Iran is not typified as a country that leads invasions, but is rather an actor that takes advantage of the conditions of invaded countries. The cases of Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon provide evidence for this argument, as Iran’s presence is manifest not only in their civilian bodies, but also in their security and intelligence apparatuses. This phenomenon has led the capitals of these countries to be ironically portrayed in the regional media as “Tehran’s four Arab capitals.”

Since the new President, Ebrahim Raisi, took up office in July 2021, Iran’s foreign and security policy towards these theatres has changed little, as the nuclear programme, missile programme and assistance to armed non-state actors such as Hamas, Hezbollah, Kata’ib Hezbollah and the Houthis persist as the central factors in Iranian strategic defence thinking. In parallel to this exercise in dissuasion, however, the new Raisi Administration has also pursued temporary détente mechanisms towards other regional neighbours, most notably the expansion of the so-called “resistance economy” in Iraq, the easing of tensions with selected countries on the Arabian Peninsula, and its apparent consolidation in the Mediterranean, not only via countries such as Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, but also through contacts with the Algerian government. Taken together, these events represent a range of opportunities for the “revolutionary pragmatism” being pushed by the new Raisi Administration, whose priority, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and in the midst of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, is the achievement of a domestic economic recovery not dependent on the lifting of sanctions surrounding the complicated nuclear affair.

Recalibrating Strategy in Iraq

In Iraq’s October 2021 parliamentary elections, the Iranian-backed al-Fatah Movement won 17 seats while its main rival, the bloc led by Muqtada al-Sadr, won 73. While this means that Iran maintained its influence over factions as diverse as Kata’ib Hezbollah, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq and the Badr Front, it also indicates that Iranian influence in the government of Iraq has decreased dramatically.1 Hence, Tehran has decided to recalibrate its strategy with Baghdad through a process of cooperation and conflict that shows, on the one hand, how Iran refuses to stop seeing Iraq as a potential market for its “resistance economy,” and on the other, how the geopolitics of the area have driven Iran to use Iraqi territory as a theatre of operations to wage a covert war with actors such as Israel.

Trade with Iraq accounts for 40% of Iranian exports, making it Tehran’s most important trading partner after China. This fact allows us to understand the enormous economic influence that Tehran has on its Arab neighbour, especially following the struggle against the Islamic State in 2014, at a time that allowed companies linked to the Revolutionary Guard such as Khatam al-Anbiya to build roads, power plants, hotel complexes and businesses throughout cities such as Basra, Nasiriyah, Najaf, KARBala and Baghdad, which formed an economic corridor worth

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around $9 billion before the pandemic. This relationship is expected to grow to $20 billion in the coming years, according to Hossein Amir Abdollahian, the new Iranian Foreign Minister, who has visited Baghdad twice since taking office, in the context of a regional summit in August 2021, and then as part of the work of the Fourth Joint Economic Committee in April 2022. This diplomatic presence is fully intended to compete with other Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, which also aspire to supply gas and electricity to Baghdad in the medium term. Parallel to this, Iran has continued its irregular war strategy against groups allegedly backed by the United States and Israel through support to Shiite militias. In this regard, Ebrahim Raisi has confirmed that Iraq remains vital to its national security because covert operations have been planned from Iraqi territory that have taken the lives of valuable nuclear scientists and important military figures, as demonstrated by the assassinations of Abul Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020. In other words, the Iraqi theatre has also become an extension of the covert war waged by the Iranian and Israeli armed forces in the Syrian arena of operations, as attacks against Tehran in southern Syria are frequently countered by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in northern Iraq, the Iraqi Kurdish area, where Mossad intelligence activities are presumed to take place. One of the tactical attacks evidencing this took place in March 2022, when the Pasdaran claimed responsibility for the launch of a dozen missiles against an “espionage centre” in Erbil in response to the assassination of two Iranian generals in the suburbs of Damascus in April of the same year.

Caution on the Arabian Peninsula

Similar strategies have been pursued with Saudi Arabia in the context of a diplomatic rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran since 2021, alongside the friction in the theatre of operations in Yemen. On the one hand, the leaders of the so-called “Arab Quartet” (Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt) signed the al-Ula agreement in January 2021, in which they pledged to resume diplomatic relations with Qatar, a move that was interpreted by Iran as a temporary measure of détente in which these countries seek to take advantage of the business climate and tourist attraction that the celebration of the next FIFA World Cup in Qatar will bring to the entire Persian Gulf in December 2022. In fact, Iran is following the same path, given that it signed multiple cooperation agreements with Qatar in April 2022 to take advantage of the proximity of Doha and the provinces of Bushehr, Hormozgan and especially the attractive island of Kish, areas that will serve not only to accommodate tourists, but also to promote tourism within Iran.

Although Mohammed bin Salman stated in al-Ula that Arab unity was necessary to confront Iran, four months after the agreement, Riyadh began a round of direct talks with Tehran. With Iraq as the facilitator and venue for the meetings, the talks with Iran were aimed at defusing tensions that arose when the two countries severed diplomatic relations in 2016 after hundreds of people attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran in response to the execution of Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent Shiite religious leader. Although progress has been slow, one of the main outcomes of these talks was the reopening of Iran’s representation to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in January 2022, which is seen as an example of the new Iranian pragmatism under the diplomacy spearheaded by Ebrahim Raisi.

