GEOPOLITICAL FUTURES

Special Collection

Middle East

Part 6 **Turkey & Iran**

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0 | INTRODUCTION

The Middle East and North Africa is a troubled region, and it isn't easy to find a success story to write about or a rewarding political experience to report. This complete work consists of several dozen essays spread out over 8 parts tackling the region's conflicts and historical evolution, relating them to contemporary issues. Each piece includes the publication date to link certain events to a specific period. It specifically questions and analyzes the political, economic, and interstate issues that beset the region without resolving them, either at the domestic or collective level.

Turkey and Iran stand out in the Middle East for being formidable non-Arab (Turkish and Persian respectively), predominantly Muslim countries in the region. Their flanking of the Levant and shared border in the South Caucasus makes for dynamic bilateral and regional relations. Part six explores the role these countries play in region dynamics with a focus on foreign policy.

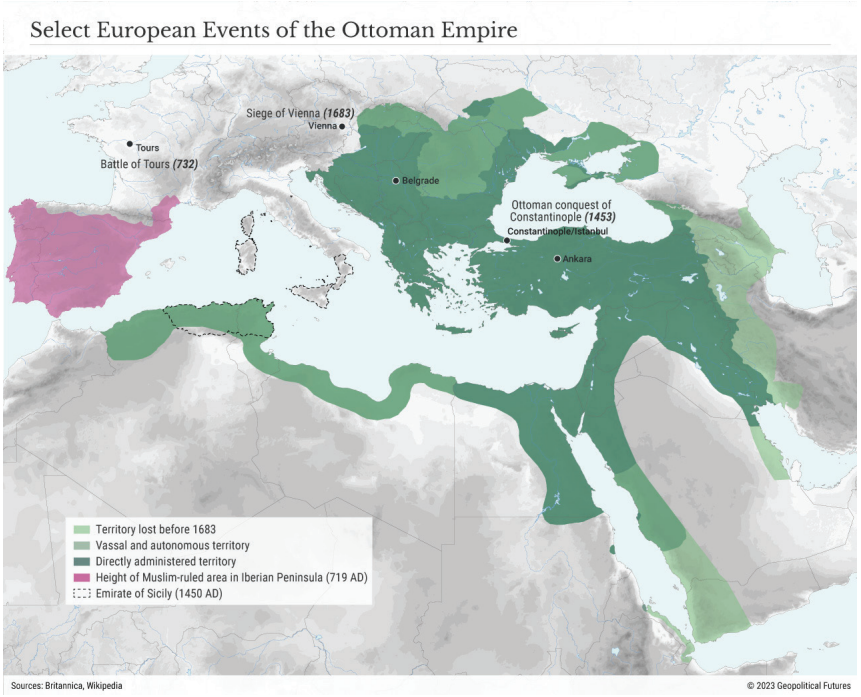
1 | How Arabs See Istanbul

The city has become a mecca for Arab tourists and expatriates.

February 10, 2020 | Hilal Khashan

Istanbul strikes its visitors as the seat of an empire, not as the capital of a nation-state. This ethnically diverse metropolis was too big for the type of state that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk founded during the War of Independence (1919-1923). For him, the current capital of Ankara suited his republican order better than Istanbul's imperial legacy that he passionately sought to disband. For Turks, Istanbul is a cultural hub and the country's economic powerhouse.

Arabs have held Istanbul in high esteem for centuries as the seat of the Ottoman Empire, the last caliphal state. By the 19th century, British influence, pan-Turanism and pan-Arab nationalist movements weakened the Ottoman Empire beyond repair. Efforts to Turkify its Arabs after the Young Turk coup of 1908 caused them to lose faith in the empire, especially after Turkish nationalists abandoned the multiethnic composition of the state. In response, people in Greater Syria and Iraq, the only remaining Arabic-speaking lands in the empire, turned to Arab nationalism and accepted it by default without understanding the complexity of the development of national identity.



Unaware of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement between Britain and France to partition Iraq and Greater Syria, the Hashemites in Arabia declared jihad against the Ottomans in the hope of establishing an Arab kingdom. Justified or not, this created a wedge between Arabs and Turks that has never fully healed. But the failure of Arab nationalism and the subsequent upheaval wrought by Islamist militancy seem to have endeared Turkey to the Arabs in recent years.

The change of heart began with the founding of the ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, in 2001 and took off after Recep Tayyip Erdogan became prime minister in 2003 and then president in 2014.

Erdogan opened up to the Arab region as part of his foreign policy agenda dubbed "neo-Ottomanism," a concept that refers to Istanbul's former imperial holdings in the Middle East, the

Balkans and the Caucasus. His behavior toward Israel was particularly attractive to some Arabs. In 2009, he stormed out of a meeting in Davos after clashing with Israel's prime minister over the military offensive in Gaza. In 2010, he became something of a hero to Arabs after Israel killed nine Turkish activists aboard the Mavi Marmara, which was leading a flotilla to break the Gaza blockade.

Erdogan is, after all, an Islamist at heart. His gestures toward Arabs have been more genuine than rhetorical. His charismatic speeches harken back to former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose pan-Arab ideals won the hearts and minds of Arabs throughout the region. Under Nasser, Cairo became a mecca for Arab tourists. Under Erdogan, Istanbul has taken its place.

Istanbul, a captivating city that straddles Europe and Asia, keeps bringing Arabs back time and time again. Since the beginning of the Arab uprisings in December 2010, it has been not only a popular tourist destination but also a haven for Arab activists and opposition leaders who lost the fight to free their societies from the shackles of authoritarianism. Arabic is widely spoken, and visitors often think they are in a familiar place. Relative to the local population, there are more Arabs in Istanbul than in Dubai and more veiled women than in Beirut. Many shop signs and tourist attractions use Arabic, and businesses often recruit Arabic-speaking staff.

Istanbul has also become the city of choice for anti-government satellite TV stations. Dozens of Syrian, Libyan, Iraqi, Egyptian and Yemeni stations that cannot broadcast at home find Istanbul ideally suited to their audiences. Arab asylum seekers in Istanbul include religious activists, such as members of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Yemen's al-Islah Party, and secular-nationalist opposition leaders such as Ayman Nour, who, in December 2019, established the Egyptian National Action Group to bring down the current regime. In recent years, Istanbul has been a forum for Arab intellectuals and opposition leaders as political debate has disappeared elsewhere in the region.

