

How Tehran Won the World

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On Oct. 22, 1951, Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh of Iran stood before the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. Addressing a crowd of hundreds at Independence Hall, Mossadegh [spoke admiringly](#) of American liberty, drawing parallels between the U.S. struggle for independence and Iran's then-continuing struggle to break free of British control over its affairs and natural resources.

“The creed of national independence is a universal one, and it is held by all peoples,” he declared in his morose, trademark whisper.

Two years later, the United States and Britain deposed the Iranian prime minister in a coup over his decision to nationalize Iranian oil and take control of the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. As large swathes of the world embraced new national identities in the wake of colonialism, Mossadegh's name became synonymous with the quest for independence and the fight against Western imperialism, his ouster still bitterly invoked across the global south to conjure the misadventures of American foreign policy.

Today, Iran's defiance in the face of Western coercion has once again become a rallying cry. President Trump's feckless war has rendered America's targeting of Iran into a premonitory tale — a violent punishment that could befall any disorderly state. This spring, solidarity, support and indignation on behalf of Iran have reverberated across the non-Western world. Even countries that do not at all admire the Iranian regime's treatment of its own people, or its conduct in the region, are experiencing a “Je suis Iran” moment.

This sense of outrage is due in no small part to the fact that the United States and Israel went to war against Iran as the world was again reordering itself — this time, to adapt to Mr. Trump's transactional and predatory behavior. Small and middle

powers are thinking about ways to assert their sovereignty, in some cases by reducing their dependence on the United States and [cultivating trade and relations with China](#) and other powers.

The war against Iran rapidly became an inflection point in this trajectory. Not only has Iran shown that it can control a major maritime chokepoint, squeeze the global economy and withstand aerial assault by the world's strongest military, the conflict has also offered its leaders a new place in the emerging global realignment. From the blackest margins of the old order — isolated, sanctioned, ignored and reviled as a ruthless, repressive state — Iran has become, in the eyes of many, an example of necessary defiance, and courage.

The deposal of Mossadegh in 1953 left Iran traumatized and its people deeply wary of Washington's designs. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi never recovered the legitimacy he lost by cooperating with America, and doubts about his true independence coalesced into the 1979 revolution. After that, the tension between the new Islamic republic and America turned to violent enmity.

The language of political contestation between the nations transformed from the courtly phrases of the earlier Mossadegh era to the new leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's [describing America as](#) "the Great Satan, the wounded snake" and "the No. 1 enemy of the deprived and oppressed people of the world." American rhetoric deteriorated as well. President Ronald Reagan [referred to](#) Iran's leaders — along with the rulers of Cuba, Libya, North Korea and Nicaragua — as "misfits, Looney Tunes and squalid criminals." By the late 2000s, John McCain and Hillary Clinton made casual, violent threats to bomb Iran normal foreign policy talk.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Khomeini's successor as supreme leader, kept up the same coarse, fulminating tone until his assassination in an American-Israeli airstrike on Feb. 28. Eleven days before his death, Ayatollah Khamenei, 86, called the United States "an empire that is heading toward collapse."

When Iran's newest group of leaders look out, they must hear this narrative echoing across the world. While China's and Russia's interests in the Middle East are vastly different — Beijing has extensive economic interests in the region, and disfavors high

oil prices, neither of which are true for Moscow — both benefit when America overextends itself, and they have cast themselves as major powers ready to expand ties with the regional blocs that have suffered from and disapproved of the war.

When China's president, Xi Jinping, hosted his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in Beijing last month, the two leaders condemned "treacherous" U.S. strikes against other countries, and Mr. Xi warned against the world "regressing to the law of the jungle." While Beijing prudently preferred to condemn the war rather than openly back Iran, it found a subtle way to express its support: In March, in a highly unusual move, the Chinese state broadcaster [put out](#) an artificial intelligence video featuring America as the villainous "White Eagle" and Iran as the hunted but proud "Persian Cat." The video became a crossover hit on Western social platforms.

Some smaller countries have been more explicit. In March, the Malaysian Parliament observed a minute of silence over the killings of Ayatollah Khamenei, other Iranian leaders and, in an airstrike on a school in Minab, approximately 120 children. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim sent condolences to both the regime and the Iranian people and [warned](#) of a "dangerous precedent" that would weaken the norms of the international order.

In Pakistan, the editorial pages of the leading English-language newspaper, Dawn, [concluded](#) that countries of the global south "should stand with Iran" and condemn the war because "they may be next." Pro-Iran demonstrations erupted across the nation in March, leaving more than 20 people dead.

In Turkey, an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim country, 93 percent of the people polled [opposed](#) the attack on Iran, and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [warned](#) that the "senseless, unlawful" war was starting to weaken Europe.

