

LESSONS OF 1979

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Middle East

This month marks the 40th anniversary of the Iranian revolution. It is time, therefore, to evaluate the fundamental lessons of the revolution. It is true that the takeover of the broad-based revolution against Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi by hard-line mullahs distorted the original trajectory of the revolution and stifled the democratic aspirations of the people. At the same time, one should not overlook the fact that the anti-Western thrust of the revolution that played into the hands of the hard-line clergy was in large part a delayed reaction to the British and American role in the coup that overthrew Iran's first elected government in 1953.

The American support to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980 augmented anti-Western sentiments and further helped the clergy-dominated regime to consolidate its power in the country. The bankrolling of Hussein's war to the tune of billions of dollars by Saudi Arabia and allied Gulf regimes solidified the antagonism between revolutionary Iran and the Arab monarchies of the Gulf. It also hardened the division between Shias and Sunnis in West Asia. The Iranian-Saudi rivalry is being played out to this day in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and other parts of West Asia.

However, the most important lesson of the revolution and its aftermath is the demonstration of Iran's remarkable staying power as a state and a nation in the face of a very hostile international milieu. Iran has confronted unprecedented economic sanctions since the revolution, a process that intensified in the past decade and a half to force Tehran to give up its presumed nuclear aspirations. The Iranian people put up with grave hardship for four decades but did not surrender their national sovereignty. This is because the state of Iran/Persia has been in existence almost since time immemorial, and in its present contours from the early 16th century, its citizens have developed a sense of innate pride and confidence in the state's staying power against the heaviest odds. The development of Persian nationalism has been a gradual process that, one can argue, culminated in the underlying thrust of the revolution.

Persian nationalism draws upon its glorious pre-Islamic heritage, as described in the *Shahnameh*, Iran's epic par excellence. It is also engendered by the twin marks of distinction that Iranians are very proud of: their ability to preserve their Persian character and language despite their acceptance of Islam, a religion of Arab origin; and the distinctive character of Persian Islam embodied in Shia doctrines that distinguishes it from its predominantly Sunni neighbours. Regardless of the nature of a particular regime, longevity of national memories and people's pride in them can work great miracles when faced by hostile forces bent on emasculating the nation's sovereignty.

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Pakistan's identity crisis, going back to the debates since its creation, remains unresolved

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