Arab money is widely spent in the city. Refugees from the uprisings, escaping death, persecution and poverty, established a flourishing mini-Arab city in Istanbul's Aksaray neighborhood. Unemployed young Arabs desperate for opportunity sought refuge in Istanbul's metropolis. Others with life savings converged on Istanbul to open a family business or buy an apartment in the relative stability and security of Istanbul compared to their countries of origin. Saudi

Attorney-General Saud al-Mujib traveled to Istanbul in October 2018 to investigate the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi. That his two-day talks with Turkish officials turned into an exercise in stonewalling did not stop his visit from becoming a shopping success. He returned to Saudi Arabia with five large suitcases of merchandise and four packages of sweets.

Still, Arab heads of state such as those of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have their reasons for fearing Erdogan: His alleged, covert Islamic agenda intimidates them, especially as it becomes economically successful. They feel threatened by the AKP's linkages to the Muslim Brotherhood, and Dubai sees Istanbul as a serious competitor in global air travel and tourism.

Refugees generally lose some status when they overstay their welcome in a host community, especially in an ethnic-nationalist environment such as Turkey's. There are at least 1.2 million Arab immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Istanbul. This figure excludes Turkish citizens of Arab descent. According to an Arab proverb, "He who leaves his homeland cries forever." Even though Arabs and Turks share many cultural values, there are specific behavioral traits that set them apart and cause tension and resentment. Arabs are more likely to feel unwelcome in parts of Istanbul that are populated by secularists and nationalists than in districts such as Fatih that are staunchly pro-AKP. In 2016, the twitter hashtag "I do not want Syrians in my country" went viral, and embroiled Arabs in Istanbul and the rest of Turkey in the country's divisive politics.

Scapegoating against Arabs is common in Turkey. Much of the media and public blame Arabs in general and Syrians in particular for triggering the country's economic crisis. (In truth, a trade imbalance is to blame.) Swings in anti-Arab sentiment in Turkey are natural and can occur in any social setting, regardless of who governs Turkey. Arabs are likely to continue to converge on Istanbul, even though its scale is contingent on Ankara's ability to become an accomplished regional power.

2 | The Ups and Downs of Turkish-Israeli Relations

They may not always get along, but ultimately, these two countries need each other.

September 9, 2020 | Hilal Khashan

In 1949, Turkey recognized the state of Israel, becoming the first Muslim country to exchange diplomatic missions with it. Since then, their relations have gone through many highs and lows. In 2004, the American Jewish Congress gave then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan its Profile of Courage award because of his positive attitude toward Israel and the world's Jewry. Ten years later, it asked him to return it because of his virulent criticism of Israel – which he "gladly" did. Turkish-Israeli relations are once again at a low point, following clashes over the Palestinian issue among other things. But it's unlikely they will stay that way; both countries are in need of regional allies, and their economic and security interests will outweigh any diplomatic disputes or gestures of disapproval.

The Honeymoon Phase

The relationship between the state of Israel and Turkey extends back decades. In 1957, the two countries established secret intelligence and security relations in response to the Soviet Union's penetration into the Middle East to supply Egypt and Syria with military hardware and technical assistance. A year later, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion met secretly with his Turkish counterpart and formed the Peripheral Pact, an alliance devoted to military and intelligence cooperation and containing communism.

However, they have also been at odds at various points throughout their relationship. In 1956, Turkey downgraded its diplomatic mission to Israel after Israel participated in the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt. Ankara did so again in 1980 when the Israeli parliament voted to annex the Golan Heights. Turkey voted in favor of U.N. Resolution 3379 that equated Zionism with racism in 1975 and allowed the Palestine Liberation Organization to open an office in Ankara in 1979. Indeed, though the Turks never questioned Israel's right to exist, the Palestinian issue has been a persistent roadblock to improving ties between the two countries.

But after the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in Washington in 1993, Turkey and Israel went through a diplomatic honeymoon phase. The Palestinian Authority was formed shortly thereafter, in 1994, and Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller, who led the secular True Path Party, visited Gaza and promised to support the Palestinians in any way she could, including by helping to build an airport, a harbor, housing and other infrastructure projects.

The honeymoon lasted a decade and in addition to improved economic and tourism ties included security partnership and technology transfers that helped strengthen the Turkish military. Contrary to expectations, Turkish-Israeli relations actually strengthened after Necmettin Erbakan, who led the Islamist Refah Party, became prime minister in 1996. During his brief

time in office, Turkey agreed to allow Israeli air force pilots to train in Turkish air space.

Deteriorating Relations

Their relationship began to change in 2003 when Recep Tayyip Erdogan became prime minister. After Israel assassinated Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Erdogan described his killing as state terrorism. And in September 2007, the Israeli air force flew over Turkish air space during a mission to destroy an illicit Syrian nuclear reactor northeast of Damascus, thwarting Turkey's efforts to make peace between Syria and Israel.

In 2008, Erdogan walked out of a World Economic Forum summit in Davos to protest Israel's Operation Cast Lead against Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement. And in 2009, he blocked the Israeli air force from participating in the Anatolian Eagle exercises because of Israel's offensive in Gaza that year, causing the drills to be canceled.

Relations bottomed out in 2010, when Israeli commandoes killed 10 Turkish activists aboard the Mavi Marmara as the ship tried to break the blockade against Gaza. After Israel refused to apologize for the incident, Turkey expelled the Israeli ambassador to Ankara.

Still, the two countries continued to cooperate on several fronts. In 2012, Israel repaired five Israeli-built Heron unmanned aerial vehicles and returned them to Turkey. Turkey used them to manufacture its own Bayraktar drones, which were used in Libya and Syria. That same year, Erdogan dispatched a high-level representative to meet with Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in an effort to revive diplomatic relations. In 2013, Israel's Elta Systems agreed, after U.S. prodding, to deliver to the Turkish air force airborne electronic systems to fit on four Boeing-737s as a confidence-building measure to lay to rest the Mavi Marmara flotilla affair. Then, in 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama helped broker a rapprochement as the two countries restored diplomatic relations and returned their ambassadors to their posts.

But the warming of relations did not last long. Turkey again expelled the Israeli ambassador in response to Israel's killing of 290 Palestinian demonstrators demanding an end to the blockade of Gaza in 2018. After openly admitting to intelligence sharing for 24 years, Turkey refused to publicize its intelligence meetings with Israel. It has continued to wield influence among dozens of Palestinian groups inside Israel's green line, including Jerusalem, through financial aid and other types of support.