Despite this, the Yemen scenario remains the main bone of contention between Tehran and Riyadh, albeit with some nuances. Although the truce signed by the Houthis and the Yemeni government in April 2022 was announced as part of the rapprochement between Tehran and Riyadh, it was actually the severe economic consequences of the Russian-Ukrain-
ian conflict that led both factions to sign a temporary ceasefire. Among other things, rising grain prices, fuel shortages and the impact of inflation on multiple commodities such as steel (which shot up by 33% globally in 2022), have led both Riyadh and Tehran to prefer to promote a process of dialogue, in conjunction with UN envoy Hans Grundberg, through a Presidential Council that will aim to negotiate with the Houthis in the short term, especially given the military attrition experienced by the factions close to Iran when they have faced troops not only from Riyadh, but also from the United Arab Emirates over the last year. Needless to say, this truce has also been beneficial to Iran because it includes an agreement to ease an embargo on fuel entering the Houthi-controlled port of Hodeida, as well as an agreement to allow commercial flights to and from the capital, Sanaa, which Tehran’s allies have also controlled since 2016. Specifically, the ceasefire in Yemen will allow both Riyadh and Tehran to focus on capitalizing on high energy prices to heal their domestic economies and alleviate the inflation caused by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which, in Iran’s case, reached 27% in May 2022.

Consolidation in the Levant?

Iran’s presence in the Levant over the past year has also been characterized by a combination of hard and soft power strategies, particularly in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. In these arenas, Iran supported groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas with money and propaganda through actors such as al-Mustafa International University, media outlets such as Al-Alam, foundations such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, and cultural diplomacy efforts by the Owj Arts and Media Organisation, Iran’s largest media organization run by the Revolutionary Guard.

First, in the case of Lebanon, although Hezbollah has remained in the national political system since 2018, when it took control of three government ministries, it lost its majority in parliament in the most recent legislative elections of May 2022. However, this political party’s real power lies in the military sphere since, according to certain specialized re-

ports, in the last decade Hezbollah has not only strengthened its military capabilities by assisting Iran in the Syrian conflict, but also increased its weapons potential to an estimated 130,000 rocket and ballistic devices. This is of real concern to Tel Aviv if one recalls the catastrophic results of the 2006 war, in which Hezbollah sustained an average of 4,000 launches over 34 days, preventing the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) from occupying southern Lebanon. This has prompted the new Iranian foreign ministry to increase the offer to bring electricity, universities and other services to Lebanon, a country mired in a political and economic crisis in the wake of popular protests in October 2019, the Covid-19 health emergency and a warehouse explosion in the port of Beirut in August 2020. Although Lebanon has reached a minimum agreement with the IMF to obtain $3 billion in exchange for debt restructuring and fiscal reform, Iran and Hezbollah are insisting on pushing for a Chinese investment programme to rescue Lebanon’s fragile economy, an option that could be a serious alternative to the interests of France and Saudi Arabia, allies of the al-Mustaqbal Party, on the Lebanese stage.

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The case of Syria is somewhat different from the previous scenarios because of two main characteristics. First, because Iran’s influence in Damascus is projected directly onto the Syrian government and not onto non-state actors. Second, because Iran’s counterweight in Syria has paradoxically been Russia and not another country in the region. On the first issue, it is necessary to stress that, at least beginning in August 2018, Tehran and Damascus have signed several military cooperation agreements, a
key part of which has been Iran’s strengthening of Syria’s air defence systems. Within the framework of these agreements, there have also been negotiations to address the inclusion of some Iranian elements in the Syrian armed forces, such as the National Defence Forces (NDF) and the Local Defence Forces (LDF) which have already been integrated into the structure of the Syrian army, as well as the al-Abbas Brigade, which was integrated into the Republican Guard, all this in direct consultations with Moscow. This brings us to the second issue, which involves, broadly speaking, the lack of agreement on the restructuring of the Syrian armed forces between Iran and Russia: while Tehran is pushing for a greater Iranian presence in the Syrian army in the short term, Moscow is committed to a plan that would allow for greater autonomy of the regime’s security structures in the future.4

On this phenomenon, it must be said that Iran is trying to increase its influence in Syria by offering salaries double those of Syrian soldiers in certain areas of the country, especially in provinces where battles were fought against the Islamic State and where the al-Quds Forces have enjoyed great popularity, such as Deir al-Zour and Raqqa, which are disputed territories today because of the cross-border area with Iraq’s strategic location for the free transit of goods from Tehran to the Mediterranean. Thus, the fact that Bashar al-Assad has remained in power in Syria has not meant the automatic emergence of a nationally shared pro-Iranian sentiment. So Tehran’s tactics on the Iraqi-Syrian border are fully intended to produce a social base among communities in the area through welfarist techniques, not to create proxy militias (given the Russian refusal), but to rely on local tribal loyalties in case the Iranians have to leave the country at some point.

