MERIA

IRAN: THE RISE OF A REGIONAL POWER

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One of the most important developments in the early twenty-first century Middle East is the rise of Iran to become a regional great power. This has come about not solely because Iran has an Islamist regime or even that it was driving strenuously for nuclear weapons, but also due to other factors including the country's geopolitical assets and a relative power vacuum. Given, however, the ideology and extremism of the Tehran regime, Iran's growing influence has serious consequences for the region's stability and Western interests that could well become a, or perhaps *the*, central global issue in the coming years.

In July/August 2006, this influence was especially felt in the border attacks against Israel by Hamas and Hizballah, leading to wider-scale fighting. Iran is the patron of both groups, supplying them with arms, training, and encouragement to launch assaults. Iranian advisors in Lebanon have long aided Hizballah, while most of the weapons and equipment Hizballah used against Israel during this period were Iranian-built and supplied. This for the first time included longer-range missiles and the radar-guided C-102 anti-ship missile.[1]

THE BASIS OF IRANIAN DISTINCTIVENESS AND AMBITIONS

Ironically, the original theorist and architect of Iran's rise to be a regional power was the man most hated by the current Islamist regime, the shah, who was overthrown by its 1979 revolution. He had foreseen Iran as the strongest state in the Persian Gulf region, albeit as a junior partner of the United States. In this pursuit, he had launched a massive military build-up, inaugurated a nuclear power program, mobilized the country's rising oil income, and tried to implement a reform program to make Iran a modern country. What had been for the shah an ambition built on nationalism was for his successors a parallel ambition built on an Islamist radicalism that often simply served as a thin disguise for nationalism.

If the ambition of its leader was one pillar of Iran's rise to be a regional power, the other was its objective situation. Iran is a large state with a large population exceeding the number of people in all the Arab states of the Gulf combined. As the price of oil soared after the 1990s, it had ample financial resources too. As an empire—only half its people are Persian-speaking—the government in Tehran knows it must be strong enough to maintain the state's existence. History has shown, indeed, that when the central regime is weak the country falls apart.

Iran's cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious distinctions from its neighbors also fuel its sense of a separate national mission. The Persian-Arab divide is a very real one, and in terms of Islam, the Iranians' Shi'a

version stands in contrast to the majority Sunni faith among the Arabs. Indeed, the dominant view among Arabs since the 1950s was a militant nationalism of their own that viewed the Middle East as their sole domain. At times of confrontation and tension, as in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, these contrasts make for real rivalry and hatred. Symbolically, Arab nationalists reject the designation "Persian Gulf," preferring to call that body of water that adjoins the world's richest oil reserves the "Arab Gulf."

This is the context into which a radical, utopian Islamist ideology seized power in Iran. The revolution's leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, regarded Iran as only the first step to creating a utopian Islamic empire that would bring, in the words of his final testament in 1989, "absolute perfection and infinite glory and beauty." He urged Muslims: "Rise up! Grab what is yours by right through nails and teeth! Do not fear the propaganda of the superpowers and their sworn stooges. Drive out the criminal rulers!.... March towards an Islamic government!" If only all Moslems cooperated, they would be "the greatest power on earth."

Obviously, Iran's Arab neighbors were to be the first ones "liberated" or victimized, depending on one's perspective. Deciding not to wait until Iran was able to launch an Islamist revolution in his country, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980 in what was partly a preemptive strike and partly an imperialistic aggression. After eight years of fighting, Khomeini reluctantly had to sue for peace, but the revolution had survived. Shortly thereafter, Khomeini died, but he had many lieutenants to take his place.

The experience of governing Iran and of fighting off Iraq had taught the country's new rulers an important lesson. They had the ambition and ideological drive to spread the revolution and expand their control but also knew that such activities were dangerous. The top priority would be on maintaining their control over Iran; a secondary priority was to expand Iranian influence and Islamist revolt. On the latter front, they proceeded carefully and covertly.

