

present-day reality and, particularly in the paper's closing section, lays out a clear response to the country's current situation. The author also calls out the weakness of strategic governance, a governance that must be forward-looking rather than merely kicking today's issues down the road. Phrases like "imbalances (shortages)" and "postponing decisions" back up this critique. Instead of the phrase "moment of destiny," the author uses "paradigm shift" and remarks: Iran stands on the brink of a historic choice — either it will be accepted in the international order or it will be left out in the cold.

This paper draws on a quote from Barbara Slavin in a 2011 interview with Shireen Hunter, where Hunter stated that Iran is "strategically lonely". This phrase later picked up steam, and Dr. Reisinezhad has played a major role in spreading the concept. Over the years, he has put out more than 30 papers, analyses, and interviews on the subject, with key works including "Iran's Strategic Loneliness; from Overextension to Regional Embrace" (published in 2025) and "Iran's Strategic Loneliness and Non-State Foreign Policy" (published in 2023).

Dr. Reisinezhad, in these works, stresses that Iran's strategic loneliness is not merely a post-Revolution phenomenon but has been present in various forms during the Qajar and Pahlavi eras as well. Countries claiming to cooperate and ally with Iran in practice did not step up to support it. Dr. Reisinezhad breaks down this approach through a constructivist lens.

However, there are several key criticisms:

First Critique: Many historical and geographical claims are broad strokes and not readily provable or refutable. For example, recently in a specialist foreign policy group, someone wrote, "In the past 200 years, Iran has never had a role in choosing its rulers." But we only need to ask: Was this really the case across the entire time span? Sure, events like the 1953 coup or the 1921 coup come to mind, but these were also tied to internal dynamics as military forces, educated elites, clerics, and various social groups were present in them.

Hence, such sweeping statements, despite their surface appeal, don't hold much water. These claims are built on a mix of geography, history, and strategic culture. However, when we dig into historical realities, we find that during the Safavid era, Iran had multiple clashes with the Ottomans and engaged with European powers to keep them at bay. Before the US got involved in world diplomacy, Iran had already sent envoys to America during the Qajar period, hoping to stack the deck against Russia and Britain.

During the Napoleonic period, Iran entered talks with the French and later opened doors to the Germans as it was always on the lookout for allies — a fact that runs counter to the assumption of constant strategic loneliness. The need for allies, especially against British and Russian pressure, was felt strongly.

But when we take a closer look at history, we see Iran has always tried to shore up its strategic loneliness by lining up allies. In the Qajar period, after heavy defeats by Russia, Iran turned towards France,



and during Naser al-Din Shah's reign, it got closer to Germany for a time. In the Pahlavi era, Iran initially leaned on Britain and then the United States. All these examples show Iran has never regarded loneliness as a preferred strategy and has always put effort into escaping it. This ongoing effort to find an external ally clearly demonstrates that strategic loneliness is not Iran's natural state but rather an imposed and sometimes temporary condition Iran has had to deal with in confronting the global order.

Sometimes this loneliness has been the fallout from great power pressures, and other times it stems from internal shortcomings.

Dr. Reisinezhad, in one of his works, puts forward an important point: Iran has been isolated not only by enemies but also by its own friends within the regional order. Meaning, what we call "loneliness" is not merely the result of rivalry with historical enemies like the US, Israel, or Britain, but even countries that apparently stand with Iran have pulled the rug out from under it in critical moments.

This claim brings us to the concept of "geopolitical loneliness" — a loneliness born not only out of overt Western hostility but from the absence of a stable network of regional allies. In major crises — Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and now the Palestinian issue — many actors that were expected to stand shoulder to shoulder with Iran either stayed neutral or effectively switched sides.

Under such circumstances, Iran's strategy to counter this isolation has been to expand its strategic depth in the region. Yet this expansion has opened up new questions:

- Has Iran's growing regional influence cut down strategic loneliness?
- Has Iran's soft power managed to build up, alongside its hard power, sustainable regional legitimacy?
- Do Iran's regional audiences see eye to eye with the image cultivated by the Islamic Republic's foreign policy apparatus?