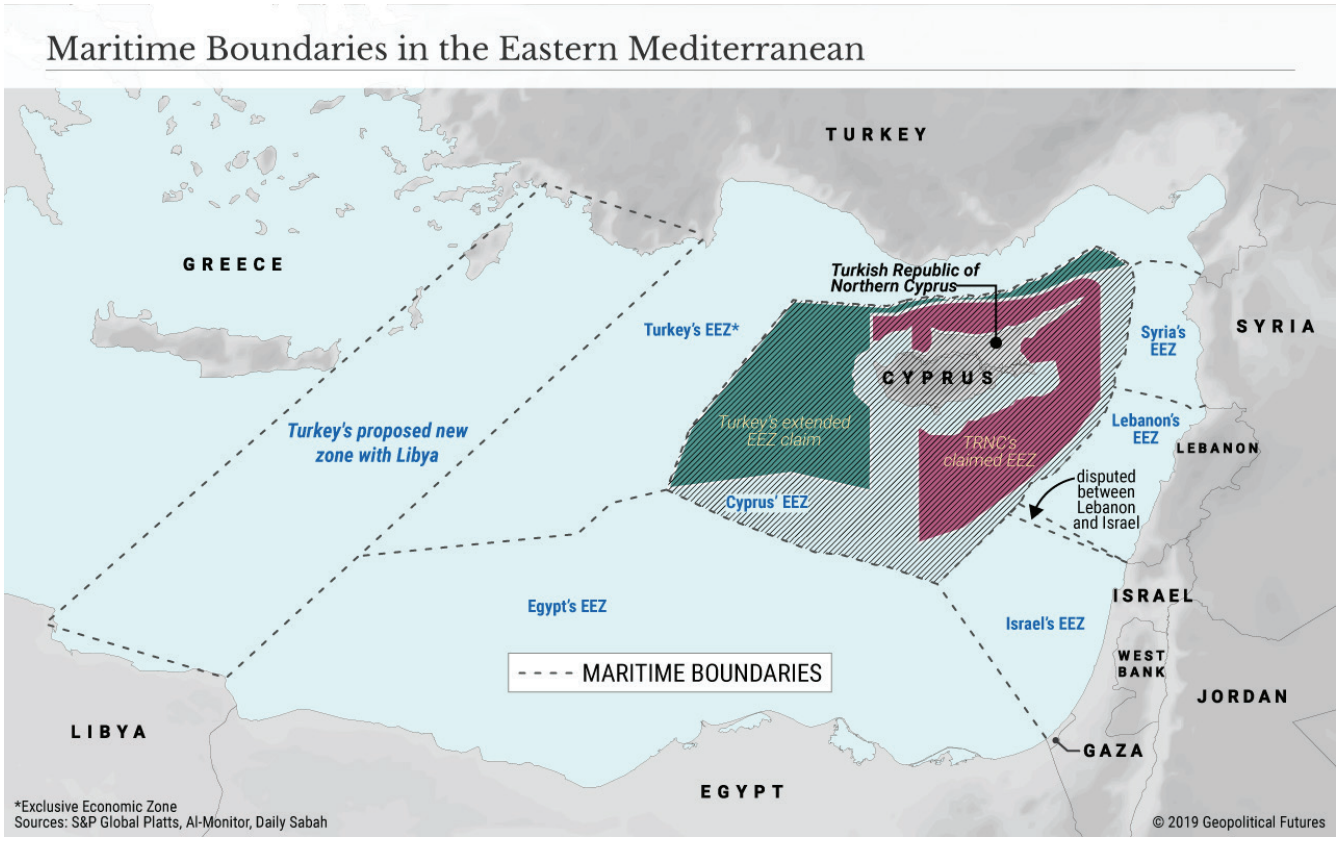
Every time Israel attacks Gaza and inflicts significant casualties, Erdogan labels it state terrorism. He has repeatedly warned that he will not allow Israel to annex parts of the West Bank. But his threats ring hollow. It would be militarily unwise and politically impossible for Turkey to stop Israel from moving into the Palestinian territories. Indeed, his threats are mostly rhetorical and don't extend much beyond recalling ambassadors and decreasing diplomatic missions. The two countries continue to share economic interests that have always risen above their political disagreements. In fact, despite their frayed relationship, the value of their trade increased from $4.7 billion in 2015 to $6.1 billion in 2019.

The two countries also continue to coordinate on security matters, as adversarial countries often do to prevent further deterioration of relations. The last known meeting between the Turkish and Israeli intelligence chiefs occurred in Washington in January. Both countries share concerns over the presence of Iran and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, in Syria. In fact, Israel Defense Forces followed with great interest the Turkish army's defeat of Hezbollah's elite Radwan unit in Idlib last February.

Rebuilding the Relationship

Following the Arab uprisings, Erdogan believed that political change would sweep the region and bolster Turkey's regional position. But the counterrevolutions dashed his hopes for regional supremacy and turned many Arab states against Ankara. Israel, however, is still eager to restore close ties with Turkey, which it believes can help counter the Iranian threat. Ankara's growing ties in Central Asia and its promotion of pan-Turkism complicate Tehran's ability to expand into these former Soviet republics where Russian, Chinese and American influences are paramount.

Erdogan was highly critical of the recent Israeli-Emirati peace agreement, but he's unlikely to make any retaliatory moves. The deal includes a powerful component on the structure of the region's future economy, and Turkey does not want to be excluded. Its chances of joining the European Union are slim, and its exclusion from the unfolding economy of the Middle East would ruin its prospects for economic development. Although a 2020 Israeli intelligence report included Turkey in the list of countries and organizations that pose a threat to Israel's national security, Israeli decision-makers tend to view Erdogan's fiery rhetoric as strategically



insignificant, more of an aggravation than a real threat. Israel is keen on maintaining an open channel of communication with Turkey, irrespective of what Erdogan says.

Among Turkey's biggest concerns over Israel is its cooperation with Egypt, Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean. The exclusive economic zone that Turkey recently declared in the Eastern Mediterranean technically overlaps with shipping routes used for 99 percent of Israel's foreign trade. But there is potential for cooperation between the two countries in this area. Israel isn't opposed to signing a maritime agreement with Turkey to ease tensions in the region; it actually declined to endorse a joint declaration in May signed by the foreign ministers of France, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus and the UAE denouncing Turkish provocation in the Eastern Mediterranean. And considering its dire economic state and need for natural resources, Turkey would likely also be open to maintaining good working relations with Israel (and, by extension, Washington).

