

# Understanding Iranian Foreign Policy

by Hilal Khashan - August 5, 2024

Iranian foreign policy is famously difficult to comprehend. When Leonhart Rauwolf, a German physician and traveler, visited Persia in 1573, he described negotiating with the Iranians as a daunting experience. From the 16th century to modern times, the leaders of Iran have dealt with the world duplicitously, developing a reputation for evasiveness and strategic procrastination. Key to understanding Iranian foreign policy is a recognition of the centrality of the Arab region. Though Iran's pursuit of its interests frequently leads to clashes with the U.S. and Israel, for Iran they are only nominal enemies. Rather than confrontation, what Tehran most wants from them is recognition of its status as a regional power.

## Obsession With the Arab Region

Iran sees itself not as an ordinary country but as an unfolding revolution. As such, despite an absence of border wars or existential threats, it inclines toward expansionism. Geopolitics guided its focus west into the Arab world. The north was closed because of Russia, a big and dangerous power with which Iran did not want to quarrel. To the east lay India, a large, relatively wealthy country with diverse identities with which the Iranians might connect. Despite the depth of cultural contacts, however, Iran's ability to influence India remained very limited. The Gulf of Oman in the south was devoid of powerful rivals, but Iran was never a maritime empire. Therefore, if Iran wanted to spread the revolution beyond its borders, it realized it must head west.

Finding justification for its animosity toward the Arabs was not difficult. Iran still resents the Arabs for the Battle of al-Qadisiyah in 636, which led to the destruction of the Sasanian Empire, the occupation of Persia and the ruin of Persian civilization. The introduction of Islam into Iran by the Arabs, whom the Persians looked at with condescension and anger, presented a dilemma for the Iranian cultural conscience that has lasted centuries. Although Iran greatly enriched Islamic civilization, it remained far from the decision-making centers, which lay exclusively in the Arab world until the 16th century.

After the success of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, then-Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini thought the revolution would inspire millions of Arabs to demand similar Islamic rule. Once political Islam had taken over the Arab countries, Khomeini believed Iran would assume a prominent leadership role throughout the Islamic world. His faith in the transience of the current Iranian state

and its borders was enshrined in Article 5 of the Iranian Constitution, which says that the Guardian of the Jurist and the Iranian state paved the way for the coming of the Imam of the Age. Khomeini died in 1989, but his dream survived. When the Arab uprisings began in 2011, Iran referred to them as Islamic revolutions.

## **Deception as a Foreign Policy Tool**

To the Arabs – mainly Sunni ones – Iran was a Muslim country that differed from them only on who should preside over the larger Muslim community and on the rituals surrounding religious duties. The leaders of the Iranian revolution proved them wrong. They used “taqiyya” (deception or, better, dissimulation) to spread their foreign influence in the Middle East.

Shiites observe two types of taqiyya. The first is praiseworthy, intended to ward off evil, avoid conflict and preserve the faith. The second entails evasion, in speech or practice, to facilitate the achievement of an objective. The Safavid Empire, which ruled Persia between 1501 and 1736, embraced this second form of taqiyya, which gave it license to break covenants and promises, even binding treaties. This tradition has endured, such that present-day Iran is known for its expertise in evasive diplomacy.

By the end of 2012, Iran had secured its influence over the government in Syria, yet it insisted that it had only military advisers, not combat forces, in the country. When media reports containing the names and photos of Iranians killed fighting in Syria became too numerous and widespread to dismiss, Iran claimed that it was only protecting Shiite shrines in Damascus. It did not acknowledge the deaths of thousands of its soldiers, nor the presence in Syria of Lebanese, Iraqi and Afghan Shiite militias that it had sent to shore up Assad’s regime.

Iran’s deceptions could not have worked so well without some degree of Arab indifference, particularly in influential countries such as Egypt, Morocco and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Their inaction enabled Tehran to impose its will and blatantly interfere in their domestic affairs. At one point, an overzealous lawmaker with close ties to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Ali Reza Zakani, rejoiced that four Arab capitals – Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Sanaa – were under Iran’s control. The Houthi surge in Yemen, he said, was an extension of the 1979 revolution.

