

The End of the Age, and Iran's Play for the Future

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

The End of the Age, and Iran's Play for the Future, by Lt Col Jonathan M. Barber, USAF, 93 pages.

There are multiple layers to the strategic context in the Middle East. First, the Western mind must overcome fundamental challenges to their understanding of reality and learn to see through the lens of Iran's Shia Twelver worldview. By examining how Iranian leaders interpret the events of the region through a different understanding of time, space, and purpose, blind spots emerge in the Western understanding of Iranian actions. Next, a long view of history is necessary to identify the trends that led to the present situation in the Middle East and to see how the Shia Twelver worldview interprets its place in time and space. Finally, bringing clarity to the strategic context requires an examination of the role that Russian, Chinese, and US national interests play in shaping the future of the region.

Amongst the tectonic tension building in the global order, Iran holds a special place that could allow it to unleash destructive forces against US allies in the region and reshape the Middle East. It is essential for the United States to confront Iran and its military proxies. They must also create conditions that force a gap between reality, and the Shia expectations of prophetic fulfillment that are currently unfolding and point to the culmination of the age and return of the Twelfth Imam.

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When writing on a culture that operates from a worldview and religion completely foreign to my own the dangers of timidity or over vilification do not escape me. I attempted an agnostic approach that was strictly evidence-based that would produce clear conclusions that match reality. However, the lens used to observe and gather facts always has an inherent bias built into it. Therefore, I spoke to as many cultural perspectives as possible to test the lens through which I interpreted data. I sought out as many Americans, Israelis, and Iranians as possible to offer their perspective on the Iranian mindset. I also sought Muslims, Christians, Jews, Agnostics, and Atheists who did the same. It seems only fair when writing a paper like this to reveal the lens that I am looking through so the reader can understand potential bias and perhaps over compensation for that bias that could be in this paper. I am a United States Air Force Officer, fighter pilot, and hold a Biblical Christian worldview, and though I have fought on the battlefields of the Middle East, I believe the most powerful force in the universe is the expression of genuine, unconditional love by an individual for another, and humanity as a whole. However, the complexity of the world we live in, the right to self-defense, and some people's commitment to violence demand other forces come into play in the relationships that define our lives. Ultimately, I hope this paper contributes in some small way to increase the US' decision-makers understanding of the Iranian people in a way that allows them to find a way of coexistence that

does not include violence. Moreover, to America, that great country whose generations past have made itself worth devoting a life and career to, may you ever be good, and may you ever be free.

Acronyms

GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
NATO	North Atlantic Trade Organization

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Introduction

History does not repeat, but it often rhymes.

—Mark Twain

The Middle East is the most complex area in the world. It is the cradle of civilization, the birthplace of three of the world's most influential religions, and the home of roughly sixty percent of the world's proven oil reserves.¹ There is practically no place on earth that is not spiritually, culturally, politically or economically tied to the events that play out in the region. The clashing worldviews, great power economic interest, scar tissue from the last century of Western domination, and regional conflict pose challenges to understanding the decision-making of potential adversaries.² As Iran edges toward nuclearization, the ability of the United States to understand the worldview and its core assumptions on which Iranian decision-makers ground their logic is critical.

Two decades ago the attack on September 11th jolted the Western mind to the reality that they were blind to an entire worldview that defined the current international framework as unjust and was competing to change the global order. There is another blindness that still plagues the West. The Humanist and Christian worldviews that form the West's understanding of reality fail to comprehend the true beliefs of the Shia Twelver Iranian leadership and how those beliefs formulate a worldview that shapes their culture and drives decision-making.³ Furthermore, a new

¹ Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, "OPEC : OPEC Share of World Crude Oil Reserves," accessed January 22, 2019, https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/330.htm.

² This paper defines "West" or "Western" as the civilization built in Europe on a Christian worldview that gave birth to a Humanist worldview and is currently in tension between the two. Therefore, the "West" consists of a mixed view between these predominate worldviews. This civilization encompasses Europe and its former colonies of the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

³ Shia Islam is one of the two main sects of the world's second largest religion. The other sect is Sunni Islam. Their division began after the death of Muhammed and is rooted in succession of power. Shia believed power should pass to Muhammed's lineage while Sunnis believed the next leader should be elected. The Sunni's dominated political power in the Muslim world from the time after Muhammed until

strategic context emerged out of the aftermath of US actions in the Middle East that shifted the Shia Twelver understanding of where they are on their timeline of history. The deeply held belief in the return of the Twelfth Imam is tied to a hope that the profound injustice Muslims feel will soon be reconciled.⁴ This belief is currently the core element to the legitimacy of Iranian leaders. It also provides a powerful motivation for recruitment and a justification for Iranian strategic aims. Finally, the most significant power of the Iranian belief in the Mahdi is their obligation to pave the way for his return. There are competing narratives for the Shia Twelver's understanding of what it means to pave the way, but the Iranian regime is shaping it to legitimize their play for Middle Eastern hegemony and domination of the Sunnis. The most aggressive and dangerous narrative lies in the minority, but it is a latent force that is emerging from the sea of Islam and could create a future that dramatically shifts the balance of power in the global system.

The field of psychology is continually breaking new ground in its attempt to inform us of the crucial aspects of decision-making. Each person operates in a reality created through the unique socialization that defined the environment where they grew up.⁵ This reality is based on a worldview and passed through culture. Together they formulate the answers to basic metaphysical questions, develop the institutions of society, and provide an interpretive lens that creates reality from all the information that flows into a person's mind.⁶ Furthermore, psychologists can identify specific biases inherent in the human decision-making processes,

the 1979 revolution in Iran where a senior Shia clergy member, or Ayatollah, became the head of state of a country for the first time in history.

⁴ The Twelfth Imam is the Shia Twelver messianic figure. He is also called the Mahdi or Qa'im.

⁵ Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 20.

⁶ Every worldview has a story, Humanists believe in the evolutionary, progressive rise of civilization and a more enlightened future. Christianity models itself after the life of Jesus Christ and awaits His return. Shia Twelver Islam models itself after the final prophet Muhammed and his progeny, the 12 Imams, and awaits the return of their Messiah, the Twelfth Imam, or Mahdi.

specifically the propensity to mirror-image when considering other perspectives that often shape inaccurate perceptions of reality. As the United States attempts to forge a strategy that supports its national interests in the Middle East, its decision-makers must first build an accurate understanding of their own reality, compare it to a potential adversaries reality, and then identify the gap between them and the emerging reality that time will produce over the next decade.⁷

The world finds itself in a messianic age. As of 2010, forty-eight percent of American Christians believe Jesus Christ will definitely or probably return by 2050.⁸ Similarly, more than fifty percent of the Muslims in the Middle East believe the Mahdi will return in their lifetime.⁹ Roughly twenty percent of the global Jewish population, or three million Jews, are Orthodox and almost all believe the return of the Jewish Messiah is near.¹⁰ Traditional Judaism believes that the elements of the coming of the Messiah include: “ingathering of the exiles; restoration of the religious courts of justice; an end of wickedness, sin and heresy; reward to the righteous; rebuilding of Jerusalem; restoration of the line of King David; and restoration of Temple service.”¹¹ The Temple Institute is an organization in Jerusalem dedicated to rebuilding the Jewish Temple. It recreated and currently displays the forty Biblical accruements required for temple worship as an act to hasten the return of their Messiah.¹² Global interconnectedness,

⁷ Shimon Naveh, interviewed by the author, Tel Aviv, Oct 28, 2018.

⁸ Media Inquiries, “U.S. Christians’ Views on the Return of Christ,” Pew Research Center, March 26, 2013, accessed October 23, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/03/26/us-christians-views-on-the-return-of-christ/>.

⁹ Media Inquiries, “Muslim Adherence to Articles of Faith,” Pew Research Center, August 9, 2012, accessed October 23, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-3-articles-of-faith/>.

¹⁰ Georgetown University, “Demographics of Judaism,” Berkley Center for Religion, accessed March 19, 2019, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/demographics-of-judaism>.

¹¹ Judaism 101, “Mashiach: The Messiah,” Ideas, accessed March 19, 2019, <http://www.jewfaq.org/mashiach.htm>.

¹² The Temple Institute, “Which Comes First, the Messiah or the Temple?,” accessed March 20, 2019, https://www.templeinstitute.org/messiah_temple.htm.

instability, and Islamic feelings of injustice have converged to create a world that fits well into the prophetic narrative produced by Twelver, Shia Islam over a millennium ago. Understanding that paradigm is essential to influencing it. What people believe affects how they act, and how people act reveals what they believe.

The theological perspective that informs the strategic decisions of Iran is vastly different from the Western Humanist or Christian worldview. Therefore, the potential for misinterpreting the Iranian perspective is high. Very little is written on the relationship between the Iranian Regimes view of eschatology and decision-making other than religious studies from both the Christian and Muslim religious perspectives. Therefore, those shaping US strategy are left few tools to help them recognize and overcome the natural tendency to interpret a different worldview by mirror-imaging their own. Hence, decision-makers reinforce those mirror-images by reliance on Western Humanist paradigms and models. These leave profound blind spots to the motives behind the Iranian political decisions and strategic direction.

The literature written in English from the Shia Twelver mindset is limited. This paper used sources from multiple perspectives, but there are four Shia Muslim scholars that were primarily used to define the Shia perspective: Abdulaziz Sachedina of George Mason University, Moojan Momen an independent scholar, Jassim Hussein of the Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Ayatollah Ibrahim Amini a professor at the Religious Learning Center in Qom, Iran who wrote a book explaining the nature of the return of the Twelfth Imam and how it connects to Iranian foreign policy. Also, there is currently one English speaking media outlet in London, England called Ahlulbayt TV that produces Shia Twelver content including a documentary on how the prophecies signaling the end of time and return of the Mahdi are being

fulfilled.¹³ Ahlulbayt means “people of the house” and refers to the lineage of Muhammed who the Shia identify as the twelve Imams who initially led their religion.¹⁴ Lastly, in 2011 the Iranian regime sponsored a documentary called “The Coming is Upon Us” to prepare its proxy jihadist forces and provide them with a timeline of events that needs to happen for the coming of the Mahdi.¹⁵

The decision-makers in Iran are probably the only leaders in the world where eschatology plays a significant role in their decisions. Eschatology is the branch of theology that studies the events leading to a culmination of human history, final judgment, and often a messianic return of God or His representative.¹⁶ There are ethnic, cultural, religious, tribal, economic, national, and other forces that are competing for influence in every decision. However, no leader in Iran will gain and maintain credibility with the people who do not acknowledge, embrace, and use the concept of the Twelfth Imam. As American Iranian Council research fellow Gabriella Billini points out, Iran is “the only state in the Middle East who’s government is guided by theology,” and its people are deeply motivated by their understanding of where Iran fits into the story of Islam.¹⁷

¹³ Amir Taki, “Signs of the Reappearance - Imam Mahdi,” *Ahlulbayt TV*, June 16, 2017, accessed January 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARFMPo1vSrM>.

¹⁴ Al-Islam, “Ahlul Bayt (‘a): Its Meaning and Origin,” February 27, 2013, accessed 10 January, 2019, <https://www.al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol2-n2-3/ahl-al-bayt-its-meaning-and-origin/ahlul-bayt-its-meaning-and-origin>.

¹⁵ Reza Kahlili, “Iran Supreme Leader: The Islamic Messiah Is Coming Soon to Kill All Infidels,” June 15, 2014, accessed March 31, 2019, <https://dailycaller.com/2014/06/15/iran-supreme-leader-the-shiite-islamic-messiah-is-coming-to-free-the-world/>.

¹⁶ Merriam-Webster, “Definition of Eschatology,” accessed February 25, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eschatology>.

¹⁷ Gabriella Ballini, “Iran’s Use of Religion as a Tool in Its Foreign Policy,” American Iranian Council, accessed January 24, 2019, <http://www.us-iran.org/news/2018/5/1/irans-use-of-religion-as-a-tool-in-its-foreign-policy>.

Many of the individuals with authority to make strategic decisions in Iran over the next ten years forged their worldview during the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the religiously charged battlefields of the Iran-Iraq war that followed. These leaders understand history as a unified story of God revealing himself and bringing judgment upon mankind through the faithful Shia Muslims; recently they began to see their position uniquely at the end of time. Their sincere belief causes them to look for the return of the Mahdi as outlined in the Quran and Hadiths. The Shia Twelvers of Iran are interpreting the unfolding events in the Middle East as signs that the return of their messiah is near. However, there is a generational split amongst the Iranian people that may be the regimes greatest threat. The Green Movement of 2009 demonstrated the frustration of the younger generation, and their dissatisfaction with the corruption of the Ayatollah's regime. Furthermore, the Iranian Christian church is one of the fastest growing in the world with an annual growth rate of twenty percent; though still between one and two percent of the population, more Iranians have converted to Christianity in the last two decades than in the last 1300 years combined.¹⁸ Lastly, almost all the Iranians, regardless of their religious belief, see the regime as corrupt and losing legitimacy.¹⁹ Amongst this competition for the hearts of the people, there is a trend for the leadership to pave the way for the Twelfth Imam through taking action that could expose Iran to greater geopolitical gain, but also higher risk. This understanding exposes particular points of vulnerability that can be exploited to influence this mindset. Iran's understanding of how the Twelfth Imam fits into its national destiny is a point of influence the West should not ignore.

¹⁸ Carey Lodge, "Which Country Has the Fastest-Growing Church in the World?" Christianity Today, September 20, 2016, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/which-country-has-the-fastest-growing-church-in-the-world/95924.htm>.

¹⁹ Abdulaziz Sachedina, interview by the author, George Mason University, Washington DC, 17 Sept, 2018.

This paper covers four sections. Section one starts with the grandest scale of how people perceive reality by developing the concept of a worldview and its resulting perception of reality. It also compares the Western worldview to the Shia Twelver worldview for Western readers to confront the blind spots and bias inherent to all worldviews. Section two gives a broad sweep of history to identify trends by exploring the historical conflict between Islam and the West, the deepening conflict between Islam's two sects, the Shia and Sunni, and how the past 100 years brought the Middle East to a point that fits the Shia prophetic narrative. Section three is an immersion into the Shia Twelver worldview to see their perspective of reality, understand their eschatology, and examine how the millennium-old prophecies anticipating the end of time and the coming of the Twelfth Imam compare to current events. Finally, the fourth section defines the current strategic context in the Middle East and how the national interests of the United States, Iran, Russia, and China are shaping the possibilities of the future.

Section 1: Worldviews and Clashing Realities

More than Iran's enemies need artillery, guns and so forth, they need to spread cultural values that lead to moral corruption. They have said this many times. I recently read in the news that a senior official in an important American political center, said: "Instead of bombs, send them miniskirts." He is right. If they arouse sexual desires in any given country, if they spread unrestrained mixing of men and women, and if they lead youth to behavior to which they are naturally inclined by instincts, there will no longer be any need for artillery and guns against that nation.

—Ayatollah Khamenei Address on Iranian State TV, 2003

Worldviews are a framework through which individuals perceive their surroundings and develop a concept of reality. This section will examine how they are formed, why they are necessary, their fundamental differences, and frame reality from the US and Iranian worldviews to identify the gaps between them. The United States is composed of two primary worldviews, a Christian and Humanistic perspective. Whereas, Iranian decision-makers operate from a Twelver, Shia Islamic worldview. The development of US strategy in the Middle East is fundamentally

shaped and influenced by the Western worldview. However, an effective strategy that achieves its aim requires an accurate and clear perception of the Iranian worldview.

Worldviews consist of a social construction of reality developed at a young age when children receive beliefs, values, and customs from their culture in what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman call primary socialization.²⁰ This transferred construct develops the worldview, or lens, that an individual uses to perceive facts and relationships to create a concept of reality and make decisions. As a child grows up, they begin to question the assumptions of the worldview transferred to them in primary socialization and compare it to others. This process is called the secondary socialization.²¹ At this point, an individual tests the evidence and logic of different assumptions and sometimes changes to a different worldview. However, this is difficult because it usually comes at a social cost.

There are competing worldviews because the human mind is the only life form on earth that contemplates certain perplexing questions. The exploration of time, space, and information with the five senses and the logic of the mind answers some of these questions. The Western world developed the scientific method to categorize this search, and organized the resulting disciplines into the physical and social sciences. However, there are some mysteries beyond time and space that cannot be discovered in a laboratory. People have debated them from time immemorial and will no doubt continue to do so.

The Foundations

Varying answers to four basic metaphysical questions drive the competition between different worldviews.²² Those questions are: (1) What are the origins of the Universe and life? (2)

²⁰ Berger and Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, 129.

²¹ Ibid., 138.

²² Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space. Metaphysical questions deal with issues of human belief and understanding.

What happens to human beings when they die? (3) What defines morality, or right and wrong? (4) What defines purpose in life?²³ The answers to these questions drive the assumptions whether there is a God, who or what it is, and what humanity's relationship to that God should be. Determining how each person and culture answers those questions with a coherent, logical framework is essential to understanding the motivations behind their decisions.

On the most general level, there are seven categories of worldviews: theism, deism, humanism -- including atheism and agnosticism -- pantheism, panentheism, finite godism, and polytheism.²⁴ Each of these are unique and exclusive except for similarities between pantheism and polytheism.²⁵ The exclusivity comes from each worldview answering the four metaphysical questions differently and then building a logical framework on those different answers. The two worldviews this paper is concerned with is theism and humanism. Theism perspectives include Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Their central principle is that there is one creator God who reveals Himself in a particular written Word. That particular written Word is the foundation of their theistic worldview and provides answers to the four metaphysical questions. For Judaism, it is the Tanach or Jewish Bible; for the Christians, it consists of the Tanach, which they call the Old Testament, and the New Testament; for the Muslims, it is the Quran and the Hadiths. Next, there are the humanistic perspectives of atheism and agnosticism. Their central principle is that there is nothing outside of time, space, and matter, no higher being, or at least it cannot be known if there is one, and humans are the beginning and end of all knowledge.²⁶

²³ Bill Pratt, "How Should We Analyze a Worldview?" June 8, 2012, accessed October 28, 2018, <https://www.toughquestionsanswered.org/2012/06/08/how-should-we-analyze-a-worldview/>.

²⁴ Ibid., 599.

²⁵ Norman L. Geisler, *The Big Book of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 599.

²⁶ Ibid.

A worldview is a framework that interprets the data input from the physical and social world and creates a sense of reality and meaning to an individual and a societies life.²⁷ Every framework is logical. However, the logic rests on the foundation of the assumptions made about the four primary metaphysical questions. The resulting logical superstructure produces a picture of reality.²⁸

Western Worldview

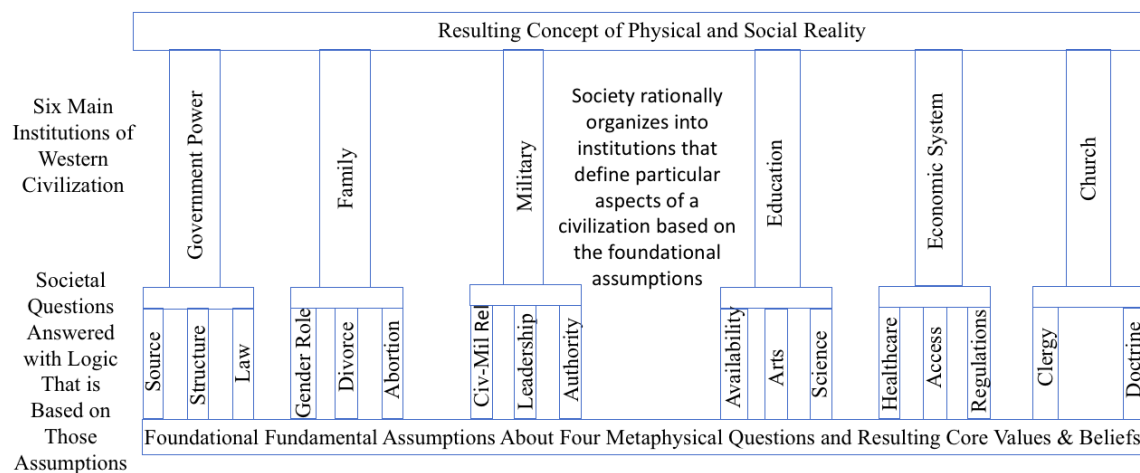


Figure 1. Model of the Western Worldview. Created by the Author.

Seeing reality from a completely different worldview requires empathy to understand a foreign perspective. The human mind is biased toward its own perspective, and empathy to immerse into another's perspective does not come naturally. Furthermore, dealing with the issues of worldview is confronting because an individual or culture's worldview consists of the underlying assumptions and beliefs used to formulate the core principles of their meaning and morality.²⁹ A challenge to someone's worldview is a challenge to their source of identity. No human being gets a vote in where on the globe and when in history they are born; and whichever

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See figure one and five as examples of the Western and Islamic worldviews.

