

## IRAN AT THE HEART OF THE MIDDLE EAST: THE GAME OF GEOSTRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE REGION

**Dina Esfandiary**, Centre for Science and Security Studies Fellow, King's College London

To many countries in the Middle East, Iran is a disruptive and difficult power. But Iran's goals are no different from those of other countries: it seeks to preserve its territorial integrity and secure its borders, ensure long-term development and expand ties with other countries.<sup>1</sup> Iran also wants to secure its influence, be taken seriously, minimise the risk of conflict on its borders and ensure that any foreign presence is removed from the Middle East. Today, many paint Iran's motivations and capabilities as blindly antagonistic, ideological and expansively powerful. While Iran's aims, interests and, particularly, methods for intervention in the region are sometimes problematic, they are hardly more abhorrent than their neighbours'.

### **Iran in the Middle East**

Iran is a dominant state in the Middle East. It is large, rich in resources and a potentially powerful and relatively stable partner in an unstable area. Iran is in a strategically significant area. It has an extensive Gulf coastline in the south that culminates in the Strait of Hormuz, giving it strategic control over the waterways through which most of the world's oil travels. Iran is also the easternmost country of the Middle East and sits closer than its neighbours to trade partners in the rest of Asia.

In the Islamic Republic, politics are fluid and constantly changing. Decisions are the product of discussion and debate, with the Supreme Leader stepping in when needed to make the final call. It is above all a reactive power, adept at responding to changing and difficult circumstances to get the best out of them.

<sup>1</sup> For more on Iran's foreign policy objectives, see Mohammad Javad Zarif, "What Iran Really Wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June, 2014, 49-58, [http://quito.mfa.ir/uploads/ZarifFinalProofs\\_\(1\)\\_28065.pdf](http://quito.mfa.ir/uploads/ZarifFinalProofs_(1)_28065.pdf)

## Iran's Foreign Policy Drivers

Since the 1979 revolution in Iran, several principles have guided Iran's foreign policy. Initially, identity and ideology were major drivers of Iranian foreign policy. But, today, Iran is more pragmatic, putting its interests ahead of ideology.

Nationalism is an important foreign policy consideration for Iran. Tied to this is prestige: Iran believes it deserves respect in the region, for its power and its rich history. In addition, foreign policy decisions are a direct result of internal politicking and bargaining, where policies are chosen because of domestic political pressure. Further, while Iran's Gulf Arab neighbours and the West see Iran's activities in the region as "expansionist",<sup>2</sup> Tehran believes it is projecting power to ensure the safety of the country and its borders. Finally, along with general economic interests, the multilayered sanctions regime on Iran, which was intended to isolate it following the development of its nuclear programme, was a significant driver of its foreign policy for more than a decade, and still is today.

The Islamic Republic has always been a reactionary and opportunistic country. Much of its foreign policy is conducted after it has been presented as an opportunity to strengthen its position that is too good to pass up, including in the Middle East. Its involvement in Bahrain and Yemen are both good examples of this. To achieve its aims, and to compensate for its historically weak military, the Islamic Republic relies on its Revolutionary Guards, regional proxies and ties with minorities in the Middle East.

## Regional Security

Today, Iran is involved in several regional security crises in the region. Iraq is a vital security concern for Tehran.<sup>3</sup> Tehran shares a porous, 910-mile border with Iraq and has significant economic interests and ethnic and religious ties to it, from the Shia community in the country (some two-thirds of the population), which represents a constituency to Iran, to the competition between Najaf – the heart of Iraqi Shiism – and Qom, Iran – the centre of the Islamic Republic's clergy. Today, Iran's objective in Iraq is to balance the preservation of Iraq's unity and its territorial integrity, while ensuring it increases its influence in the country and preventing Iraq from becoming strong enough to challenge Iran again. It achieves its objective by helping the central government and its armed forces to fill the power vacuum in the country, helping Shia forces fighting under the umbrella of Hashd al-Shaabi, and by fighting Islamic State. In other words, Tehran aims for either manageable instability, giving it the opportunity to increase its influence through its proxies, or an easily influenced government.

