



IRAN TASK FORCE

BY NASSER HADIAN

## Iran Debates Its Regional Role

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Concerns in the United States and its traditional Middle Eastern allies about Iran's expanding regional role in the aftermath of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), reached between Iran and the P5+1<sup>1</sup> on July 14, 2015, fail to take into consideration a significant debate within the Iranian policy elite. Situated in the midst of a region with rising instability and fragility, Iranian policymakers are divided between those who believe that Iran must act more forcefully to help stabilize its neighbors and those that advocate a more minimalist approach. As US policymakers consider options for engagement with Iran after the JCPOA, they should be aware of this debate and seek ways of working with Iran to increase stability and prevent traditional US allies from exacerbating instability.

Located in one of the most vitally strategic regions in the world, Iran borders seven countries, connects the Middle East to Central and Southwest Asia, and sits directly between the oil rich and strategically significant Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea. Throughout its history, the stability and defense of the Persian Gulf have always been critical matters for Iranian national security. These concerns call, *inter alia*, for a lessening of tension among regional states, as well as with the United States.

The most dramatic recent change in Iran's strategic situation came after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. The US invasion of Afghanistan, subsequent removal of the Taliban, and the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, all served to fundamentally transform the security landscape. The near-dissolution of the Iraqi state, combined with Iran's seemingly emergent and fast-growing military and political capabilities, created an environment in which Tehran's ascendance seemed indisputable.

Importantly, Iran also tends to view itself as the "motherland" of the Persian language and Shiism—both of

<sup>1</sup> P5+1 refers to the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, and the United States) plus Germany.

### Iran Task Force

The Iran Task Force, chaired by Ambassador Stuart E. Eizenstat, seeks to perform a comprehensive analysis of Iran's internal political landscape and its role in the region and globally, and explore opportunities for an improved relationship with the West. The Iran Task Force is a project of the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center. It is supported generously by the Ploughshares Fund.

which constitute an integral part of Iranian national identity and, hence, national security. Because neither Shiites nor Farsi speakers live only in Iran, in the past, the country has felt the need to assist those communities, wherever they exist. The Persian language has contributed to the promotion of literature and culture in an extensive sphere of influence in the Middle East and Central and South Asia since the pre-Islamic era. The role of Shiism, though temporally shorter, has also come to form a central feature of Iranian society and regional influence.

### Threat Perceptions

Generally speaking, Iranian threat perceptions can be divided into two categories: threats to its revolutionary ideology and values, and threats to its traditionally defined national interests and security. In the discourse of post-1979 Iran, the two have often been conflated.

From the perspective of the dominant political conversation, "global arrogance" (US imperialism) and Zionism are seen as bent on destroying Islam writ large. Therefore, the Islamic Republic is viewed as providing revolutionary leadership and protection to the worldwide umma, or community of Muslims. US imperialism and Israel are regarded as the principal and most immediate threats to Iran. Other countries supported by the United States such as Saudi Arabia are also considered to be threats, though of considerably lesser significance.

These more ideological issues are often in line with basic security concerns. For instance, the increasingly

**Nasser Hadian** is a Professor of Political Science at the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Tehran, where he has previously served as the Director of Graduate Studies

permanent presence of the US military in the Persian Gulf since the 1980s—in part the result of a desire by key members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to counter Iran—has significantly increased Iranian concerns. The procurement of advanced Western military hardware by individual GCC states over the past several decades has hardly been reassuring to Tehran.

However, reality sometimes differs from perception. Comparative analyses of Iranian and GCC military strength point to a continuing strategic imbalance in favor of the GCC.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Israel still possesses the most advanced military arsenal in the region, including advanced missile systems potentially capable of carrying nuclear warheads, and second-strike capabilities.

Iranian threat perceptions are also informed by the multi-ethnic nature of Iranian society. Many groups, including Iran's Kurdish minority and Sunnis in Baluchistan, inhabit peripheral areas and share close affinities with members of the same ethnicity outside the boundaries of the Iranian state—potentially threatening its sovereignty or territorial integrity.

At times, however, Iran's national interests—whether economic, geopolitical or security-related—have clashed with Tehran's ideological priorities. For example, many academics, policymakers, and intellectuals within Iranian society believe that the JCPOA strengthens Iran's national interests as opposed to its ideological priorities and that it can open the door to further cooperation with the United States and regional players.

In this way, territorial integrity and attempts to enhance Iran's status within the international community have often played a far more influential role than ideology in informing and molding Iran's security and defense policies. Generally, concrete threats emanating from Iran's immediate neighborhood are considered more dangerous than those from countries farther afield.

