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NITIATIVE

Iran's Hegemonic Drive
and the Nuclear Talks

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Paper No. 31
May 2015

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Precisely at a time at which Iran appears to be seeking to close an agreement with the P5+1 powers over the future of its nuclear program, Tehran shows greater indications of harboring hegemonic ambitions to dominate the Middle East. The Iranian leadership vociferously denies this charge. In 2013 President Hassan Rouhani told CNN's Christiane Amanpour, in what has become the regime's standard refrain, that "...in the past 200 years or so, Iran has never attacked another country."

More significantly, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, related to the charge that Iran has hegemonic ambitions vis a vis the surrounding states in the Middle East; in April 2015, he declared: "Iran has never been and will not be a threat to regional and neighboring countries, but it will act with full force in the face of any threat."¹ Obviously, Iranian behavior is perceived as increasingly aggressive in recent years by most of the states of the Middle East region, raising the question of whether a meaningful nuclear agreement can be reached with the West while Iranian actions in the Middle East persist.

First, it is critical to understand what exactly Iran has been doing on the ground with respect to its neighbors and what are exactly the sources of its hegemonic drive. As will be seen below, Iran's present-day drive to dominate the Middle East began with the Islamic Revolution itself in 1979, but also received two significant boosts: the Iraq War in 2003 and the breakdown of many Arab governments with the advent of the Arab spring in 2011, both of which Tehran fully exploited.

The Perception of Iranian Activism in the Arab World

The Arab states have had no doubts about Iran's regional ambitions. It was Jordan's King Abdullah who first sounded the alarm back in 2004 when he warned in an interview in the *Washington Post* that a new Shiite Crescent was encircling the Arab world. In 2007, the editor-in-chief of the Kuwaiti daily, *al-Siyassa*, warned, "The entire Arab world is in danger." He explained that "Iran is trying to extend its aggressive policies to all the Gulf countries and to Egypt."

In many respects, these fears grew as leaders of the Arab states realized that with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, who came from a Sunni Arab background, Iraq would henceforth be led by a Shiite-dominated government. Moreover, with the growing sense that Iraq might break up, it could no longer play its traditional role as a strategic barrier against Iranian expansionism. The gateway to the Arab world was now open.

A year after the Kuwaiti editor's comments, the former Bahraini former chief of staff, General Khalifa ibn Ahmad, gave a high-profile interview to the prestigious Arabic daily *al-Hayat* on May 16, 2008, in which he compared Iran to "an octopus" whose tentacles reached everywhere in the Middle East.

There was a guiding hand coordinating these Iranian expansionist moves across the Middle East. His name was General Qassam Suleimani, the commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) who already introduced himself in 2008 in a message to General David Petraeus, the commander of the U.S. forces in Iraq: "General Petraeus, you should be aware that I, Qassam Soleimani, control Iran's policy for Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan."²

Summing up Iranian activities in 2015 in an article entitled "Iran's Hunger for Regional Hegemony," Abdulrahman al-Rashed, the former editor-in-chief of *Asharq al-Awsat* wrote: "Iran is currently in an offensive state, the likes of which we have not seen in modern history. It is directly fighting in Syria and Iraq, and has proxies in Lebanon, Gaza, Yemen and elsewhere."³

Iranian Military Intervention on the Ground

What is undeniable today is that Iranian forces are on the ground, in a number of Middle Eastern conflicts, in greater numbers than in the past. In Syria, the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has had forces in place since 2011 in order to bolster the embattled regime of Iran's ally, Bashar al-Assad. In an interview in April 2015, King Abdullah of Jordan noted that "we are seeing Iranian boots on the ground" just over the Jordanian-Syrian border.

Abdullah was confirming what was appearing in the Arabic press, that the IRGC, along with Shiite militias from Iraq and Afghanistan, were positioned near the Jordanian kingdom. A month earlier, General Qassem Suleimani,

the commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, was quoted as saying that Iran could now control events in Jordan, the same way it controlled them in Iraq and Lebanon. Tehran denied the Sulemani quote, but analysts judged that it was in all likelihood completely accurate.⁴ The Arab Spring in 2011 led to the weakening of multiple Arab governments which lost control over whole portions of their territories. Iran exploited this vacuum across the Middle East.