In India, while the government of Narendra Modi has professed itself a close ally of Israel, the people, who share [a historical and cultural affinity](#) with Iran, have responded differently. Residents of New Delhi, including [Hindu nationalist supporters](#) of Mr. Modi, brought enough donations to the door of the Iranian Embassy to fund a shipment of medication. In Kashmir, farmers donated their sheep,

and women donated their gold bangles and daughters' trousseaux to an aid collection drive.

In other parts of the world, the war quickly kicked up long-simmering concerns about sovereignty. In Africa, autonomy-seeking movements are already driving politics in West Africa and the Sahel, seeking to reduce dependence on Europe's donors and end partnerships with its militaries. Those movements now look prescient, as the closure of the Strait of Hormuz has exacted a brutal price across the continent.

The war in Iran is a "warning," [wrote](#) Faiez Jacobs, a former South African lawmaker, arguing that wars "now arrive in households through petrol prices, electricity insecurity, bread costs and job losses." His argument, echoed widely in the continent's press, is that Africa must detach from "systems designed elsewhere and controlled elsewhere," and turn to continental and BRICS cooperation on everything from payment alternatives and industrial corridors to maritime strategies.

There are exceptions, of course, especially among countries that are deeply polarized along religious lines, or those that have strong ties to Israel and the Persian Gulf states. Many governments have chosen to simply say nothing, in some cases, perhaps, out of concern over where Mr. Trump will turn his attention next.

In Cuba, people follow the conflict avidly during the short hours of the day when they have electricity, the historian Sara Kozameh told me. "For Cubans, it matters whether Iran wins, since a defeat of the United States could reduce the likelihood of an attack on Cuba," she said. "But they also understand that Trump needs to feel like *he* got a win, so that he doesn't attack Cuba to get one."

Iran has played the role of iconoclastic challenger to an unjust world order before. In the wake of decolonization, it was the first major Middle Eastern oil-producing country to attempt the nationalization of its oil sector. When Mossadegh stopped in Egypt in 1951, 250,000 people reportedly lined the streets of Cairo, many of them chanting, "Long live the leader of anti-imperialism!"

Then came the coup. Mossadegh failed, but his audacity helped usher in a new world order. An inspired Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, closely studied his

approach and missteps, and triumphantly nationalized the Suez Canal three years after Mossadegh was overthrown.

Today there are no great crowds cheering an adversary of empire. We have, instead, an online public sphere that Iran's propagandists have flooded with Lego videos to make its case to the world's young people. Some people have [claimed](#) Iran is "winning the vibe war."

It is mostly bookish elites who remember the 1950s, and the earlier round of Iran versus Empire. "Does tonight resemble last night?" [asked](#) the veteran Egyptian diplomat Walid Abdelnasser in the newspaper Al-Ahram, recalling Mossadegh's visit to Cairo and suggesting that this time around, it would be a military attack, not a stealthy coup, that would come for Iran's oil wealth. In fact, the governments in Washington and Tel Aviv contemplated a mini-regime change, too, with a plot to install the former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

What unites disparate small and medium-size countries in parsing the lessons of this war is the belief that they are standing on shaky ground. They now know with certainty, if they did not know before, that their own wealth and economies can be imperiled by this new Washington, unbound by the international guardrails established last century, and will spend the years ahead repositioning themselves. The world will seek new ground to stand on, as friends and foes adjust.

Some disagree that Iran's successful defiance of the United States will diminish America's influence. American military defeat is, after all, nothing new: Most of America's military interventions since World War II — Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan, and Iraq — have ended as meandering, low-level conflicts that few would call victory. The policy expert Gideon Rose views "loose talk" about the war signaling a broader loss of U.S. power as overblown; after losing in Vietnam, he recently [wrote](#), America rebounded and could very likely do so again.

Perhaps it is Iran's fate to find itself again, for the second time in a century, the subject of American aggression and the rebel protagonist of the non-Western world. Its millenniums of history as a nation have made the preservation of sovereignty Iran's all-consuming drive, regardless of who runs it.

Where, for the long meanwhile, does this disordered story leave Iranians themselves? For them, matters are far more complicated. This wave of solidarity and sympathy comes not long after the regime had lost much of its legitimacy in the eyes of its own population, only a few short weeks after it killed thousands of protesters.

The war cut short that period of mourning, despair and global condemnation. Instead, Mr. Trump and Israel appear to have shored up and consolidated the Iranian state, raising its profile as a symbol of clever defiance and softening the views of many inside the country who hated and opposed it, because they recognize that it defended them through weeks of terrifying bombardment.

The Islamic republic is not accustomed to perceiving itself as part of a larger whole, and it is far from certain how long this surge in good will last. But Iran now has a story to tell, and it has the ability to tell it.