## Two Views of Iran's Regional Strategy

Responses to the threats Iran faces can be broadly organized into two camps: “pro-stabilization” and “pro-minimal engagement.” The first view, which at present is dominant in Tehran, argues that there is a tremendous amount of insecurity surrounding Iran in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

Proponents of this view posit that Iran cannot be an island of stability surrounded by unpredictable states and ongoing conflict. Moreover, considering the multiethnic nature of Iranian society, it is hard to imagine that this insecurity would not have a “trickle-down” effect within

Iran itself. Thus, proponents argue that, for the next ten to fifteen years, Iran must act strongly to try to re-establish security and stability throughout the region. If a prerequisite for this security is cooperation with the Saudi government, or even with the United States, that is fine.

The second orientation argues that Iranian engagement in the region should be reduced to a bare minimum. Adherents to this view assert that Iran is already overstretched as a result of its commitments in Afghanistan, Lebanon, and elsewhere, and that the war against the group that calls itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is not Iran's to fight. By taking such a prominent role in fighting ISIS, they argue, Iran has essentially made itself a target for the group's attacks. If ISIS or similar groups have not exploded bombs in Tehran, Shiraz, Mashhad, or elsewhere, it is not because they do not have the capability, but simply because they have not yet decided to do so.

The minimalist approach argues that Iran can achieve its policy objectives by providing support to Baghdad and southern Iraqi Shiites. In Syria, Iran would focus on Damascus and the coastal Alawite regions. There is potentially less incentive for ISIS to attempt to capture territory in predominantly Shiite areas, especially if residents are allied to a regional power. Adherents to this strategy assert that the natural trajectory of ISIS's territorial expansion would stop in Sunni areas of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Yemen—regions where the movement has a social base of support. In addition, a minimalist approach might make it possible for Iran to come to some kind of mutual understanding or truce with ISIS.

The flip side to this strategy, however, is that ISIS would be able to consolidate power in the regions it already controls. This would become a primary security concern for the Saudis and Jordanians, and to a lesser extent for the Turks and Americans. Moreover, if Iran leaves the fight against ISIS, there are few other powers capable of successfully combatting the group, especially in Iraq. The United States has the capability and capacity, but not the political will.

The second orientation also does not satisfactorily address the issue of Kurdistan, and the impact that the potential independence of at least the current Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) would have. While Iran has, by and large, good relations with its Kurdish population and good security, intelligence, and political infrastructure within Iraqi Kurdistan, an independent KRG could become an arena of competing forces that want to ally with regional and extra regional actors in order to expand their power.

While the first orientation is the official and dominant position in Iran, a compromise between the two could

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *Military Spending and Arms Sales in the Gulf: How the Arab Gulf States Now Dominate the Changes in the Military Balance* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 28, 2015), [http://csis.org/files/publication/150428\\_military\\_spending.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/150428_military_spending.pdf).

occur. The lack of a strong Iraqi government push to fight ISIS in Mosul would be a good indication of the rising influence of the second view. Similarly in Syria, fighting forcefully in some parts of the country but not others would also be a sign of compromise. To reduce the anxiety of its traditional allies, the United States may want to try to encourage such compromise.

### Myths about the Islamic Republic

US policymakers, in trying to understand and influence the foreign policy debate in Iran, need to disabuse themselves of several myths about Iran. The first is that Iran is ripe for regime change. The current Iranian government is far from perfect, with serious shortcomings and flaws. However, it remains firmly in control and is not about to be overthrown by a few choice declarations or exhortations from Washington. Preventing the JCPOA from coming into force because of concerns about preventing future regime change is unrealistic.

The second myth is that Iran can be isolated in its region. Iran is the most important “linkage state” in the Middle East. For reasons of geography, history, ambition, and a jealously guarded sense of independence, Iran is central to nearly all issues of importance to the region, including the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, Persian Gulf security, energy, and the future of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Afghanistan. Isolating Iran is simply not an option.

A third myth about Iran is that it is focused on promoting Shia sectarianism. In fact, Iran’s interests are better served by regional stability. Confessional violence may occasionally be the result of Iranian actions, but in most cases that is incidental and predicated on geopolitical factors (preexisting cultural animosities, regional history, alliances etc.) other than Iranian intent. This aversion to sectarian conflict makes sense given that Shiites comprise about 10-13 percent<sup>3</sup> of the global Muslim population. It would certainly be unwise for Iranian policymakers to foster a sectarian civil war against a numerically superior enemy. A more nuanced perspective on this topic assigns primacy to Iran’s conception of its “Islamic” revolution—rather than Iran’s predominantly Shiite faith.

Utilizing this perspective, the past thirty years of Iranian foreign policy can be understood through the paradigm of realist political aims combined with support for friendly “revolutionary” governments. “Revolutionary” is defined in this context as anti-American, anti-Israel, and anti-establishment sentiment geared primarily toward challenging a predetermined world order.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Muslim Population* (October 2009), <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/>.