²⁹ Ken Funk, "What Is a Worldview?," Oregon State University, March 21, 2001, accessed March 30, 2019, <http://web.engr.oregonstate.edu/~funkk/Personal/worldview.html>.

worldview is correct, there are almost eight billion people on this world who believe theirs is the correct one. It is wise then to gain an understanding of adversary's worldview to help discern the justification for their decisions and avoid strategic miscalculation.

If US decision-makers do not understand an adversary's worldview, they will likely mirror-image their own worldview on the adversary and misperceive how an adversary interprets reality. The resulting gap creates a risk of US actions resulting in undesirable and self-defeating second and third order effects. Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman identifies mirror-imaging as a type of cognitive bias that assumes "that others will act the same as we would, given similar circumstances or that the same dynamic is in play when something seems to accord with an analyst's past experiences. It is also the tendency to assume that others share the same or similar thoughts, beliefs, value or positions."³⁰ As Donald Rumsfeld quipped, "There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say; there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns."³¹ Understanding another's worldview will help reduce the risk of unknown unknowns when acting in competition with them. This process starts with an understanding of ourselves and identifying the inherent bias that affects our own perception of reality.

Christian Worldview

The Christian worldview is focused on relationship. It defines time and space as finite and created by an infinite, personal God who is defined in the Bible and is involved in individual lives.³² God revealed Himself to humanity through the Bible and the life and death of Jesus Christ, providing redemption to man's fallen condition and restoring a relationship He intended

³⁰ Assessment Capabilities Project, "ACAPS Technical Brief Cognitive Biases," accessed January 21, 2019, https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/resources/files/acaps_technical_brief_cognitive_biases_march_2016.pdf.

³¹ "NATO Speech: Press Conference US SoD - NATO HQ, Brussels - 6 June 2002," *Cognitive Biases*, March, 2016, accessed January 21, 2019, <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s020606g.htm>.

³² See figure two.

when humankind was created.³³ God’s character as revealed in the Bible and the life of Jesus Christ defines morality.³⁴ God is allowing history to unfold in a way that allows people to choose or reject His plan of redemption. Purpose is defined as engaging in a relationship with God through accepting the forgiveness offered through the sacrifice of Christ and living a life that is a testament to God’s truth claims through choices that resemble the humble and righteous life of Christ.³⁵ Destiny will be played out at an appointed time when He, in the form of Jesus Christ, will return to earth to make an end to sin and its destructive consequences. The organizing principle of the Christian worldview is to follow Christ’s example of unconditional love for God and fellow man. When Jesus was asked the greatest commandment, he defined the principle with the words “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”³⁶

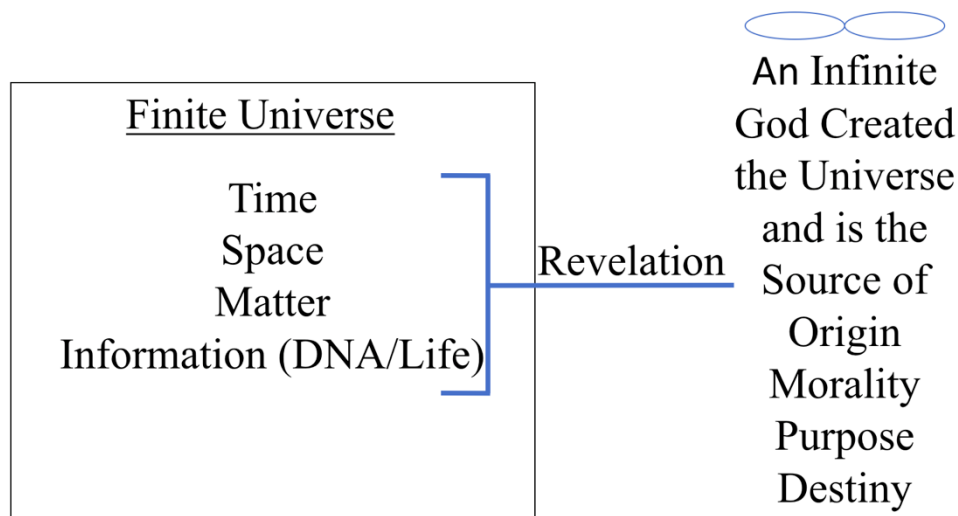


Figure 2. Theistic Concept of Time, Space, and Reality. Created by the Author.

³³ Alex Crain, “What Is Christianity?,” Christianity, July 23, 2013, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.christianity.com/god/jesus-christ/the-basics/what-is-christianity-alex-crain.html>.

³⁴ All About Worldview, “Christian Ethics,” accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.allaboutworldview.org/christian-ethics.htm>.

³⁵ Patheos, “Human Nature and the Purpose of Existence,” accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/library/christianity/beliefs/human-nature-and-the-purpose-of-existence>.

³⁶ Matthew 22:37-38, (New American Standard Bible).

The Christian worldview formed the foundation of Western civilization and allowed the eventual separation of church and state.³⁷ In his article on the *Roots of Muslim Rage*, Bernard Lewis shows how this separation is grounded in Jesus Christ's answer to his apostles to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."³⁸ However, as Wilfred McClay from the University of Tennessee points out, that separation was only politically realized after the Reformation broke the political power of the Catholic Church and "the bloody wars of the 16th century had made the principle of religious toleration seem inevitable, and therefore, the need for a secular state."³⁹ The idea of democracy grew in the West until it culminated in the political experiment of the United States. The discoverers of the New World expanded the culture of religious tolerance, where people worshiped as they chose, and the government was produced by the people and inherently a place of compromise. However, Western civilization had a tipping point in the early 20th century where Western culture began to embrace a Humanistic worldview.

Humanist Worldview

The underlying assumption in the Humanistic perspective, which includes agnostics and atheists, is that anything outside of observable time and space does not exist or cannot be known and has no bearing on their concept of reality.⁴⁰ They leave metaphysical questions that science cannot answer to future discovery or perhaps the perpetual unknown. The theory of the Big Bang posits that the Universe began in a singularity about fifteen billion years ago.⁴¹ According to Stephen Hawking, the current theories of physics can be combined to generally describe the

³⁷ Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic*, September, 1990, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/>.

³⁸ Matthew 22:21, (NASB).

³⁹ Media Inquiries, "Religion and Secularism: The American Experience," Pew Research Center, December 3, 2007, accessed October 23, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/12/03/religion-and-secularism-the-american-experience/>.

⁴⁰ Atheists assert there is no God or metaphysical realm, Agnostics are skeptics who believe it is impossible to know if there is a God or metaphysical realm because it cannot be scientifically tested.

⁴¹ Stephen Hawking, "The Origin of the Universe," Stephen Hawking, accessed March 23, 2019, <http://www.hawking.org.uk/the-origin-of-the-universe.html>.

beginning of the Universe as multiple bubbles emerging from something, but where it came from, or why it happened is beyond those theories.⁴² Because all metaphysical questions begin and end with humanity, morality is relative to each society and is based on the rules of cooperation that the majority of a particular society agrees will ensure their survival and ability to thrive.⁴³ Human purpose is generally defined as self-actualization; it is free to be chosen by the individual and is not determined by an outside source. Richard Dawkins, a leading Western Humanist, says that humans have two purposes. First, they are survival machines with the purpose of competing long enough to pass on their genes. However, because they evolved bigger brains, they also have the capability to ask why they are here, and that “spirit of inquiry” defines their purpose. The setting of any goal they chose provides purpose and he believes the ultimate purpose is contributing to the “complete understanding of the Universe.”⁴⁴ However, there is no purpose beyond death, so it is illogical to pursue a purpose that lies outside of this Universe, especially at the cost of life. The organizing principle of the Humanistic view is to seek self-actualization and maximize happiness in this life because people cease to exist at physical death. Abraham Maslow was a Humanist, and his famous hierarchy of needs provides a framework for this Humanist organizing principle.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Fred Edwords, “The Human Basis Of Laws And Ethics,” American Humanist Association, accessed April 2, 2019, <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/human-basis-laws-ethics/>.

⁴⁴ Richard Dawkins, “Why Are We Here? What Is the Purpose of Life,” Atheist Republic, accessed April 2, 2019, <http://www.atheistrepublic.com/documentary/what-is-the-purpose-of-life-richard-dawkins>.

⁴⁵ Psychology Today, “Our Hierarchy of Needs,” *Psychology Today*, accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hide-and-seek/201205/our-hierarchy-needs>.

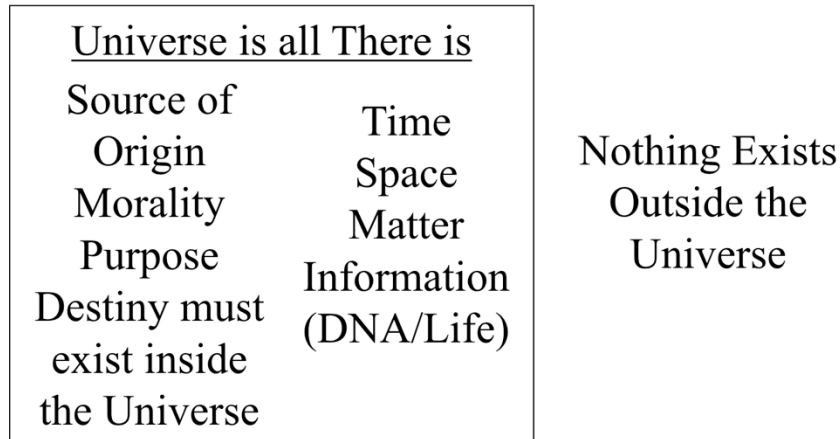


Figure 3. Humanist Concept of Time and Space, and Reality. Created by the Author.

Maslow's hierarchy is an inadequate model to explain the behavior of people and specifically the Muslim world. It is a Humanist model based on the assumption that meeting a series of human needs brings ultimate fulfillment. Therefore, using the model to understand theistic worldviews, who find their purpose in an eternal object outside of the universe, is a classic case of mirror-image bias. Often, actions from a theistic worldview are considered irrational, because the idea of a rational worldview is defined as one that fits Maslow's hierarchy. Take for instance Christian missionaries who risk death trying to share the "good news" of the Gospel in foreign lands; they forgo Maslow's hierarchy. Furthermore, this paradigm is commonly used to claim an unfulfilled hierarchy drives people to "radical" Islamic ideology, including Iran's desire to wipe Israel from the map and conquer the world.⁴⁶ Yet, the terrorists who flew into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, showed no regard for their physical needs, only their metaphysical needs.

⁴⁶ Sarah Sewall, "Combating Terrorism: Looking Over the Horizon - Remarks by Under Secretary Sarah Sewall," U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, June 15, 2015, accessed January 14, 2019, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2015/06/15/combating-terrorism-looking-over-the-horizon-remarks-by-under-secretary-sarah-sewall/>.

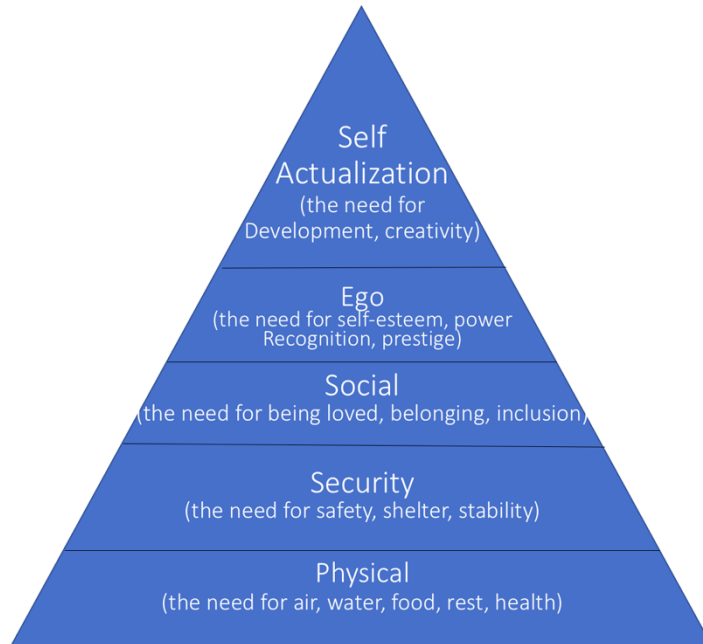


Figure 4. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Created by the Author.

The human condition is rational, emotional, affected by physical needs, but driven by metaphysical needs. Human beings do make decisions based on their basic physical needs, but a more profound desire for meaning and purpose in life, to spend their life doing something greater than themselves, more fundamentally shapes their actions.⁴⁷ Viktor Frankl, in his seminal work, *Man's Search for Meaning*, reveals the power of meaning in an individual's life was the most significant factor to determine the survival of Holocaust victims during World War 2.⁴⁸ Regardless of their physical strength, those Jews whose purpose in life was their own happiness died, while those who found purpose outside of themselves persevered and survived the unspeakable horror of the death camps.⁴⁹ To analyze someone's decision-making, it is critical to

⁴⁷ Holder Herwig, *The Marne, 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2011), 25.

⁴⁸ Emily Esfahani Smith, "There's More to Life Than Being Happy," *The Atlantic*, January 9, 2013, accessed October 12, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/theres-more-to-life-than-being-happy/266805/>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

understand how they define their purpose in life. For the Shia Twelver leaders of Iran purpose, individual and national, lies in looking forward to and preparing for the return of their Mahdi.

The separation of church and state is a critical understanding that shapes both the Humanist and Christian worldviews, but this concept does not exist in Islam. In the West, the church and state influence each other, but neither dominates the other. This tension allows a shared society with six significant institutions that organize physical and social reality.⁵⁰ Both church and state organize society and help allocate resources to meet society's needs. The purpose of this society, as outlined in the Declaration of Independence, is to enable all citizens the pursuit of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. American values are security, liberty, and prosperity.⁵¹ However, Islam is fundamentally different, and though Friedrich Nietzsche declared in 1882 that God is dead, eighty-four percent of the world and ninety-nine percent of the Middle East still thinks of some God or gods as very much alive.⁵²

Islamic Worldview

Iran is ruled by clergy who embrace the Shia Twelver Islamic worldview. Islam's understanding of time and space has similarities to the Christian view in that a God created the Universe and provided a revelation through the Quran and Muhammed's life as outlined in the Hadiths. However, the character of God and the questions of morality and purpose are answered much differently in the Quran. Muhamad founded the religion in 610 AD and authored its foundational document, the Quran, by the time of his death in 632 AD. He was the first to unite the disparate Arab tribes, and within one generation, those tribes conquered more territory than any other civilization up to that point in history. This rapid rise of political and military power

⁵⁰ See figure one.

⁵¹ George Friedman, *America's Secret War* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), 59.

⁵² All About Worldview, "Nietzsche and the Madman," Philosophy, accessed March 30, 2019, <https://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/nietzsche-and-the-madman.htm>.

Worldometers, "World Population Clock: 7.7 Billion People (2019)," accessed January 21, 2019, <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>.

resulted in the Hadiths defining a worldview that placed all aspects and institutions of a society under religious law.⁵³

The Quran and the four Shia Hadiths produce a legal code, called Sharia law, that defines morality and fundamentally integrates the political, religious, educational, and military spheres. From its inception, Islam encompassed all of society in one legal code that directs behavior in all areas of life. As George Friedman explains, “at the heart of the empire was the Caliph, a ruler who combined political, military, and religious authority.”⁵⁴ The destiny of Islam is for this Caliph to ultimately rule the world. Shia Islam called its Caliph an Imam and believed they spoke infallibly and could do no sin. The destiny of individual Muslims depends on how well they lived Sharia or executed jihad and is determined by Allah after death. The organizing principle of Islam is to live a life according to Sharia law that modeled Muhammed, and advanced Islam. The fundamental difference between Western civilization and Islam is in their respective understanding of purpose, morality and how society is defined between church and state. Therefore, authentic Islam provides no possibility for an institutional separation of church and state and elevates religious law to dominate the political sphere.⁵⁵ These differences create wide disparities in the realities they perceive. Iran built its government on this worldview, and the Shia clergy hold enormous power as a result.

⁵³ Hadiths are books written by Muhammed's closest confidants based on words and actions of Muhammed.

⁵⁴ Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic*.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Iran's Islamic Worldview

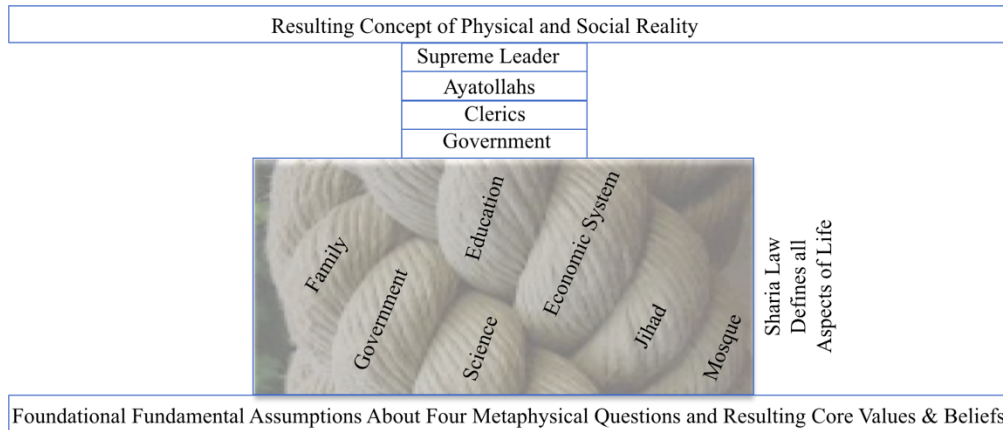


Figure 5. Model of the Islamic Worldview. Created by the Author.

The Western worldview tends to determine Iran's actions as either rational or "radical" based on whether those actions fit into a Western understanding of reality. However, this dichotomy only exists in the paradigm of the Western worldview. Iran is both rational and a true believer in its ideology. Exporting the Islamic revolution is central to the Iranian regime, but the regime understands that for an ideology to survive in a global order dominated by the Western idea of nation-states, it must have a state with sufficient economic and military strength to support the ideology's organization, implementation, and defense.⁵⁶ Therefore, Iran will change its course on a dime if they think the viability of the economy or the state is at risk. Blend this rationality with a celebration of martyrdom in their role to bring about the Twelfth Imam, and the human wave attacks that cleared minefields in the Iran-Iraq war begin to be rational. At what point a worldview's rationality dictates the worthiness of dying for its beliefs is a point that is difficult to know but looking at the Bushido worldview of the Japanese helps shed light on the question.

Desperation creates fertile ground to plant a metaphysical justification to make the ultimate sacrifice. For instance, during World War 2 the first kamikaze attack is recorded on

⁵⁶ Eado Hecht, Interviewed by Author, Tel Aviv, Israel, 30 Oct, 2018.

twenty-five October 1944.⁵⁷ The Japanese pilots already knew the war was lost for their empire, but 3,843 Japanese pilots voluntarily flew their aircraft in suicide attacks.⁵⁸ Their primary motivation was to serve their worldview that the Yamato race was superior and protect their families with honor; “they were preoccupied by philosophical ideas such as how to find some spiritual value in their brief lives, how to spend their remaining time meaningfully, and how to philosophically justify their suicidal act.”⁵⁹ The Iranians are not motivated by physical desperation, they are motivated by a strong metaphysical commitment. Increasing the consequences of Iranian action will likely not have a powerful effect on changing their strategic direction. If someone believes what they are doing gives them purpose and meaning, then they can endure much to ensure its accomplishment. Iranian leaders believe their actions through proxy groups around the Middle East are helping fulfill the requirements for the return of the Twelfth Imam. Therefore, US efforts should undermine the connection between those actions and the expectation of fulfilled prophecies and also expose the corruption of the leaders making those decisions.

Human existence is fundamentally social and defined by relationships. In this relational existence, a powerful force is the human will. The core of warfare is competition, and Carl Von Clausewitz, the great military theorist, defined warfare as the relationship between parties attempting to impose their wills on each other.⁶⁰ Therefore, the most powerful force in the human experience is a vast collection of coherent, determined wills toward a single objective. Great leadership harnesses the forces that align these wills and accomplishes the seemingly impossible.

⁵⁷ History, “First Kamikaze Attack of the War Begins,” History, last updated August 21, 2018, accessed January 28, 2019, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-kamikaze-attack-of-the-war-begins>.

⁵⁸ Yuki Tanaka, “Japan’s Kamikaze Pilots and Contemporary Suicide Bombers: War and Terror” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, July 6, 2005, accessed January 28, 2019, <https://apjpf.org/-Yuki-Tanaka/1606/article.html>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Indexed Edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 87.