Yet in following this strategy, they also created a hostile environment for themselves. Insisting that the United States was the "Great Satan" whose influence must be swept out of the region did not endear Iran to America. In truth, an accommodation would have been possible in which Washington would accept an Islamist regime in Iran if it did not try to overthrow its neighbors, spread anti-Americanism, sponsor terrorism, and try to wreck any progress in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. The rivalry was not inevitable. The United States wanted to avoid trouble. Having Iran's cooperation in blocking Soviet influence (at a time when Moscow had invaded Afghanistan) and Arab radicalism—or at least Tehran's neutrality—would have satisfied the United States. Seizing the staff of the U.S. embassy as hostages and holding them for more than a year provoked a different reaction.

By 2006, after a quarter-century in power, Iran had helped produce a very difficult environment for itself. Its relations with neighboring Arab states was formally correct but also tense. American forces were in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Tehran could talk about

encirclement. It was also facing American sanctions and international pressure on the nuclear arms issue. In conventional military terms, Iran was relatively weak. It had never recovered from the cutoff of Western arms and spare parts, especially when it came to planes, ships, and tanks.

The domestic situation was also far from secure. During a period of relative political permissiveness in the 1990s and into the next decade, reformist candidates had won every election. The majority of Iranians, especially among the young, were discontented with the regime's tight rule. Moreover, at least before oil prices hit their peak, the economy was not doing well. The regime contained these threats by maneuvering and blocking any real change, but they did not go away

To all these problems—foreign and domestic—the regime's response was ideological firmness, repression of opposition, mass mobilization, the sponsorship of terrorist and revolutionary movements abroad, and the acquisition of non-conventional weapons. There were also elements in the international and regional situation that gave Iran its long-awaited opportunity to become a great power in its own area.

IRAN'S OPPORTUNITY

Despite these problems, inside and outside of the country, developments also provided Iran with opportunities for exerting its power and influence that were unprecedented during the time of the Islamist regime and even in Iran's entire modern history.

The first among these elements is the Soviet Union's collapse, which led to the emergence of a half-dozen Muslim majority states to Iran's north. These include Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. Given the weakness of these states, Iran has backed indigenous Islamist movements. The absence of a strong USSR to Iran's north also eases the pressure on Tehran.

Second, high oil prices in the early twenty-first century greatly enhanced Iran's financial assets. In addition, Iran became the patron and sole ally of Syria, which needed the oil Iran supplied it at special discounts as well as Tehran's diplomatic support. The two countries cooperated closely in Syrian-controlled Lebanon for many years.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein eliminated Iran's most immediately threatening enemy. Moreover, in a democratic situation, the majority Shi'a lead the government. Some elements in this leading coalition and Shi'a militia groups are pro-Iranian, though the leadership as a whole has no desire to be Iranian clients. A Sunni insurgency, supported by Arab regimes, also pushes the post-Saddam government to view Iran as a necessary ally. From a situation in which Iraq menaced Iran, Tehran can now send in large numbers of agents and money to play a pivotal role in the country.

The U.S.-led removal of the Taliban government in Afghanistan also eliminated another force hostile to Iran. While Iran is not happy having American troops in Afghanistan, Tehran has its own client groups and considerable influence in the Shi'a-majority southwestern part of the country.

Although the United States looks at Iran as the world's leading sponsor of terrorism (as well as an obstacle to an Arab-Israeli peace settlement, and seeking nuclear weapons) America is constrained from going beyond its present pressure on that country. Tied down with Iraq, lacking support from allies and domestic public opinion, the United States is unlikely to attack Iran and lacks other alternatives for changing Tehran's policy.

Unwilling to have a confrontation with Iran while needing Iran's oil and wanting its business, Europe is not ready to support serious sanctions, much less a military operation against Iran's nuclear weapons' program. Although a great deal of diplomacy was conducted and many plans offered, the bottom line is that Iran fairly easily maneuvered these efforts in order to continue its nuclear arms drive without serious cost.

Having already built long-range missiles and well on the way to possessing nuclear warheads, Iran's hand is already strengthened in anticipation of getting them. When the day finally comes, Tehran will be the most strategically powerful Muslim state in the world.