Iran has invoked taqiyya at other times as well. For example, in response to internal criticism of the 2015 nuclear agreement, Khamenei said he had accepted the atomic deal according to the concept of taqiyya, i.e., concealing his true intentions and beliefs from his enemies. He said it was sometimes

necessary to be heroically flexible without abandoning one's strategic objective. Sure enough, the agreement did not derail Iran's missile tests or its ambitious policy in the region, which led the Trump administration to withdraw from the deal in 2018 and impose strict sanctions on Iran.

In another example, Iranian officials say that they promote Islamic unity even as they repress Sunnis in Iran and prevent them from performing their religious duties freely. After the inauguration of Masoud Pezeshkian as Iran's president on July 28, a prominent Sunni preacher appealed to him to tackle discrimination and injustice so that Sunnis would feel free and safe in performing their religious rituals, including congregational prayer.

### **Inherent Weakness**

When Iran has faced serious resistance, it has tended to back down. After the U.S. killed Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' elite Quds Force, near Baghdad airport in 2020, it negotiated with Tehran over how Iran might be permitted to respond. Iran's retaliation targeted a U.S. base on Iraqi soil, and no American soldiers were seriously injured. Similarly, since Iran started its direct intervention in the Syrian war, Israel has been launching strikes on its military presence there. Israeli attacks have destroyed Revolutionary Guard bases, killed its operatives on the ground and blown up Iranian weapons depots near Damascus and Aleppo airports, in addition to military shipments to Hezbollah. Iran publicizes the funerals of its officers killed in these attacks, but it never comments on Israeli strikes in Syria. Instead, it counters rumors about its weakness relative to Israel by repeating the old trope that it will respond when the situation allows.

In April, Tehran was embarrassed by Israel's attack on its consulate in Damascus and the killing of one of its most senior generals, who was responsible for the Quds Force's combat operations in Syria. Iran wanted to silence critics who accused it of cowardice and to prove to the world that it could deter Israel. Tehran opted to target Israeli territory directly, which involved a tremendous amount of sensitivity because despite Israel's nuclear capabilities, its society is fragile and dreads attacks by regional actors, regardless of their effectiveness. In the end, Iran's retaliation was nothing but a masquerade. A U.S.-led coalition destroyed most of the Iranian drones and missiles before they reached Israeli airspace; they appeared on TV screens as expensive fireworks. The few drones and missiles that reached Israel had a negligible impact. Nevertheless, the Iranian leadership announced that its missile strikes had achieved their goals. Its Arab Shiite followers, systematically persecuted by their own oppressive regimes and inundated with Iranian propaganda for 45 years, hardly questioned it. The pro-Iranian press in Beirut said Tehran had re-established deterrence and taught Israel a lesson it would not forget. In reality, Israel knows what Iran dares, and Iran understands that

war with Israel would cost it control over the Arab countries it dominates. It could even lead to the downfall of the Iranian regime, which is widely despised.

The recent killing in Tehran of Hamas' political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, which Iranian officials blamed on Israel, has again embarrassed the Islamic Republic. Tehran viewed the assassination as a violation of its sovereignty and a blow to its honor, and it pledged to answer it with unprecedented force. Contrary to what the Iranian propaganda machine is disseminating, however, it is unlikely that Iran will risk an attack on Israel that would trigger an Israeli military response beyond its capacity to contain.

Iran's strategic objective is to gain U.S. and Israeli acceptance of its status as a legitimate regional power. Iran and its regional ambitions may challenge the U.S., but Americans recognize that Tehran is a potential regional partner because of its pragmatism. It threw its support behind the Palestinian cause under the pretext of defending Palestine and eliminating Israel, but its true purpose was to outflank the Arab regimes and assert its power in the region. In 2014, its deputy foreign minister warned that the fall of Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime at the hands of the Islamic State would destroy Israel's security. Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran has sought coordination and coexistence with Washington, and the same applies to the Iranian presence in Syria, which did not conflict with the U.S. presence in northeastern Syria. Iran wants to build on its regional gains over the past 45 years, not perpetuate its reputation as a pariah state and the mastermind of the axis of evil.

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