

Dossier: Geopolitical Turmoil and its Effects in the Mediterranean Region

# Iran and Middle East Conflicts: Myths and Reality

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The Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979 transformed the West's perception of Iran. From the watchdog of the Persian Gulf under Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi to an Islamic Republic that has appeared since then as a destabilizing power for its Arab neighbours, the nature of Tehran's regional policy has been a constant source of controversy. We will attempt to ascertain whether Tehran could be a partner in the struggle against Daesh or if, on the contrary, Iranian aid against Sunni jihadism could hold future danger in and of itself. There are various perspectives for interpreting the role of Iran in the Middle East.

The first view is the one put forth by President Rouhani: a pacific presence in a conflict zone. From this perspective, it would be preferable to use Iran's network of alliances in the Greater Middle East in order to settle conflicts. This viewpoint is contested in Iran itself by the most radical individuals among the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*pasdaran*). The latter believe Iran should get involved in regional wars (Iraq, Syria, Yemen) to shift the frontline of struggle against Daesh far from national borders. There is likewise a debate on the assessment of the "American threat" in Iran: President Rouhani wishes to phase out the slogan "Death to America," whereas the most conservative consider it an existential threat.

The Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) reached on 14 July 2015 has allowed a military confrontation between Iran and the US to be avoided. The fact remains, however, that, contrary to the "grand bargain" theory, it has not normalized relations between Iran and certain Persian Gulf neighbours, in particular Saudi Arabia. The hypothesis according to which Iran would become more aggressive on the regional level after the nuclear deal went into effect has likewise not proven correct. One can observe a continuity in Tehran's regional policy that uses the projection of its power in order to boost its national security<sup>1</sup> and emerge as a major regional power.

In any case, the Daesh attack of 7 June 2017 perpetrated by Iranian Sunni jihadists, some from the country's Kurdish provinces, is the consequence of several factors: first of all, zero risk does not exist, even for an authoritarian regime such as Iran's, which lends security services primordial importance. Tehran's spy mania has certainly contributed to reducing the terrorist risk through heightened surveillance, but the other side of the coin has been restriction of individual liberties and increased surveillance of the population. This security atmosphere was, moreover, one of the issues of the presidential campaign in 2013, and again in 2017. Iran's regional action and the capture of Mosul by Daesh has also been presented for three years within the framework of the struggle against terrorism. Iran's will to eliminate Daesh, particularly in Iraq, however, has neared its limits today, since Iran, in turn, has fallen victim to regional chaos.

<sup>1</sup> See FARHI, Farideh. *Iran Power Projection Strategy and Goal*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Middle East Program, April 2017, p. 1 [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170421\\_Farhi\\_Iranian\\_Power\\_Projection.pdf?R.Ck9Gr6VPAvyWbG2JIPf3ab DR201S1](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170421_Farhi_Iranian_Power_Projection.pdf?R.Ck9Gr6VPAvyWbG2JIPf3ab DR201S1)

Moreover, there are several dozen Iranian combatants in Daesh, namely in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. The State is struggling against radicalization in Iran's Sunni community, which represents approximately 15% of the population (co-opting the Sunni elite) and against Salafism. It is precisely this Salafist issue that provides an official justification for prohibiting all Sunni mosques in Tehran. On the other hand, in Kurdish and Baluch provinces, phenomena of radicalization of traditional Islam (particularly under Deobandi influence) can be observed. Nonetheless, in their immense majority, Iranian Sunnis are moderate. This is attested to by Rouhani's results in the Sistan and Baluchistan Province (at 73.2%, his best results).

### **Rouhani's Re-election: The Limits of Presidential Power**

On 19 May 2017, in the first round of the Iranian presidential elections, Hassan Rouhani, with 57% of the votes, prevailed over his rival, the conservative Ebrahim Raissi, who obtained 38.3% of the votes. This victory marked the people's expression of a will to normalize the country's interior (aspiration to gradual reform) and exterior (*détente* on the international stage) situations. The Iranian middle class chose a centrist president, expecting a foreign policy of *détente* and a focus on the country's socio-economic development. This also reveals a certain fatigue regarding revolutionary slogans among the Iranian population, regarding both interior and regional politics.