Answering these questions is complex. There is evidence that Iran's strategic depth has sometimes been met with serious resistance or skepticism from host societies. From Iraq and Lebanon to Syria and Yemen, we have seen ups and downs in ties and societal acceptance

of Iran — sometimes due to internal considerations in those countries and sometimes due to changing views among new generations toward the Islamic Republic's regional policies.

Therefore, a key issue in tackling "strategic loneliness" and "geopolitical loneliness" is to rethink Iran's role in the region. Iran's role should not only hinge on military deterrence or ideological bonds but should bring together a mix of soft power, cultural diplomacy, and economic partnership.

We need a model that, rather than putting all its weight on "resistance," focuses on "regional synergy" — a model that goes beyond ideological boundaries to bring to the table countries with diverse political and intellectual views under a shared cooperation framework.

Otherwise, Iran's loneliness — strategic or geopolitical — not only will not end but may take root more deeply, raising the stakes and cutting back its diplomatic maneuvering space.

Given these conditions, one must ask: Can "strategic loneliness" also be seen as an opportunity? Can this state be turned into a platform for redefining Iran's foreign policy and place in the international system?

Dr. Mesbahi has repeatedly highlighted that "loneliness," when accompanied by self-awareness and reflection, can lead to the production of theories in foreign policy. That is, a country disillusioned with

reliance on power blocs and placed in isolation may end up in a unique position to rethink the foundations of its foreign policy thoroughly. Such reflection can kick off a kind of theoretical and practical independence in international relations — not out of isolationism but from a position of identity and institutional reconstruction.

In this framework, geopolitical loneliness can also push the country to think about creating local regional cooperation institutions rather than relying on unstable allies or fragile coalitions; institutions grounded not only on common threats but based on mutual interests.

In other words, moving beyond the current situation requires Iran to shift gears from a reactive stance to becoming a constructive actor capable of shaping the regional order — not by imposing or clashing, but through providing models and establishing institutions. Of course, such a change in position also calls for a shift in how we narrate our foreign policy.

If our foreign policy discourse continues to circle around victimhood, threat, conspiracy, and hostility, overcoming loneliness becomes neither possible nor desirable. But if the discourse takes off toward emphasizing Iran's role as a "regional idea factory" — a country not just as a player but a norm entrepreneur of regional order — then there is hope that

Iran's position will be cemented not based on power balances but on the legitimacy of its role-playing.

We cannot keep playing with a 20th-century playbook in the 21st century. In a world where even great powers are on the hunt for reliable partners and long-term cooperation networks, loneliness is no longer a badge of honor or an inevitability; It is a wake-up call that must be taken seriously. It is the duty of universities, research institutes, and the diplomatic apparatus to take stock of the path traveled and lay out a realistic picture of Iran's position in the region and worldwide.

Undoubtedly, part of our current loneliness boils down to structural realities of the international system, but a more substantial share stems from misguided strategies, unrealistic hopes, and tense narratives we have held onto.

I will end by touching on a key point from Dr. Reisinezhad. He believes that for Iran to break out of geopolitical loneliness, it must "redefine the boundaries of cooperation instead of re-drawing those of enmity". This sentence captures the essence of a fresh outlook on Iran's foreign policy — a view that, rising out of difficult experiences but with a new vision, aims to step toward a less lonely yet more responsible future.

The article first appeared in Persian on IRNA.



Three-dimensional lighting (video mapping) with the theme of unity and solidarity of the Iranian nation was performed on the Azadi Tower by the Tehran Municipality in Tehran, Iran, on December 14, 2020. ● SHUTTERSTOCK

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A worker stands at the entrance of the reactor of the Bushehr nuclear power plant, outside the southern city of Bushehr, Iran, on August 22, 2010. Work was stopped on the reactor to ascertain whether it had been affected by the Stuxnet computer virus, developed in Israel with the help of the CIA. ● IIPA