

Iran, a Geopolitical Player in the Middle East

Keys

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Iran is an immense country with a national identity marked by the self-esteem of those who know they form part of a great civilisation. Geography also plays a part in Iran's desire to become a great regional power. This nation state is located at a strategic intersection between the Arab, Turkish, Russian and Indian worlds. It is a key point of transit for the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, the Caucuses and the Indian subcontinent and for three seas: the Caspian, Persian/Arabian and the Sea of Oman. Nevertheless, it has never been an expansionist regional power. Iran has no tradition of invading neighbouring countries, although this does not mean that it has not experienced growing frustration recently in light of its potential regional power combined with the scant chances of exercising it. When it once again claimed its place as a sovereign country under the nationalist government of Mohammad Mossadeq, the US and Britain arranged a coup in 1953 to make it into a local "client state," to act as a kind of pro-Western vassal state throughout the Cold War, until 1979. The Iranian revolution, which led to an Islamic Republic in accordance with the philosophy of Ayatollah Khomeini, saw the start of a period of isolation and sanction which once again, albeit in a different way, prevented it from fulfilling its potential for exercising regional leadership.

Aware as it is of its potential, Iran is the most traditional Middle Eastern state and the strongest defender of "regionalism", that is, of developing a strong regional system amongst local players, whilst deeming counterproductive policies of military alliances with foreign powers, such as those practised by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, which aim to compen-

sate for their vulnerability through foreign protection and not that of regional Middle Eastern powers, a phenomenon that has increased enormously since the 1990s.

Despite its isolation and the sanctions, Iran has not missed the opportunity, whenever the situation so permits, to show its important role as a regional player, albeit without securing significant results. During the 1991 Gulf War, its position of collaborating with the international anti-Iraqi alliance, in 1997 with Tehran acting as venue of the Islamic Conference Organisation summit and, later on, showing its collaboration in the "war against terror" by detaining a number of people on the list of terrorist suspects. Nevertheless, it has been US policy since its invasion of Iraq, and all the regional consequences that this has entailed, which has opened the door to Iran progressively becoming a regional player. However, this role, even though it is today significantly more important than it was before, should also not be overestimated.

Factors in Iran's Favour

Iran's goal, or "dream", is to be respected as a great regional power. However, as long as it remains the great enemy of the only global superpower, this will not be possible. The fact is that said superpower sees it as a long-term problem for its policy in the Middle-East. However, Iran plays its hand the best it can, despite being surrounded by US military bases in Iraq, the Gulf States, Afghanistan and Central Asia. On the one hand, there is Iraq and the Shiite question. Amongst the inevitable contradictions arising from the US's erratic policy in Iraq is that of empowering Shiite players. Indeed, it is precisely those Iraqi Shiite groups with the closest historical and political links to Iran that the US has placed in government in the country: the Islamic Dawa Party, to which Iraqi

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki belongs, and the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), led by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim. Yet, nevertheless, it is the Iraqi Shiite player most independent of Tehran and over whom it has less influence, Muqtada al-Sadr, who has become the great Shiite enemy of the US in Iraq. Relations between Iran and Muqtada al-Sadr are complex, but the latter – a convinced Iraqi nationalist – will never be the Iranian client that al-Hakim has always been. This could lead to Tehran and Washington joining forces in the battle against al-Sadr sometime in the future but this would, in turn, show that it is precisely in Iraq (or, at least, what remains of the country) that the US needs dialogue with and the cooperation of the Iranians. Therefore, Baghdad became, on 27th May 2007, the only place where the Americans had meetings with Iranian officials, reluctantly acknowledging the regional role to which Iran aspires.

Other significant errors have favoured the political protagonism of Shiite players in the Middle East. In Lebanon, Israel's failed war against Hezbollah in Summer 2006 bolstered the latter's position as a key political player in the country. Hezbollah is, above all, a Lebanese party, whose frame of reference is clearly within its nation-state, but given the required strategic alliances needed by every player in the region, Syria and Iran provide clear focuses of support. The manifest foreign interference in current Lebanese politics strengthens Iran's policy of strengthening the Middle East through alliances of states in the region and thus opens up to it the ability to influence Hezbollah's "regionalist" view.

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In Palestine, the extreme policy of embargo and isolation against Hamas, practised by the US, Israel, the EU and the Palestinian National Authority itself (which governs the West Bank), has been a significant contributory factor to Iran gaining entry for the first time to this area, which is so important and symbolic to Arabs and Muslims alike, providing economic support that the Palestinian Islamist party (which is

Sunni and not historically associated with Iran) has inevitably received with relief.

Additionally, given the possibility of an attack on Iran by the US, using the nuclear question as an excuse but with the clear goal of changing the regime, it should not be forgotten that 75% of the world's oil reserves lie in the Gulf and that 70% of the population of its Arab countries is Shiite. This population has, been historically marginalised and excluded from Sunni-held power structures and its loyalty to the State is therefore shaky, to say the least.

