

The shadow of 1979:

Radical Islam is under challenge in Iran and Saudi Arabia, while it holds sway in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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- ❖ There is no question that our western neighborhood has begun to evolve a little faster – if unevenly and in a non-linear fashion. Delhi must make the best of these opportunities and limit the damage from the lingering effects of 1979.

The current Indian focus on the appointment of a new army chief in Pakistan is unfortunately not matched by an interest in far more consequential developments unfolding further west. The anti-regime protests in Iran and the social and economic transformation of Saudi Arabia under Mohammed bin Salman point to the potential restructuring of our western periphery. Of course, the persistent conflict with our western neighbour dominates our mind-space. It also obfuscates the fact that Pakistan has never really been the anchor of the Subcontinent's western marches. Pakistan has often served as a useful instrument for outsiders, and Afghanistan has long been the theatre of contestation. But they do not have the agency to reshape our western frontiers. Iran and Saudi Arabia do.

Status of Pakistan and Afghanistan

Given the weight of the army chief in Pakistan's polity, it is certainly worth keeping an eye on what the new general might have in store. But it is unlikely that General Asim Munir can produce or facilitate the structural changes needed to end Pakistan's political dysfunction, rejuvenate its economy, and arrest Islamabad's relative decline.

If Pakistan is in a bad shape, Afghanistan is in worse condition. Last week's public flogging of 14 people, including three women, suggests that the Taliban can't break away from its medievalism, despite the certifies from some of its friends that it has changed. The regime's reluctance to let girls go to school, its violent conflict with other extremist groups, and its inability to win international legitimacy more than a year after regaining Kabul suggest that Afghanistan is stuck in a bad place.

Wave of change in the Persian Gulf region

But change is in the air in the Gulf. The continuing protests in Iran have shaken the clerical regime — not the first time they have faced protests. There have been repeated rebellions against the Islamic Republic of Iran after it was proclaimed in 1979. Tehran had easily crushed such protests.

The current movement was triggered by the death of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, in the custody of the religious police in September. She was arrested for not wearing her hijab properly and assaulted. The protests, which are in the third month, now have wider support.

Even if the clerics succeed in putting an end to the current wave of protests, it is doubtful if they can handle the multiple crises — social, economic, political and foreign policy — confronting Iran today. That Iran's football team refused to sing the national anthem at their opening game in the World Cup last week underlines the declining legitimacy of its regime.

Changes in Saudi Arabia and Iran

In Saudi Arabia, the impetus for change is coming from the top — the crown prince and prime minister Mohammed bin Salman. Since he took charge of the kingdom in 2015 as the crown prince, MbS has embarked on a series of reforms. These include reducing the role of the clergy in the kingdom's social life, greater freedoms for women, and an ambitious economic agenda to reduce the reliance of the kingdom on oil and turn it into a dynamic modern economy. Equally important has been the effort to strengthen Saudi nationalism distinct from its transcendental Islamic identity.

1979 the watershed year

If there is one historical moment that provides the context for the developments in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is the watershed year of 1979. Three events that year altered the social and geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and the Subcontinent. One was the attack on the grand mosque in Mecca by zealots claiming that the House of Saud had abandoned Islam and was becoming a subaltern to the West. That drove the Saudis and much of the Arab Gulf towards religious conservatism at home and pushed the militants outwards to pursue their radical agenda abroad. Second, was the overthrow of the Shah of Iran. Although a wide range of forces combined to oust the Shah, they ended up with the Islamists led by Ayatollah Khomeini coming out on top. Among the consequences were the replacement of a secular autocracy with clerical oppression, the tension between the revolutionary Islamic Republic in Tehran and the conservative regimes in the Arab world, and an entrenched conflict between Iran and the West. Third, was the invasion of Afghanistan

Iran before the Islamic Revolution

↳ The West had tremendous influence in Iran before the Islamic Revolution. There were no restrictions on dress and lifestyle, nor were there any religious restrictions. At that time, Iran was considered the most modern among Islamic countries and the atmosphere of Iran was no less than that of cities like Paris or London. In 1953, US and British intelligence agencies overthrew the democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, in a coup d'état. He wanted to nationalize Iran's oil industry.

Why did Iran's revolution happen?

↳ Due to the violation of Islamic values, there was anger in the mind of the people towards the rule, which culminated in the form of Islamic Revolution. In fact, the biggest reason for Iran's revolution was the brutal, corrupt and pro-Western civilization of the US-supporting Shah's regime. Iran's Islamic revolution is also important because it had an impact on the whole world and the political and diplomatic scenario of the world today has some influence of Iran's Islamic revolution. Iran's revolution was also a major reason for the war that broke out between Iran and Iraq in 1980. That's why the Islamic Revolution of Iran holds an important place in history.

by the Soviet Union setting off the mobilisation of a massive jihad against Russia by the West, Arabs and Pakistan.

Together, the three developments unleashed radical Islam and terrorism in the name of religion that profoundly altered the politics of the Middle East and South Asia.

Can the present conflict overcome the dynamism of 1979?

The current developments on our Western periphery raise questions about the possibility of moving away from the dynamic unleashed by the developments of 1979. Afghanistan and Pakistan induce pessimism about reversing the political consequences of 1979. But developments in Iran and Saudi Arabia generate much optimism. The Western failure to build a modern and moderate state in Kabul despite twenty years of occupation provides a cautionary tale on the difficulty of modernizing traditional societies by external forces.

How did Pakistan reach this situation?

In Pakistan, the military leadership under Ziaul Haq deliberately chose to build an alliance with the mosque, put down the democratic forces at home and promote jihad against Afghanistan and India. There was little interest within the military to modernise Pakistan's economy. Rawalpindi had much rent to collect from leveraging Pakistan's position as the staging post for the Afghan jihad. After the US finally turned its back on Afghanistan last year, the rental value has gone down, but Pakistan has no plan B for its economy.

Iran's current anti-regime struggle

But developments in the Gulf offer hope. That the people of Iran are defying extreme odds to protest against a regime underlines the enduring popular agency to reclaim control over their lives from the state and religion. Similarly, MbS promises to open up Saudi Arabia to long overdue change.

Chronology of the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran

- ↳ Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran and leading leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran.
- ↳ Ayatollah Khomeini considered the government of the then Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran as un-Islamic. In 1962, he launched a jihad against the Shah's government, leading to an uprising against the government that was a major political event in the history of Iran.
- ↳ Ayatollah Khomeini called the Shah's political movement the White Revolution and refused to join it, calling it un-Islamic. Under this White Revolution, such economic and social reforms were carried out that took Iran's traditional society towards Western values. Shah's opposition to these reforms forced him to leave the country in 1964 and lived outside the country till 1979 in Iraq and France.
- ↳ By January 1979, Iran was in a state of civil war, with protesters calling for the return of Ayatollah Khomeini, who was living in exile. When the situation became uncontrollable, Shah had to flee Iran along with his family.
- ↳ After a referendum in April 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran was proclaimed and a new government was elected.
- ↳ He was the only leader in the world of Islamic countries who held political and religious leadership simultaneously. Ayatollah Khomeini died on 4 June 1989. Before his death, he named Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as his successor, who holds the highest religious position in Iran to this day.