Aside from these better-known factors are some other, more recent ones that contribute to Iran's stronger position. One of the most important, and least noticed, of these is the high level of Arab weakness and disorganization. The Arab world's decline is related to its leaders' refusal to make necessary reforms whether they involve civil rights, economic changes, pragmatism, or moderation toward the West and Israel. The breakdown is apparent in virtually every country even though the regimes are still managing to use demagoguery, Arab nationalism, and the fear of Islamism to hold onto power.

Arab nationalism has collapsed, especially in its international aspects. Apart from propagandistic exercises, there is no Arab world. Moreover, not a single Arab state has any real influence on the others today. Egypt has turned inward, Syria is isolated, and Iraq no longer even defines itself as Arab. Only Iran has something to offer ideologically and is able and eager to promote its influence across borders.

This is not to deny that the Persian ethnic and Shi'a religious factors limit Iran's appeal. Yet this can be transcended to some extent or even, in the latter case, provide an advantage. The growing Sunni-Shi'a divide is the main such situation where Iran's distinctiveness is an advantage. Shi'a Muslims are the largest group in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Oman, and Bahrain, while also comprising significant minorities in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and other countries. Iran sponsors large Shi'a groups in Lebanon and Iraq along with small ones, often oriented toward terrorism, in the Gulf Arab monarchies.

Several years of terrorism by Sunni on Shi'a Muslims in Iraq, with some bloody reprisals in the other direction, have stirred up these passions even beyond Iraq's borders. By cheering on the terrorist insurgency, the Arab regimes have taken the side of the Sunnis and Iraq's Shi'a majority knows it. Saudi Arabia supplies money for the insurgents, Jordanians cross the border to fight, and Syria sponsors the terrorist war in every way.

Since Arab nationalism and Arab

states offer Iraq's Shi'as nothing except support for their enemies, why shouldn't Iraqi Shi'as see Iran as an ally, though not as a master? In 2005, the leader of the insurgency, al-Qaida's Abu Musab al-Zarqawi openly called for a jihad against Shi'as, in effect denying that they were Muslims at all. There was virtually no condemnation of this shocking statement by Sunni Muslim clerics or political leaders in other Arab countries. Jordan's King Abdallah, far more politely, warned of a Shi'a alliance of Iran, Iraq, and others that would threaten the Arab world.

Egyptian President Husni Mubarak added his views in an April 8, 2006 interview on al-Arabiya satellite television. Pointing out that Iran has influence over the Shi'a in Iraq, which is certainly somewhat true, he concluded: "The Shiites are always loyal to Iran. Most of them are loyal to Iran and not to the countries in which they live." This portrayed Shi'as everywhere as Iranian agents and traitors to the Arabs.

In a tape posted on the internet on July 2, 2006, and authenticated by experts, Usama bin Ladin accused Iraqi Shi'a of trying to wipe out the Sunni. He calls the Shi'a "traitors" and "agents of the Americans." Contrary to previous Muslim practice, bin Ladin proclaims that the Shi'a are themselves "apostates," a crime punishable by death in Islamic law.

Of course, bin Ladin represents a very extreme view of Islam and even of Islamism. However, in the past, some of his ideas—though less so his strategic proposals—have percolated throughout Islamist and even into mainstream Sunni Muslim thought. Moreover, although Sunni clerics and political leaders could easily have denounced this statement as a simple way to discredit bin Ladin and promote Muslim unity, they did nothing to blunt the growing rift.

More and more Shi'a may thus turn to Iran, making Mubarak's statement a self-fulfilling prophecy. If Iran has nuclear weapons this is not just a "Muslim bomb" but more specifically a "Shi'a bomb." The Shi'a, often treated as second-class citizens, may see this as their alternative to living with the status quo.

So far, Iran has had a major appeal to only one Shi'a community, that of Lebanon through its sponsorship of Hizballah. Hizballah had the only armed militia in Lebanon, controlled the southern part of the country, has elected members to parliament and even joined the government coalition. Through its war with Israel in 2006, Hizballah showed itself to be a very effective way of increasing Iran's prestige and potentially its influence in the Arab world.