<sup>2</sup> US, EU and GCC lawmakers and officials, interviews with the author, New York, Washington, Brussels, London, Paris, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Muscat, Doha, and Kuwait City, 2014.17.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the importance of Iraq to Iran, see Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS policy", *International Affairs*, 91(1), 2015, 1-15.

To Iran, Syria is a symbol of, and a means to, its influence in the region. It allows Iran to extend its reach all the way to the Mediterranean and Israel. Syria also allows Tehran to continue to arm its vital proxies in the Levant, most importantly Hezbollah, by serving as a conduit for Iranian money, weapons, personnel and expertise, made possible by the long-standing and loyal alliance Tehran has maintained with the Assad family. Today, Tehran continues to funnel money, surveillance equipment and military assistance to the Syrian government, under the guidance of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards. In Syria, Iran aims to ensure the survival of some parts of the Assad regime to avoid turmoil as well as to secure its access to the Mediterranean. While Iran's involvement in Syria has been the subject of debate among both the population and the elite, many officials now accept President Assad's gross credibility loss and his potential departure, but they are adamant that the regime's institutions must remain to ensure a smooth transition.<sup>4</sup> Syria also became a way for Iran to ensure it would have a seat at the table with some of the world's great powers: indeed, resolving the crisis in Syria is no longer an option without Iran and its partner Russia.

The conflict in Yemen is not as clear cut for Tehran as Iraq and Syria. Iran's Gulf Arab neighbours pointed to Tehran's links to the Houthis as justification for their actions in Yemen.<sup>5</sup> But Iran's involvement is not as clear cut as is often depicted. Yemen is not a priority for it. Unlike Iraq, Iran has no border with Yemen, and the country has no covetable natural resources. In addition, the Houthis, while viewed as an Iranian puppet, do not respond to Iran as its other proxies do. The Houthi-Iran relationship is similar to Tehran's relationship with Hamas: the group receives varying degrees of resources and support from Iran without fully reporting to it. Rather, Iran built up capacity by helping the Houthis build an effective internal administration, learning to manage security, expanding their religious education and boosting trade ties. As the conflict progressed, however, the Gulf perception of Iranian involvement became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Iran upped its participation. Nevertheless, Iran's involvement in Yemen is expendable and more hands-off than in Iraq or Syria. It is involved because it is a useful way for it to be a thorn in Saudi Arabia's side. For Iran, Yemen is a bargaining chip and potentially the first step in a dialogue with its Gulf Arab neighbours.

The Arab countries of the Gulf have always been fearful of Iran's perceived regional expansionist policies. Indeed, to them the rise of Supreme Leader Khomeini, the Islamic Republic's founder, and his call to export the Iranian revolution to the region proved Iran's expansionist desires. Today, they are sceptical about the possibility of dialogue with the Rouhani administration

<sup>4</sup> Senior Iranian official, interview with the author, Vienna, July 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Kareem Shaheen and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Gulf States Consider Yemen Ground Offensive to Halt Houthi Rebel Advance", *Guardian*, March 26, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/26/gulf-states-yemen-ground-offensive-to-halt-houthi-rebel-advance>

leading to any meaningful changes in Iran's behaviour. With the 2015 nuclear deal, the need to counter Iran became further entrenched in their minds. The differences in opinion on Iran in the Gulf region exacerbated existing rivalries and suspicions among the countries of the GCC, contributing to the June 2017 crisis with Qatar.<sup>6</sup> Iran, for its part, is split when it comes to its outlook on its Gulf Arab neighbours: while the Rouhani administration made dialogue with its neighbours a foreign policy objective, from January 2016, after the hanging of Saudi Shia Sheikh Nimr al Nimr, the Iranian public and parts of the elite became less receptive to the idea of dialogue. Personal frustrations and pressure from hardliners stalled Iranian outreach toward the Gulf Arabs throughout the rest of 2016, and while it resurfaced in early 2017, with the Kuwaiti initiative calling for dialogue, it was quickly brushed aside following Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia and the outbreak of the GCC crisis in summer 2017.

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