US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken was quite right when he said that the talks with Iran on its nuclear program are at “a decisive moment.” At it looked for a time as if Washington was ready to accept full responsibility for the deteriorating situation both in the Islamic Republic and in the Middle East as a whole.

But instead, Mr. Blinken stuck to the aggressive policy line adopted by the current US administration, and threatened Iran that if no agreement was reached in the next few weeks then Washington and its allies might be forced to change their tactics. In other words the Biden administration is ready to impose tougher sanctions against the Iranians, who are already on the breadline and even resort to force in order to pressurize Tehran to capitulate and accept a decision dictated by Washington.

But Joe Biden and his administration’s fanciful hopes count for nothing in the face of the realities in the Middle East, a region that the GIs have been withdrawing from over the last few years. In contrast Iran is enjoying a string of foreign policy successes and it seems that the time will soon come when it will be the dominant power in the region, just as Persia once was. Many recent developments would appear to confirm this view.

Over the past 15 years Iran has gained a strong foothold in Iraq, enabling it to influence its policies and obtain financial benefits from the Iraqi economy. Tehran has strengthened its position in Northern Syria, the northernmost
part of the Middle East and a strategic crossroads between Central Asia, Europe, and Yemen, the southernmost part of the Arabian peninsula, bordered by Africa and the Indian Ocean. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 the Iranians have built up close political and cultural ties with the Shiite community in Lebanon, founding Hezbollah, a powerful Lebanese-based militant group.

Its presence in Syria and Lebanon has enabled Iran to develop negotiation and containment strategies in relation to the US, Europe, Turkey, Russia, Saudi Arabia and, of course, Israel. It should be noted that Iran’s presence in Syria and Lebanon is a fulfilment of its centuries-old ambition to secure a strategic position on the Mediterranean coast, a goal that has tantalized countless past national leaders, from Cyrus the Great and Xerxes to the last Shah.

Iran’s confidence in its ability to achieve its goal is founded in the national faith. The Islamic Republic is founded on theology, and on a deep faith in historic sacrifice (the Lineage of the Prophet), veneration of the Martyrs (beginning with the assassination of Imam Al-Husayn, the Prophet’s grandson) and a sense of historical guilt (Imam Al-Husayn was abandoned by those who had offered him hospitality). Over the centuries these concepts of sacrifice, martyrdom, and guilt developed into a cohesive ideology, and in the second half of the 20th century were enshrined in the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini, one of the most charismatic religious leaders of his time, who channeled them into a powerful messianic movement. The Islamic Republic of Iran is thus both a nation and a Shiite ideal, which the Iranians see as sanctioned by Allah himself.

But Iran tends to express this concept in secular terms. In their official addresses, Iranian politicians present their country as a key link in the “axis of resistance” to both the Pax Americana in the Middle East and the Sunni militants who are sowing havoc in the Levant. This language reflects the Iranian regime’s firm convictions about the nature of the US empire, and is also good public relations at a time when many people in the region fear the spread of militancy and radicalism.

Iran’s role as the moral leader of that resistance has now spread far beyond the Middle East. It now has close links with states and organizations opposed to US hegemony in Africa, Asia and South America. Links which go far beyond just offering moral support. As the years have passed, these connections have developed into sophisticated networks and relationships for the transfer of weaponry and money, allowing Iran to greatly expand and develop its authority in far-flung regions of the world.

In addition to its foreign policy successes, the Islamic Republic has also been able to secure its home front. The groups that challenged the regime back in 2009 have been disbanded, and a those within the Republic who sought to bring about gradual controlled reforms have now been sidelined. That was the result of the inevitable transition from the rule of the 80-year old Ayatollah Khamenei to a new spiritual leader. It is now evident that Khamenei’s successor is part of the uncompromising camp that has guided Iran’s domestic and foreign policy over the last ten years.

Iran’s conservatives view that fact as a point gained over the USA. As they see it, since the mid-2000s the US has been putting pressure on Iran, adopting a stick-and-carrot approach to persuade it into signing a deal aimed primarily at protecting US interests in the Persian Gulf and Middle East. Iran’s ability, both in the past and now, to resist that colossal pressure and lead negotiations on its deal with the US on its own conditions is seen as a major strategic and rhetorical victory for the country.

Its clear successes over the last 40 years have made Iran much more ambitious, and it is now possible to identify its three main goals. Firstly, Iran wants to cement its presence in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. This explains its determination to establish a Government of National Unity in Iraq and to engage in talks - which now seem increasingly likely- on a new constitutional document for Lebanon, to replace the 1990 Taif Agreement, which marked the end of the civil war in that nation.

Secondly - and this is related to the first goal - Iran wants to strengthen its ability to contain Israel, which it owes largely to the military capabilities of Hezbollah.

Thirdly, Iran wants to reinforce its “axis of resistance” by reaching agreements with major countries bordering the sphere of influence that it has built up in the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean. Specifically, it wishes to improve its relations with Turkey and start working with Egypt.

But, as the great Persian poet and Sufi Sheikh Hafiz Shirazi wrote, the “art of presence and of absence” aforms an important part of harmonious relations. The growth of Iran’s presence on the Arabian peninsula and in the Middle East and Levant has forced other major powers to consider how they can go about minimizing that presence and maximizing its absence. It is worth looking at three important variables that may impact future developments.
The first is that, for the first time in many centuries, the Shiites are now the dominant political force in the region that extends from Central Asia to the Eastern Mediterranean. This force owes its current position to natural population growth and to the demographic changes that have taken place over the last decade, primarily in Syria, and to Shiites’ increasingly dynamic and confident cultural presence, and their growing military might. As a result Sunni Muslims - and many Christians - living in this vast region are increasingly anxious, if not fearful, for the future. The tensions may cause outbursts of popular anger, of the type already seen in Lebanon, which may in turn trigger other undesirable events.

The second variable concerns Iran and Saudi Arabia, which has felt threatened by Iran’s Shiite politics for the last 40 years. But it’s successes over the last decade, especially its strengthening of its political identity in the Persian Gulf region, the Levant and Yemen, have effectively encircled Saudi Arabia, and now appear increasingly menacing, especially since the latter country’s rulers are currently trying to reform both their political system and national culture. Riyadh may seem calm and focused on its savage, long-drawn-out and ill-advised war in Yemen. But the youth and lack of experience of Mohammed bin Salman, the current leader, the country’s vast wealth, and the perception of a growing external threat together form an explosive combination.

But it is the third of these variables that may, in the foreseeable future, turn out to have the most impact on the Middle East and the Levant, and thus on North Africa and Europe. It involves Iran’s advanced nuclear program, its rocket arsenal, and Hezbollah, its proxy on the Eastern Mediterranean. Together, these represent a serious challenge to the policies on which Israel’s national security depends. They also make up another powder keg, which could easily be ignited by the USA’s and Israel’s ill-considered policies, causing great damage to the whole Middle East.

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