The challenges to overcome remain significant until these popular aspirations are met by President Rouhani. In the first place, unelected institutions (the Supreme Leader, the Judiciary Branch and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) will attempt to prevent him from applying his reforms. With regard to human rights, he will have to deal with a judiciary dominated by elderly ayatollahs who fear any political reform. With regard to regional politics, the Revolutionary Guard Corps will oppose any attempt at compromise with the Gulf oil monarchies and will attempt to limit Rouhani's diplomatic ambitions for *détente*, in particular his plan for disengagement from regional wars (Syria, Iraq and Yemen). The Supreme Leader will only support him in his policy to

revive the economy and will use the ultra-conservatives to preserve both the revolutionary purity of the Islamic Republic and his personal power.

This institutional duality fosters concern among Iran's neighbours. With which Iran should they negotiate? President Rouhani's Iran, which seeks win-win relations based on economic synergies, or the security-state Iran with ties to non-state groups in the Greater Middle East? This concern is even greater in countries with a considerable Shiite community. From Afghanistan to Iraq, not to mention Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the question of Iran's religious leadership arises. Such tension is particularly significant in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In addition, whereas the Obama Administration attempted to restore Washington-Riyadh relations by establishing a direct dialogue with Tehran, it seems that the Trump Administration has chosen to support the Saudis and Israelis in their regional confrontation with the Islamic Republic.

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Although Trump's US has de facto continued to keep its engagements from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, the fact remains that US statements under the Trump Administration concerning Iran close the Obama parenthesis. The conventional American perception of Iran as the premiere cause of Middle East conflict is back. Indeed, since the 1978-1979 Islamic Revolution, the West's perception of Iran has changed dramatically. From the watchdog of the Persian Gulf under Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi to an Islamic Republic that has since emerged as a destabilizing power for its Arab neighbours, the nature of Tehran's regional policy has continually been under fire. Today, the Trump Administration qualifies Iranian influence as "evil," but at the same time, Tehran could be a partner in the struggle against Daesh. In any case, Iranian aid against Sunni jihadism is controversial: for Russia, Iran is an asset in defeating the high-pri-

ority enemy, Daesh. For the US and its Gulf allies, on the other hand, Iranian influence is henceforth, and while Daesh is in the process of being defeated, the main threat to regional stability.

### Military Entente with Russia

Iran's participation in the Syrian war is increasingly militarily co-ordinated with Russia. At the onset of Russian military intervention in Syria in autumn 2015, Russian military forces launched 26 missiles from the Caspian Sea against targets on Syrian land.<sup>2</sup> It was the first time the Caspian area had served as a base for launching an attack against a Middle East country. This new security connection between the two areas confirms one of the main parameters of the Russian-Iranian partnership in the post-Cold War period: regional co-operation in the former Soviet area. In the 1990s, the two States came to an agreement to stabilize Central Asia, including Afghanistan, and the Caucasus. Since the onset of the Arab uprisings, this entente has spread to include the Middle East. Iran's contribution to the stabilization of these areas, according to the framework established by Russian diplomacy, was obtained in exchange for bilateral co-operation in strategic sectors such as military, space or civil nuclear co-operation. This entente remained in place after the signature of the nuclear deal in July 2015, for the major Western powers maintain an embargo on military exports and certain (civil and military) dual-use technologies. After Russian military intervention in Syria, it seems that Iran had kept the use of its Shahid Nojeh airbase near Hamadan secret for nearly a year before the revelation by the Russian media regarding its use by Russian aviation in August 2016. When the information became public, Iranian Defence Minister Hossein Dehghan stated that the Russians were not reliable and that they act exclusively according to their interests (*bi-ma'refat va khodkhah*). He likewise stated that: "The Russians wish to show they are a su-

perpower and can influence all matters of security in the region and throughout the world. They want to demonstrate that they can influence events in Syria and determine them in order to negotiate with the Americans and ensure they play a role in Syria's future politics. They published [this information] in order to consolidate their interests."<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the parliamentary speaker, Ali Larijani, attempted to justify the presence of foreign troops on Iranian soil by explaining that it was due to a temporary agreement for refuelling Russian bombers and that this military agreement did not violate the Iranian Constitution. Article 146 forbids the establishment of foreign military bases in Iranian territory even for pacific purposes. Larijani explained that the bilateral Russian-Iranian agreement, which includes stocking Russian military equipment and the presence of Russian military personnel, did not envisage the permanent establishment of foreign forces in an Iranian military base, which would be unconstitutional.<sup>4</sup>