Muhammed was such a man, who was able to bring together disparate tribes under one belief. Once consolidated, this force unleashed itself on the Eastern Roman Empire, Persia, and North Africa and conquered a vast territory far more extensive than the Arabian Peninsula where it was born. Today, Iran's Supreme Leader seeks a path toward uniting the Shia of the Muslim world under one cause that would consolidate the Islamic world under his leadership and ultimately repeat Muhammed's great accomplishment.

In a monotheistic worldview with a distinct eschatology that defines the last chapter of history, the great question is where does God's responsibility stop and the people's responsibility start. The Iranian's believe in God's sovereignty, but also believe that they and their government are held responsible by Allah for their decisions. The critical point for Iran's decision-makers is where God's sovereignty ends, and their responsibility to bring about the Twelfth Imam begins. All monotheistic worldviews must answer this question, and as Iran debates how much action and risk they should take to bring about the return of the Mahdi, their success or failure will be determined as a blessing or rebuke from Allah.

Section 2: The Shifting of the Tide and the Expectation for the Twelfth Imam

Tides naturally shift with the gravitational pull of the moon, but other elements can converge to amplify its power. When tides rise into the long, shallow, and narrowing bay in Alaska called Turnagain Arm, it creates what is called a bore tide that builds momentum until it is a wave as high as ten feet tall sweeping through the bay.⁶¹

Similar to tides, the conflict between civilizations both rise and fall, and the past sets the stage for the possibilities of the future. Sometimes circumstances converge to create a wave of change that can wash through a system and fundamentally reshape its trajectory. The historical conflict between the Islamic civilization in the Middle East and Christian civilization in Europe

⁶¹ "Alaska Bore Tide: When, Where & How to See It," *Alaska*, accessed March 30, 2019, <http://www.alaska.org/advice/alaska-bore-tide>.

defined two fundamentally different worldviews locked in a struggle for dominance and survival. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War 1 ended the struggle, but only for a time. The deepening conflict between Islam's two sects, the Shia and Sunni, unleashed by the civil war in Iraq is contributing to the regional events of the past 100 years and bringing Iran to believe they are now at the threshold of the Twelfth Imam's return.

The generation of Arabs after Muhammed successfully conquered many of the former territories of the Western Roman Empire and threatened the Eastern Roman Empire. For the next six hundred years, the struggle continued through Crusades in the east and the fall of Spain to Islamic forces in the west. The French successfully stopped Muslim encroachment in western France, but the Muslims overwhelmed the Eastern Roman Empire with the fall of Constantinople in 1453 AD.

The history of Islam began in the Arabian Peninsula during the fifth century and was one of expansion, domination, golden-age, 600-year domination by the Turks, and then collapse. The story noticeably changed after World War 1, and a sense of hopelessness enveloped the followers of Islam in what Bernard Lewis called the "crisis of Islam."⁶²

From the Western point of view, a 1400-year geopolitical struggle between Islam and the West ended at the conclusion of World War 1 when the defeat of the Ottoman Empire shattered the power of the unified Muslim world. For the first time since Muhammed, the Islamic Caliphate ceased to exist. The colonial powers of Britain, France, and Russia carved the land of the caliphate into modern nations after the Westphalian model, of their own design, and for their own benefit through the Sykes-Picot agreement.⁶³ This agreement intended to permanently eliminate

⁶² Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), xvii.

⁶³ Yale Law School, "The Sykes-Picot Agreement : 1916," The Avalon Project, accessed January 20, 2019, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/sykes.asp.

The Westphalian model refers to the Treaty of Westphalia that ended Europe's religious wars in 1648 and established the nation-state as the arbiter of violence reducing small wars, feuds, and pillaging that left Europe with twenty-five percent of the population dead or displaced during the Thirty-Years War.

the Muslim threat that attempted to conquer Europe on three different occasions.⁶⁴ However, 100 years after World War 1, the Muslim world is growing closer to consolidating its power once again.

The Muslim view of the defeat of the Ottoman Empire at the conclusion of World War 1 differed. The domination by its archenemy, the Christian West, precipitated a crisis in the Muslim mind, for the great civilization based on the legal code of Islam is meant to prove its validity through unchecked global domination, not a total defeat.⁶⁵

Modern Salafism, the idea that was born in the nineteenth century through the rise of the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, called Muslims to adhere as close as possible to the example of Muhammed and his followers.⁶⁶ This idea found fertile ground in the defeated and frustrated minds of the Islamic clerics and thinkers who chaffed at the authoritarian, secular rulers. Those rulers were embracing a Western culture the clerics saw as incompatible with Islamic values and morally decadent for Muslims.

The secular direction of the Islamic world continued for three decades but found increasing resistance by these Islamic religious leaders. The Western focus on materialism and economic growth did not overcome this resistance as it did in Germany and Japan after Nazism and Bushido exhausted themselves in the defeat of World War 2. A senior fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy, Shadi Hamid, explains how Islam is different from other religions; “Unlike Jesus Christ, the Prophet Muhammad was a theologian, a preacher, a warrior, and a politician, all

⁶⁴ Charles Martel defeated the first Muslim invasion into France in 732. The West then stopped Muslim expansion into Europe at the first siege of Vienna 1529. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the subsequent collapse of the Eastern Roman Empire opened Europe to invasion which again reached as far as Vienna in 1683.

⁶⁵ David Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 215.

⁶⁶ Joas Wagemakers, “Religion: Salafism,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, August, 2016, accessed January 19, 2019, <http://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-255>.

at once.”⁶⁷ He calls Islam exceptional and explains that because “of its outsize role in law and governance, Islam has been—and will continue to be—resistant to secularization.”⁶⁸

Salafism's adherents began to grow the moment the Ottoman Empire capitulated to the Western powers, but they had no political power and had to answer why the Caliphate fell to infidels. Many of the states born from the death of the Ottoman Empire were led by dictators or kings who pursued the Western secular model. Among them was the Shah of Iran, King Abdullah of Jordan, Gamal Nasser of Egypt, and Ataturk of Turkey.

However, within these secular regimes two individuals, Sayyid Qutb, a Sunni Muslim, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a Shia Muslim, rose from their respective sects of Islam and provided political and intellectual leadership to the Muslim world. These two men identified America culture, which they saw as degenerate, as the “great Satan” and the biggest threat to the Muslim world.⁶⁹ They both explained the fall of the Caliphate as judgment for corruption in the Muslim community and made a call for religious purity, application of Sharia law, and a fighting spirit against the Western world order. Western culture was the symptom of Western political domination through the establishment of nation states. The resulting secular puppet governments in the Middle East that engaged in global trade and diplomacy formed a religiously illegitimate world order that must be replaced with a single Islamic government or Caliphate.⁷⁰ Now, one hundred years later the convulsions that have yet to break the grip of the Western nation-state restrictions on Islamic power grows. The question remains whether what is born will once again challenge the security of an American-led global order, will it coexist with the current global

⁶⁷ Shadi Hamid, “How Islam Is Different from Other Religions,” Brookings, November 30, 2001, accessed, March 14, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/how-islam-is-different-from-other-religions/>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, 81.

⁷⁰ Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 153.

order, or will it be still-born and the status quo domination of modernism will continue over the Muslim lands.

The nation of Israel is a splinter in the eye of the Muslim world and represents the only non-Islamic country to exist in traditionally Muslim lands. Islam views Israel's birth as a representation of the power of the West over the Islamic world. The idea of Israel as a modern nation came into being during World War 1 in the Balfour Declaration.⁷¹ The journey to statehood culminated in 1947 as a byproduct of the United Nations restructuring the world after World War 2. Eleven minutes after Israel's creation, The United States became the first nation to recognize the new country.⁷² Israel is a Western-style democracy with Western values. After surviving an attack by five Muslim nations immediately after its birth with little outside military support, the small country eventually found a patron in France and then the United States that provides military, political, and nuclear advantage over the surrounding sea of former and current adversaries.⁷³

Although the Muslim nations failed to eliminate Israel from their midst, Islamic leaders' resistance against Israel became a standard call and necessary for politico-religious legitimacy amongst the Islamic world. In 2012 during a speech marking the end of the month of Ramadan, the Supreme Leader of Iran declared "The great powers have dominated the destiny of the Islamic countries for years and...installed the Zionist cancerous tumor in the heart of the Islamic

⁷¹ The Balfour Declaration was a public statement issued by the British government in 1917 supporting the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in the Palestinian region. For 1400 years Palestine was part of a Muslim empire or contested by Crusaders from the Holy Roman Empire. For the previous 400 years, Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire. The British sought Jewish support against the Ottoman's in World War 1 and sought the empires collapse. This shift in the global order from the age of empires to the age of states began in 1648 at the treaty of Westphalia and effectively ended in World War 2 when the US redefined global interaction with the Bretton-Woods agreement. Within this global transition, a seam opened that allowed Zionist Jews to return to Palestine and establish a modern state.

⁷² Truman Library, "Recognition of Israel," accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/dbq/israel.php>.

⁷³ US Department of State, "The Arab-Israeli War of 1948," Office of the Historian, accessed March 12, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/arab-israeli-war>.

world...many of the problems facing the Muslim world are due to the existence of the Zionist regime.”⁷⁴ A call for the destruction of Israel is one of the few points Muslim nations find almost universal agreement, and it will continue to be a crucial source of legitimacy for leadership in the Muslim world. Resisting and attacking Israel is an indirect, and arguably a direct, attack on its most significant supporter, the United States, and its global order that helped establish the state.

The year 1979 set in motion forces that continue to fundamentally shape the Middle East. The Muslim world began to rise from its sleep and bludgeon the Western oriented autocracies ruling them like a battering ram that begins its slow methodical assault on a reinforced door. First Islamists took over the Grand Mosque in Mecca challenging the religious credentials of the House of Saud to preside over the holy place. The Saudis responded with a deal to allow the Salafist Wahhabis have a free hand in determining the social norms of the kingdom and generous funding for madrassas around the world that taught their pure form of Sunni Islam that stood against rights for women, Shia, or coexistence with any other worldview.⁷⁵ This lurch toward pure, fundamental Islam coincided with the Shia Islamic revolution in Iran and a competition for leadership in the Muslim world began. Both of these movements were fed by a surge in the price of oil and an enormous amount of money to support their agendas. Additionally, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan began in 1979 providing a furnace that forged a Sunni Mujahadeen resistance that eventually became Al Qaeda.⁷⁶

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was the direct descendant of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, a Sunni branch acting out the Jihad-Salafist ideology of Sayyid Qutb. The original leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, instigated a sectarian civil war in Iraq between the Sunni

⁷⁴ Greg Tepper, “Israel a ‘Cancerous Tumor’ and Middle East’s Biggest Problem, Iranian Supreme Leader Says,” *Times of Israel*, August 19, 2012, accessed February 23, 2019, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/khamenei-israeli-a-malignant-zionist-tumor/>.

⁷⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, “For the Mideast, It’s Still 1979,” *The New York Times*, December 21, 2017, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/29/opinion/thomas-friedman-for-the-mideast-its-still-1979.html>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

and Shia that spread and entrenched itself like never before in Islamic history.⁷⁷ Historically, the Shia and Sunni lived side-by-side in relative peace. Many relate the Sunni-Shia split to the Catholic-Protestant split in Christendom during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. However, this is a poor comparison because the violence between the two groups was never as acute or brutal as the Catholic Church and Protestants during the Thirty-Years War.⁷⁸ That is changing, and the violence is growing across the Middle East.

Unintended Consequences

For over 1000 years the Shia played the role of underdog and did not challenge the Sunnis for political power in the Muslim world. However, all that changed in 1979 with the consolidation of Shia clerical power after the Iranian revolution. The Iranian regime survived its first trial when Saddam Hussein attempted to seize Iran's oil fields and critical access to the Persian Gulf in the 1980s Iran-Iraq war.⁷⁹ Just over a decade later the United States did Iran a great favor by eliminating Saddam Hussein and his Sunni minority that ruled the mostly Shia nation of Iraq. Iran quickly became actively engaged against the Salafist Sunni elements in Iraq through extensive support of the Shia militias that ultimately won the country and controlled the government.⁸⁰ Never in the history of Islam did the Shia have such power as they now find in the state of Iran, and with it, they find a pole position for the role of hegemon of the Middle East.⁸¹

The turmoil that erupted across the Middle East in 2012 demonstrated the gap between the West and Iran's perception of reality. The United States coined the turmoil as the "Arab

⁷⁷ George Michael, "The Legend and Legacy of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi," *Journal Defence Studies*, September 12, 2007, accessed 19 January 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14702430701559248?src=recsys&journalCode=fdef20>, 338-57.

⁷⁸ Vox, "The Middle East's Cold War, Explained," *Vox*, July 17, 2017, accessed January 20, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veMFCFyOwFI&t=329s>.

⁷⁹ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Iran-Iraq War | Causes, Summary, Casualties, & Facts," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed March 31, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Iran-Iraq-War>.

⁸⁰ Garrett Nada, "Part 1: Iran's Role in Iraq," Wilson Center, April 26, 2018, accessed January 23, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-1-irans-role-iraq>.

⁸¹ Meir Litvak, interviewed by author, Tel Aviv University, Oct 30, 2018.

Spring” and hoped for democracies to spring from the collapsing autocracies; the Ayatollah of Iran labeled it as an “Islamic Awakening” that was a “miraculous fulfillment of divine promise” of a sweeping Islamic revival.⁸² Egypt’s attempt at democracy resulted in a coup that recreated an autocracy. Meanwhile Libya, Yemen, and Syria became failed states where Salafist groups thrive, and the Shia and Sunni continue to wrestle for power. The West looked for democracies to emerge, and Iran looked for theocracies. The final score was zero democracies, three failed states, one coup, and as Iranian lawmaker Ali Reza Zakani pointed out, Iran controlling four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sanaa.⁸³

The Muslim world is deeply divided by the Shia and Sunni competing for a consolidation of power, and both sides perceive they are facing existential threats.⁸⁴ Middle East relationships are plagued by sectarian, national, ethnic, and cultural divides creating a complex system that promises the solution to one problem will likely create several new ones. Furthermore, any bid for leadership in this environment faces an overwhelming challenge to persuade these disparate factions and states to cooperate.⁸⁵ Yet, the competition for this leadership is coming to a head.

⁸² Kissinger, *World Order*, 146.

⁸³ Middle East Monitor, “Sanaa Is the Fourth Arab Capital to Join the Iranian Revolution,” Middle East Monitor, September 27, 2014, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140927-sanaa-is-the-fourth-arab-capital-to-join-the-iranian-revolution/>.

⁸⁴ Max Fisher, “How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 2018, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-proxy-war.html>.

⁸⁵ Max Fisher, “The Middle East, Explained in One (Sort of Terrifying) Chart,” *Washington Post*, August 26, 2013, accessed January 26, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/08/26/the-middle-east-explained-in-one-sort-of-terrifying-chart/>.

Relationships in the Middle East

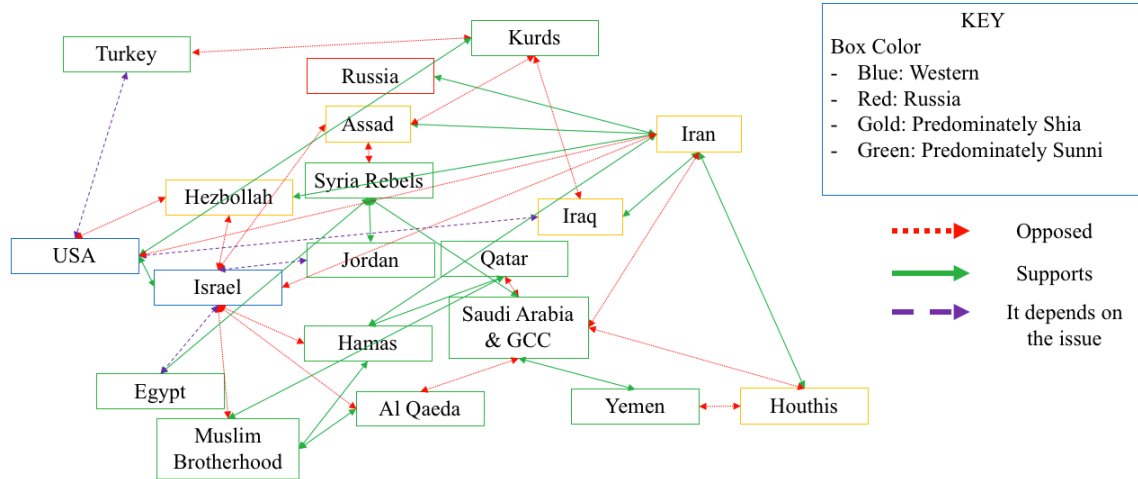


Figure 6. Sketch Demonstrating the Complexity of the Relationships in the Middle East. Created by the Author.

From this melee of relationships and interests, there are only a few contenders who have the potential to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Islamic world and also possess the military and economic power to back it up. There are four real states in the Middle East, and the rest of the nations are tribes with flags. Turkey, Iran, Israel, and Egypt are somewhat stable polities with human, technological, economic, and military resources that can project power outside their borders.⁸⁶

Egypt exhausted its leadership potential in the 1960s and 1970s with a failed pan-Arabic bid built on secular dictatorships. The resulting wars with Israel in 1956, 1967, and 1973 culminated in defeat and a peace treaty solidifying Egyptian acceptance of Israel as a state. Egypt now struggles to support the Middle East's largest population off of the banks of the Nile, a small oil industry, and an economy wracked by corruption and revolution over the last five years.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Aaron David Miller, "Tribes With Flags," *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2013, accessed March 31, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/02/27/tribes-with-flags/>.

⁸⁷ Shadi Bushra and Maggie Fick, "More People, Less Water Mean Rising Food Imports for Egypt," *Reuters*, July 9, 2014, accessed March 13, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-water-analysis-idUSKBN0F818120140709>.

Therefore, only Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey remain as possible contenders to lead the Muslim world.

The House of Saud has a tenuous hold on power and is unlikely to dominate or lead the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is staggering under a debt load that paid for social stability over the last generation and is competing in a global energy market that it no longer dominates. Meanwhile, it faces conflict with Iran on two flanks, Yemen and Syria, that is becoming more costly and producing very little return.⁸⁸ Furthermore, salafist elements of the Sunni faith like Al Qaeda and ISIS are committed to the downfall of the Saudi kingdom due to its alliance with the United States.⁸⁹ The Saudi willingness to stage Western troops in their borders was the core reason behind the September 11th terrorist attacks and was a blow to their legitimacy in the eyes of Muslims.⁹⁰ Saudi Arabia is ideologically on the defensive, locked in alliances with the West due to its fear of a rising Iran. Iran and Turkey are the two realistic centers of socio-political power that have the potential to exert their influence over the Middle East.

Turkey lies on the edge waiting for the moment to make its own claim.⁹¹ Its leader, Erdogan, successfully overthrew the Turkish military guardianship of the secular government and established himself as the de facto dictator.⁹² Furthermore, he is aligning himself with the Salafist elements of the Sunni world.⁹³ ISIS is now gone as a territorial entity, and the spectacular failure of the Salafist, Sunni Caliphate to hold its ground against Kurds, Shia militias, and

⁸⁸ George Friedman, "Saudi Arabia's Race Against Time," *Geopolitical Futures*, April 25, 2018, accessed April 20, 2019, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/saudi-arabias-race-time/>.

⁸⁹ Friedman, *America's Secret War*, 316.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 17.

⁹¹ George Friedman, *Flashpoints* (New York: Doubleday, 2015), 237.

⁹² Dexter Filkins, "Turkey's Vote Makes Erdoğan Effectively a Dictator," *The New Yorker*, April 17, 2017, accessed January 22, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/turkeys-vote-makes-erdogan-effectively-a-dictator>.

⁹³ Soner Cagaptay, "Where Does Erdogan Want to Take Turkey?," *The Washington Institute*, June 15, 2016, accessed March 31, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/where-does-erdogan-want-to-take-turkey>.

Western air power continues the crisis of Islam and leaves Turkey as a rallying point for its leadership and Iran's greatest regional hegemonic competitor.

