

## Taking a longer view

The Islamic Republic of Iran has just celebrated the 47th anniversary of its founding. Amid the bunting and fireworks foreign reporters detected a sense of foreboding they had not experienced previously. According to some estimates, more than 30,000 demonstrators had been killed in some 400 towns and cities while demanding a change of leadership. Hazhir Teimourian, formerly of *The Times of London*, looks back on what he regards as an experiment in governance by Muslim ‘priest-kings’ on the model of ancient Babylon.

5-minute read



Morning light over Tehran, as the Islamic Republic faces mounting political and economic pressure.

**T**he first time I predicted the fall of the Islamic Republic of Iran was 43 years ago. Perhaps deluded by medication as I lay in a hospital ward expecting to die, I responded to a question from my editor as to how long the Islamic regime would last. Iran’s previous regime, the authoritarian Pahlavi monarchy, had been overthrown in a hugely popular revolution led by an arch-reactionary Shia cleric only four years earlier, but the new rulers were already in the throes of violent internal dissension while also fighting a ruinous foreign invasion.

I replied that I did not think it had much chance of lasting long. It was trying to drive a forward-looking nation back to the seventh century and was, furthermore, beset by the incompetence of its clerics charged with the running of every department of state, people often lacking an elementary education in science. My

editor disagreed. Mindful of the return of the English monarchy under Charles II in 1660, he said: “Restorations usually take at least 20 years”. It turned out that even he was being too optimistic.



**Khomeini arrives in Tehran on 1 February 1979, days before the collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy.**

The leader of the Islamist take-over, the Ayatollah Khomeini, had at first promised not to interfere in politics. He even supported the election of Abolhassan Banisadr, a former student leader in Paris (and friend of mine) to be the country's first president. But Khomeini soon changed his mind. He tolerated Banisadr's democratic ideals barely a year, allowed the taking hostage of 52 American diplomats in their own embassy in Tehran for 444 days and ordered the massacre of hundreds of left-wing political prisoners who had been among his most ardent backers. Their leaders had sided with the foreign invader, Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

Khomeini died in 1989, after being forced to accept a humiliating ceasefire in the eight-year war with Saddam. He had also alienated



**Iranian students climb the gates of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979, a moment that came to define the Islamic Republic's early years of radicalisation, purges, and international isolation.**

the world by issuing his infamous decree of death against the Anglo-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie, for ridiculing Mohammad, and dismissed his own designated successor, Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, for objecting to his many cruelties. By then, he had set the future course of his Islamist regime firmly in the mould of the priest-kings of ancient Babylon as interpreted through the Islamic caliphate of the late seventh century in Arabia's Mecca.

The regime would accept grudgingly that the nation it commanded had a non-Arab identity and a national memory that went back to classical empires. It set out to denigrate that heritage and, among other policies, began importing a torrent of new Arabic words into Persian, the most potent conveyor of that older loyalty. Calls were made to ban Iranian personal names and achievements of the classical age, like Greek philosophy, were belittled as the divergence of an Age of Ignorance, to use a Koranic phrase.

It was therefore not surprising that in choosing his successor the old man had leap-frogged over many a venerable ayatollah to nominate a junior mullah by the name of Ali Khamenei to follow him. The firebrand was in his own mould.

At that point I made my second mistaken prediction: I wrote in *The Times* that the new priest-king Khamenei would be only a stopgap, that a more able and more prestigious man would soon push him aside. One of the men I profiled was the wily Akbar



**Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei consolidated power over decades through the security forces and the elimination of rivals. Photo: Khamenei.ir**

Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was more influential in the regime despite the fact of his white turban, the turban of those who could not claim descent from the founder of Islam himself. Little did I allow for the possibility that Khamenei would use his official command of the armed forces to elbow aside all such rivals. The process, the struggle to achieve complete predominance, took a long time, but by January 2017, when the lifeless body of Rafsanjani was found in his swimming pool in Tehran, it was unquestioned.

Ruthlessness has thus been the secret of Khamenei's longevity. The brazen recent massacres of unarmed demonstrators in 900 places in 400 towns and cities prove once again that he had determined early in his rule not to make the mistake that the last



**A man hold up a poster bearing the faces of Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei and his predecessor Ruhollah Khomeini, in a rally to mark the anniversary of the 1979 Revolution, in Qom, Iran, 11 February 2026.**

monarch had made. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, with an eye towards his Western allies, such as President Carter in Washington, had shied away from killing large-enough numbers of demonstrators.

However, this new challenge seems radically different. The overwhelming proportion of Iran's citizens are demanding the eradication of clerical rule. Further, even if Washington recalls its naval task force in return for a reduction in the scale of Khamenei's great-power ambitions, his regime will still have no answer to the economic failures that triggered the protests in the first place. One terrifying prediction is that, despite strong winter rainfall, the capital, a city of 12 million people, will run out of piped water by early summer. Experts say this would be entirely due to mismanagement of resources. Also, the current official rate of inflation at 70% is likely to become even more unbearable. The middle class has already been virtually wiped out, while the rich

flaunt their luxurious foreign cars on the streets and the state founders towards the bottom of the international index of corruption.

Islamism in Iran will collapse or be overthrown before long if it does not give up its leadership role, which Khamenei and those around him refuse to contemplate. They have now begun to arrest even those mild reformists who gather around former presidents Khatami and Rouhani, in case one of these figures becomes attractive as Iran's Gorbachev. Such is the degree of alienation on the part of the various components of Iran, from the Azeris and Kurds of the north-west through the main body of the country, the Persians, to the Baluch of the south-east, that people see no alternative to risking their lives any longer calling for the removal not just of Khamenei but of Islam itself. In their own words, they have too little to lose. Hope has died among the young.



**A man withdraws cash from an ATM in Tehran amid runaway inflation and economic strain. Photo: AFP**

I fear that any succeeding regime will not be as pretty a sight as we would wish. Iranians are both too angry and too impatient to forgive and forget. Some among them will even see in the collapse of the Islamists an opportunity to avenge Zoroastrianism for its defeat at the hands of Arab armies 1300 years ago. I have seen signs of this among my own people, the Kurds. In the semi-autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq, where there is a surprising measure of free expression, significant numbers of young couples exchange their matrimonial vows in newly-sprung Zoroastrian temples, often with little idea of what Zoroastrianism is about. Shia clerics, even those who are not complicit in the Khomeini-Khamenei order, would be advised to flee Iran for an Arab land while they can. I suggest Baghdad and Beirut, though the latter is a little unsafe for its nearness to Israel.

Hazhir Teimourian's most recent book is *A History of Philosophy in Mesopotamia, Classical Iran and Early Islam*. He is also author of a biography of the Persian poet and mathematician Omar Khayyam.