While leaping the Shi'a-Sunni divide has been hard for Iran, it has recently scored some successes in that area. A key factor here is the decline and disinterest of Arab states—at least apart from Syria—in continuing to sponsor terrorist and revolutionary groups. As a result, Iran has become the patron for both Palestinian Islamist groups, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, eclipsing Arab counterparts. This gives Tehran a real ability to ensure that the Arab-Israeli (or at least the Israeli-Palestinian) conflict continues to simmer. It can also portray itself to Arabs as the real hero in fighting the conflict while their own governments are largely inactive.

Despite bin Ladin's anti-Shi'a invective, there also might be links between Iran and al-Qa'ida. What is most suspicious is the continued safe haven it provides a couple of hundred wanted al-Qa'ida terrorists on its soil, where they continue to plan terrorist activities. While this connection should not be overstated, Iran clearly does use such people when its interests are parallel to theirs: striking at American, Israeli, or Western targets.

Finally, there is the factor of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who represents both a more aggressive Iranian policy and a new form of appeal beyond Iran's borders. Ahmadinejad was elected after the regime cracked down on the reformist opposition. While he is in broad terms a member of the ruling group, he was not the establishment's favorite candidate, has his own faction, and is seen as a problem by much of the Islamic Republic's ruling group.

Ahmadinejad is a populist with close ties to the hardline Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (the military formation, incidentally, that would have control over Iran's nuclear weapons) and who is trying to install his own appointees to a wide range of high-level positions. The president in part uses militancy as a demagogic way to build his own popularity while he also believes in returning to Khomeini's original thought.

His adventurism is visible on two high-profile issues on which he does not differ with the establishment so much in content as he does in style. For example, he is much more outspoken about Iran's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. Though all Iran's leadership wants them, the majority prefer to be more circumspect, allowing them to maintain officially that they seek only peaceful nuclear power. Similarly, all Iran's top leaders have called for Israel's destruction but Ahmadinejad does so more frequently and openly.

His establishment critics ask why create unnecessary frictions with the West when Iran is doing so well with a more subtle approach? Yet in the Middle East, Ahmadinejad's extremism plays better. With Saddam Hussein in jail and bin Ladin apparently ineffective, the Arab world is looking for some new hero who postures at standing up to the West. Clearly, Ahmadinejad, and thus Iran, are winning more respect among the Arab masses than the country has hitherto enjoyed. It also benefits from the rise of its client, Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah.

How Iran can exploit these opportunities is still an open question. Yet clearly, with the possible exception of the period immediately after the revolution Iran is riding higher than at any time during the previous quarter-century. Obtaining nuclear weapons would move that situation up by a very big margin.

The Lebanon Crisis

Another front where Iran increased its influence was with the Lebanon crisis of July-August 2006. Iran's client, Hizballah, attacked Israel and kidnapped two Israeli soldiers. Israel attacked into Lebanon and a month-long war ensued, with Hizballah firing 4,000 rockets into Israel and Israeli forces bombing Lebanon and seizing temporarily the south. Iran supplied Hizballah's advanced arms, training, and sent advisors to Lebanon.

Arab popular support for Hizballah, especially since Hizballah claimed victory, also reflected favorably on Iran, and to some extent the Sunni-Shi'a divide was breached. The conflict also knit Syria and Iran tighter together. This was, then, a major step forward for Iranian influence.

At the same time, though, a number of Arab states—Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia especially—anti-Hizballah forces in Lebanon, and even to some extent Iraq's government were alarmed at the growth in Iranian power and sought to oppose it.

The Nuclear Issue and the Day After

Iran has handled the nuclear issue brilliantly. In diplomatic exchanges, it has repeatedly demanded concessions, hinting that once these are given it will accept a compromise solution. Yet when the United States and Europe offer attractive packages, for example helping Iran get nuclear power as long as there are safeguards to keep it from using the technology to build bombs, Iran stalls or makes promises that it quickly breaks. Avoiding any punishment, Iran makes still more demands—and sometimes threats—thus beginning the next round.