Iran's leaders fight for legitimacy in the eyes of Shia and Sunni Muslims and for power on the global stage. First, they maintain an aggressive attitude toward Israel to prove they are the keepers of true Islam. Meanwhile, Turkey has historically maintained diplomatic relations with Israel, and the Saudi Arabians are quietly developing a de facto alliance with Israel against Iran.⁹⁴ Second, Iran maintains the ability to strike its enemies, especially Israel, through multiple proxy groups, ballistic missiles, and contesting the Strait of Hormuz; while the Saudis and Egyptians have limited capabilities against Israel and ally with the United States.⁹⁵ Third, Iran is building economic and military relationships with Russia, China, and North Korea that is developing a lethal mix of sanction-resistant energy markets, sophisticated air defense systems, and nuclear technology.⁹⁶ Fourth, Iran's support of the Houthi rebels in Yemen adds to its power the ability to coerce global trade and US force projection at another of the world's most strategic straits, Bab al Mandab. Fifth, Iran's legitimacy behind its aggressiveness comes from marrying the national objective of exporting its revolutionary ideology to the narrative of helping the downcast Shia population around the Middle East. There are 1.665 trillion barrels of proven oil reserves in the world.⁹⁷ As seen in figure seven, the territory that encompasses forty-eight percent of these global

⁹⁴ World Affairs Journal, "The New Arab-Israeli Alliance," accessed January 24, 2019, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/new-arab%E2%80%93israeli-alliance>.

⁹⁵ Melissa Dalton, "Iranian Backed Militias: Destabilizing the Middle East," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 4, 2017, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20171004/106468/HHRG-115-FA18-Wstate-DaltonM-20171004.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Dina Esfandiary and Tabatabai Ariane, "Moscow and Beijing Have Tehran's Back," *Foreign Policy*, July 25, 2018, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/25/moscow-and-beijing-have-tehrans-back/>.

⁹⁷ Kimberly Amadeo, "Where Are the World's Largest Oil Reserves?," *The Balance*, updated November 4, 2018, accessed March 6, 2019, <https://www.thebalance.com/oil-reserves-definition-categories-world-s-largest-3305873>.

reserves has a majority Shia population.⁹⁸ The price of oil and end markets are Achilles heel of Iran, and control of this region would give Iran enormous power over oil markets and is a prize they would relish if the opportunity presented itself.

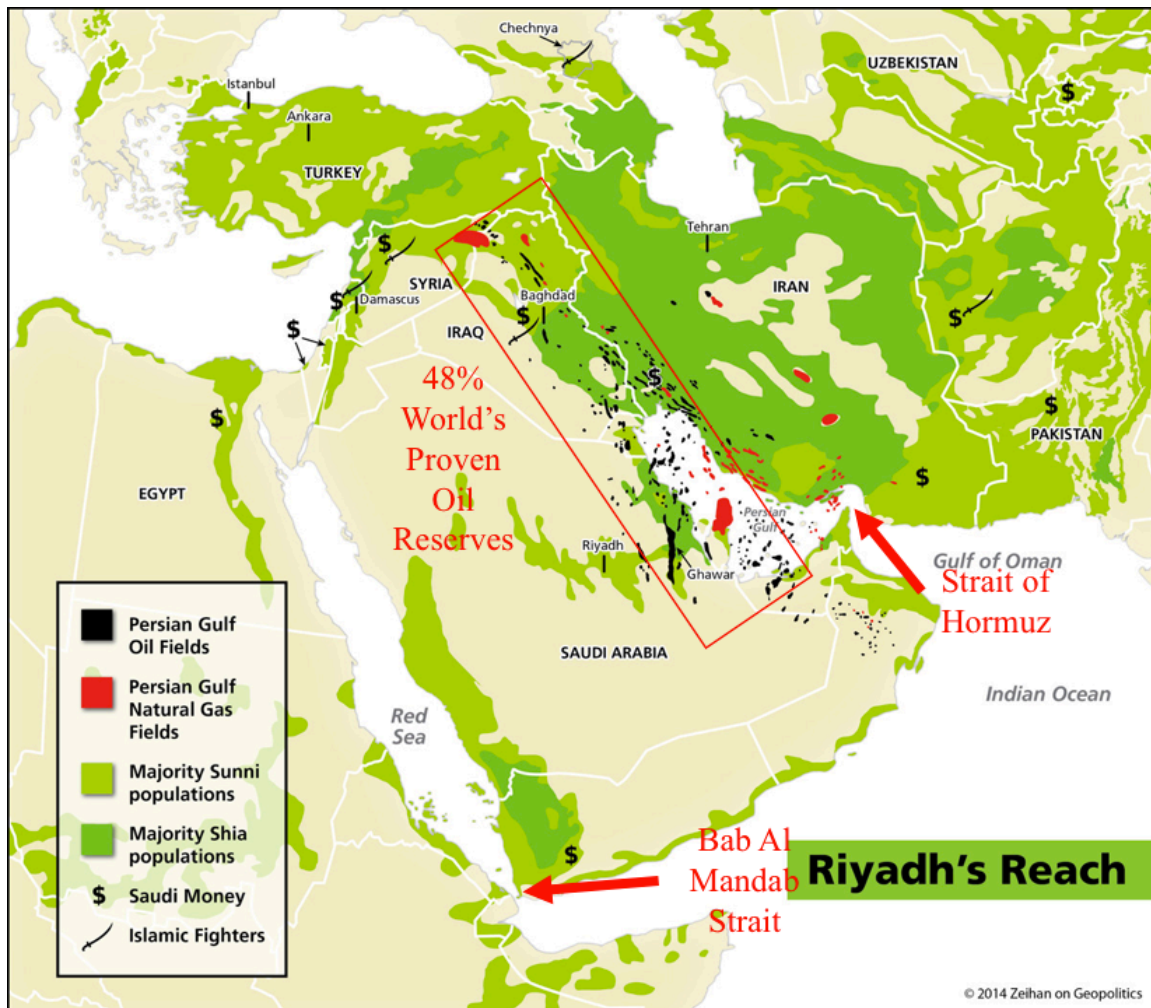


Figure 7. Shia Population and Oil Field Disposition. “The Absent Superpower Maps – Peter Zeihan,” accessed February 28, 2019, <https://zeihan.com/the-absent-superpower-maps/>.

As the Cold War ended the United States was an undisputed power unlike the world had ever seen. Some, like Francis Fukuyama, thought that the Western model of human rights, liberal democracy, and free-market capitalism had defeated all opposition and the world order would peacefully settle as all acquiesced to its irrefutable pragmatism, this idea eventually fell into the

⁹⁸ United States Energy Information Administration, “International - U.S. Energy Information Administration,” *Beta*, accessed March 6, 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/>.

expanding bin labelled Western mirror-image bias.⁹⁹ On the other hand, Samuel Huntington saw a return to conflict along historical, cultural lines and the greatest form of a culture is a civilization. He anticipated that countries would respond to the encroachment of Western culture and power in three ways. First, they could join the culture and accept Western values. Second, they could isolate to preserve their values, but this would be prohibitively expensive. Third, they could balance Western power through developing economic and military power and cooperating with other non-Western countries against the West. This would preserve their values and institutions and make the West begin to develop a better understanding of the cultural fundamentals underlying other civilizations. Therefore, Western civilization will cease to be regarded as “universal,” but different civilizations will learn to coexist and contribute to shaping the future world.¹⁰⁰ This third response demonstrates the path Iran chose and aligns it with another great power who also responded to US dominance in the same way, China.

China and Iran could not be further apart on their respective worldviews, but the critical difference between Iran’s view of the United States and China is that the latter does not threaten to impose its views on Iran. Also, as Huntington predicted, China is successfully embracing the technology of the West while rejecting what they see as cultural degeneration. Instead, China is preserving their own way of rule and a Chinese civilizational pride. This appeals to the Iranians immensely and happens to find synergy with the fact that China is an enormous end market for Iran’s energy and a veto power on the United Nations permanent security council. These relationships provide strong evidence to support Huntington’s prediction that non-Western powers would band together to preserve their values while still trying to compete economically.

⁹⁹ Louis Menand, “Francis Fukuyama Postpones the End of History,” *The New Yorker*, August 27, 2018, accessed March 31, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/09/03/francis-fukuyama-postpones-the-end-of-history>.

¹⁰⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045621>.

There are also many players competing for power inside Iran. Traditionally Shia clerics represented the deeply conservative people of Iran and never engaged in politics. This made their credibility much easier because humble living and purity from corruption are much easier when not operating the levers of government and the economy. However, after the 1979 revolution the Iranian, Shia clerics gained ultimate political power through the Supreme Leader. Their credibility depends on their ability to implement good governance and run the economy in a matter that is perceived as just and fair. This has proven to be much harder than anticipated, and Ayatollah Khamenei is experiencing a crisis of legitimacy with the people of Iran.¹⁰¹

Furthermore, the experience of three thousand years of managing empire developed Iran's leaders into shrewd negotiators and careful players on the world stage. However, the Iran of today is different. It is the guardian of Shia, Islam. The sect of Islam that was rarely able to exert power, and in the eyes of the Iranians, this is the age of supreme injustice and exploitation by the West. Furthermore, this is the age of weapons so powerful that the fate of humanity could be changed in a day.

Section 3: Seeing Through the Eyes of Iran - The Persian, Islamic, Shia, Twelver Worldview

Know your enemy and know yourself, and you will win 100 battles.

—Sun Tzu

This movement is for the sake of Islam and cannot be limited to one country only, it cannot be limited solely to Islamic countries either.

—Ayatollah Khomeini

¹⁰¹ Abdulaziz Sachedina, interview by the author, George Mason University, Washington DC, 17 Sept, 2018.

The leaders of Iran see reality through a set of lenses: Persian, Muslim, Shia, and Twelver. Iran's civilizational history, constitution, and the Twelver primary sources identify Iran's logic formulating an understanding of their time in history and the role they are to play.

Persian Lens

The story of Iran goes back much farther than the idea of nations. It began when civilizations were only just emerging on earth. First were the Egyptians, safe in the Nile river basin and surrounded by the safety of deserts.¹⁰² Next, Nebuchadnezzar established the first great empire that encompassed the entire fertile crescent. Then, less than a generation after Nebuchadnezzar sat in the height of his power in Babylon, the Medes, known today as Kurds, and the Persians under Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon's holdings becoming the first great superpower of antiquity by combining the Nile, Mesopotamia, and Indus river politico-economic systems.¹⁰³ The Persian civilization that established itself under Cyrus the Great in 538 BC demonstrated an impressive staying power over the next two and a half millennia.

Persians invented the game of chess, and they approach statecraft with the same strategic, long view; democracies like the United States do not.¹⁰⁴ Modern day Iran, which consists of sixty-one percent Persians, prioritizes state survival, seeks regional dominance and finds its legitimacy in its Islamic worldview.¹⁰⁵ As an ancient civilization, Persians are intensely proud. Throughout their history, whenever the Persians felt violated, they took revenge or waited for the day they could retaliate.¹⁰⁶ They remained unconquered by Rome and persevered through invasions by the

¹⁰² Peter Zeihan, *The Accidental Superpower: The Next Generation of American Preeminence and the Coming Global Disorder* (New York: Twelve, 2014), 14.

¹⁰³ Robert Kaplan, *The Return of Marco Polo's World: War, Strategy, and American Interests in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Random House, 2018), 12.

¹⁰⁴ Harold Rhodes, interviewed by the author, Jerusalem, Nov 2, 2018.

¹⁰⁵ World Population Review, "Iran Population 2019," accessed March 24, 2019, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/iran-population/>.

¹⁰⁶ Reuvan Merkhav, interview by the author, Jerusalem, Nov 1, 2018.

Greeks, Mongols, and Arab Muslims. Persians had the unique ability to maintain their cultural structure and persuaded their new masters to adopt it for themselves. To the chagrin of his Macedonian army, Alexander the Great even embraced the Persian culture after defeating the great empire by taking a Persian wife and adopting many of their customs.¹⁰⁷ When the Arabs imposed Islam on Persia, the Persians kept their pride about them and developed the art of hiding what they really think, as well as a philosophy of concern for the poor and deprived. The oppressed, minority sect of the Shia Islam combined these factors into the modern day Iranian spirit.¹⁰⁸

Muslim Lens

The Iranian regime sees the world through a distinctly religious lens that gives the state a clear purpose to establish regional hegemony and then challenge the world order. Henry Kissinger warns the West against convincing themselves the more extreme statements from Iran are mere metaphorical rhetoric intended for concession or as a negotiation formula, but to realize the Iranians are ideologically engaged “in a contest over the nature of world order.”¹⁰⁹ The Iranian constitution cites the Quran fourteen times and makes clear that its primary objective is to promote Islam globally culminating in an Islamic global political order. The preamble states the “mission of the Constitution” is “to realize the ideological objectives of the movement and to create conditions conducive to the development of man in accordance with the noble and universal values of Islam” and that “the aim of government is to foster the growth of man in such

¹⁰⁷ Facts and Details, “Persia and Alexander the Great,” accessed April 1, 2019, <http://factsanddetails.com/world/cat56/sub371/item1978.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Kissinger, *World Order*, 157.

a way that he progresses towards the establishment of a Divine order (in accordance with the Quranic phrase “And toward God is the journeying” [3:28]).”¹¹⁰

Iran’s number one national objective is regime and state survival. Henry Kissinger uses Khomeini’s words to describe modern day Iran’s perspective of their nation-state as,

“a weapon of convenience in a broader religious struggle.” The twentieth-century map of the Middle East, Khomeini announced, was a false and un-Islamic creation of “imperialists” and “tyrannical self-seeking rulers” who had “separated the various segments of the Islamic *umma* [community] from each other and artificially created separate nations.” All contemporary political institutions in the Middle East and beyond were “illegitimate” because they “do not base themselves on divine law.”¹¹¹

Khomeini’s view that the state is a weapon to achieve the ultimate goal to bring all of Islam together under Sharia, or divine, law justifies Iran’s primary national interest as regime and state survival. The leaders of Iran know that the power of a nation-state matters, and if Iran is destroyed or the regime falls, its ideology loses power along with it. Therefore, the principle that it does not matter what someone believes if they cannot do anything about it rings true to Iran’s policy makers, and they are careful about risking the survival of the regime. Furthermore, a strong Iranian state is a necessary precursor to becoming the cornerstone of a future Islamic empire.

Islam’s commitment to remove the United States from the Middle East bridges even the Sunni-Shia schism. A.Q. Khan, the master proliferator and father of Pakistan’s nuclear weapon, exclaimed after his first successful detonation in 1998 “There was a Christian bomb, a Jewish bomb, a Buddhist bomb, and a Hindu bomb. Now there is a Muslim bomb!”¹¹² A.Q. Khan is a Sunni Muslim, but he facilitated Iran’s pursuit of nuclear capability in the form of uranium

¹¹⁰ Constitue Project, “Iran (Islamic Republic of)’s Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989.” Comparative Constitutions Project. February 1, 2019, accessed February 7, 2019, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf?lang=en.

¹¹¹ Kissinger, *World Order*, 153.

¹¹² Thomas Reed and Danny Stillman, *The Nuclear Express a Political History of the Bomb and Its Proliferation* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2009), 320.

centrifuge technology.¹¹³ The competition between the sects gave way to the need for Islamic states to shift power to their favor in the global order.

However, the US' destruction of the Iraqi army and removal of Saddam Hussein from power was a catalyst that pivoted Iran to a position of advantage in the Middle East. With the Sunni bulwark that checked their power shattered, Iranian influence grew in Iraq. Iraq elected a majority Shia government for the first time in 2006. The sudden removal of US troops in 2011 opened a significant opportunity for Iranian political and military support to fill the vacuum.¹¹⁴ When ISIS overran northern Iraq and threatened Baghdad, the most powerful Iraqi Shia cleric, Ayatollah Sistani, issued a fatwa for all Shia militias to join forces and fight them.¹¹⁵ The militias solidified like never before, and with the help of American air power crushed the Sunni ISIS forces. This provided Iran an opportunity to empower its position in Iraq in such a way that some from the Iranian government now looks at Baghdad as the future capital of its growing empire.¹¹⁶

Iraq is effectively three independently ruled areas, a Shia portion controlled from Baghdad that encompasses the richest oil and farmland, a Kurdish enclave in the north, and the northern and western wastelands where Sunni tribes exist in destroyed infrastructure and limited resources. Iran sees an opportunity never before granted to them. For over 1000 years they lived in the shadow of a dominant Sunni Caliphate. Yet, the revolution of 1979 made Iran the guardians of Shia, and Iran has the chance to unite the Shia scattered across the greater Middle East into a

¹¹³ Global Security, "A.Q. Khan & Iran," Weapons of Mass Destruction, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/iran/khan-iran.htm>.

¹¹⁴ Will Fulton, "Iranian Reactions to U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq," Critical Threats, November 4, 2011, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iranian-reactions-to-u-s-withdrawal-from-iraq>.

¹¹⁵ Tyler Hicks, "Answering a Cleric's Call, Iraqi Shiites Take Up Arms," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2014, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/22/world/middleeast/iraq-militia.html>.

¹¹⁶ Abdullah al-Thuweini, "Tehran Official: 'Baghdad Is Capital of New Persian Empire,'" *The New Arab*, March 10, 2015, accessed January 30, 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/4fd25814-2b45-4c9e-a298-21dbc4a302b1>.

territorial enclave that increases its power and legitimacy to lead the Islamic world. Such success also demonstrates to all Muslims the favor of Allah and visibly reverses the crisis of Islam.

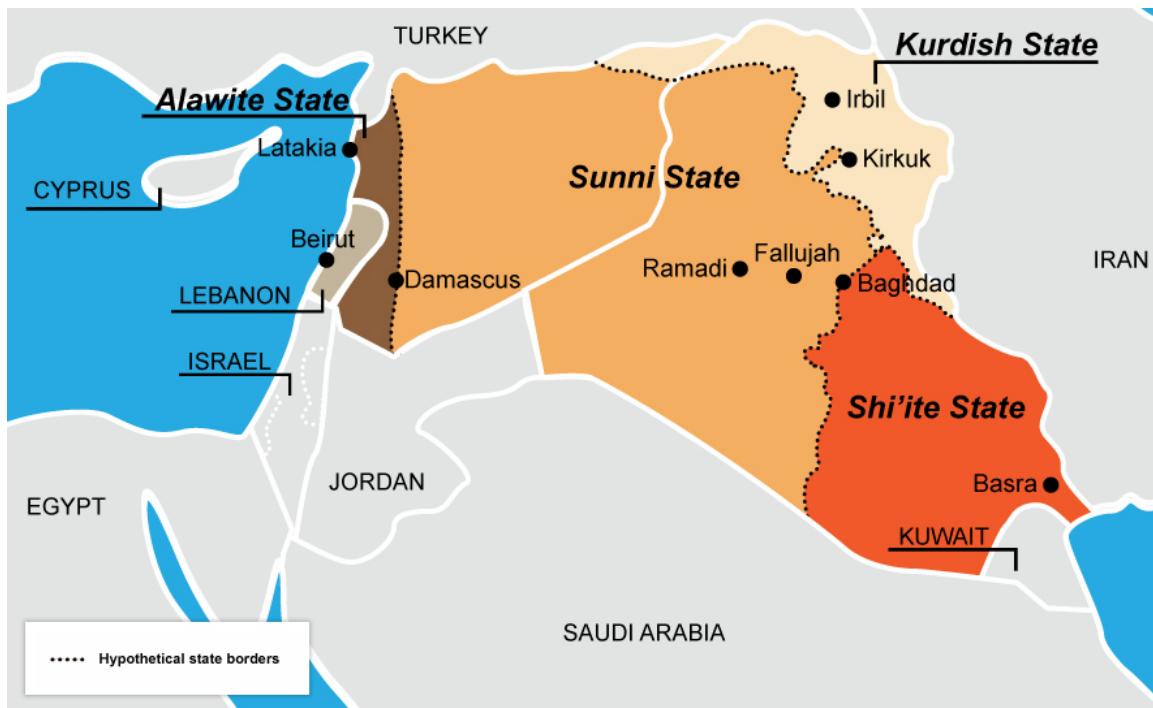


Figure 8. Iraq's Three Defacto States. "27 Maps that Explain the Crisis in Iraq," Vox, accessed February 26, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/a/maps-explain-crisis-iraq>.

Shia Lens

The origins of the Shia sect of Islam defines the tendencies and possibilities the idea of the Mahdi plays in their story. After the death of Muhammad in 632 AD a fight for the legitimacy to rule ensued. The Shia determined that rule should be through the progeny of Muhammed, and they desired that Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son in law, should rule. However, the many tribal factions that followed Muhammed politically usurped Ali by electing Muhammed's trusted aid Abu Bakr as their leader.¹¹⁷ After Bakr's death twelve years later from sickness, and the

¹¹⁷ John Harney, "How Do Sunni and Shia Islam Differ?," *The New York Times*, December 21, 2017, accessed March 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/04/world/middleeast/q-and-a-how-do-sunni-and-shia-islam-differ.html>.

assassination of his two successors, Ali finally became Caliph.¹¹⁸ The Shia ignore the first three Caliphs and consider Ali the Second Imam.