The litmus test of improving Turkish-Israeli relations is the resumption of their diplomatic relations at the ambassador level. Turkey, which is now isolated from much of the Middle East and Europe, has a compelling reason to restore ties. Israel, which has forged strong relations with all of Ankara's adversaries, likewise is looking for more allies in the region. In reference to Necmettin Erbakan's ascension to the role of prime minister in the 1990s, Israeli President Shimon Peres said, "Governments may change, but basic interests remain." These two countries don't need to agree on everything, but what they have in common exceeds what separates them.

3| Turkey Adjusts Its Foreign Policy

After hitting some roadblocks, Ankara is reevaluating its foreign relations.

February 19, 2021 | Hilal Khashan

Turkey's long-term goal is to become a military and economic power with global outreach. Its path to success, however, isn't a straight line. Crises will inevitably emerge, requiring tactical pauses or a strategic redirection. Today, Turkey is facing mounting challenges in the international system, forcing the country to rethink its foreign policy. It's therefore making an effort to stop the deterioration of its foreign relations and to stabilize its financial situation, so that it can resume its quest to become a global power.

Reviving Its Past Glory

Turkey's claims to great power status have a long history. In the 1930s, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk endorsed the sun language theory – the belief that all languages are derived from an early iteration of the Turkish language. Ataturk, who was a big proponent of Turkish nationalism, wanted to convince European nations that Turkey was one of them. During his time, Turkish historians traced the origins of Turkish nationalism to the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 when the Seljuks defeated the Byzantine army and conquered Anatolia. They emphasized Anatolia's Hellenistic heritage to advocate that it had a place in Europe.

Like Ataturk, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is a populist leader and staunch modernizer. Both men also realized quickly that Russia would not be an ally in Turkey's quest for greatness. For Ataturk, it was clear that the Soviet model was not one he wanted to follow, and for Erdogan, the two countries' histories, geographies and perceptions of their own power stood in the way of strategic cooperation. The difference between Erdogan and Ataturk, however, is that Ataturk looked to Europe as a model of modernity that he wanted to replicate in Turkey, whereas Erdogan wants to reconnect Turkey with its Ottoman roots.

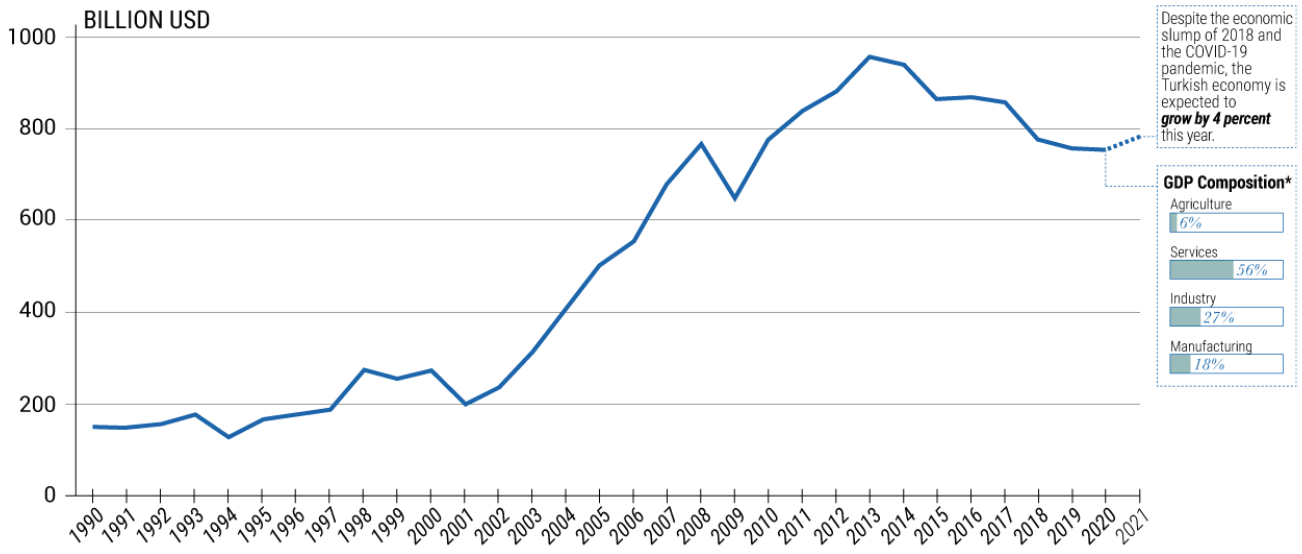
Erdogan's campaign to resurrect Turkey's past glory and transform it into a military and economic power explains some of Ankara's recent achievements. Earlier this month, Erdogan announced that Turkey planned to send an unmanned spacecraft to the surface of the moon in 2023. Ankara also plans to launch its first domestic-made communication satellite in 2022.

Over the past two decades, Turkey has developed a robust defense industry that now meets 70 percent of the country's military equipment needs, with plans to become self-sufficient by 2053. Turkey is one of just 10 countries that manufactures warships and is already working on building a modern main battle tank and a fifth-generation fighter.

Turkey has also experienced impressive economic development over the past 30 years. Its economy is the world's 19th largest and 13th largest in terms of purchasing power parity. Its human development index rose from 0.58 in 1990 to 0.82 in 2019, placing it in the very high

