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Iran

Iran Between the Russian and Chinese Models

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Donald Trump claimed to pursue “regime change” in Iran, but in a manner distinct from the George W. Bush administration’s use of the term to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which was framed as bringing democracy after Saddam Hussein’s overthrow. As we have repeatedly argued in these pages, even before the joint U.S.-Israeli aggression against Iran (see, for example, [“Washington Will Not Bring Democracy to Iran”](#) [Arabic], 10 February 2026), Trump’s objective was – and remains – to replicate his Venezuelan strategy: abducting the president to pave the way for a successor willing to cooperate with Washington and its oil interests. In other words, his aim was to “[change the regime’s behaviour](#)”, not to change the regime itself.

Yet the outcome of Trump’s actions in Iran has been the opposite of his intent. He has not strengthened the “pragmatic” reformist wing within the Iranian regime. These reformists argue that Iran’s best interests lie in halting its uranium enrichment program, which awkwardly sits halfway between the thresholds for nuclear weapons and peaceful nuclear energy use. The truth is that Iran does not need nuclear energy: it has abundant fossil fuels and even greater renewable energy potential, particularly solar power, of which China – its key economic partner – is the world leading producer. Reformists also contend that Iran’s policy of expanding its influence in the Arab world has failed to deter adversaries, instead triggering destructive wars involving Iran and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah. Most crucially, they believe that economic liberalization and engagement with the West could revitalize Iran’s economy, harness its human and technological resources, and repair the fractured relationship between the government and a population increasingly hostile to the current regime.

The bipartite aggression led by Washington, however, has bolstered the military wing of the Iranian regime, centred on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This wing rests on a rentier economic model fuelled by oil and gas revenues and shows little interest in developing a productive, globally integrated economy – the kind China achieved through the historic economic opening that allowed it to accomplish the greatest economic miracle in modern history. In effect, Iran is trending toward a model similar to that of Vladimir Putin’s Russia, based on militarization and rentierism, in stark contrast to the Chinese model favoured by the reformists.

It is important to note that religious ideology has not been a guiding force of the Islamic Republic since the death of its founder, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in 1989 and the subsequent rise of Hojjatoleslam Ali Khamenei – then a mid-ranking cleric whose elevation required constitutional changes that effectively lowered the theological qualifications for leadership. Khamenei’s ascension, facilitated by Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, resulted from a political manoeuvre that gradually eroded the spiritual and religious leadership of the Khomeini era. Contrary to Rafsanjani’s pragmatic aspiration though, Iran transformed into a military republic dominated by the Revolutionary Guards, closely allied with Khamenei, increasingly abandoning its broader Islamic ideological claims in favour of sectarian opportunism to expand regional influence.

This expansion began in Lebanon during Khomeini’s era, rightfully justified as a support against the Zionist occupation of southern Lebanon. Expansion later extended much less rightfully to Iraq, where Tehran encouraged its sectarian proxies to cooperate with the U.S. invasion and occupation to enhance Iranian influence. In Syria, support for the Assad regime – ostensibly a regime belonging to the “Arab Socialist Ba’athist” ideology that Iran had long loathed – was part of a broader strategy to construct a sectarian axis loyal to Tehran, stretching from Iran to the Lebanese and Syrian Mediterranean coasts, through Iraq. The Yemeni Houthis subsequently joined this axis, initially rebelling against the elected government that emerged from the 2011 popular uprising and the overthrow of Ali Abdullah Saleh. They temporarily allied with the ousted dictator, with whom they shared nothing but sectarian affiliation, only to assassinate him soon after.

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The U.S.-led bipartite aggression has further strengthened this militarized expansionist orientation, explaining the stalled negotiations between Tehran and Washington. This outcome aligns with the wishes of the Israeli government, which, unlike Trump, does not seek mere behavioural change but the complete overthrow of the Iranian regime, and even the country's fragmentation along ethnic lines. Netanyahu therefore favours the deadlock, hoping that reformist Iranian efforts to pursue a negotiated settlement (see "[Outlines of a Settlement between America and Iran](#)" [Arabic], 7 April 2026) will fail.

Trump now faces the consequences of his political short-sightedness and his reliance on replicating Venezuela's scenario in Iran, without appreciating the profound differences between the two countries. He confronts a dilemma: continue the bipartite aggression as urged by Netanyahu, bearing immense economic and political risks in the U.S., especially with congressional elections looming, or withdraw under a pretext that would deceive no one and further erode trust among regional and Western allies alike. In any event, the current state of "neither war nor peace" cannot endure indefinitely.

Adapted for the English language [blog](#) from the Arabic original published in [Al-Quds al-Arabi](#) on 28 April 2026. Feel free to republish or to publish in other languages, with mention of the source.

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