Ali valued purity to the Quran and Muslim way of life over political machinations but made enemies as he tried to enforce Muhammed's precepts on the people.¹¹⁹ These enemies were led by a politically cunning man who through subterfuge overthrew Ali's governors in Syria and Egypt and took control.¹²⁰ Ultimately, an assassin killed Ali with a poisoned sword, and his two sons were betrayed by most of their own forces and killed in battle in Karbala, Iraq.¹²¹ This martyrdom of Muhammad's heirs, known as Imams, whom the Shia consider their holy leaders defined the Shia's value of martyrdom and sacrifice in search of justice.¹²²

The political experience and persecution of the Shia throughout their history developed a rich narrative of endurance both spiritually and politically, and hope in the Twelfth Imam's return and the justice he will bring. The subsequent nine Imams avoided obvious political activity or any direct attempt to incite revolt because their Sunni opponents had the preponderance of political and economic resources.¹²³ As the Sunnis usurped political power, the Imams were forced to seek power according to those methods which they felt to be sound and legal. They restricted their activities to three areas. First, to encourage prophetic traditions among the people to establish the right of Muhammad's progeny, the Imams, to rule. They needed to demonstrate they were totally committed to the struggle to regain control, but only when the time was right, and the circumstances favored them. Second, about a century after the martyrdom of the second and third

¹¹⁸ Sunni is derived from Sunnah, the body of traditional custom and practice of the Islamic community. The Sunnah is based on the verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds, and sayings of Muhammed and his companions and eventually copied down in a series of books Muslims call the Hadiths. Shia is a contraction of the phrase Shiat Ali, or followers of Ali.

¹¹⁹ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 24.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹²¹ Harney, "How Do Sunni and Shia Islam Differ?"

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Hussain, *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam*, 153.

Imams, the Shia leadership created and circulated the Hadith -- authoritative commentaries on the life of Muhammed and his followers -- amongst the Shia community developing a narrative about the rise of a special Imam from Muhammad's family who would establish a righteous Muslim empire. Third, Early Imams believed any of them could be the Mahdi if the conditions were right, but after the failure of a revolt in 757 AD, the time of the 6th Imam, they became far more cautious and decided not to fix a particular date for another uprising. In this way, they encouraged their followers to focus on religious activities which would prepare the way for more political matters at the appropriate time and also secretly encouraged their most faithful followers to rebel against unjust and tyrannical rulers.

In Shia Islam, the Imam's are different from all other human beings. All are direct descendants of Muhammed and uniquely created by Allah from a special matter that made them perfect beings.¹²⁴ The Shia scholar Moojan Momen describes the Imams:

Their births were miraculous; the baby Imam being born already circumcised and with his umbilical cord already severed; that they spoke immediately on birth (and sometimes from within their mother's womb) praising God that each was explicitly designated by the preceding Imam (or in the case of 'Ali by Muhammad); and that each performed miracles and was possessed of supernatural knowledge.¹²⁵

Also, most Shia writers believe the tyrants of the day martyred the first eleven Imams. When the Twelfth Imam initially disappeared, it was the first time the line of Imams failed to propagate. This produced the doctrine of the minor occultation, or physical disappearance, of the six-year-old Imam who ruled through four successive regents. They conferred with him in secret and carried out his guidance. A century after his disappearance, the Shia began to question the possibility the Imam could still be alive, which resulted in the idea of the major occultation. This is defined as the semi-permanent state of invisibility as the Twelfth Imam silently waits for Allah

¹²⁴ Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 184.

¹²⁵ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 23.

to direct him to manifest himself physically and establish justice in the world.¹²⁶ The Shia continued without the political leadership of an Imam until the revolution of 1979.¹²⁷

Martyrdom of the 12 Imams

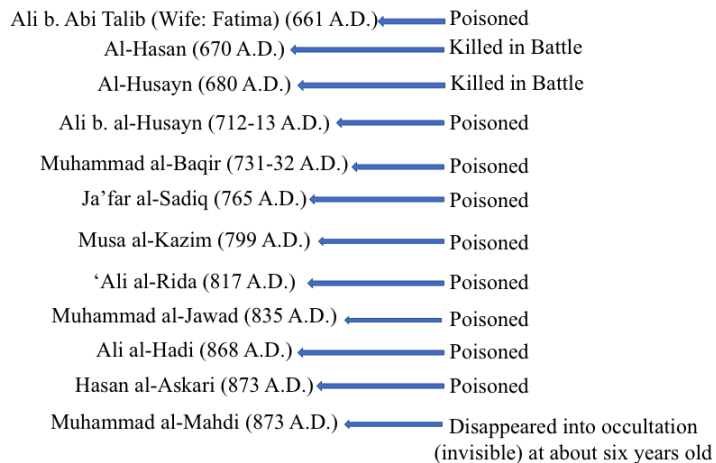


Figure 9. Timeline of the Imams, Muhammad's Lineage. Created by the Author.

The response to the persecution and assassination of their Imams drove a passivism amongst Shia clergy until 1979 when Ayatollah Khomeini led the Iranian revolution and established a Shia Twelver republic.¹²⁸ Khomeini reinvented the Shia and claimed to be the deputy of the Mahdi until his return.¹²⁹ However, because the Mahdi did not directly appoint Khomeini, he and his successor Khamenei are accountable to the people.¹³⁰ This structure reinforces the priority of the Iranian government to strengthen the state and ensure regime survival.

¹²⁶ Hussain, *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam*, 154.

¹²⁷ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 24.

¹²⁸ Ayatollah literally means "miraculous sign of Allah."

¹²⁹ Michael Rubin, "Like It or Not, Regime Change Is Coming to Iran," *The National Interest*, November 16, 2018, accessed February 25, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/it-or-not-regime-change-coming-iran-36157>.

¹³⁰ Abdulaziz Sachedina, interview by the author, George Mason University, Washington DC, 17 Sept, 2018.

The revolutionaries developed an intricate government that has the facade of a republic to facilitate this accountability while leading an effective theocracy. The Supreme Leader is in direct control of the police, army, militia, TV and radio, foundations, mosques, foreign affairs, economy, and can rule by decree.¹³¹ He also chooses six of the twelve members of the Council of Guardians while the head of the judiciary chooses the other six. Their primary function is to interpret the constitution and determine if laws are in line with Sharia law. The Supreme Leader directly appoints the head of the judiciary as well, who is subsequently beholden to him. The Assembly of Experts meet for one week a year and consists of eighty-six “virtuous and learned” clerics elected by the public to eight-year terms. The Assembly elects the next Supreme Leader and will also reconfirm him. However, the Assembly has never challenged any Supreme Leader decisions. The Expediency Council is a conservative body of thirty-four members who advise the Supreme Leader.¹³² Finally, the 290 members of Parliament are elected every four years, and they draft legislation, ratify international treaties, and build the government’s budget.

¹³¹ Robin Wright, ed., *The Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and US Policy* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 219.

¹³² Frontline PBS, “Inside Iran - The Structure of Power In Iran: Terror And Tehran,” *Frontline PBS*, accessed February 10, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/inside/govt.html>.

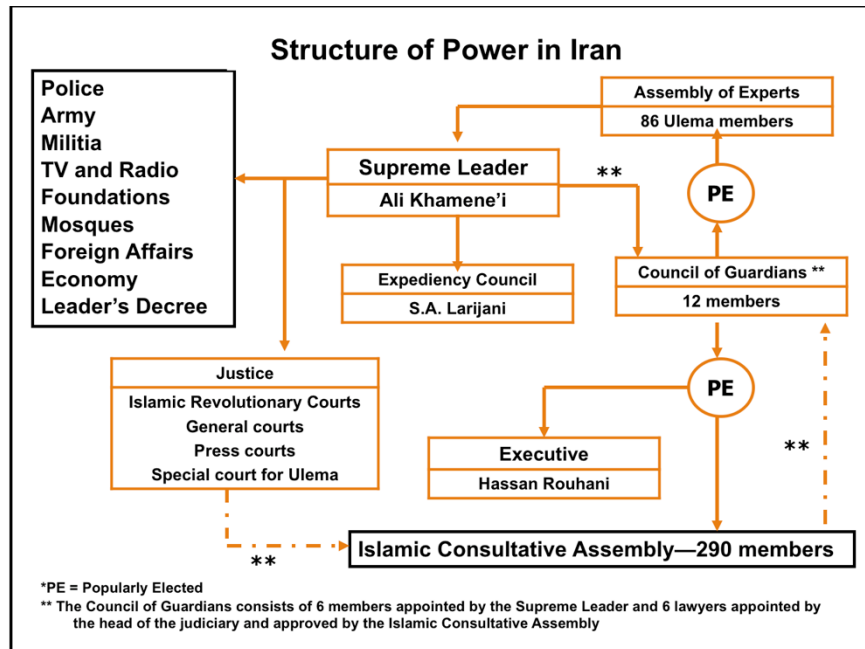


Figure 10. Iranian Government Structure. Courtesy of Dr. Jonathan Zartman, Air Command and Staff College.

Because the Supreme Leader is the representative of the Mahdi, disobedience to him and his government is not political accountability, it is theological heresy and punishable by death.¹³³ Inside of this power structure the Supreme Leader, guardian of the revolution, must balance an aggressive impulse to arm proxy groups who can challenge Muslim competitor states and Western influence with a responsibility to the Iranian people to create a strong economy and avoid corruption in economic management.

Shia theology is much more malleable and adaptive than their Sunni counterparts. The Sunni are legalistic, meaning they take the Quran and acts of Muhammad at face value, which led ISIS to tribal, barbaric actions against their Shia and Western enemies. However, the Shia approach interpretation of Islam differently.

¹³³ Shia Ayatollahs are mullahs (leaders of local mosques) who reach a high level of religious knowledge requiring an advanced degree and approval by peers. This status allows the issuing of jurisprudence judgments in the form of fatwas and their opinions carry a significant amount of weight in the Shia community. Grand Ayatollah, the highest level, is rare and based on knowledge, writings produced throughout a lifetime, and respect of peers. The credibility of the Supreme Leader is partially based on this status. He leads the government of Iran and is the premier power broker.

The Shia believe that Muhammed and each Imam was perfect and infallible so their words and actions are models to follow.¹³⁴ Muhammed wrote the Quran, and it is the word of God and the cornerstone of Shia theology. The Hadiths are commentaries by Shia scholars who expound on the lives and sayings of Muhammed and the twelve Imams. The most reliable Shia Hadiths are organized into four books and were recorded fifty to 100 years after the Twelfth Imam disappeared into occultation. Some of the Hadiths create competing narratives which forces the Shia clerics to argue over which one was more authoritative. This developed a rich theological culture of debate and consensus in the community. As a result, it is difficult to create dramatic change in the Shia culture or doctrine. Consensus must be built to develop incremental change towards a new idea.¹³⁵ The Shia have other cultural forces that are crucial for the leaders to tap as they seek legitimacy and consensus.

The three traditions of martyrdom, remembering the Twelfth Imam in occultation, and prudent concealment are the most powerful traditions in the lives of individual Shia Muslims.¹³⁶ The twelve Imams lived during the 200 years after the death of the Muhammed in the shadow of Sunni political power, and they struggled to rule and survive. The Twelfth Imam disappeared, and the Shia community and clerics receded into the political background. This reality gave rise to these three rituals that build the framework of Shia culture.

First is the power of ritually recognizing martyrdom, to die for a cause greater than yourself is of great merit morally and spiritually.¹³⁷ This is grounded on the martyrdom of Hussein, the third Imam, specifically; and all eleven collectively. Those Iranians fighting with

¹³⁴ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 173.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 172–75.

¹³⁶ Abdulaziz Sachedina, interview by the author, George Mason University, Washington DC, 17 Sept, 2018.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

Hezbollah are committed to this tradition and base it on the Quran's call to institute the good and prevent the unjust.

The second ritual is to remember the Mahdi in occultation. Friday is the Shia worship day, and an essential part of worship is to commemorate the promise of the Twelfth Imam and long for his return. This is an emotional and spiritual event, not a militant one.¹³⁸ However, after the 1979 revolution, there was a massive upsurge in a hope the return was near because the Shia had their first political power in centuries. The Supreme Leader declared himself the Twelfth Imam's deputy, but the brutality and desperation experienced in the Iran-Iraq war dampened the Iranian's spirit. However, with the US invasion of Iraq and its subsequent pro-Iranian government, along with the erosion of stability in the Middle East and fragmenting Sunni world, the messianic hopes are reigniting.

The third ritual is called prudential concealment and is the idea that, for self-preservation and owing to a history of political oppression, Iranians do not have to reveal what is in their heart. The Sunnis do not like prudential concealment; they say it is lying.¹³⁹ This tradition, mixed with three millennia of shrewd Persian statecraft, put a premium on the psychological manipulation of adversaries.¹⁴⁰ These three traditions also resonate with the Shia population and are crucial tools to develop any ruler's legitimacy; hence the frequent reference to the Twelfth Imam and martyrdom.

Twelver Lens

The return of the Twelfth Imam is the most anticipated, studied, and looked forward to event in Shia culture. It is the central subject of a prayer uttered every Friday morning across all

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Kissinger, *World Order*, 151.

of Iran and the focal point of their religion.¹⁴¹ The current narrative is to live a pure life according to Sharia law and support Ayatollah Khamenei, the legitimate representative of the Twelfth Imam and his government. The majority of Iranians hold this view, and it is heavily espoused by Ayatollah Khamenei.¹⁴² In 2004, several Shia scholars and masters of Islamic seminaries launched the Bright Future Institute to increase the knowledge of the Mahdi. It is a non-profit research center that seeks to correct wrong ideas about the Mahdi through discussion sessions and providing scientific answers to the superstitions surrounding him. It is one of eight such institutes dedicated to research and hasten the return of the Mahdi.¹⁴³ According to the Bright Future Institute, “No one, not even the Mahdi himself can decide upon his return. Only God decides. Meanwhile, all Muslims can do is to pray and to be good human beings.”¹⁴⁴

The current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is a power broker who maintains consensus amongst the many factions in the Iranian government.¹⁴⁵ The Shia rely heavily on this and have a rich tradition of adaptation of their theology to fit the challenge of their time. When Ayatollah Khomeini declared himself the representative of the Twelfth Imam, he opened up the possibility to change the Shia narrative from passivism to activism with regards to the Mahdi’s return.

All Shia believe they have a responsibility to pave the way for the return of the Mahdi, but what that means is an area of continual debate. Shia Twelver Islam is a religion of the

¹⁴¹ Abdulaziz Sachedina, interview by the author, George Mason University, Washington, DC, 17 Sept, 2018.

¹⁴² Ali Khamenei, “Dear Youth, Prepare Yourselves for the Era of Imam Mahdi: Ayatollah Khamenei,” Khamenei.ir, May 22, 2016, accessed 23 November 2018, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/3828/Dear-youth-prepare-yourselves-for-the-era-of-Imam-Mahdi-Ayatollah>.

¹⁴³ Scott Peterson, *Let the Swords Encircle Me: Iran--a Journey Behind the Headlines* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 307.

¹⁴⁴ Meir Javedanfar, “Ahmadinejad’s Messianic Connections,” *The Guardian*, May 6, 2009, accessed November 4, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/may/06/iran-ahmadinejad-mahdi>.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

oppressed and disenchanted. After the uprisings during the time of the Sixth Imam were violently put down by the Sunnis, the definition of preparing for the Mahdi became living a holy life, taking care of widows and orphans, and keeping away from worldly vice. However, when the Twelfth Imam returns the world will observe that “blood is dripping from the Imam's sword and that he is calling people to jihad and to command the good and forbid the evil, and that he is killing the unjust worshippers and returning the goods they have stolen to their rightful owners, such actions of the Imam they will indeed find new!”¹⁴⁶ Since the 1979 revolution, a bridge between these two perspectives appeared, and there is a constant debate about how close to jihad the Shia should be to prepare to receive the Twelfth Imam. The aggressive narrative justifies proxy action to control territory, pressure Israel, and pursue Jihad until the United States is destroyed. Or in the words of Khamenei, “all the officials in the country...are fighting and are continuing the combat for the establishment and survival of the Islamic system...Jihad is never-ending because Satan and the satanic front will exist eternally.”¹⁴⁷

One of the great treatise on the return of the Twelfth Imam was written in 1993 by Ayatollah Ibrihim Amini, a prolific writer and Vice President of the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Discernment Council.¹⁴⁸ Amini outlines the Twelfth Imam’s agenda in the following excerpt from his book:

First, in the light of the traditions dealing with the function of the Mahdi it is possible to suggest that the program that the Imam intends to implement is ideal, comprehensive, and of course difficult. It has as its target the *reform of the entire world*, the defeat of the forces of tyranny and wickedness in their entirety, *the raising of Islam as the official religion of all the inhabitants of this world*, the removal of prejudices and wrong attitudes from the minds of the people so that they can all live in peace and harmony under the government of God. In addition, the Mahdi’s revolution aspires to found a global community *under one God, one religion, and one ideal system of law and to bring all other communities under the united flag of Islam*. Obviously, such a goal is not easy to

¹⁴⁶ Abdulaziz Sachedina, “Translator’s Introduction,” Official Website of Ayatollah Ibrahim Amini, May 6, 1996, accessed February 24, 2019, <http://www.ibrahimamini.com/en/node/1291>.

¹⁴⁷ Kissinger, *World Order*, 167.

¹⁴⁸ Al-Islam, “Biography of Ayatullah Ibrahim Amini,” December 17, 2013, accessed December 12, 2018, <https://www.al-islam.org/self-building-ayatullah-ibrahim-amini/biography-ayatullah-ibrahim-amini>.

accomplish. This program is practicable *only when the human mind is prepared to accept those goals* and to go beyond the narrow confines of materialistic ideologies to realize the value of God's guidance for humanity. The need for the revolution and the desire to promulgate the divine blueprint for an ideal human have to come from the people *who have actively participated in preparing the way for the twelfth Imam* to launch his program for the new world order. Second, in view of several traditions reported from the Imams it appears that the Imam of the Age and his supporters will overcome the forces of disbelief and godless materialism *by undertaking jihad*. It will be with the power of just warfare that the forces of God's enemy and the supporters of disbelief and injustices will be exterminated.¹⁴⁹

Violence and victory over apostate Muslims and all non-Muslims will frame the return of the Twelfth Imam. He goes on to say “The Mahdi resembles his grandfather Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny) in the way in which the latter began his struggle with the sword. He will kill the enemies of God His Prophet and those who have oppressed the people and have led them astray. He will gain victory through the sword and creating fear [in the enemy]. None of his armies will face defeat.”¹⁵⁰

The narrative developed by the Shia Ayatollahs after the 1979 revolution is that the two obligations of the Shia as they await the Twelfth Imam are to establish a stable, Islamic government and to select a qualified jurist (Ayatollah) to lead them.¹⁵¹ This narrative points to the number one priority of the Iranian government which is regime survival. This government is in waiting for the Mahdi to take over, but in the meantime, it will take prudent risk to expand and re-establish the influence of the ancient Persian Empire.

Many Iranians believe the need to prepare a strong military is paramount, but some go further and believe Iran should gain “advanced weapons” to hasten the return.¹⁵² One proponent

¹⁴⁹ Ayatollah Ibrahim Amini, “Chapter 12: How Will the Imam Know That the Time for the Appearance (Zuhur) Has Come?” Official Website of Ayatollah Ibrahim Amini, October 18, 2012, accessed October 22, 2019, <http://www.ibrahimamini.com/en/node/1303>.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Yaron Brenner, “Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, a Religious Authority and Iranian President Ahmadinejad’s Spiritual Mentor, Implies in a Theological-Political Book That Iran Must Acquire a Nuclear Weapon (‘a Special Kind of Weapon’),” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, February 28, 2010, accessed December 22, 2018, <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/18141/>.

of this path toward nuclear weapons is Mesbah Yazdi, Ahmadinejad's mentor and a cleric who takes a more aggressive stance toward paving the way for the Mahdi, believes that instigating war and turmoil will hasten the return of the Mahdi. Currently, it seems only a small minority outwardly supports his view about nuclear weapons, but there is a potential for that to soon change.

There are many signs written in the Hadiths that signal the return of the Twelfth Imam. Most of these signs are outlined by the Sixth Imam, a revered scholar by both the Sunni and the Shia, who defined the dominate form of Shia jurisprudence. The Shia divide these between the major and minor signs, the major signs being more general and minor signs specific. The primary general sign is the Mahdi will fill the earth with justice after it has been filled with injustice and tyranny.¹⁵³ Shia az-Zanjani proclaimed the television fulfilled the following prophecy; "I heard Abu Abdullah [the Sixth Imam] saying' the believer, in the time of the Qa'im [Twelfth Imam], while in the east, will be able to see his brother in the west and he who is in the west will be able to see his brother in the east."¹⁵⁴ Other signs prophesied by the Sixth Imam include moral degradation in the form of a falling away from Islam, seen as the wide-scale secularization of society.¹⁵⁵ The following table outlines the general signs that form the lens through which the Shia Twelver worldview views the world. Keep in mind these prophecies were written 1000 years ago and world and regional history have never come close to matching the picture they paint, until now.