Aside from eating up a great deal of time that is used to make progress on nuclear weapons research, Iran is being taught the lesson that it can get away with doing just about anything it wants without penalty. Equally, Iran's leaders have absorbed the idea that Europe will appease them and that the United States—which Ahmadinejad calls "an imaginary superpower made of straw"—in Khomeini's words, "Cannot do a damn thing" against Iran.

What is most disconcerting here is the combination of Ahmadinejad's recklessness and his ridicule of the apparent balance of power. Based on similar characteristics, Saddam Hussein launched three Middle East wars even without nuclear weapons. To some extent, the majority of the Iranian establishment would be a restraining factor, yet they are hardly moderates either.

What are Iran's motives in seeking nuclear technology? The official story, which even Iranian leaders contradict when speaking in Persian, is that they are not seeking weapons but merely peaceful nuclear power. It is true that Iran lacks oil refining capability, but it is doubtful that one of the world's main oil-producing countries believes it needs nuclear energy when this mode of power generation has been a costly, dangerous failure elsewhere. Nor has Iran spent so much money to develop long-range missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons to distant targets in order to build an overnight international mail delivery service to compete with Federal Express.

Given this poor cover story, the first fallback argument is that Iran needs nuclear weapons because it is surrounded by enemies. This neglects the fact that Iran would have few enemies (the worst of the real ones, Saddam Hussein, is now an imprisoned ex-dictator) if it were not the world's main supporter of terrorism, subverter of Arab-Israeli peace, and official sponsor of anti-Americanism, while also sabotaging Iraqi stability and daily threatening to wipe Israel off the map.

The second fallback argument is that Iran has as much right to have nuclear weapons as other states, which neglects the regime's actual nature,

ideology, and aggressive ambitions. This ignores the fact that Iran has legal obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty not to develop weapons. Other countries that did obtain nuclear weapons—Israel, India, Pakistan—forewent the advantages offered by the treaty since they never signed it.

There is actually a third argument that Iranians do not use, but which makes sense. As expensive as nuclear weapons are, it is cheaper and easier to build them (and the long-range rocket delivery vehicles) than to rebuild a conventional military. After all, the latter option would require building or buying hundreds of tanks and planes as well as other equipment. Moreover, if Iran can build its own nuclear weapons, it would not be dependent on buying and maintaining high-tech items from other countries, which involves the risk that supplies could be cut off in case of war or policy disputes.

In short, in a sense, nuclear weapons are the poor man's nuclear weapons. This point, however, also shows how dangerous such a dependency on unconventional weapons for deterrence would be. It is an inflexible strategy in which these arms either would or would not be used. Even the threat to employ them can set off a major confrontation and a stressful arms race.

Iran has already threatened to wipe out one country, Israel, in a policy that can only be termed genocide. Of course, if Iran were to obtain nuclear weapons it would not necessarily immediately use them against Israel. The principal concern, however, is that Tehran would be able to do so whenever it wanted; and thinking about the kind of people—both in terms of their responsibility and ideology—who would control that decision makes it a frightening prospect indeed.

Yet there are other dangerous implications of Iranian nuclear weapons that should make stopping Tehran's drive to get them a priority for many others. First, such weapons would be far more likely to fall into the hands of terrorists than any other nuclear arms in the world, through carelessness or intention of even a small group of Iranian government extremists. While it is often claimed that Iran would not pass nuclear weapons to terrorist groups, it should be noted that in 2006, Tehran did give Hizballah some of the longer-range missiles designed to carry nuclear warheads—not a good omen for the future in this regard.

Second, the weapons would more likely be used in the probable event that the Iranian regime were to face domestic instability or imminent overthrow.

Possessing such power would give Iran tremendous strategic leverage. Who in the area would say "no" to a Tehran so armed? A Europe already too quick with appeasement would go even further in that direction, while U.S. ability to act in the region would be greatly reduced. The Gulf Arabs, freed from the menace of Saddam Hussein, would now face an equally or even more frightening threat.

