



Racism and redemption: Virginia 'blackface' row sparks national debate

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French guns on Iraq border aim to pin down IS diehards

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QOM, Iran: An Iranian woman walks past the house of the late founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in the holy city of Qom, 130 kilometers south of Tehran. — AFP

Iran revolution: Quake still shaking Mideast

Political aftershocks are still being felt 40 years later

TEHRAN: The victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran was an earthquake that upended the political order in the Middle East, and the aftershocks are still being felt 40 years later. When Shiite cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ousted the shah's last government in February 1979 it was a moment that for many was completely "unthinkable, unexpected", said Clement Therme, a researcher on Iran at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. "The victory was an immense surprise for the Middle East and the world," Therme said. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had been seen as a pillar of stability and bulwark of US influence in a region where Cold War tensions were playing out with the Soviet Union.

But the tumult of the revolution soon ended that spectacularly. "One of the founding events for the foreign policy of the new regime was the taking hostage of American diplomats," said Therme. The saga at the US embassy in Tehran ran for 444 days from November 1979 and ruptured ties between Washington and its one-time regional ally. And events in Iran did not just reverberate on the global stage: across the region it fired up political Islam that represented a major threat to monarchies and ruling elites.

"For Sunni Islamist movements and for the Shiite

minorities in the region", the message of the Iranian Revolution was "a source of inspiration", Therme said. According to the official narrative of the Islamic Republic, the revolution did not stop in 1979 with the overthrow of the monarchy but remains a process that is still going on. "The Islamic Revolution has three levels in the view of the Imam (Khomeini): one is Iran, the other is the Islamic world and the last one is the world of the oppressed," said Abdullah Ganji, editor-in-chief of ultra-conservative Javan daily.

War and isolation

"We did not have any plans at the beginning for the Islamic Revolution to go beyond Iran's borders," Ganji told AFP, drawing a distinction with Soviet military interventions abroad. But he said the changes in Iran inspired a string of startling events in the Middle East: attacks against US embassies, protests by Shiites in Saudi Arabia and the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981.

The convulsions rattled rulers around the region and fears of Tehran were "among the reasons that led to the invasion of Iran by Iraq" in September 1980, said Therme. The bloody conflict with Saddam Hussein's forces ended in 1988 after hundreds of thousands of lives had been lost. While it strengthened Islamic rule at home in Iran, it left the country cut off from most of the rest of the world. Except for some key allies: most notably Syria and the Shiite movement Hezbollah that arose after Israel's invasion in 1982. "There was a division in the Arab world between supporters and opponents of the 'axis of resistance' promoted by the Islamic Republic," said Therme.

1979 events fired up political Islam

'New strategy'

Ganji said that after the war with Iraq, Tehran developed a "new strategy" aimed at confronting US influence around the region. "The strategy of the Islamic Republic over the last 30 years has been preventing

America from having a foothold in the Middle East," he said. From Syria to Yemen to Lebanon, the standoff between Washington and its allies and Tehran continues to shape events. The US, Israel and Saudi Arabia see Iran's hand pulling the strings in a raft of hotspots.

Tehran has helped prop up Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad during nearly eight years of civil war, is accused of aiding Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen and maintains Hezbollah as a major threat against Israel. But Iranian officials insist the US is really responsible for the conflicts and that allegations of regional meddling are used as an excuse to target the Islamic Revolution.

Last year, the US pulled out of a landmark 2015 accord on Tehran's nuclear program and reimposed sanctions, citing in part Iran's role in regional conflicts. Conservative Iranian politician and analyst Amir Mohebbian said the West's "massive arms sales" to Arab monarchies in the Gulf are justified because "Iran remains a danger" to US designs in the Middle East. Analyst Therme said that "militant anti-Zionism" has been one of the constants of Iranian foreign policy since Khomeini transformed the country. But now the current geopolitical aims of Tehran seem focused mainly on one goal, he said: "First and foremost to ensure that (the Islamic Republic) endures." — AFP

Mali Muslim leaders call for PM's resignation at mass rally

BAMAKO: Mali's chief Muslim leaders yesterday called for the resignation of Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubeye Maiga at a mass rally, accusing his government of failing to halt jihadist attacks and allowing "moral depravity". Huge crowds packed out a 60,000-seat stadium in the capital Bamako, with many veiled women sitting in stands separated from the male attendees, according to an AFP reporter.

