



IRAN IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE NOTION OF “STRATEGIC LONELINESS”

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When in 1979 a revolutionary mass movement in Iran ousted Shah Reza Pahlavi to establish the Islamic Republic of Iran, political leaders in Iran’s immediate neighbourhood became anxious about the potential appeal of the Islamic Revolution on their own populations. Not only had one of the key aims of the revolution been to empower the “downtrodden” (mostaz’afin) — a notion many Arab leaders saw as being directed at different strata of their societies. The leader of the revolution, late ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, had also denounced monarchies as being un-Islamic political systems. Furthermore, the good diplomatic relations all neighbours had with the United States (dubbed ‘the Great Satan after 1979) were rejected in the strongest terms in Iran’s new political elite. These regional tensions got catalysed by historical, geographical and geopolitical competition and rivalry between Iran and other regional powers (such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq), and eventually culminated in the military invasion of Iran by Iraq under Saddam Hussein: a war that started in the fall of 1980 and ended late summer of 1988. For his military campaign against the nascent Islamic Republic, Saddam Hussein enjoyed the military and financial support of Western capitals, as well as that of all Arab leaders except for Syria’s Hafiz al-Assad. Even in light of the use of chemical weapons, Iraq was neither condemned nor put on notice by the international community, with the United Nations Security Council falling short of even addressing the war crimes committed by Iraq. Iran, as a consequence, found itself surrounded by hostile countries, which in their enmity towards the newly founded Islamic Republic were backed by the West, and would go as far as attacking Iran militarily.

It is noteworthy, however, that for many years there has been a critical debate inside Iran on both the state and societal levels about Iran’s own share in allowing the political climate shortly after the Islamic Revolution to escalate so badly, and for not having been able to prevent the prolongation of the Iran-Iraq war. Regardless of any conclusion that can be drawn from

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these questions, and that most Iranians would strongly reject both notions, it is important to understand that the essence of Iran's security doctrine has been shaped by the traumatic experience of the war with Iraq. One of the key aspects of Iran's security doctrine is the awareness of the country's military limits and strategic loneliness. With the Islamic Republic being under a decades-old arms embargo, its military industry is by far inferior to that of its regional rivals — first and foremost Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — let alone the United States.

This leaves Iran with no alternative but to develop means of deterrence (i.e. its missiles program) and means of asymmetric warfare (i.e. the alignment with non-state actors). Both do not suffice to defeat the militarily more powerful rivals, but the deterrent signal is sent that any aggressor can at least be critically harmed. Iran's missile range is per decree of the Supreme Leader limited to 2,000km. This radius is sufficient for Iran to threaten retaliatory attacks against US bases and troops in the region, as well as the capitals of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In similar fashion, proxy militant groups can fight battles on the ground the Iranian military forces are unable to fight. Both the missiles and non-state armed groups are Iran's key instruments to keep the enemies at bay.

Statements from high-rank officials as well as the top brass of the military apparatus always highlight the defensive nature of Iran's security doctrine. The missile programme and the alignments with armed groups is propped up to be able to effectively defend Iran's territory against extremist groups that regularly penetrate Iran's borders to Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Territorial integrity is also supposed to be ensured in light of the increasingly hostile rhetoric from Washington, followed by Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv. Having said that, however, Iranian officials need to understand that what in their perspective is purely defined as "forward-defence" creates realities on the ground that are perceived as others as being expansionist. As a matter of fact, Iran-aligned groups outside the territory of

the Islamic Republic widen the country's sphere of military influence. It is the assessment of this author that, indeed, the underlying logic of Iran's regional policies is defensive. But Iran needs to acknowledge that outside its borders this view can't probably be shared.

What the leadership of Iran is most concerned about is its territorial integrity and political stability. This in itself makes Iran an inward-looking actor. In order to discourage Iran to deploy aligned forces outside its own territory, the legitimate security interests of the Islamic Republic need to be acknowledged and taken seriously. A demystification of Iran's regional ambitions needs to take place. Talking of Iranian "behaviour", instead of "policies", shows that action undertaken by Tehran are perceived as being abnormal. Like any other state, Iran acts upon considerations of hard security and realpolitik. The policies clash with those of Iran's rivals for the simple reason that no country in the Middle East acts on the basis of win-win calculations. Iran cannot be a constructive actor in the Middle East unless all regional actors (including the US, Russia, China and the European Union) act constructively.

For Iran's security doctrine which postulates the need of means of deterrence and means of asymmetric warfare to change, a regional security arrangement with all key stakeholders involved needs to take shape, non-aggression pacts need to be developed, security concessions have to be granted on equal footing, and policies of regime change as well as foreign interference need to be abandoned. In such a setting, Iran will have neither the need nor the appetite to build up armed networks outside its own borders, as its sense of insecurity would be significantly alleviated.

The European Union is directly affected by the realities in the Middle East. It, therefore, has a credible position to work towards regional dialogue and ask all regional actors — not just Iran — to play a constructive role in stabilizing the Middle East.