With regard to Palestine, it should be noted that in the past year Iran has increased its support for Islamism in Gaza not only through its well-known alliances with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but also through support for other small groups such as Harakat al-Sabirin, which has a profile closer to the ideology of Iranian revolutionary Shi’ism. The Hamas government in Gaza already banned Harakat al-Sabirin as of 2015, but has also tolerated its symbolic activities, such as the annual celebrations of the martyrdom of Abul Qasem Soleimani, sponsored by the Imam Khomeini Foundation.5 Although Iran is trying to increase the promotion of Shi’ism in Gaza, the truth is that support for such groups is intended to provide militias that can act militarily against Israel in contexts where Hamas, due to its connections with other Arab countries or the pursuit of its own political agenda, does not have the leeway to do so. Clearly, Iran’s support for multiple factions in Gaza pursues the same counter-intelligence strategy it does in other theatres such as Iraq, because in the past, relations between Iran and Hamas differed on issues such as the conflict in Syria, the rule of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, and even internal differences with Khaled Mashal, who preferred to distance himself from the Iranian orbit in order to strengthen ties with what he called moderate Arab regimes. However, since Yahya Sinwar assumed the leadership of Hamas in 2017, Hamas has reinvented its public discourse regarding Iran and has pointed out that the only enemy of Gaza and the Palestinian people is the Israeli occupation and that the support and backing of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah for the Palestinian cause deserve thanks and appreciation, as the activities of the Iranian Committee for Reconstruction in Gaza, or the support for Hamas’ military experts in terms of ballistics demonstrate.6

Algeria, Iran’s Connection for Rebuilding Relations with North Africa

At the same time, Iran has made a bid to reach out to Algeria in the context of Ebrahim Raisi’s new policy of restoring ties with the African continent, an area completely ignored by the Hassan Rouhani Administration. Its interest in Africa finds common cause when Iran condemns the West’s plunder of its natural resources, just as European colonialism

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6 HAMAS WEB PAGE. “عطلت امسا زور نه حومش تي هلا عويداتان غواترا نه مرور(VIRUS OUTBREAK-VIRUS OUTBREAK).” (“Hamas denounces the burning of pictures of Lebanese and Iranian leaders in the southern Gaza Strip”), 2022.
did with Africa before the independences. Specifically, Algeria’s government maintains a similar regional policy to Iran’s when it criticizes the Israeli occupation in Palestine, an issue that has drawn attention lately, as Morocco, Algeria’s main regional rival in North Africa, broke diplomatic relations with Iran in 2018 when it accused it of supporting the Polisario Front through its embassy in Algeria. Friction between Iran and Morocco intensified when Rabat joined the process of normalizing relations with Israel alongside Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, a process wholly rejected by Iran.

In addition to these regional dynamics, another angle of Iran’s influence in North Africa through its relationship with Algeria can be seen in the energy sphere. For example, in the framework of the sixth Gas Exporters Summit held in Tehran in February 2022, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune met with Ebrahim Raisi to strengthen dialogue between them, Qatar and Russia for greater cooperation in the face of high gas prices given the impact of the Covid-19 health crisis on the global economy. An additional element of this relationship is that Algeria has always supported Iran’s right to develop nuclear technology and that, following recent rapprochement, mechanisms have been devised for further dialogue through the establishment of a Joint Economic Commission to work on issues relating to finance, education and health, which could be the beginning of a real Iranian policy in the Maghreb.

**Iran and the Unites States on the Nuclear Issue**

At the time of writing, neither the success nor failure of the negotiations to bring the US back into the Iran Nuclear Deal has been officially announced. One remaining obstacle to this is the fact that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard remains on Washington’s list of terrorist organizations, something that Iran aspires to reverse and which, for Washington, is critical as a political win for the Democratic Party, facing midterm elections in November this year.

As mentioned above, the international context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is favouring the Iranian oil industry, which expects to receive up to $84 billion this year, so it is highly likely that Iran’s new negotiating team will not be in a hurry to resolve the nuclear issue and will remain in the process, presenting Washington with a conditional position so that it is Biden who makes the decision and, if he withdraws, bears the domestic and international political consequences. In the meantime, Iran is capitalizing on every dollar from oil sales, making it easier for Ebrahim Raisi to fulfil his campaign promises to serve the domestic economy first, regardless of US-imposed sanctions.

Finally, in the face of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, we must not lose sight of the fact that, from the first day of the conflict, Iran decided to adopt a cautious narrative but one that is close to Russia, a country with which Tehran has collaborated intensely on security and defence issues. For this reason, it makes no sense for Iran to give up its nuclear programme, as Israel is requesting, especially when it is in a position of negotiating strength given the demand for its energy and when Moscow has announced its intentions to expand the Bushehr nuclear plant, a reactor that Russia has known about since the 1990s.

**Iran is capitalizing on every dollar from oil sales, making it easier to serve the domestic economy first, regardless of sanctions**

In conclusion, the above data suggest that Iran is highly likely to maintain strategies of cooperation and conflict with the aforementioned countries through a pragmatic and cautious policy where formal and informal actors, despite possible internal disagreements, coordinate irregular military efforts in the Arab world that adapt to the changing structural security conditions not only in the region, but also in the international arena.

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