In Afghanistan, Iranian influence has also been seen on important occasions. The case of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former *mujahidin* forged in the heat of the war against the Soviets, is particularly noteworthy. Hekmatyar returned to Afghanistan in February 2002 when Iran released him from the "controlled exile" under which he was held by the country's authorities. Although a stable Afghanistan is key to Iran's interests (which are seriously affected by numerous Afghan refugees and drug trafficking from the country), the US's threatening policy against Iran convinced the government in Tehran that the priority for its security was not to contribute to that of Afghanistan, but rather to create problems for the US in the latter country by freeing the notorious warlord Hekmatyar, who immediately began contributing to the armed destabilisation of the country.

Tehran is also carrying out an active foreign policy eastwards, where it is strengthening its leadership and countering the US's energetic hegemony in the Gulf by establishing close relations, both commercial and energy-based, with its eastern neighbours via the Iran-Russia-India corridor, without forgetting the ties in this area, which are increasingly linking Iran with China. In other words, Tehran is playing its hand in the area as an energy security player. This policy is being headed by Iran's Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, who studied in Bangalore, India. Thus it is that Iran's "regionalism" is becoming a kind of "panregionalism."

Factors Working against Iran

Without taking into account the fact that being considered "Public Enemy Number 1" by the only world superpower might be considered something of a handicap, other factors also obstruct Iran's way to the leadership it seeks in the Middle East.

Iran's regime, far from being monolithic, suffers from great internal division and fragmentation which hin-

ders its ability to provide regional leadership. There is a lack of consensus on the direction the country should take internally, how to manage the nuclear issue, relations with the US and the regional role that Iran should play. This is due to the discrepancies and rivalry between the members of its political class. And this, in turn, means that Iran's leaders act more in their own interests than those of the country. The result? Institutional paralysis due to factionalism (e.g. Iran wants to form part of the World Trade Organisation, but the liberal reforms required to achieve this goal go against the interests of a key sector of its leadership, whose power is based on controlling around 80% of the country's economy) and internal disputes on the direction to be followed in foreign policy. One significant example of this is provided by the virulent criticism directed against President Ahmadinejad's policy by a top politician. Hassan Rowhani, who is close to Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and representative of the "Supreme Leader", Ayatollah Khamenei, on the Supreme National Security Council, has made clear on a number of occasions his opposition to the President's provocative style and his position in favour of improving relations with the West and the USA: "The USA is our enemy (...) but even the Prophet signed peace agreements with the infidels" (...) "One can respect another because he has a knife in his hands, but this is very different from the respect one has for him due to his knowledge, his ethics and his science." Additionally, Ahmadinejad has surrounded himself with a political elite that has become unpopular due to its administrative incompetence, particularly in the field of economic policy. Nevertheless, this incompetence does not mean that the country is moving towards a popular revolt in the case of foreign attack, as some US strategists have been suggesting. Iran's nuclear programme is the source of widespread patriotic pride. With regard to Iran's influence of Shiite Islam, one should also bear in mind the division existing in the world of Shiite religious authority: although this influence is a source of power for Tehran in the Middle East, Lebanon's and Iraq's Shiite religious leaders have on a number of occasions made declarations more in line with their respective national interests than with any unconditional alliance with Iran.

In Iraq, the influence that has until now allowed Iran to strengthen its position, even before the US, may in the future depend on developments with the organisation led by Muqtada al-Sadr, who has stated on a number of occasions that he does not want Iran to become involved in Iraqi affairs. If al-Sadr increases his

popularity and power at the expense of al-Hakim's SIIC and the Shiite coalition around Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Iran would lose influence in the country. Al-Sadr's form of Shiism is more "Iraqi" and enjoys great popularity amongst the most disenfranchised Shiites. Moreover, not only has it eliminated any anti-Sunni rhetoric, but it also boasts close relation with those Iraqi Sunni sectors that share his radical opposition to the US occupation and the idea of conserving Iraqi territorial unity, rejecting the creation of an autonomous Shiite region in the south, an idea that has, nevertheless, been defended by Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim. Added to this is the fact that Iran's great ally, Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, is ill and does not appear able to control Iraq's Shiite community for much longer. His successor, Ammar al-Hakim, neither enjoys Muqtada's popularity nor appears able to ensure with his charisma the unity of the SIIC and its powerful al-Badr militia after al-Hakim's death. Iran is aware of this fact, which undoubtedly worries it, because any cooperation with al-Sadr will always be limited and he will never become another al-Hakim, and because, for this reason, the strategic value of Iran's role in Iraq in US eyes and its ability to share influence with them will be diminished.

Another important factor that should be borne in mind when considering Iranian influence in the Middle East is how events progress in the Lebanon and Syria. In the former country, everything depends on Hezbollah's experiences and whether it gains or loses strength. Should Lebanon descend into a civil war, or should another war with Israel weaken it, Iranian influence will also be affected. Similarly, should negotiations between Israel and Syria on the Golan Heights progress, the relationship between Damascus and Hezbollah would be harmed.

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In conclusion, almost everything remains to be written on the real emergence of Iran as a regional power in the Middle East. There is no doubt that there are clear indications that it has significant advantages that it did not previously enjoy. However, now more than ever, everything in the region is temporary.