"Muslims can't let things go to waste. From now on, they will be vigilant and mobilise for their country, their religion and their dignity," influential imam Mahmoud Dicko, who presides over the Islamic High Council (IHC), told his supporters. "Mali needs a complete overhaul," said the ultraconservative leader who organized Sunday's event with Bouye Haidara, another leading Muslim.

Over the past decade, Dicko has emerged as one of Mali's most prominent public figures, playing a key role in negotiations between the government and Islamist extremists. He is also a proponent of Wahhabism which he studied extensively in Saudi Arabia, the cradle of this strict Sunni doctrine. "We must fight corruption... We must fight moral depravity. We are the guardians of morality," added Issa Coulibaly,

Dicko's spokesman, speaking on the sidelines of the gathering.

In 2015, Dicko stirred controversy when he called militant attacks "divine punishment" for Mali adopting more liberal Western traditions. "Our guide, our leader, is Mahmoud Dicko," said minibus driver Moussa Dicko (no relation), adding that he had taken the day off to join the gathering at the stadium. Last year, Prime Minister Maiga sparked outrage for supporting a plan to introduce sex education school books promoting a more tolerant view of homosexuality.

Homosexuality is not illegal but remains taboo in the Muslim-majority country. Members of the LGBT community often face discrimination and even physical punishment, according to civil society groups. Dicko and his followers had slammed the Dutch-financed proposal for "wanting to teach homosexuality to school children". The government eventually bowed to the pressure and dropped the project in December. "Our country is faced with a governance problem. This rally wants to draw attention to that. People need to talk to each other," Dicko told AFP ahead of the event.

The imam's political profile was boosted when he became a key mediator between the government and militants who took control of large swathes of the country's north in 2012. Despite French military intervention and a 2015 peace deal, militant attacks have continued and vast stretches of the landlocked Sahel nation remain out of state control, with violence also spilling into neighbouring Burkina Faso and Nigeria. Dicko, 64, has repeatedly pushed for dialogue to help solve the security crisis plaguing Mali, one of the world's poorest countries. In yesterday's speech, he denounced the "terrorist attacks", saying jihadism "has no place in Mali". — AFP

New Zealand flight turns back mid-air

SYDNEY: An Air New Zealand flight to Shanghai turned back several hours into its journey yesterday after discovering it did not have permission to land in China, the airline said. Flight NZ289 carrying about 270 passengers left Auckland shortly before midnight on Saturday only to return about 10 am yesterday (2100 GMT Saturday). It turned around several hours into the flight. "A technicality meant the particular aircraft operating this service did not have Chinese regulatory authority to land in China," the airline said.

China's foreign ministry did not make any immediate comment when contacted by Reuters. Calls to the civil aviation administration were not answered. Air

New Zealand apologized to passengers and said a special service would fly them to Shanghai at 11 pm yesterday (1000 GMT). "We know customers will be deeply disappointed and frustrated by this situation and we are very sorry for the disruption to their travel plans," Air New Zealand said.

Disgruntled passengers voiced their disapproval on social media. One posted a picture on Twitter of the onboard flight map showing the aircraft turning around over Papua New Guinea. "I've just experienced a new level of China Bad: midway through our flight from Auckland to Shanghai, the pilot informs us that Chinese authorities had not given this plane permission to land, so we needed to turn around. A permitting issue, supposedly," the passenger commented. The same flight, NZ289, was turned back on a flight to China on Aug 24 last year, although an airline spokeswoman said that was due to an engineering issue, not a permitting one. — Reuters