¹⁵³ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 166.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 167.

Table 1: General Signs the Mahdi Will Return Soon

General Signs	Shia Interpretation	Hadith/Tradition Source¹⁵⁶
Earth will be filled with injustice and tyranny	Nonmuslims ruling around the world and having power over the Muslim world	Al-Mufid, al-Irshad, 341
While in the east, Muslims will be able to see their brother in the west	Television and the internet	‘Aqa’id, 255
Injustice prevails throughout land	Land ruled by corrupt illegitimate Muslims allied with the Great Satan	Quoting Kulayni, al-Kafi (Rawda)
Quran despised	Corruption amongst Islamic leaders and lack of respect for Sharia law and Quran among people	Quoting Kulayni, al-Kafi (Rawda)
Moral depravity and homosexuality is in the open	Society embracing homosexuality and sexual promiscuity	Quoting Kulayni, al-Kafi (Rawda)
Alcohol being drunk openly	Common in the West and in some places in the Middle East	Quoting Kulayni, al-Kafi (Rawda)
Women will rule in governmental assemblies	Common to have women in positions of government mostly in the Western world for first time in history	Quoting Kulayni, al-Kafi (Rawda)

Source: Created by the Author.

From the Muslim perspective, the fulfilment of every one of these general signs is complete in the modern world. However, the closeness of the precise moment of the Twelfth Imam’s return is tied to specific prophecies, and their fulfilment are what raises the Shia’s excitement and expectation. The Shia interpretations are pulled from the sources listed in the literature review shown in the introduction, all are representations of their own words. They are summed up in the following table.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 166.

Table 2: Specific Prophecies only the Shia Muslims Believe

Specific Prophecies	Shia Interpretation¹⁵⁷	Hadith/Tradition Source¹⁵⁸
There will be a great conflict in the land of Syria until it is destroyed	The current destruction after the Arab Spring and rise and fall of ISIS	Al-Mufid, al-Irshad, 338 (Tr. 544)
Death and extreme fear will afflict the people of Baghdad and Iraq. A fire will appear in the sky, and a redness will cover them. “The swift winged will attack...and cause divisions in the tribes” ¹⁵⁹	The fragmentation of Iraq after the US invasion, death from the sky in the form of America’s air power, and subsequent civil war.	Al-Mufid, al-Irshad, 337 (Tr. 542, 548)
The Arabs will throw off the authority of foreigners and take possession of their land	The Western order and influence will be pushed out of the Middle East	Al-Mufid, al-Irshad, 336 (Tr. 541)
Soldiers of the Twelfth Imam will march from Yemen to seize Mecca	The Houthi rebels should be supported by Iran to control this territory and prepare this army	Al Fusulul Muhimma Ibn Sabbagh Maliki, Pg. 248 ¹⁶⁰
Several figures will appear Including the One-eyed Dajjal (Anti-Christ)	The United States (great Satan) Israel (little Satan) and those who follow the corrupt Western order	Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj Nishapuri <i>Sahih Muslim Sahih Muslim</i> , 41:7007 ¹⁶¹
Yamani (Follower of Mahdi who rises in/out of Yemen and prepares the way to conquer Mecca and Medina) will bear white flags and march north at when the time is right	Iran must support the Houthi rebellion in Yemen to prepare the way for Yamani. Also, the leader of Hezzzbollah, Nassrallah is from a Yemeni family	Sheikh al-Faḍl Ibn Shādhān. <i>Mukhtasar Isbat al-Rej’ah</i> . pp. 28.
He will come with a new cause (just like Muhammad) with a new book and a new religious law, which will be a severe test for the Arabs	The 12 th Imam will change the rules and traditions of Islam and usher in a new age, and the Arabs will resist this	Al-Numani, al-Ghayba, quoted in Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar (od ed.), Vol. 13, 192, 194; al-Mufid, al-Irshad, 343 (Tr. 552); al-Irbili, Kashf al-Ghumma, Vol. 3, 255

¹⁵⁷ Office of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, *The Coming Is Upon Us*, Translation by Reza Kahlili, *A Time to Betray*, 2011, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwiadYT-N9k&feature=youtu.be>.

¹⁵⁸ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, 166–71.

¹⁵⁹ Office of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, *The Coming Is Upon Us*.

¹⁶⁰ Quran.mu, “Signs Of The Arrival Of Imam Mahdi (As),” accessed August 9, 2018, <http://www.quran.mu/signs-of-arrival-of-imam-mehdi-as.html>.

¹⁶¹ University of Southern California, “The Book Pertaining to the Turmoil and Portents of the Last Hour” Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement, October 5, 2017, accessed October 12, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171005173210/http://cmje.usc.edu/religious-texts/hadith/muslim/041-smt.php#041.7007>.

Between the Mahdi and the Arabs, there will be only the sword	Most Arabs are Sunni and the Shia must be prepared to fight and subdue them	Al-Numani, al-Ghayba, quoted in Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar (old ed.), Vol. 13, 192
The sun will rise from the west, and a star will appear in the east giving off as much light as the moon	One of the few metaphysical signs	Al-Mufid, al-Irshad, 336 (Tr. 541)
A call from heaven will verify the Mahdi	There is room to interpret this a number of different ways	Ibn Babuya, Kamal ad-Din, 650, 652; al-Ayyashi, Tafsir, other sources quoted in Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar (old ed.), Vol. 13, 156, 160
Before he comes the red death (sword) and the white death (plague)	1/3 of the world's population will die from a world war and 1/3 from the resulting famine ¹⁶²	Ibn Babuya, Kamal ad-Din, 655; Shaykhut-Taifa, al-Ghayba, quoted in Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar (old ed.), Vol. 13, 156-7; al-Mufid, al-Irshad, 338 (Tr. 544)

Source: Created by the Author.

Of particular interest is a documentary produced by the office of President Ahmadinejad in 2011 spells out how each of these specific prophecies are being fulfilled by Iran and its proxy groups in Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon.¹⁶³ The purpose of the documentary is to lay out a timeline of events and show the legitimacy of Ayatollah Khamenei as the prophesied “Sayed Khorasani” who is to facilitate the coming with a strong military and pass Jerusalem and the flag of Islam to the Twelfth Imam. Furthermore, the documentary claims that the leader of Hezbollah, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, is the Yamani. Nasrallah’s family came from Yemen fulfilling the prophecy (see table two). The documentary highlights significant prophecies needing to be fulfilled including Baghdad will be the capital of the Twelfth Imam’s global empire, Jerusalem must be conquered, and the Arab kingdom ruling the area of Saudi Arabia will collapse into conflict and a struggle for power.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Amir Taki, “Signs of the Reappearance - Imam Mahdi,” *Ahlulbayt TV*, June 16, 2017, accessed January 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARFMPo1vsrM>.

¹⁶³ Office of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, *The Coming Is Upon Us*.

¹⁶⁴ Office of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, *The Coming Is Upon Us*.

Table 3: Specific Signs Both Sunni and Shia Agree On

Specific Prophecies	Shia Interpretation	Hadith/Tradition Source¹⁶⁵
The Mahdi will be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad of the line of Fatima	He is currently alive and in occultation (invisible), and both Supreme Leaders and Ahmadinejad claim they have spoken with him	Mahdi is the Twelfth Imam, and all Imams are descendants of Muhammad ¹⁶⁶
He will bear the name Muhammad	This was established 1200 years ago	The full name of the Twelfth Imam is Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Askari ¹⁶⁷
He will rule for seven, nine, or nineteen years	Competing narratives in Hadiths leave this ambiguous	Al-Irbili, <i>Kashf al-Ghumma</i> , Vol. 3, 257, 269; al-Numani, al-Ghayba quoted in Majlisi Bihar al-Anwar (old ed.), Vol. 13, 178
the black flag in Khurasan (Area of Afghanistan and Iran) will prepare the way of his coming	An army will arise from Iran and/or Afghanistan to bring about the Mahdi's return. The Hadith says "If you see it [the Black Standard] then go to it even if you have to crawl over the snow, for with it is the Mahdi, the vicegerent of God."	Al-Irbili, <i>Kashf al-Ghumma</i> , Vol. 3, 262-3; Shaykhut-Taifa, al-Ghayba, quoted in Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar (old ed.), Vol. 13, 159
the Dajjal (Anti-Mahdi) in the East will accompany his coming	This is defined as the United States, Israel, and the Arab leaders who ally with them ¹⁶⁸	Ibn Babuya, Kamal ad-Din, 525-32

Source: Created by the Author.

Recent historical events include two decades of war between the United States and the Taliban, destruction of much of Iraq, the Arab Spring, overthrow of many Western-backed autocrats, rise of ISIS, destruction of Syria's cities, and intractable situation in the Sunni lands of northern Iraq and Syria fit the specific prophecies of the Mahdi's return the Shia have looked to for one thousand years.

Essential to see in these prophecies is the expectation that the Iranian Shia Twelver Mahdi will violently subjugate the Arab Muslims and then the world. The Sunnis and the world

¹⁶⁵ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 166–71.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 336.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Office of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, *The Coming Is Upon Us*.

will reject him, and they will war against him. The domination of the Middle East by the Western world order and the 1400-year-old schism between the Sunnis and Shia that is currently coalescing into a cold war with multiple proxy forces being established and supported by the Iranians fits the narrative of the coming of the Mahdi.

Table 4: Prophecies Specific to the Mahdi Himself

Prophecies	Hadith/Tradition Source¹⁶⁹
He will come in an even year (Muslim calendar)	Al-Mufid, al-Irshad, 341 (Tr. 548)
He will announce himself in Mecca between the Kaba and the Station of Abraham (about 130 meters away) and summon the people to follow him	Al-Mufid, al-Irshad, 341 (Tr. 548)
He will go from Mecca to Kufa	Al-Mufid, al-Irshad, 341 (Tr. 549)
He is young of medium stature with a handsome face and beautiful black hair which reaches his shoulders.	Al-Mufid, al-Irshad, 342 (Tr. 551); al-Irbili, Kashf al-Ghumma, Vol. 3, 254
He will follow Muhammad's pattern and demolish whatever precedes him [religious/political structure]	Al-Numani, al-Ghayba, quoted in Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar (od ed.), Vol. 13, 191
The Mahdi will be treated even worse than Muhammad because instead of worshipping stones and sticks these people [current Muslims] will turn the Quran against him, when his flag is raised it will be rejected by the people of the East and the West	Al-Numani, al-Ghayba, quoted in Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar (od ed.), Vol. 13, 193
He will rule with justice and remove injustice in his days. Roads will be safe, and earth will show its bounties. Everything will be returned to the rightful owner, and everyone will follow Islam. No one will have to charitably give because riches will encompass all.	Al-Mufid, al-Irshad, 343-4 (Tr. 552-3)
All knowledge is encompassed in 27 letters and the prophets have brought two of those letters. Mahdi will bring the other 25 letters and spread them among the people.	Qutbu'd-Din Rawandi, al-Khara'ij, quoted in Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar (old ed.), Vol. 13, 187

Source: Created by the Author.

¹⁶⁹ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 166–71.

Table 5: The Return of Several Figures of the Past.

Figures who will return after the Mahdi returns	Hadith/Tradition Source¹⁷⁰
First to return will be Imam Husayn (3 rd Imam) accompanied by the seventy-two companions that were killed with him at Karbala	Al-Ayyashi, Tafsir, quoted in Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar (old ed.), Vol. 13, 222
Jesus Christ will return and convince all the Christians that Muhammad was right	Ibn Babuya, Uyun al-Akhbar ar-Rida, quoted in Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar (old ed.), Vol. 13, 214.
The 313 people who fought with Muhammad at the Battle of Badr will return	Ibn Babuya, Kamal ad-Din, 654; Hasan ibn Sulayman al-Hilli, Muntakhab al-Basair, quoted in Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar (old ed.) Vol. 13, 210
All the other 11 Imams and prophets of former ages will return	Al-Mufid, al-Ikhtisas, quoted in Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar (old ed.), Vol. 13, 210

Source: Created by the Author

Every line of engagement Iran pursues has a geopolitical goal underwritten by a Twelfth Imam prophecy. The Iranian Regime are true believers in the prophecies, but they are also pragmatic decision-makers who will use the startling fulfilment of so many age-old prophecies to solidify the legitimacy of their rule, encourage recruitment to proxy groups, and justify their play for regional hegemony over the resource rich lands with a majority population of Shia Muslims. Furthermore, though some of these prophecies seem absurd or impossible to fulfill to the Western mind, these are the symbols and numbers that hold great power with the Shia. For instance, in 2017 Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps stood up a new proxy force in Syria called the 313 Brigade, reflecting the return of the Third Imam's 313 companions.¹⁷¹ Iran's power lies in the core beliefs of the people, and as long as the hope that they are a special generation to bring about a new age remains Iran will continue to grow in strength.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Enab Baladi, Echoes of Hezbollah: New Iranian Experiment Takes Shape in South Syria, *The Syrian Observer*, November 10, 2017, accessed April 11, 2019, https://syrianobserver.com/EN/features/21866/echoes_hezbollah_new_iranian_experiment_takes_shape_south_syria.html.

Section 4: The Dao of the Desert

The best military policy is to attack strategies, the next to attack alliances, the next to attack soldiers, and the worst to assault walled cities.

—Sun Tzu

Dao indicates a “way” in the sense of a road or a path...dao can function as a noun or a verb. It may indicate the road upon which one travels, the act of wayfaring or traveling down a road, or even the act of way-making by leading someone down or constructing a road.

—Britannica.com

Choosing a way forward in the Middle East requires understanding the emerging context of the region, which comes from the past but is unique to the present. Greater Islam is a distinct worldview with multiple competing narratives, but Islam universally chafes under the political and economic domination of the West. In Islam’s eyes, Israel is a historical aberration of this domination. Specifically, Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, believes US power will soon recede, and Israel will cease to exist politically by 2040; he is committed to “a spirit of fighting, heroism, and jihad” to help bring this about.¹⁷² This anticipated sea change of regional and global power distribution fits into the prophetic narrative of the return of the Twelfth Imam. Changing Iran’s worldview may be impossible but creating the conditions that make the people of Iran realize that their role in this endeavor is not pressing, and the timing is not immediate, should be a key component of US policy.

The great powers of the world compete in the Middle East for energy, access to markets, security, and prestige. The future is uncertain, it will be created by the decisions of the collective players who act in relation to each other. Furthermore, US decisions in this region will produce second and third order effects that could support or undermine its national interests. Therefore, creating clarity from complexity requires an understanding of how the national interests of Iran,

¹⁷² Thomas Erdbrink, “Iran’s Supreme Leader Says Israel Won’t Exist in 25 Years,” *The New York Times*, December 21, 2017, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/10/world/middleeast/iran-ayatollah-khamenei-israel-will-not-exist.html>.

the United States, Russia, and China impacts their decisions and shapes the potential futures in the Middle East.

Since 1979 Iran's three interests were to destroy Iraqi power, push the United States out of the region, and keep the historical enemy, the Wahhabi Saudis, weak.¹⁷³ Sunni Iraq is now gone, and the United States effectively ceded control of Iraq to Iranian influence.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, the American electorate is tired of Middle Eastern wars, and both Presidents Obama and Trump declared their intention to end US involvement in the region's conflict. The last remaining objective is to weaken the Wahhabi's protector, the House of Saud.

Iran's great success over the last decade is driving new national interests with a much grander scheme. Iran now seeks to consolidate the scattered Shia populations under their rule and protection to increase their relative power. They also build and support proxy armies all around the Middle East that create potential options the Iranians can use later when the timing is favorable to gain key territory, resources, or psychological gains.

The leadership of Iran desires regional hegemony and believes they are ultimately destined to it. The Shia crescendo across the Middle East is a direct result of geopolitical opportunity and is legitimized and empowered by an eschatological excitement. Iran began a push to regain its religious fervor and motivation when Ahmadinejad and other former students of the 1979 revolution entered leadership positions.¹⁷⁵ The traditional message for the Shia to prepare their hearts through obedience to Sharia law and support of the Iranian government is expanding to offensive action against Israel and the Sunni. Former US National Security Advisor H. R.

¹⁷³ Friedman, *America's Secret War*, 249–50.

¹⁷⁴ Tamara Cofman Wittes, "The Regional Impact of U.S. Policy toward Iraq and Syria," Brookings, November 30, 2001, accessed February 24, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-regional-impact-of-u-s-policy-toward-iraq-and-syria/>.

¹⁷⁵ Robert Gates, *Duty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 189.

McMaster sounded the alarm on Iran and pointed out they poured \$16 billion into their proxy groups between 2012 and 2018 to accomplish this new aim.¹⁷⁶

It is common for those with a Western worldview to present the false dichotomy that Iran is either pragmatic or ideological when trying to understand the logic behind Iran's rhetoric and actions. However, Iranian leaders are both pragmatic and ideological. They truly believe in the Shia Twelver Islam ideology; it is a powerful motivator behind their rational decisions, and they realize its limitations. However, believing in a religious worldview does not mean someone is illogical; this idea is a trap that many Humanist Western minds fall into and is a mirrored-image view that religious ideology and logical pragmatism cannot coexist.

Ayatollah Khamenei's number one priority is regime survival, and it is far from guaranteed. The regime interprets the events of history through the lens of a sovereign Allah behind all history, so negative consequences to the Muslim world are either judgment or guidance, an example being the "crisis of Islam" mentioned in section two.¹⁷⁷ The Iranian regime also knows that its people were more ideologically motivated after the 1979 revolution, but the Iran-Iraq war left them disenchanted. However, the recent events in the Middle East are blowing a fresh breeze into the ideological sails of hope and expectation for the Shia. It is a time of both opportunity and desperation for the Regime that could reignite the revolutionary fervor of 1979 or perhaps be its last gasp. The Shia are asking themselves if not now, then when?

There is a distinct divide in the Iranian society between the generation that currently leads Iran and its younger generation. The actions of Iran's leaders to fund their proxy groups at the cost of heavy economic sanctions is a way to double down on their ideology and make a play for the hearts and minds of the next generation of Iranians. However, it also introduces great risk. If

¹⁷⁶ Joyce Karam, "McMaster: Iran Spent More than \$16 Billion on Syria and Proxies," *The National*, March 16, 2018, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/the-americas/mcmaster-iran-spent-more-than-16-billion-on-syria-and-proxies-1.713493>.

¹⁷⁷ See page twenty-two.

the policy fails, the divide could widen enough to completely delegitimize the leadership of the Shia clergy who have ruled Iran since 1979. Therefore, the consequences of Iran's aggressive proxy actions around the Middle East will be crucial towards affecting the younger generations understanding of the proximity and legitimacy of the Twelfth Imams' return. The narrative that this is the time, and the Iranians are the ones to usher in the return of the Twelfth Imam will only gain momentum if Iran's aggressive actions through their proxy groups are deemed successful and blessed by Allah.

The idea of a Muslim empire is one that many Islamic leaders espouse, and they know their competitors must be delegitimized or subjugated to achieve it. To Iran, the competition for both Muslim and global leadership are two rails of the same track. First, an empire needs ideological legitimacy, economic viability, and security. The insurgency that tore Iraq apart and the subsequent withdrawal of the American military precipitated ISIS and created conditions fitting the signs of the Twelfth Imam's return. These conditions and continuance of the unraveling of Sunni power in the Middle East may provide the opportunity to seize ancient Persian lands that happen to contain a vast majority of the world's proven energy reserves.¹⁷⁸ No single action in the community of nations could shift the balance of global power so quickly.

The holy sites of the Shia are powerful symbols, and their protection is a motivating force for Shia of all nationalities to volunteer to retake and secure them. The destruction of the Shia holy sites by Al Qaeda in Iraq drove the Iranian regime to seize control of these areas through supported proxy groups, especially in southern Iraq. Even more threatening to the Shia, the ISIS publication and celebration of the destruction of Shia holy sites in Syria inspired tens of thousands of Shias to volunteer to fight to regain and protect them.¹⁷⁹ However, Iranian leadership ambitions lie far beyond holy sites.

¹⁷⁸ See figure seven.

¹⁷⁹ Avi Melamed, interviewed by the author, Jerusalem, Nov 1, 2018.