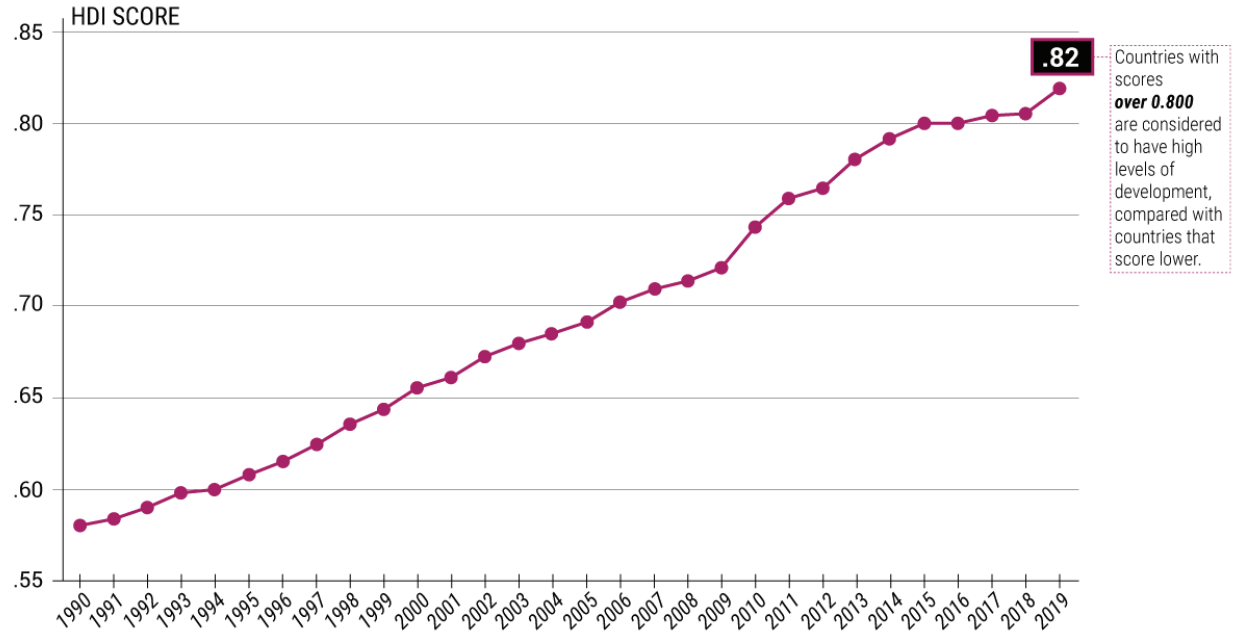
human development category. It has a modern economic structure, with 65 percent of the labor force involved in the services sector, 27 percent in industry, and 8 percent in agriculture. Despite the economic slump of 2018 and the COVID-19 pandemic, the Turkish economy is expected to grow by 4 percent this year.

Turkey's Gross Domestic Product



*The GDP composition numbers don't add up to 100 because manufacturing is included in the Industry figures and also separately reported because it plays a critical role in the economy.
Sources: Trading Economics, Michigan State University

Turkey's Human Development Index*



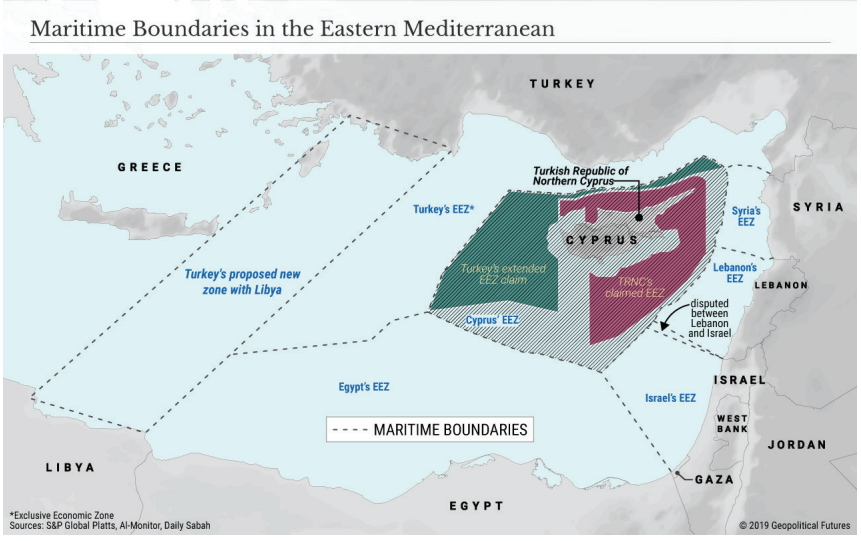
*The ***Human Development Index*** is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: having a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable, and having a decent standard of living.
Source: United Nations Development Program

Recent Foreign Policy Changes

Since the 2016 failed coup, Turkey's foreign policy has seen a raft of changes. Former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's 2004 "zero problems with our neighbors" policy has been replaced with a bewildering array of enemies in the Middle East and beyond. Over the past five years, Turkey has participated in armed conflicts in northern Iraq, Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. It also maintains significant military contingents in Qatar, Northern Cyprus and Somalia. Ankara's relations with Europe and the United States have deteriorated thanks to its military adventurism, purchase of Russian-made S-400 missiles (which led to a U.S. ban on arms exports to Turkey and Ankara's expulsion from the F-35 fighter jet program), and recent activities in the Eastern Mediterranean.

However, Turkey appears determined to make 2021 the year of political flexibility and diplomacy. Erdogan is keen on engaging the new U.S. administration – despite President Joe Biden's calling Erdogan an autocrat during his election campaign and his secretary of state, Antony Blinken, saying that Turkey was not acting as an ally. Erdogan continues to believe that U.S. support for the Syrian Kurds is at the center of the rift between the two countries, but he has softened his tone, signaling that Turkey's problems with the outside world can be resolved through dialogue. Turkey's minister of defense also suggested the country was willing not to use the S-400s in an effort to defuse tensions and avoid incurring sanctions.

Erdogan has also expressed an openness to working with Europe. In part, that's because European leaders already approved sanctions on Turkey over its drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's apparent willingness to restart talks with Greece on demarcating exclusive economic zones in the Mediterranean doesn't change its fundamental position. But the move shows that Ankara would rather use diplomacy than flex its military muscle (which angered NATO, and especially France) to defend its drilling rights in Mediterranean waters. Erdogan has also toned down his criticism of France, after calling French President Emmanuel Macron a thug. Turkey's foreign affairs minister expressed willingness to start a constructive dialogue with France to resolve their differences on issues ranging from Syria to Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean. Erdogan also urged Europe to remove obstacles blocking its accession to the European Union and European customs union and stalling visa-free entry into the EU for Turkish citizens.



Erdogan has also extended an olive branch to Egypt. Last September, he spoke of the deep historical ties between Turkey and Egypt. He called for dialogue with Cairo and recognized Egypt's interests in Libya, eager to strike a maritime agreement similar to the one Ankara reached with Libya's Government of National Accord. Erdogan emphasized that intelligence

cooperation between the two countries continued despite their political differences. (Erdogan was a supporter of former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, who was ousted in a 2013 military coup led by current President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi.) Turkey has also made overtures to Israel, appointing a new ambassador in December after leaving the post vacant for two years.

