of 1949 Cresset Press edition.

¹² Vali Nasr, *Forces of Fortune: The Rise of the New Muslim Middle Class and What It Will Mean for Our World*, Free Press, New York, 2009.

¹³ Roy, p. 193.

¹⁴ M. K. Bhadrakumar, "Russia, China, Iran Energy Map," *Asia Times*, 2010.

¹⁵ Robert D. Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, Random House, New York, 1996, p. 242.

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