Iranian Strategy

The Iranian strategy to export its revolution involves three phases: (1) create options and shape the region, (2) establish a regional hegemony over the Middle East, (3) restructure the world order after an Islamic model. Phase one of the strategy requires establishing legitimate leadership through political and economic advantage over Turkey and the Arabs. Article eleven in the Iranian constitution states “All Muslims form a single nation” and the preamble states that the constitution “provides the necessary basis for ensuring the continuation of the Revolution at home and abroad” and “will strive with other Islamic and popular movements to prepare the way for the formation of a single world community (in accordance with the Quranic verse “*This your community is a single community, and I am your Lord, so worship Me*” [21:92]).”¹⁸⁰

Iran's constitution establishes the role of its military in fulfilling its goals: “The Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran must be an Islamic Army, i.e., committed to Islamic ideology and the people” (Article 144).¹⁸¹ From the preamble: Iran’s Army and Revolutionary Guard “will be responsible not only for guarding and preserving the frontiers of the country but also for fulfilling the ideological mission of jihad in God's way; that is, extending the sovereignty of God’s law throughout the world (this is in accordance with the Quranic verse “*Prepare against them whatever force you are able to muster, and strings of horses, striking fear into the enemy of God and your enemy, and others besides them*” [8:60]).¹⁸²

Iran risks internal stability by pouring money into Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and the Gaza Strip; there is no economic gain from this. However, it does create options by connecting their main proxy group Hezbollah through a land bridge to Iraq and Iran. This connection aids military logistics and provides possible future trade outlets to the Mediterranean and Turkey, who are

¹⁸⁰ World Policy, “A Detailed Analysis of Iran’s Constitution,” October 12, 2010, accessed February 25, 2019, <https://worldpolicy.org/2010/10/12/a-detailed-analysis-of-irans-constitution/>.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

more than obliged to work around sanctions for Iran, ISIS, or anyone who enriches Erdogan or his circle.¹⁸³ Therefore, these avenues complicate enforcing sanctions and gain some deterrence value against an Israeli or Sunni attack, but the motive is mostly ideological.¹⁸⁴ The oil fields of Syria are all but destroyed, and it is estimated to cost between \$35-40 billion to rebuild the devastated infrastructure. Russia is the only player moving in with the capital, companies, and risk tolerance to take on the project.¹⁸⁵

The Iranian leadership developed a multi-layered approach over the last three decades that provides Iran with the ability to instigate instability around the Middle East while enjoying immunity from retaliation. Their most significant capability is a missile program consisting of tens of thousands of missiles.¹⁸⁶ Their long-range missiles have an accuracy of +/- 2.5 kilometers which makes them only useful as delivery vehicles for chemical warheads or other weapons of mass destruction.¹⁸⁷ Iran's chemical program started in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war and is shrouded in ambiguity and secrecy. However, Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell assessed that Iran possesses dual-use facilities that could produce chemical weapons to place in bombs, artillery shells, and long-range missiles.¹⁸⁸ Iran's long-range missiles are only useful for chemical weapons aimed at area targets, like enemy bases and civilian populations.

¹⁸³ Colin P. Clarke, "Turkey's Double ISIS Standard," *Foreign Policy*, April 12, 2018, accessed March 2, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/12/turkeys-double-isis-standard/>.

¹⁸⁴ Avi Melamed, interviewed by the author, Jerusalem, Nov 1, 2018.

¹⁸⁵ Viktor Katona, "Russia Is Taking Over Syria's Oil And Gas," *OilPrice*, February 14, 2018, accessed March 2, 2019, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/Russia-Is-Taking-Over-Syrias-Oil-And-Gas.html>.

¹⁸⁶ Al Jazeera, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Capabilities," September 23, 2017, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/06/iran-ballistic-missile-capabilities-170621125051403.html>.

¹⁸⁷ Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Missiles of Iran," Missile Threat, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/iran/>.

¹⁸⁸ Global Security, "Chemical Weapons - Iran," Weapons of Mass Destruction, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/iran/cw.htm>.

Surrounding, pressuring, and eventually destroying Israel is central to Iran's constitution, legitimacy, and strategy; but they know that Israel and its allies are capable of a devastating retaliation against the Iranian homeland and interests militarily.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, they target Israel's soft underbelly, the lives of its civilians. Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps currently has well-supplied proxy forces with 100,000-150,000 rockets pointed at Israel.¹⁹⁰ However, Israel covers its population with the most advanced missile defense systems in the world.¹⁹¹ The system works because it detects rockets on a trajectory toward unpopulated areas and ignores them to save the limited and expensive interceptors for more threatening projectiles. Iran is attempting to make the majority of Hezbollah's rockets precision-guided, which would overwhelm Israel's defense systems.¹⁹² To eliminate this threat Israel dropped 2,000 bombs in Syria in 2018, but battlefield losses are not deterring Iran because losses on the battlefield do not affect the logic driving their actions.¹⁹³ Furthermore, during 2016 Iran began building a 100,000-strong army inside Syria of Pakistanis, Afghani, and Iraqi Shias.¹⁹⁴ Israel now faces two Shia armies on their northern border, and Iran is demonstrating to the Muslim world its commitment to reestablish "justice" in the lands of Muhammed.

To deter action by Israel's allies, Iran threatens global trade by positioning anti-ship missiles and thousands of fast attack small craft adjacent to two of the world's strategic

¹⁸⁹ Regionally speaking, Iran fears unilateral or coalition action by the United States as well.

¹⁹⁰ Aron Heller, "Israel Confirms Syria Strike, Ends Mission on Lebanon Border," *AP News*, January 13, 2019, <https://apnews.com/be5b1ce101094463bd2a9c81f512e069>.

¹⁹¹ Jewish Virtual Library, "Israel Missile Defense Systems," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/israel-missile-defense-systems>.

¹⁹² David Kenner, "Why Israel Fears Iran's Presence in Syria," *The Atlantic*, July 22, 2018, accessed December 3, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/07/hezbollah-iran-new-weapons-israel/565796/>.

¹⁹³ Heller, "Israel Confirms Syria Strike, Ends Mission on Lebanon Border."

¹⁹⁴ BBC News, "Syria War: Israeli Jets Target Iranian Positions around Damascus," January 21, 2019, accessed February 23, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46941717>.

straights.¹⁹⁵ One-third of the world's seaborne oil passes through the strait of Hormuz and significant trade between Europe and Asia passes through Bab Al Mandab each day.¹⁹⁶ This constitutes an external envelope of deterrence against preemptive action or retaliation against Iran from Israel or its Western allies, especially if the United States cedes its ability to contest these straits by reducing its military presence in the area. Furthermore, the deterrence creates a strategic space where Iran's proxies have a free hand to gain a position of strategic advantage over Iranian competitors.

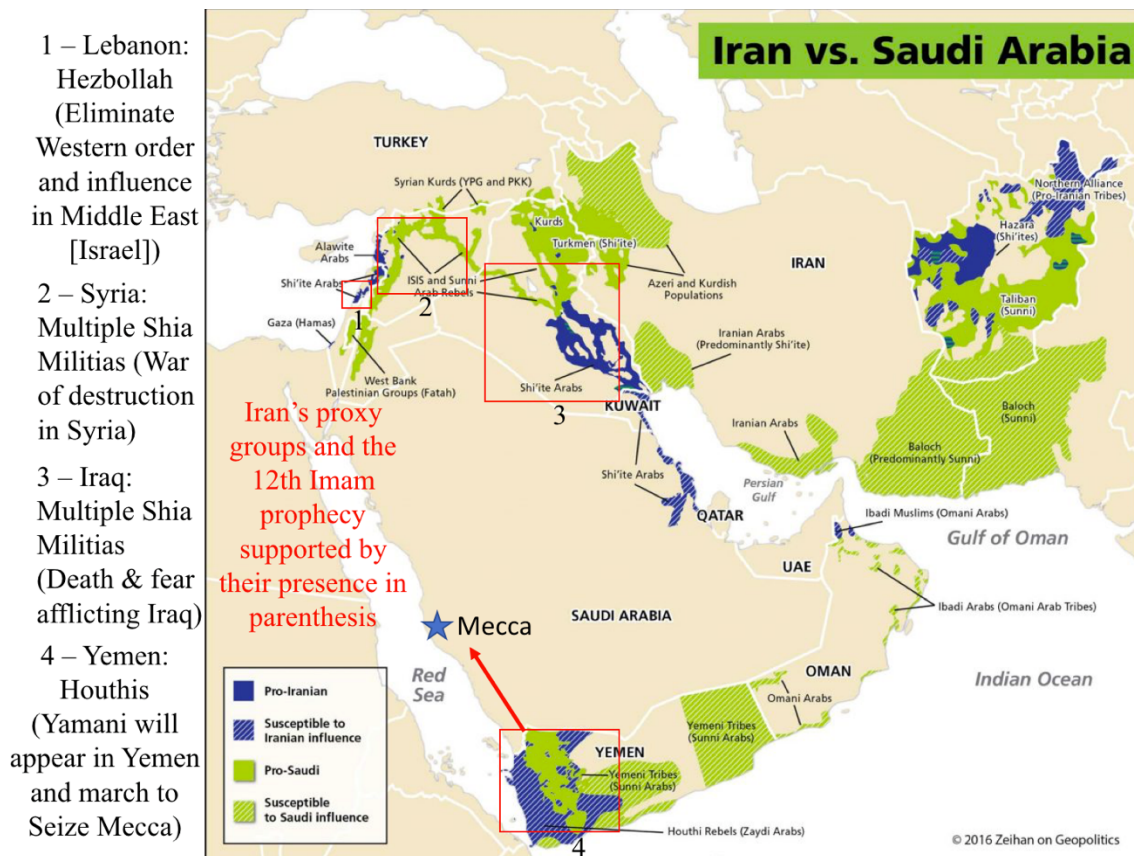


Figure 11: Iranian, Shia Proxy Groups (associated end time prophecies). “The Absent Superpower Maps – Peter Zeihan.” (Boxes and text outlining the prophecies added by author).

¹⁹⁵ Parisa Hafezi, Jonathan Saul, and Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, “How Could Iran Disrupt Gulf Oil Flows?,” *Reuters*, July 11, 2018, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-iran-explainer/how-could-iran-disrupt-gulf-oil-flows-idUSKBN1K12MH?il=0>.

¹⁹⁶ “Strait of Hormuz: The World's Most Important Oil Artery,” *Reuters*, July 5, 2018, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-oil-factbox/strait-of-hormuz-the-worlds-most-important-oil-artery-idUSKBN1JV24O>.

Control of Mecca and Medina is central to phase two. This is fundamental to the Shia Twelver Islamic worldview and the legitimacy of leadership in the Islamic world. Whoever controls these locations controls the ideological epicenter of Islam. The Twelfth Imam will appear in Mecca and Hadiths predict the Yamani will seize Mecca from the area on the Arabian Peninsula that is now Yemen.¹⁹⁷

If the Iranian Regime is successful in establishing regional hegemony, it should be expected that they will pursue phase three of their strategy to challenge the global system. The cold war currently raging in the Middle East between the Shia and the Sunni is well beyond a Muslim civil war; the world is involved. Ideology drives the Regime, and they view their current place in time as an opportunity to make a big leap in relative power because the Sunnis are weak, disoriented, and disintegrated both practically and spiritually, they do not differentiate the two.¹⁹⁸ The geopolitical events of the last two decades that partially fulfil the prophecies pointing to the Twelfth Imam's return motivates an aggressive regional policy.¹⁹⁹

The success of Iran's aggressive, proxy actions in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and the Gaza Strip will encourage Iran's belief that they are in the end times and motivate more action. Therefore, these actions must be contested, and the Iranian government held accountable for their proxy group actions. The best hope for the future of the Middle East and the global order is an internally driven shift inside of Iran away from these eschatologically focused strategies and toward a capacity for coexistence in a stable world order. However, neither China nor Russia will hold Iran accountable, the Sunnis and Israel only have the power to defend themselves, and Europe has no military ability to reach into the Middle East to check Iranian ambition. Only US leadership can shape the direction of the Iranian strategy by thwarting Iran's proxy and terror

¹⁹⁷ See Table 2 prophecy on Yemen.

¹⁹⁸ Avi Melamed, interviewed by the author, Jerusalem, Nov 1, 2018.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

activity and creating conditions that convince the Shia that this is not the time for their prophecies to be realized. Iranian soldiers are not known for being good, if Turkey or anyone crushed Shia proxies, the Iranians will likely yell, and that is it.²⁰⁰ There is no evidence of Iran sending troops abroad besides their Revolutionary Guard in advisory roles.²⁰¹ However, hitting closer to home would elicit a different response. Any direct attack on Iran should never be ruled out, especially with the threat of the Iranian nuclear program, but the consequence will likely be the end of all divisions in Iran and consolidation under the current regime.²⁰² Only by reshaping the environment will Iran be forced to come to terms with an internal reformation of the strategy and a shift away from their ideological Shia Twelver view. A lack of vision or understanding of Iran's plan could spell disaster for the US-led global community.

This has happened before. By the 4th century, the Roman world order cracked and began to devolve. The Visigoth barbarians who were the outsiders of Rome's economic system took opportunities to seize land and exact revenge on the system that marginalized them. They carved out places that they could settle, decisively defeated three Roman legions and killed the emperor in the process. Eventually they sacked Rome itself.²⁰³ The Visigoth's reasons started with marginalization and desperation and grew to enmity and revenge. They grew in regional power, and directly assaulted the global order when they grew strong enough. Ultimately, they seized all of North Africa and contributed to the empire's collapse by the destruction of Mediterranean trade through piracy.²⁰⁴

Another example of pent up socio-political energy being released was in the seventh century when the Muslim armies first emerged out of the Arabian Peninsula. Finding a weakened

²⁰⁰ Reuvan Merkhav, interviewed by the author, Jerusalem, Nov 1, 2018.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Gates, *Duty*, 190.

²⁰³ Evan Andrews, "8 Reasons Why Rome Fell," History, January 14, 2014, accessed March 2, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/8-reasons-why-rome-fell>.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

political and economic system, they systematically conquered the majority of the Eastern Roman Empire and Persia. For six hundred years they expanded until conquering Constantinople itself, and the Muslim world reached its zenith in breadth and power. The likelihood of something like this happening again seems extremely low. However, the beginnings of severe challenges to the US-led global system is apparent to all. Iran is one of the leaders of this challenge and understanding their worldview is critical to engaging them instead of ceding the Middle East to a way that produces an unacceptable outcome to US interests in the Middle East.

Iran's ideology makes it an outsider to the current world order, and as sanctions bear down on their economy, the situation for the regime and economy becomes more desperate. The pressure is essential, but staying focused on the end goal of an internal move by the younger generation towards new leadership that reforms the nations worldview is critical. A large shift away from the Shia worldview is unlikely, but US strategy should include creating and highlighting gaps between the Iranian leadership's Twelver narrative and the physical, social, and economic evidence.

The Resurgence of Empire

The US National Security Strategy defines its interests in the Middle East as a region that is “not a safe haven or breeding ground for jihadist terrorists, not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and that contributes to a stable global energy market.”²⁰⁵ Iran directly challenges every one of these interests. The United States uses economic sanctions to coerce Iran and access to global banking and markets as a reward for positive behavior. The military options to deter Iran include enabling local Sunni partners through arms sales, then supporting them with command and control, intelligence, air power, naval power, missile defense, and nuclear retaliation in the event of an Iranian chemical or nuclear attack. President Obama's play to co-opt

²⁰⁵ Donald J. Trump, “A New National Security Strategy for a New Era,” Washington, DC: White House, 2017, accessed November 23, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

the Iranians through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) seems to have emboldened them. The deal focused on the nuclear pursuit and all other behavior was tolerated. The hope to bring stability through freeing Iran from the economic chains restraining it proved to have the opposite effect, giving Iran confidence that the United States would avoid interference in Iranian proxy action as long as the pursuit of nuclear weapons was temporarily suspended.²⁰⁶

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a vocal leader in the call to aggressively resist Iran, voices the belief of many in the Middle East that reapplying heavy sanctions will “lead to pressure and when Iran faces paralyzing sanctions with a threat of military action, they will come to the table.” He also voices the concerns of many in his view that “the Iran deal was supposed to moderate Iran’s ambitions, it actually fueled their aggression by giving them billions of dollars.”²⁰⁷

However, the premises driving US interaction in the Middle East are changing. George Friedman, a geopolitical analyst, asserts that “the foundation of US strategy in the Persian Gulf had always been maintaining the balance of power between Iraq and Iran, in order to protect the security of the Arabian Peninsula. The United States knew that if either country had the upper hand in the region-as Iraq did in 1990-it would try to seize part or all of Arabia.”²⁰⁸ However, this strategy was based on the 1970 oil embargoes and the US dependency on Middle Eastern oil. It was also based on the premise that the United States underwrote the global security of the world’s oceans to ensure free trade and access to markets. However, the reality has changed.

Fracking technology is changing the geopolitical rules in a way unseen since the advent of nuclear weapons. It is an economic mechanism as opposed to a military one; but the

²⁰⁶ Avi Melamed, “A Growing Whirlpool of Violence: The Middle East Legacy of Barack Obama,” January 17, 2017, accessed November 25, 2018, <https://www.avimelamed.com/2017/01/17/a-growing-whirlpool-of-violence-the-middle-eastern-legacy-of-barack-obama/>.

²⁰⁷ Benjamin Netanyahu, “Israeli PM Netanyahu on the Iran Nuclear Deal and Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *BBC Newsnight*, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCYY3w5VoZg>.

²⁰⁸ Friedman, *America’s Secret War*, 253.

ramifications are just as potent, though political recognition of the reality is proving to be subtler. Fracking added sixteen billion barrels to the US oil reserves and took the world from a “peak oil” crisis to a price collapse from 2010 to 2016.²⁰⁹ Furthermore, the United States stayed heavily involved in the Middle East after the 1970 oil embargo proved its energy vulnerability, but US oil production recently surpassed Saudi Arabia’s to become the largest in the world. Guaranteeing access to Middle Eastern energy is no longer a matter of vital interest for the United States.

Wars are expensive, and the awareness is growing that the bill for the last three decades of profligate spending will come due in the next generation. The interest on the national debt is a little over ten percent of annual tax receipts as of 2019 and is expected to reach twenty percent in the next decade if tax receipts stay on their current trend.²¹⁰ The \$4-6 trillion price tag, depending on how cost is defined, on two Middle Eastern wars has already changed the political landscape US leaders must navigate as they shape foreign policy.²¹¹

These facts are becoming apparent through US strategic action. President Obama withdrew from Iraq and hoped to stabilize the region by removing economic pressure from Iran in exchange for a temporary agreement to halt their nuclear weapons. Instead, Iran was confident the United States would not interfere in its proxy actions and found themselves empowered to strengthen the narrative about the end times and return of the Twelfth Imam. The JCPOA signed by the Obama administration freed up \$40-150 Billion for Iran, depending on the measure of second and third order effects, and gave the regime resources and a realization of their long-stated goal to push the United States out of the Middle East. Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* warned this surge of cash could turbocharged the revolutionary goals of the Iranian Regime, and

²⁰⁹ Amadeo, “Where Are the World’s Largest Oil Reserves?”

²¹⁰ Nelson D. Schwartz, “As Debt Rises, the Government Will Soon Spend More on Interest Than on the Military,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2018, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/25/business/economy/us-government-debt-interest.html>.

²¹¹ Gordon Lubold, “U.S. Spent \$5.6 Trillion on Wars in Middle East and Asia: Study,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 8, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/study-estimates-war-costs-at-5-6-trillion-1510106400>.

the evidence points to the warning now being a reality.²¹² President Trump is just as committed to reducing the US military presence abroad demonstrated by his commitment to pulling troops out of Syria and Afghanistan.²¹³

These decisions are driven by an electorate whose tolerance for seeing flag-draped coffins return from the Middle East and money spent abroad is at its exhaustion point. The problem is that both instability in the Middle East and complete disengagement due to disinterest will exacerbate this problem and likely produce second and third order effects that significantly affect US security and its interest abroad.

The receding US interest leaves little capacity for large-scale intervention unless some future action stirs the enmity of the US population. *New York Times* journalists Rod Nordland and Mujib Mashal write that the United States spent \$932 billion in Afghanistan over the last seventeen years, “on reconstruction aid alone, America spent more on Afghanistan than on the entire Marshall Plan to rebuild post-World War 2 Europe, in today’s dollars...but the Taliban are unapologetically antidemocratic, believing in an outsize role for the mullahs in governance. Reconciling those two worldviews seems almost impossible.”²¹⁴ Change in the Islamic world must come from within, and an attitude toward containment and creating the conditions for internal, incremental change is compelling.

The Bear

The Obama administration did not expect a bellicose and resurgent Russia. However, Vladimir Putin relentlessly pursues Russia’s national interests by directly challenging the US-led

²¹² Friedman, “For the Mideast, It’s Still 1979.”

²¹³ Alexander Bolt, “Trump Tells GOP Senators He’s Sticking to Syria and Afghanistan Pullout,” *The Hill*, January 16, 2019, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/425760-trump-tells-gop-senators-hes-sticking-to-syria-and-afghanistan-pullout>.