Constraints on Policy Shifts

Despite showing room for negotiation on some fronts, Turkey's position on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and People's Protection Units (YPG) remains unshakeable. Ankara views these groups as existential threats because it believes leaving them unchecked could lead to Turkey's demise. Ankara was angered by the U.S. State Department's statement earlier this week on the deaths of 13 Turks in Iraq because the statement made its condemnation of the killings contingent on verification that the PKK carried them out – rather than accepting Ankara's account. That Blinken called his Turkish counterpart to accept the Turkish version of events attests to the Biden administration's openness to dialogue.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey does not recognize the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea because Ankara believes it favors Greece and Cyprus. Turkey does not expect to reach an agreement with Greece in 2021 to delineate their exclusive economic zones. Though Erdogan is willing to negotiate, he's not willing to concede much on this issue, which enjoys rare national consensus in Turkey.

With Russia, Turkey has many ongoing disagreements, including over Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. In Syria, Turkey wants an end to Bashar Assad's regime and a comprehensive political settlement that allows the return of displaced Syrian refugees. In Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey managed to penetrate Russia's backyard by backing Azerbaijan's war to reclaim the disputed region last year. In doing so, it gained access to the Nakhchivan Corridor, linking it to Azerbaijan, as well as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan via the Caspian Sea.

Future Outlook

Despite its diplomatic overtures, Turkey will face a number of challenges this year. Its relationship with the U.S. will not normalize in 2021, though it's unlikely to deteriorate any further. Erdogan isn't willing to burn bridges with an administration that just took office. His most formidable challenge, however, is defining Turkey's relationship with Russia. Both countries will be bound by dialogue, but their disagreements especially over Syria's fate will be an obstacle to any rapprochement.

Ankara's diplomatic outreach may be more successful among its Middle East neighbors. The Saudis, concerned about a shift in Washington's Gulf policy, especially on Iran and the Houthis in Yemen, seem to have opened up to Turkey to try to secure a semblance of a regional balance. The Saudis are quite interested in allying with Israel, but they cannot do so without the backing of a major Muslim country, such as Turkey. Indicators point to the opening of a new chapter of friendly relations between Riyadh and Ankara. (Turkey also maintains good relations with Qatar, which was the subject of a 3 1/2-year Saudi-led blockade that recently ended.)

Erdogan's pursuit of an independent Turkish foreign policy sends signals to the West that Turkey will no longer be subservient. In this sense, his foreign policy approach is close to that of Ataturk, who fiercely defended Turkey's sovereignty and independence. Erdogan is probably the Middle Eastern leader best equipped to seize opportunities when they arise and change his position when circumstances permit, as they do now.

4 | Turkey and Iran Compete Over Afghanistan

Both countries share historical and cultural ties to Afghanistan.

August 26, 2021 | Hilal Khashan

Afghanistan is not a country that lends itself to domination by sheer force. Its rugged, mountainous terrain makes it impossible for a foreign military, no matter how powerful, to conquer and occupy the country. Indeed, after 20 years of war, even the United States was unable to effect much lasting change there. However, smaller states that share historical, cultural and religious values with the Afghans are better positioned to achieve their objectives in the country than culturally distinct nations, regardless of how many resources they expend. Thus, in the United States' absence, Iran and Turkey will compete for influence over Afghanistan, with which both countries share historical and cultural ties. Afghanistan's fluid political and security situation following the U.S. pullout will present challenges for Iran and opportunities for Turkey. But stability or even a semblance of peace will remain elusive.

Tehran's Objectives

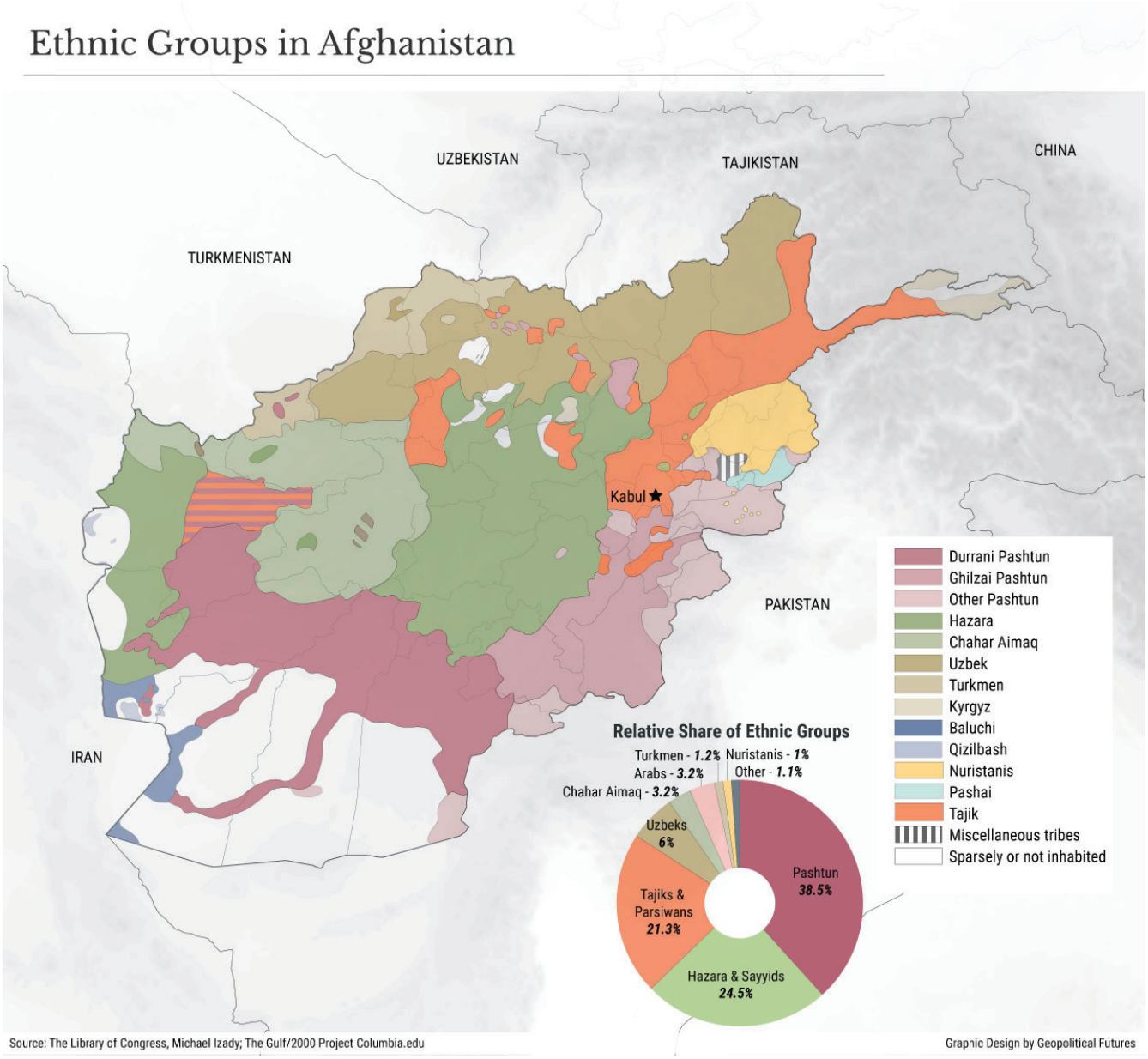
Relations between Iran and Afghanistan have ebbed and flowed since 1722, when the Afghans invaded Persia and occupied Isfahan, the capital of the Safavid Empire. Even after the Afghans' defeat in 1730, water issues marred relations between the two countries, until they finally signed the Treaty of Friendship in 1921. Today, Iran and its new hardline president, Ebrahim Raisi, seem determined to expand Tehran's regional influence into Afghanistan as well as Central Asia, the Caucasus, the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf.