### Russian-Iranian new co-operation is presented within the framework of the struggle against terrorism, in particular against Sunni jihadist groups

In fact, this Russian-Iranian military agreement is unprecedented since World War II. The Iranian State did not actually authorize the use of its national territory to attack targets on foreign soil. Even the Shah of Iran, Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi, forbade the installation of US missiles in Iranian territory, a decision which allowed a warming of Iranian-Soviet relations after 1962. The United States wished to establish military bases in Iran, which the Shah rejected, not only to present his country as an independent power on the international stage, but also to soothe relations with its large northern neighbour.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> "Russian missiles strike Syria from Caspian Sea," *BBC News*, 7 October 2016. Available here: [www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-34462539/russian-missiles-strike-syria-from-caspian-sea](http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-34462539/russian-missiles-strike-syria-from-caspian-sea) (retrieved 1 June 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Statements cited by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) on 25 August 2016. Available at: <http://memri.fr/2016/08/25/le-ministre-iranien-de-la-defense-hossein-dehghan-critique-la-russie-pour-avoir-revele-utiliser-des-bases-aeriennes-iraniennes-en-syrie-cetait-inapproprié> (retrieved 5 January 2017).

<sup>4</sup> See "Larijani: Irān pāigāh nezāmi dar ekhtiār rusie qarār nadāde hast," *BBC Persian*, 27 mordād 1395 (17 August 2016). Available at: [www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2016/08/160817\\_i03\\_iran\\_russia\\_military\\_base](http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2016/08/160817_i03_iran_russia_military_base) (retrieved 2 November 2016).

<sup>5</sup> THERME, Clément. *Les relations entre Tehran et Moscou depuis 1979*, PUF, Paris, 2012.

The internal debate and contradictory statements by Iranian policymakers show that factionalism in the Islamic Republic is often responsible for weakening national unity in a region that is volatile in terms of security. Parallel to the strengthening of the bilateral military entente through the use of a common military base in the Syrian war in 2016, Russia finally delivered the S-300 missile defence system to Iran and the Iranian defence minister met with his Russian counterpart five times between 2014 and 2016. This new co-operation is presented within the framework of the struggle against terrorism, in particular against Sunni jihadist groups that Iran qualifies as *takfiri* (excommunicators). And finally, the two governments share the vision according to which, since co-operation began between the West and Afghan mujahidin in the 1980s in Afghanistan, there has been collusion between Sunni jihadism and Western countries. According to the Russian account, the proof is in the relations between the US and Syrian opposition groups considered by Moscow as terrorists or jihadists. Insofar as the Iranians are concerned, Ayatollah Khomeini accused Saudi Arabia of being the leader of “American Islam,” and today, the leaders of the Islamic Republic often point out the US’ role in the emergence of Daesh.

### **Conclusion: The Trump Challenge**

For President Rouhani, the Trump Administration is a challenge. Indeed, accusations of Iranian support to “terrorism” have intensified since Trump took up office as US President. It is thus a negative factor for President Rouhani. In fact, the hope of the US lifting primary sanctions not associated with nuclear matters (“terrorism” and human rights) is slim. In other words, Rouhani’s campaign promise may run

up against the Trump Administration’s strategy of using a rhetoric including the threat of the use of force to counter Iran’s regional influence. Moreover, Iran’s regional policy is not under the President’s authority: stopping the ballistic missile programme or ending Iranian support to Hezbollah or to certain Shiite militias in Iraq does not seem a possible option. The problem is that there is a link between Tehran’s regional policy and the US system of primary economic sanctions. Nonetheless, if Washington keeps its engagements in the nuclear deal, this could allow the pursuit of economic co-operation between Iran and European countries.

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In any case, Rouhani’s re-election is preferable for reaching diplomatic solutions in the Middle East region. This electoral campaign has allowed, for instance, the lifting of the taboo on Iran’s participation through “proxies” in regional wars (Iraq, Syria, Yemen). Without questioning the fundamentals of regional policy, the incumbent President insists on the need to make Iran a mediating power exercising a stabilizing influence rather than spending Iran’s resources on participation in conflicts. In any case, he is aware that pursuing a regional strategy hostile to Western interests is hardly compatible with a strategy of economic emergence in a conflict zone.