The regional Iranian force deployments extended beyond Syria to Iraq, whose Shiite-dominated regime has been at war with the country's Sunni minority, generally, and with the jihadist army of the Islamic State (previously known as ISIS). Most recently, Iran became involved in the war between the Yemeni Houthi clan, consisting of Zaidi or Fiver Shiites, and the Yemeni government. Iranian weapons ships were intercepted in 2013 that were bound for Yemen to re-supply the Houthis. Iran had a presence in Sudan for many years, but now it could raise its profile in the Red Sea area as a whole.

U.S. sources have claimed that Iran has been training the Houthis on the ground in Yemen as well. The Iranians themselves summed up the new reality that was emerging in 2015 as follows:⁵ Ali Riza Zakani, a member of the Majlis (Iranian parliament) who is close to Khamenei, declared defiantly: "Three Arab capitals (Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad) have already fallen into Iran's hands and belong to the Iranian Islamic Revolution." With the fall of Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, the number of Arab capitals that had fallen to Iranian surrogates rose to four.⁶

In the same vein, Zakani added, "The Yemeni revolution will not be confined to Yemen alone," He implied that the war in Yemen would eventually extend into Saudi territories. Similarly, Gen. Mohammad Ali Jaafari, the current IRGC commander, recently asserted that the Saudi leadership was on the verge of collapse and would be toppled soon, adding the phrase "God willing." By making this comment, he was suggesting that more Arab capitals would soon come under Iranian domination.

The Historical Roots of Iranian Policy

What are the sources of this Iranian behavior? Is it possible to explain what appears to be Iran's drive for regional hegemony? To answer this question it is important to recall that the Islamic Republic of Iran owes its origins to the

Safavid Empire that existed in the 16th century. It was with the founding of the Safavid Empire that Iran accepted Shiite Islam as a state religion, which distinguished it from its Sunni neighbors. Three leading Middle East analysts, including a Shiite theologian, explained the pivotal role Iran's Safavid history played in molding modern Iran's hegemonic ambitions.⁷

At the height of the Safavid period, Iran stretched from Baghdad and much of Iraq, as well as parts of Syria, in the west to Herat, Afghanistan, and parts of Pakistan, in the east. Within its current borders, Iran is thus a truncated state relative to its geographic expanse at that time. For many in the Arab world, the role of this Safavid background could not be underestimated. Some analysts trace Iran's imperial instincts to its Safavid past.

According to one account, the late monarch of Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, warned a high-level U.S. official in the aftermath of the Iraq War: "You have allowed the Persians, the Safavids, to take over Iraq." By invoking the Safavid dynasty, Abdullah was referring to Iran as an imperial power with ambitions of recovering its lost glory.⁸

There are multiple expressions from Iran's senior leadership that it is keenly aware that it once ruled much of the Middle East. Thus an Iranian Member of Parliament quipped in 2007 that most of the Arab states "were once part of Iranian soil..." A senior Iranian official named Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, who was Ayatollah Khamenei's hand-picked choice for president of Iran in 1997, described the independent state of Bahrain as Iran's 14th province.

After the arrival of Iranian troops to help the regime of Bashar-al-Assad, one of Khamenei's clerics even referred to Syria in 2013 as "the 35th province of Iran." Historical memory is clearly part of the Iranian hegemonic drive.

More recently, on March 8, 2015, Ali Younesi, an adviser to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, linked Iran's imperial past to its hegemonic ambitions in the present. In the past, Younesi served as the powerful intelligence minister under President Mohammad Khatami. Younesi now said that Iran was once again "an empire." Its capital was Iraq. He added, "There is no way to divide the territory of Iran and Iraq." He spoke about an eventual "union" between the two countries. In short, he was speaking about an Iranian take-over of Iraq and the restoration of its historical role among the states surrounding it.

The Ideological Component of Iran's Actions: The Export of the Revolution

The Iranians operationalized this historical awareness of once being an empire by calling for the export of the Islamic revolution. Two points in the preamble of the constitution of the Islamic Republic, drafted in 1979 right after Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew the Shah of Iran, make this abundantly clear. It states that the constitution provides “the necessary basis for ensuring the continuation of the Revolution at home and abroad.” It then adds later that the Iranian armed forces including its Revolutionary Guard, “will be responsible not only for guarding and preserving the frontiers of the country, but also for fulfilling the ideological mission of jihad in God’s way; that is, extending the sovereignty of God’s law throughout the world.”⁹

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who came to power in 1989, continued to support the doctrine of the export of the revolution. His rule was based on the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (the role of the jurispudent) which was not territorially-bound, but applied to Muslims outside of Iran. Indeed, Khamenei eventually called himself the “Supreme Leader of Muslims,” and not just the “Supreme Leader of Iran.”