Tehran is angling to become Afghanistan's main economic benefactor, hoping to form a relationship with the Taliban similar to Turkey's relationship with Northern Cyprus. But incompatible religious ideology and Iran's cooperation in America's 2001 invasion are significant obstacles.

Iran allowed the Taliban to open offices in several Iranian cities and provided living quarters for the families of many Taliban leaders. Afghans, however, view Iran's behavior with suspicion. A few years ago, Iran tried to pit the Shiite Hazaras against the Taliban to justify the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' intervention in Afghanistan. IRGC forces masqueraded as members of an Afghan Shiite militia called the Fatemiyoun Division to try to coerce the militants to establish a Shiite state in Afghanistan – which ultimately failed.

The Iranians are deeply concerned about the Taliban's resurgence, despite publicly claiming to be happy about the U.S. departure. Iran wants to see a fragile Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban to obstruct Turkish intervention plans and secure more water supplies from the Helmand River for its water-scarce border areas. A stable Afghanistan would enable the country to protect its own supplies from Iranian interference. Iran does not believe the Taliban will maintain a firm hold over the country and is devising a plan to create a militia loyal to Tehran

similar to the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq.



Iran has avoided publicly criticizing the Taliban, hoping to play a peacekeeper role in Afghanistan. Tehran has even encouraged local media to praise the group for driving U.S. forces out of the country. It presents itself as a partner of Afghanistan, providing much-needed energy supplies to help ease its economic collapse. There's at least one opponent of Tehran's official stance on the Taliban, however. Last month, former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said the Iranian people did not support Tehran's Afghanistan policy, believing that their country's meager resources should instead be used for economic development.

Ankara's Hopes

Unlike Iran, which shares a 900-kilometer (560-mile) border with Afghanistan, Turkey is geographically distant from the war-torn country. Still, it sees an opportunity to influence the outcome there. Despite the Taliban's warning against Turkey keeping its 500-strong military contingent in Kabul beyond the end of August, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan thinks he can strike a deal with the group through Qatar, which has close ties with the Taliban. And indeed, the Taliban have promised to maintain cordial relations with their near and distant neighbors – except for India because of its human rights record relating to its Muslim minority. On India, Turkey and the Taliban share a common approach. The Taliban support the Islamist insurgency in Indian-controlled Kashmir, and Turkey has strong relations with the Popular Front of India, a militant Islamist movement, and the insurrectionist Jamaat-e-Islami in Kashmir.

Turkey's involvement in Afghanistan is also part of Ankara's strategy to repair its strained relations with Washington. It participated in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan since its establishment in 2001. It could also help mediate between the Taliban and Washington as the crisis unfolds. Last week, the Biden administration froze the Afghan central bank's reserves in the U.S. totaling $10 billion. It also convinced the International Monetary Fund to suspend Kabul's access to $440 million in funds until the country could meet certain conditions. Given the Taliban's urgent need for cash, they will likely be open to dialogue with a mediator like Ankara.

For the U.S. and its Western allies, one of their key objectives is containing Russian and Chinese influence in Afghanistan. Washington is keen on slowing down China's economic progress and preventing Russia from restoring its lost influence in Central Asia. The U.S. considers Russo-Chinese activity in South and Central Asia the most significant threat to its national security. As the rivalry between these major powers accelerates, Afghanistan's importance as a critical juncture linking China, Russia, India, Pakistan and Iran will increase.

In 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Islamabad and launched the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, part of Beijing's massive Belt and Road Initiative, which drew mixed reactions in Pakistan. Given Pakistanis' skepticism about BRI, Turkey can use its friendship with Pakistan to temper its relations with the United States. The U.S. sees an opportunity in the CPEC controversy to derail Chinese influence in the region and bring Pakistan back into the U.S. fold, using Turkey as an intermediary.

For Moscow, the primary concern in Afghanistan is the potential for the instability there to spill over into Russia – namely Chechnya, Dagestan and Tatarstan – and its neighbors in Central Asia, specifically Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The prospect of establishing Islamic emirates in these countries and regions, similar to the Taliban's self-proclaimed Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, is not far-fetched. Iran has similar fears in its restive Sunni-populated Baluchistan region.

Turkey wants to increase pressure on countries competing for influence in the Middle East and Central Asia – Russia, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia – by influencing the Taliban's foreign

policy, hoping that this will give Ankara an edge. Maintaining a degree of soft power in Afghanistan would increase its prestige in NATO and open a new chapter in relations with the United States. Erdogan has tried to make the case that his country is well positioned to mediate with the Taliban, recently saying that Turkey is "the only reliable country left" that could help stabilize Afghanistan.

