

The illusion of regime change

written by Prof. Zaki Shalom | 24.03.2026

The notion of overthrowing hostile regimes and replacing them with pro-Western, ostensibly moderate alternatives has long been embedded in Western and Israeli strategic thinking.

In the current Iranian context, it is frequently argued that the collapse of the Ayatollahs' regime would lead to a fundamental transformation in Iran's foreign policy - most notably, a reduction in its hostility toward Israel.

However, a careful historical examination of the Middle East, alongside comparative international cases, raises substantial doubts regarding the validity of this assumption.

Regional experience, in particular, should have tempered expectations surrounding the emergence of a "new regime." King Farouk of Egypt, despite his reliance on Britain and the West, nevertheless participated in the 1948 war against Israel. His successor, Anwar Sadat - who adopted a markedly pro-Western orientation and expelled Soviet advisors in 1972 - subsequently led Egypt into the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

The Jordanian case further reinforces this pattern. Both King Abdullah I and King Hussein, widely regarded as pragmatic and pro-Western leaders, took part in military confrontations with Israel, including the wars of 1948 and 1967, and were engaged in prolonged periods of tension and conflict.

A similar dynamic can be observed in Iraq. King Faisal II and Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, both closely aligned with Western powers, nevertheless joined other Arab states in the 1948 war against Israel. Lebanon, often described as a pro-Western state, has likewise been involved in multiple military confrontations with Israel over the decades.

Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan offers a more contemporary illustration of the limitations inherent in the assumption that alignment with the West ensures moderation. Despite its NATO membership since 1952 and its long-standing strategic, economic, and diplomatic ties with the United States, Turkey's foreign policy in recent years has grown increasingly assertive - and at times

confrontational – within the regional arena. Even the personal rapport emphasized by U.S. President Donald Trump, who referred to Erdoğan as a “friend,” did little to restrain these tendencies.

Pakistan provides an additional instructive example. Often characterized as a pro-Western state, and whose current military leader, Asim Munir, has been received with considerable honor in Washington, Pakistan nonetheless pursued the acquisition of nuclear weapons with determination, ultimately achieving this objective in the late 1990s. Its regional policy has remained consistently assertive, particularly toward India, including explicit nuclear threats. Moreover, Pakistan has repeatedly been accused of supporting Islamist extremist organizations.

Taken together, these cases challenge the assumption that regime change – particularly toward governments perceived as pro-Western – necessarily produces more moderate or conciliatory foreign policies.

At the same time, it is important to critically reassess the widely invoked notion of the “brave Iranian people.” While acknowledging the constraints imposed by repression and fear, one cannot ignore the recurring mass mobilizations in which millions have chanted slogans such as “Death to Israel.” Although it is inherently difficult to assess genuine public sentiment under authoritarian conditions, it would be imprudent to assume that hostility toward Israel is limited solely to the ruling elite. Indeed, it is plausible that, in the event of significant harm inflicted upon Israel, segments of the Iranian public would respond with approval – whether expressed openly or privately.

In light of these considerations, the expectation that regime change in Iran would automatically yield a fundamentally more moderate and less hostile foreign policy appears, at the very least, highly questionable.

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