Such a development would be an inspiration to radical movements and terrorists to become even more reckless, believing that Tehran would back them up or at least that their enemies would be demoralized and the West too afraid to help their intended victims.

Western countries would be asked by Middle Eastern states to give them serious guarantees to intervene, even to the point of using nuclear weapons if Iran were to threaten with them. To fail to do so would mean a collapse of Western credibility in the region; to do so would mean that some day that promise might have to be fulfilled.

What will the current nuclear powers do when the Saudis or other Arab states ask for help in obtaining their own nuclear devices?

As for the attempts to stop Iran or persuade it to slow down the nuclear program, concern over the danger has sparked some U.S.-Europe cooperation. Yet Iran is not bargaining in good faith; it is merely buying the time necessary so it can reach its goal and ward off further pressure by flourishing its new nuclear arms. Furthermore, since there are no teeth in the Western stance—and Iran knows it—the effort is completely futile.

Finally, if one asks the negative consequences for Iran from the international community when--not if--it is clear Iran has broken its pledges, openly rejected a deal, and is on the verge of obtaining atomic warheads, the answer is: remarkably little.

Of course, much could be done to stop Iran if Europe were to join the United States in a serious program of economic and political sanctions combined with tough, credible warnings along with real pressures on Russia, China, Pakistan, and North Korea to stop any help to Iran. However, Europe would not back such measures, fearing confrontation and the loss of both oil imports and profits from trade with Iran. The same point applies to any attempt to topple Iran's regime, which would not work any way.

Thus, despite all the talk of efforts to stop Iran's nuclear weapons effort and about someone attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, this is probably not going to happen. Thereafter, the only defense for Iran's intended targets would be deterrence and hope.

IRAN'S GOALS

It should be reiterated that while Iran might not be a "crazy state" it is also not a normal one guided by pragmatic ideology, limited aims, and realpolitik. The Iranian ruling establishment certainly shows signs of caution at times and an ability to read the balance of power, but this is a slender reed on which to base the future of the Middle East, much less of the world. In addition, the mainstream Iranian establishment is the group that has already proven to be the world's leading sponsor of terrorism, a determined wrecker of Arab-Israeli peace, a prime source for anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism, and a determined enemy of the status quo in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is even more extreme; And while the establishment has limited his power so far—as the two terms of his reformist predecessor, Muhammad Khatami, showed, Iran's president can be a relatively powerless job—this will not necessarily apply forever. Unlike Khatami, Ahmadinejad is a tough young man who is building his own faction. It is conceivable that he will be in total control of Iran—as much as anyone can be—in the future. In partnership with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, he can

implement his design; and what a design it is. Iran's goals include:

- Fomenting revolution in every existing Muslim majority state.
- Encouraging radical Islamist forces everywhere Muslims live.
- Wiping Israel off the map.
- Expelling Western influence from the Middle East.

Even if it falls very short of this ambitious redesign for the globe, the consequences are far-reaching and quite dangerous. Moreover, Iran now has more ability to pursue such a program than at any time previously. Iran faces the least Western opposition to this program at a time when the most extreme faction may be establishing rule over the country and moving in a very militant direction.

CONCLUSIONS

Iran is the sole regional great power today in the Middle East, because no Arab state can claim that title. It has expanded influence in Iraq, Lebanon, and among the Palestinians as well as in parts of Afghanistan, becoming the sponsor not only of Hizballah, but also of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In many ways it is the patron of Syria. The growing Shi'a-Sunni rift is adding to Iran's influence, which is also helped by the high price of oil; even without nuclear weapons.

Iran is relatively more powerful today than at any time in modern history. At the same time, it has an extremist, adventurous regime that makes it dangerous but also gives it appeal in the Arab world. Iran is the world's leading sponsor of terrorism and a major force subverting any resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is on the verge of obtaining nuclear weapons.

Given all these factors, it is reasonable to say that Iran's growing power is possibly the most dangerous situation that the world will face in the coming years.

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[1] Associated Press, July 14, 2006.