In one of the most revealing statements ever made by Khamenei, quoted in the Iranian daily *Ressalat*, on July 7, 1991, he asserted, “Where do we look in drawing up the National Security Strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran? Do we look to preserving the integrity of our land, or do we look to its expansion...We must definitely look to expansion. The Islamic Republic’s survival depends on the support of a global Islamic force.”¹⁰

This understanding of Iran’s role in exporting the Islamic Revolution has continued and penetrated the Iranian armed forces as well. Take for example a speech by General Mohammad Ali Jaafari, the commander of the IRGC, who told his fellow officers in 2008: “Our revolution has not ended... Our Imam did not limit the movement of the Islamic Revolution to this country, but drew on greater horizons...”¹¹

Misreading Key Aspects of Iranian Expansionism

Up until now, Iran’s drive for regional hegemony has not always been fully understood by analysts. Take for example the case of Hizbullah. Some

commentators have explained its rise as a local Lebanese phenomenon, largely in response to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon.

But a far more persuasive explanation of the establishment of Hizbullah is tied to the need for Iran to have an organization for the Lebanese Shiite population that accepted the supreme authority of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus when the Lebanese Shiite organization, Amal, refused to accept the Iranian doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, Tehran took steps to establish an alternative movement, even prior to the Israeli invasion and its war with the PLO at the time.¹²

Hizbullah became a model for Iranian regional intervention across the Middle East. In 2007, General Petraeus spoke about Iran setting up Shiite militias in Iraq “to act like Lebanese Hizbullah.” The Hizbullah model was copied elsewhere. Ali Shirazi, the representative of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to the Qods Force, declared in January 2015 that: “The Houthi group is a similar copy to Lebanon’s Hezbollah, and this group will come into action against enemies of Islam.” What that meant was that while Hizbullah forces were made up of local Shiite personnel, they were armed, trained, and ultimately controlled by Iran.

That control was illustrated in a 2007 statement by Sheikh Naim Qassem, the deputy-secretary-general of Hizbullah, who admitted to the Iranian Arabic-language television station al-Qawathar that Hizbullah requires permission from Iran’s supreme leadership for its military operations. But most importantly, Iranian military adventurism is less visible with the Hizbullah model because it does not involve invading neighbors with large armored formations, but rather a more subtle way of exercising force using subversion and fanning the flames of insurgency wars.¹³

Iranian domination of the Middle East uses other instruments of power that Western analysts often miss. For example, religious outreach is a central component of Iranian encroachments. Tehran often stresses the protection of Shiite holy sites and will dispatch forces for that purpose, like the Zeinab Shrine on the outskirts of Damascus. The Iranians have taken an interest in the shrines of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad in Southern Jordan and while they have proposed to Amman an agreement regulating Shiite pilgrimage to these sites, Jordan has kept Iran at arm’s-length.

In Iraq itself, Iran often exploits the Shiite festivals like Ashura, at which time it dispatches hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to the Shiite holy cities

of Najaf and Karbala. In December 2014, the number of Iranian pilgrims that crossed the Iranian-Iraq border exceeded a million. Many entered without passports or any documentation. Here again religious practices by Iran can have huge implications for the demographic and political makeup of the Middle East.

Iran also builds its influence with its neighbors by bringing Shiite Heterodox religious groups for study in the Iranian religious center, Qom. Thus, after the Shiite cleric, Imam Musa al-Sadr recognized the Alawis as Shiite Muslims in 1973, an act which helped cement the strategic ties between Syria and Iran, hundreds of Alawi students were sent to Qom to study in its Shiite seminaries.

The Yemeni Shiites revere the Fifth Imam (Zaid al-Baqir), who is descended from Ali, as opposed to the Twelfth Imam and hence, as noted above, they are called Zaidi or Fiver Shiites. Nonetheless, in 2014, some 5,000 Yemeni Shiite students were given Iranian stipends and brought to Qom to study Twelver Shiism.