²¹⁴ Rod Nordland and Mujib Mashal, “U.S. and Taliban Edge Toward Deal to End America’s Longest War,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2019, accessed February 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/26/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-peace-deal.html>.

liberal order and taking a realist view of international power. In the last two decades, he disrupted Russia's frontiers, sparking new life into the North Atlantic Trade Organization's (NATO) old fears. The invasion of Georgia in 2004 was the first violation of sovereignty in Europe to seize and assimilate territory since World War 2. The subsequent seizing of the Crimea and Donbass from Ukraine violated the 1994 Budapest Memorandum that promised Ukraine the United States, United Kingdom, and Russia would guarantee the security of its borders if they gave up their nuclear weapons to Russia.²¹⁵ Instead, the United States and the United Kingdom turned their heads when Russia violated the agreement which begs the question of the validity of US and UK agreements to weaker countries.

Indeed, Russia's security concerns demand control or a heavy influence over the countries in its near abroad, specifically the Caucasus countries like Georgia, and the Northern European Plain encompassing Poland and the Baltics. These traditional invasion routes that Muslims, Napoleon, and Hitler used to march toward the Russian heartland drive a Russian fear of an encroaching NATO border.

Another vital Russian national interest is the price of its oil exports, which significantly strengthens or weakens the Russian economy. Russia is the second largest energy exporter in the world, but its oil revenue dropped from thirteen percent of its GDP in 2005 to five percent in 2015.²¹⁶ Taxes from the energy sector are crucial for running the state and in 2016 still made up thirty-six percent of Russia's federal government revenues.²¹⁷ The collapse of the price of oil in

²¹⁵ United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the General Assembly Security Council*, Official Records, 49th sess., agenda items 62 and 70, December 19, 1994, accessed March 4, 2019, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_1994_1399.pdf.

²¹⁶ The Global Economy, "Russia Oil Revenue - Data, Chart," accessed March 5, 2019, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Russia/Oil_revenue/.

²¹⁷ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Russia Exports Most of Its Crude Oil Production, Mainly to Europe," *Today in Energy*, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=33732>.

2015 was a critical blow to Russian power, and Putin has since sought ways to exert more control over this variable.

The Russian Federation is likely the only actor that would benefit economically from Middle Eastern destabilization. The price of global energy exports depends on supply, demand, market access, and the US dollar as a reserve currency. Perhaps the most powerful influencer in the age of speculation and manipulation by hedge funds in futures, options, and derivatives markets is the fear caused by instability and war.²¹⁸

There is little Russia can do with regards to demand in energy markets. However, five of the top seven oil exporters are in the Middle East; the other two are Russia and Canada. Instability in this region gets priced into the oil markets, but a regional war would likely involve the destruction of oil infrastructure raising oil export prices for the long-term. Libya exported 1.6 million barrels of oil a day, two percent of global demand, and its GDP was \$74.76 billion in 2010 before the Arab Spring. Following Gaddafi's death in 2011, the GDP fell to less than half at \$34.7 billion and due to infrastructure destruction and the tumultuous political climate that keeps risk too high to invest in repairs, oil exports were at a mere 200,000 barrels a day in August, 2016.²¹⁹ The oil markets had a 4.5 million barrel capacity to cover a loss like this, but the instability still contributed to higher prices until 2014.²²⁰ Therefore, if more than roughly four percent of oil exports were taken offline through conflict in the Middle East, oil prices would spike to the benefit of Russia.

Vladimir Putin's strategy to increase Russian power includes undermining US leadership in Europe and pulling Europe into economic and political alignment with Russia. The most

²¹⁸ Marin Katusa, "The Libyan Crisis: Where Are Oil Prices Going?," *Forbes*, March 3, 2011, accessed March 6, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/energysource/2011/03/03/the-libyan-crisis-where-are-oil-prices-going/>.

²¹⁹ The Borgen Project, "Infrastructure in Libya," accessed March 6, 2019, <https://borgenproject.org/tag/infrastructure-in-libya/>.

²²⁰ Katusa, "The Libyan Crisis: Where Are Oil Prices Going?"

significant barrier to this plan is NATO. Putin has demonstrated a willingness to weaken NATO with any means at his disposal. The cauldron of the Middle East is a place that's proven to be useful in this endeavor. Russian attack aircraft supported Syrian forces against ISIS and the Sunni rebels. They also indiscriminately bombed Syrian Sunni civilians with 5,000-pound barrel bombs to exacerbate the refugee flow into Europe; a flow that is proving to create more divisions between NATO countries than anything since the alliance's conception.²²¹ However immoral the action, Putin seems to understand the value of attacking a strategy vice attacking the "walled cities" of NATO.

The final variable Putin is targeting is the US dollar's place as the reserve currency. Convincing exporters to price energy in currencies other than US dollars is a crucial step. Therefore, Putin is building relationships with every major player in the oil exporting business and lobbying for an alternative to the US dollar.²²² This feeds Iran's narrative to undermine US power and offers hope that a Russian partnership could establish Iran as a regional hegemon.

There is no Napoleon or Hitler on the horizon, and direct military control of Eastern Europe is something Putin can wait for and may not need. NATO military capability that can be brought to bear on the border is 31,813 soldiers, 129 tanks and 2,529 combat aircraft against Russia's 78,000 soldiers, 757 tanks, and 1,251 combat aircraft.²²³ NATO's only advantage in combat aircraft must face the world's most advanced integrated air defense system on its home turf. In fact, Putin would prefer to avoid conflict and instead pull Europe, specifically its leader

²²¹ John Grady, "EUCOM Breedlove: Indiscriminate Russian Bombing in Syria Worsening European Immigration Crisis," *USNI News*, March 1, 2016, accessed January 22, 2019, <https://news.usni.org/2016/03/01/eucom-breedlove-indiscriminate-russian-bombing-in-syria-worsening-european-immigration-crisis>.

²²² Irina Slav, "Russia Wants To Drop Dollar For Oil Payments," *Oil Price*, April 9, 2018, accessed March 6, 2019, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/Russia-Wants-To-Drop-Dollar-For-Oil-Payments.html>.

²²³ Scott Boston et al., "Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe: Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority," RAND Corporation, 2018, accessed January 24, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2402>.

Germany, away from US leadership and secure his end markets for energy while securing the western border. Therefore, Russia's most important vital interest is oil markets and prices, and Russia fuels Middle Eastern competition through arms sales and diplomatic support. There is a much higher probability of Russia's military ending up in the Middle East than in Europe; in fact, it is already there.²²⁴

Russia is gaining a position of strategic advantage to create options for opportunities to affect oil markets in their favor. Russia cannot directly affect a rise in the price of oil without incurring anger of the end markets who depend on Middle Eastern energy, specifically China. However, Russia can be a significant player in the Middle East and positioned to encourage an energized Iran to pursue its regional ambitions, which would result in a significant instability and a rise in energy prices. Iran, encouraged by its growing hope in its time and place in history, pursuing its geopolitical goals to consolidate control over Shia populated areas and prepare the empire for the Twelfth Imam's return, is finding a patron in the world's largest nuclear arsenal and producer of the top air defense and arms exports in the world.

The Dragon

The primary Chinese national interest is political stability. The internal threat of revolt outweighs any external threat of invasion. However, stability relies on economic growth and opportunity for China's 1.4 billion people. China pursues this growth through an export economy and needs access to natural resources and global markets. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative is meant to connect China to markets in the Middle East and Europe, but it depends on stability in Iran and the greater Middle East. Therefore, a Middle Eastern war resulting in high oil prices is China's nightmare, but a Middle East dominated by Iran would be advantageous to Chinese interests.

²²⁴ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers," Carnegie, Moscow Center, April 5, 2016, Accessed March 12, 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16_Trenin_Middle_East_Moscow_clean.pdf.

Northeast Asia is the most disadvantageous geography in the world with regards to the oil markets. Only one percent of recoverable global oil reserves exist in the area, but over thirty percent of global energy is consumed there.²²⁵ China's military is powerful, but they currently have one aircraft carrier worth of force projection, and it used to be a casino.²²⁶ However, China has something that may be more powerful than military force projection. They have a codependent relationship with an ambitious Iran that needs Chinese end markets for its energy and is more than willing to spend the proceeds from that energy on Chinese goods. China's involvement in the Middle East will be providing Iran with political support and advanced military hardware in hopes of a regional hegemon that aligns with China against the West. Iran's other end market is Europe, and as resources become scarcer over the next few decades, competition will increase, and China plans to be in an advantageous position.

Currently, the Chinese and Russians offer far cheaper infrastructure building costs to the Middle East than the West which is causing it to lose its economic presence and influence.²²⁷ Containing Iran's ambitious regional strategy is difficult with Russia and China supporting it militarily and economically. However, the pressures on Iran may precipitate a collapse of the government, and the resulting social catastrophe could also energize the clergy's eschatological narrative.

There is a possibility that Iran could suffer political disruption in the coming decade over resource exhaustion and economic failure. Due to Western sanctions, the Iranian Rial is crashing, and if the economy fails, famine could result. This would be a catastrophe for the Iranian people,

²²⁵ US Energy Information Agency, "Asia Is the World's Largest Petroleum Consumer," *Today in Energy*, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=5130>.

²²⁶ Center for Strategic and International Studies, "How Does China's First Aircraft Carrier Stack up?," China Power Project, December 9, 2015, accessed January 5, 2019, <https://chinapower.csis.org/aircraft-carrier/>. China also has three aircraft carriers under construction but none will be supercarriers, and the United States has eleven supercarriers. China will be able to contest regional access, which is significant, but not confront a blue water navy.

²²⁷ Eado Hecht, interviewed by author, Tel Aviv, Israel, 30 Oct, 2018.

and a situation the West should intervene to prevent.²²⁸ In 2015 the former agricultural minister in Iran warned that if the government did nothing to prevent the looming water crisis, fifty million Iranians, that is seventy percent of their population, will be forced to leave the country.²²⁹ The limited resources of the Middle East define the key terrain, and with populations outgrowing many countries access to potable water, it will soon become critical to powers in the region. Exacerbating the water problem is Turkey's ambitious scheme to harness the water of the Tigris and Euphrates to increase their agricultural output. They have already completed twenty-two dams along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and will continue to restrict the flow into Syria and Iraq by completing irrigation canals that will service 75,000 square kilometers.²³⁰ Furthermore, a 2006 to 2009 drought, in addition to the mismanagement of water and agricultural policies, caused crop failure in Syria. This disaster forced 1.5 million people to migrate to the cities, which became a causal factor to the Syrian civil war.²³¹ Iran will not be immune to the same pressures over the next decade.

The Middle East will be the harbinger of this emerging global reality of resource scarcity. The global trade structure previously underwritten with an American security guarantee will see water dry up, energy demands increase, and an America less willing to spend its treasure and the lives of its children to help the Europeans, Arabs, Persians, and Chinese facilitate trade. Yet, without US leadership and engagement in the Middle East, Iran's expanding influence and the achievement of their goals will precipitate second and third order effects that could destabilize those global economic and trade structures.

²²⁸ Reuvan Merkhav, interviewed by the author, Jerusalem, Nov 1, 2018.

²²⁹ Arash Karami, "Iran Official Warns Water Crisis Could Lead to Mass Migration," *Al-Monitor*, April 28, 2015, accessed January 14, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/iran-water-crisis-mass-migration.html>.

²³⁰ Water Technology, "Atatürk Dam, Euphrates River, Anatolia," Water Technology blog, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.water-technology.net/projects/ataturk-dam-anatolia-turkey/>.

²³¹ Henry Fountain, "Researchers Link Syrian Conflict to a Drought Made Worse by Climate Change," *The New York Times*, January 19, 2018, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/03/science/earth/study-links-syria-conflict-to-drought-caused-by-climate-change.html>.

The Middle East learned from the fall of Saddam, Mubarak, and Gaddafi. They watch North Korea and see that the United States acts far more cautiously when it's adversary has nuclear weapons. From their point of view, North Korea gets respect from the threat they pose to the United States. This respect is coveted by countries that feel the second and third order effects of US action around the world. These trends point to Iran eventually developing nuclear weapons, possibly much sooner rather than later. This will precipitate a future in the Middle East that promises few of any winners and many losers.

Saudi Arabia likely has a deal with Pakistan to purchase nuclear weapons if they have not already. Saudi Arabia purchased fifty CSS-2 theater ballistic missiles from China in 1985. These missiles have a miss distance of greater than a mile and are made to carry the CHIC-4 A-bomb. Additionally, since Pakistan's detonation of a nuclear weapon in 1999, the Saudis donated billions in economic help and made several high-level visits to Pakistan's nuclear facilities.²³² Furthermore, Turkey possesses up to fifty NATO nuclear weapons on its soil and will likely strive to possess nuclear weapons on its own terms once its competitors gain a nuclear advantage.²³³

This new reality, a nuclearized Middle East ensuring deterrence against invasion, air strikes, and regime security would have an unfortunate side effect for the Middle East. It would eliminate the advantage Israel enjoyed for almost fifty years and once again give the Islamic world a military option against Israel. After their first use in World War 2, nuclear weapons proved to be weapons of defense to deter instead of offensive opportunities, especially when both sides in a conflict are nuclear capable countries. Therefore, the probability of their use against Israel is low. Israel's retaliation would completely destroy any country that attacked them.

²³² Reed and Stillman, *The Nuclear Express a Political History of the Bomb and Its Proliferation*, 289-290.

²³³ Kingston Reif, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Turkey Raise Alarm," Arms Control Association, November 2017, accessed April 28, 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017-11/news/us-nuclear-weapons-turkey-raise-alarm>.

However, nuclear weapons would create parity, and this new reality would allow Iran and the Sunni powers to enable, support, and encourage proxy group aggression against Israel while complicating retaliation against themselves. Furthermore, wars of limited aims to regain the Golan Heights, Sheba Farms, the West Bank, or portions of the Negev would be risky but possible, and would place Israel in an almost impossible position. Muslim countries can outnumber Israel in conventional terms ten to one.²³⁴ Israel would be forced to fight conventionally and risk a high casualty rate. Israel's only other option would be to use tactical nucs to destroy enemy formations that would earn intense international condemnation. This is a situation that ends very badly for everyone.

The Muslim worlds inability to coalesce into a single political entity would help restrict this reality. The division between the Turks, Arabs, and Persians, not to mention the Sunni Shia divide, are such that one would never willfully submit to the leadership of another. However, as the United States abdicates leadership in the Middle East, Russia is rapidly filling the gap, and the outside leadership Russia provides would allow Islamic powers to remain equal among each other. Russia also provides significant air defense capability that hinders Israel's greatest advantage, it's exceptional air power. Russia's interest in energy markets and the abdication of US involvement in the Middle East are two trends that are shaping a potential future that could create significant regional disruption and end with a change in the control of sixty percent of the world's global energy reserves, and a Shia world that significantly advances a belief and narrative that they live in the end of time.

Conclusion

There is a change of currents beneath the surface of the social sea in the Middle East. After decades of war and chaos, over half the Muslims living there expect the imminent return of

²³⁴ Alon Ben-Meir, "Army of Islam: Erdogan's Plot Against Israel," *The Jerusalem Post*, March 21, 2018, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/Blogs/Above-the-Fray/Army-Of-Islam-Erdogans-Plot-Against-Israel-546704>.

their Messiah, or Mahdi, and look to religious leaders to direct this energy.²³⁵ Iran shapes this energy into a three-fold strategy: (1) create options around the Middle East through proxy groups and advanced weapons while building legitimacy to lead the Muslim world (2) Energize and unite the Shia around the Middle East into a coalition based on eschatological hope that seizes key terrain and resources, dominates their Sunni competitors, and destroys Israel (3) Directly challenge the US-led global politico-economic order.

A series of forces are currently converging in the Middle East to create the conditions for Iran to accomplish this strategy unless the United States intervenes. The Middle East continues to be the beating heart of the energy markets with control of over sixty percent of global energy reserves. Any regional conflict that damages infrastructure and reduces the global energy exports beyond the meager excess capacity in global markets would effectively give the global economy a heart attack. Additionally, a regional hegemon that controlled the preponderance of energy reserves could exercise significant power over energy pricing and directly challenge the global economic order. Furthermore, ninety-nine percent of the people in the Middle East are religious and the area is a focal point of the world's three largest religions that account for fifty-five percent of global population.²³⁶ This area must be seen through a religious lens if it is to be accurately understood. One of the greatest challenges to the global community in the next decade will be resource scarcity, specifically potable water. Iran is closer to this catastrophe than most nations and will be forced to take internal or external action to deal with the resulting crisis. Lastly, the Middle East is an arena for continual great power competition; and for the first time since the end of the Cold War, US power seems fallible and Chinese, Russian, and Iranian interests are converging to jointly challenge the US-led global system.

²³⁵ Media Inquiries, "Muslim Adherence to Articles of Faith."

²³⁶ Worldometers, "World Population Clock."

Specifically, Russia's national interest is driving greater involvement in the area and the potential to bring coalescence to a divided Muslim world. The social forces in the Islamic world that demonize Israel and call for its destruction are a lightning rod for any would be leader. Iran is on the verge of nuclear weapons. The breaching of this sacred line along with the most developed proxy armies in the world and a powerful narrative that culminates in the Twelfth Imam's return would put teeth on Iran's regional and global threats. This is a dangerous fact for the Middle East and for the world. Perhaps the only hope of internally changing the course of the Persian civilization is supporting its young generation as they pull against the leadership and conservative movement. Iran is at a crucial crossroads that will lead the nation, and most likely the world, toward stability and prosperity or a chaotic devolution of the structures and trust that facilitates the economic and physical security of billions of people.

The story of man continually unfolds and competition between ideologies is an age-old pursuit. However, ideologies are only as dangerous as the power that supports them. The United States must understand how the Shia Twelver leaders perceive power and create conditions that make it irrelevant. If there are gaps between the Shia eschatological narrative and the reality the Shia masses observe, the burden falls on the religious leadership to justify their claims which undermines their legitimacy. Left to pursue their stated objectives, the Iranian Regime promises to undermine US national interests and seek a dangerous path toward regional and global destabilization and ultimately domination.

Glossary

Eschatology – The study of the end of time in the context of a particular worldview or religion, and sometimes associated with a messianic component.

Twelfth Imam – The Shia, Islamic messiah, also known as Al'Qaim or the Mahdi. He will return at the behest of Allah to exercise justice on the world.

Hadith – Since the Prophet and the Imams were sinless and infallible, their words and deeds are a guide and model for all to follow. These were eventually written down after being transmitted orally for several generations. Thus, each hadith consists of the names of the chain of transmitters followed by the text of the Tradition being transmitted. There are four collections of Hadith for the Shia. The Sunnis have six Hadith. Furthermore, there was an obvious forgery of Traditions in order to support factional opinions, so the Shia established a branch of religious sciences which consist of examining the chains of transmitters in order to assess the reliability of Traditions. These are then classed by their reliability into one of four categories: correct, good, trustworthy, and weak. The resulting debate formulating these classes creates a need for consensus amongst the learned and recognized of the Shia clergy and balancing against rapid shifts to new ideas.²³⁷

Imams – Twelve of Muhammed's progeny who ruled the Shia successively until the six-year-old son (his age is debated, but it is agreed he was a child) of the Eleventh Imam went into occultation.²³⁸ Four out of five factions did not believe he existed because his father was known to have no son, but the child reportedly appeared at his father's funeral and declared he was the rightful heir.²³⁹ They were each created by Allah from special substance, and the only ones to truly understand the Quran. They were enlightened rulers, but all were martyred by the tyranny of the Sunni Muslims until the Twelfth Imam disappeared. When Allah allows it, he will return to restore justice in the world.

Mullah – Educated, local religious leaders, equivalent to the village parishioner or pastor of a church.

Sheikh – Title of respect to a religious leader.

Occultation – The Twelfth Imam, due to the threat from the Sunni political power and competition over successive rights amongst the Shia at the death of the Eleventh Imam, disappeared from the physical world into a state of minor occultation. He could still speak to a regent who ruled based on the Twelfth Imam's guidance until about 100 years passed and the Twelfth Imam entered greater occultation where he is hidden from view and awaiting the end of

²³⁷ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 173–74.

²³⁸ Jassim Hussain, *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam* (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 1982), 69–72.

²³⁹ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 59–60.

time. A senior cleric in Iran claimed that both of the Supreme Leaders of Iran, as well as President Ahmadinejad, claim they have conversed with the invisible Imam.²⁴⁰

Quran – Given to Muhammed from heaven and is the word of Allah and the cornerstone of Shia theology

Umma – The aggregate community of believers, Muslims as a whole.

²⁴⁰ Ryan Mauro, “Iran: Syrian War Fulfills End of Days Prophecy, Triumph of Iran,” *Clarion Project*, September 17, 2013, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://clarionproject.org/iran-syrian-war-fulfills-end-days-prophecy-triumph-iran/>.

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