Iranian behavior in response to the Nagorno-Karabakh war between primarily Shiite Azerbaijan and predominantly Christian Armenia in the late 1980s to early 1990s is particularly illustrative. Iran primarily sided with Armenia because Azerbaijan was not seen as “revolutionary” and thus undeserving of Iranian support.

Similarly, Hamas, a Sunni organization, but a “revolutionary” one—i.e., one that fights Israel and is not entirely hostile to Iran—receives undeniable support from Iran. The same has been true at times for other Palestinian groups, such as Fatah; the late Hugo Chávez in Venezuela; and the current leader of Bolivia, Evo Morales. A similar metric can be applied to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Even though most Iranians do not regard Alawites as Shiites, the Iranian government supports Assad because it perceives his regime to be, among other things, against Israel and a US-directed world order.

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At the same time, it is important to take into account a realist perspective when analyzing Iranian strategic decision-making—particularly with regard to Syria and Lebanon. Support for “revolutionary” governments, movements and non-state actors do not always fully explain Iranian policies. Iran’s relationship with Syria is based in many ways on a realist analysis. Iranian decision-makers are not in love with Assad, but many believe that his removal would entail the collapse of the Syrian government. By the Iranian government’s account, the disintegration of the Assad regime would simply result in more chaos and bloodshed. Iran supports Assad because, in the short term, it views this as the best available option to manage the situation and maintain a modicum of strategic presence. However, no one in Iran is under the illusion that Assad will ever be able to rule over a unified Syria again. Rather, Syria is valued instrumentally as a way for Iran to maintain its “resistance access” to Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon.

This access to Hezbollah is fundamentally a defensive posture aimed at deterring Israel from attacking Iran. Since Iran is not capable of accurate strikes against Israel using Iran-based missiles, it relies on Hezbollah's rockets and missiles—obviously placed much closer to Israel—to achieve strategic deterrence.

Therefore, Lebanon and Syria represent a kind of strategic hedge based on Iranian threat perceptions and strategic calculations. If Iran perceives Israel to be its greatest threat, then it requires the strategic depth that Hezbollah provides, especially in order to counterattack should Israel strike first. This assumption has defined a large component of Iran's foreign policy. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, plays little to no role in this calculus. It is incredibly important for Americans and others to understand that Iran has little interest in challenging the Saudis.

However, the reverse is true for the Saudis. For them, Iran lies near the top of their threat list. This position is predicated upon a perceived contradiction between Wahhabism and Shiism, Saudi animosity toward the revolutionary nature of the Iranian government, and Iranian foreign policy that the Kingdom perceives to be destabilizing. Moreover, Iran is a convenient enemy; it has become a scapegoat for Saudi elites and pundits—primarily because placing blame elsewhere, particularly on Israel, would be too costly. In fact, the Saudis have adopted a de facto policy of containment against Iran, even before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and certainly since. The GCC was formed essentially to counter the Iranians, with the goal of keeping Iran under a regionally securitized framework. Similarly, most of Saudi Arabia's activist foreign policy is geared not toward opposing Israel, but toward containing Iran, whether in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, or Yemen.

In seeking a more stable region, it is important for the United States, Iran, and other regional powers to rise above such zero-sum analyses and look for areas of possible convergence. The diplomatic channels established in the negotiations that led to the JCPOA can be employed and expanded to address other regional concerns. Successful regional diplomacy could also foster compromise in Iran's foreign policy orientation, lessening a currently perceived need for Iran to intervene forcefully in its neighbors' affairs.

### Recommendations Reducing Regional Tension

There are a number of steps the United States, Iran, and other regional powers can take to build on the nuclear agreement and help reduce, rather than intensify, conflict. They include:

- The governments of Iran and the United States should reduce the level of hostile rhetoric,

especially hyperbolic statements about the role of the other in the affairs in the region. The legacy of the "axis of evil" and "death to America" has spurred deep mistrust, which has undermined joint efforts in the past.

- The United States and Iran should agree to an "Incidents at Sea" understanding akin to the 1972 agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union that stopped or prevented accidents in international waters from escalating into full-scale war. Such an agreement would open the way for a formal line of communication between the navies of both countries and reduce the chances for hostilities in the narrow waters of the Persian Gulf.
- The United States and Iran, which cooperated in the early days of the US intervention in Afghanistan and to some extent in Iraq, should discuss new ways of working together in both countries, which face significant threats from militant groups.
- Iran, the United States, Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia should engage in serious discussions to identify elements of a realistic plan for containing and resolving the conflict in Syria, as each have influence on major warring parties.
- Iran and Saudi Arabia should make a determined effort to improve their relationship. This would serve not only to strengthen security against common threats, but also to create opportunities for economic cooperation. Unnecessary enmity and competition have and will cost them tremendously. The United States, other Persian Gulf countries, and indeed the rest of international community would benefit from a better Iran-Saudi relationship.

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