This was part of a larger pattern. During the previous decade, newspapers in Jordan and Egypt warned that Iran was seeking to convert Sunnis to Shiism. This was done on a massive scale in Syria over the last two decades. In fact, Morocco severed diplomatic relations with Iran in March 2009, charging that Tehran was using its embassy in Rabat for that very purpose. Thus, religion remains a critical instrument for Iran in cementing ties in the Middle East.¹⁴

Observers in the Sunni Arab states understood the strategic impact of Iranian endeavors to spread Shiite Islam. This was particularly pronounced in Sudan, where one writer complained that Tehran was using its embassy in Khartoum for that very purpose, adding: “We should be aware of the Shiite octopus in Sudan, before it is too late – otherwise, the day will come when we see tanks of the Sudanese Hezbollah racing through the streets of Khartoum.”¹⁵

Iran’s Hegemonic Drive and the Nuclear Talks

During the last two years, while Iran’s hegemonic drive has intensified, the US and its P5+1 partners have been involved in intense negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program. Yet the negotiators have not created any formal

linkage between a cessation of Iranian adventurism in the Middle East and any nuclear agreement. In fact, it seems that the West prefers to keep them as separate subjects. Introducing the Iranian international behavior into the nuclear talks, it is frequently stated, will only complicate matters and make the achievement of a final agreement much more difficult.

But are these really separate subjects? Don't certain linkages exist? Take for example the removal of sanctions, which the Iranian leadership hopes will occur shortly after the agreement is concluded. Estimates vary as to how much money will become available to the Iranian Treasury in the period after the sanctions are lifted: anywhere from 100 billion dollars to 250 billion dollars. What is undeniable is that the amount of funds that will become available for Iranian surrogate organizations fighting Western allies, like Israel and the Gulf states, will increase markedly. This could have implications for Middle Eastern security as the quantity and quality of available arms for these groups improves.

For example, Hizbullah is seeking far more accurate rocket forces and Iran is increasingly supplying precision-guided munitions to its various surrogate forces. These include the most up-to-date anti-tank missiles like the Russian Kornet. The Iranian-sponsored buildup has made the Iranian surrogate forces more robust than the national armies of their host countries. For years, it has been apparent that Lebanese Hizbullah is stronger than the Lebanese Army. Lately in Iraq, the Iranian-backed Shiite militias have proven to be a far more formidable military rival for the Islamic State (ISIS) than the Iraqi Army. These trends will likely intensify as new financial resources become available after the removal of sanctions.

Moreover, Iran is seeking to complete a strategic ring around Israel with these surrogate armies. In the south, Hamas is undergoing a new buildup as is Hizbullah in the north. In the northeast, Iran has undertaken to establish a new insurgency network in the Syrian Golan, with cells in Syrian cities like Daraa and Kuneitra. Senior Iranian officers have been viewed surveying this new northern front. The Free Syrian Army has announced that it uncovered IRGC and Hizbullah operatives in this area. What is only a nascent military presence will undoubtedly expand as new Iranian resources pour in. A diplomatic process that is not cognizant of the new wave of Iranian regional activism can contribute to the destabilization of the Middle East as a whole.

The regional dimension of Iranian activism is related to the nuclear talks themselves. P5+1 negotiators believe that Iran will comply with its

commitments to limit its nuclear program and will not follow the North Korean example of signing an agreement and then breaking out of it, either clandestinely or openly in the years ahead. The North Korean case involved a plutonium bomb, but the same move could be made by Iran with a uranium program. According to this scenario, Iran begins enriching uranium beyond the level needed for a civilian nuclear program and moves to the production of weapons-grade uranium. From there it is a short span of time until Iran has an operational atomic bomb.

If Iran's quest for regional hegemony is not addressed now and persists as a major motivating force driving Iranian policy, then what are the chances that Iran will not go down the breakout route? It should be remembered that nuclear military capabilities are critical for a state seeking to establish its hegemonic status. Therefore ignoring Iranian regional behavior while negotiating nuclear limitations will ultimately be self-defeating as any serious agreement begins to come apart.

The notion that arms control can be successful when it is oblivious to the international behavior of one of the negotiating partners was disproven in the 1970's as the US worked on agreements with the Soviet Union, known as SALT 1 (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty) and SALT 2. The process through which these agreements were negotiated ultimately proved to be untenable as Moscow began to challenge the West, during these talks, by backing proxy forces in Angola, Mozambique, the Horn of Africa, and eventually with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Today, negotiating Iranian centrifuges and uranium stockpiles, while ignoring Iranian actions in the Middle East appears to be a repeat of the mistakes of the West in the 1970's, but it can have even more deleterious consequences than what transpired back then.

Notes

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