Turkey's involvement in the conflicts of the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia has alarmed many Turks, who argue that the country's resources are being spread too thin. In addition to deploying troops in Libya, Syria and Iraq, Turkey established military bases in Qatar and Somalia and played a game-changing role in last year's conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The opposition Republican People's Party has criticized Erdogan's Afghanistan policy and called for an immediate withdrawal of Turkish troops from the country. Erdogan's opponents believe he wants to drag Turkey into the Afghan quagmire and replace the United States as the major power in the country. Erdogan seems undeterred, however.

It's likely that anarchy and civil war will return to Afghanistan. For most Afghans, the idea of the state is nebulous. The fragmentation of the population into tribal ethnicities and sectarian identities makes it difficult to create a unified collective consciousness. What seems to matter most right now is foreign rivalry while the Taliban attempt to construct a pristine Islamic emirate.

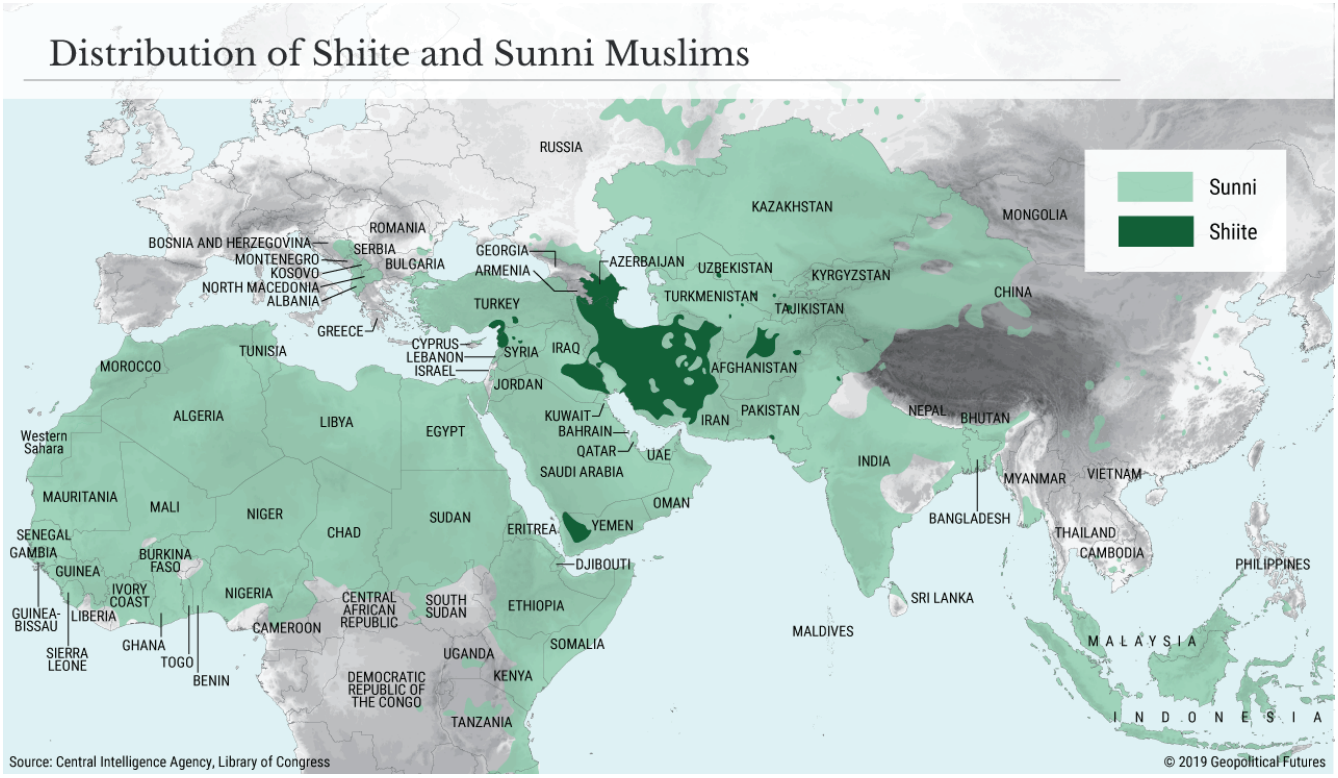
5 | How Iran Lost Its Hold Over Iraqi Shiites

Iraqi Shiites understand that Iran wants their country to remain weak and fragmented.

November 18, 2019 | Hilal Khashan

After the creation of the Iraqi state in 1921, Iraqi Shiites largely chose to eschew politics for decades, bogged down as they were in the bitter split in Islam that pitted them against the Sunnis. Iraqi Shiites have always been proud of their roots in Yemen and the Hejaz in the Arabian Peninsula, but they were never particularly drawn to Arab nationalism. They did, however, absorb pan-Arab nationalist influences following the 1958 military coup that toppled the Hashemite monarchy and, more importantly, after the radical Baathist coup that brought Saddam Hussein to power in 1968. The Baathist regime inundated Iraqi Shiites with pan-Arab political and cultural rhetoric that, during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, turned into anti-Persian propaganda.

Shiites overlooked Saddam's oppression that culminated in the execution of prominent opposition cleric Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, who issued a religious edict banning membership in the Baath Party. They fought for Iraq against Iran, a Shiite-majority country. Shiites, who account for two-thirds of the population of Iraq, played a decisive role in winning the war, which ultimately led to a surge in Arab national identity and widespread animosity for a fellow Shiite country.



Politicization of Sectarian Identity

The 1991 uprising in Basra that spread throughout southern Iraq was started by an Iraqi soldier who was humiliated by the defeat in the First Gulf War. The Republican Guard's brutal crushing of the Shiite uprising caused Shiites to turn inward, shifting their focus from Iraqi nationalism to sectarian concerns. The fall of Saddam's regime in 2003 ushered in a new political system based on sectarian accommodation that gave Shiites, who for 60 years stood outside the corridors of Iraqi power, overwhelming control over the state and its resources.

The Badr Brigade, established in Tehran in 1982, became the military wing of a Shiite political party known as the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. The brigade, which took Iran's side during the Iran-Iraq War, led the rebellion in 1991 and joined the U.S.-led coalition to overthrow Saddam's regime in 2003. It took advantage of the vacuum left by the collapse of the government and ousted those who played a significant role in the war that led to Iran's defeat in 1988. Poor post-war planning by the Americans allowed Iran to use the SCIRI and Iran-funded Shiite militias to overwhelm Iraq and penetrate its centers of power.

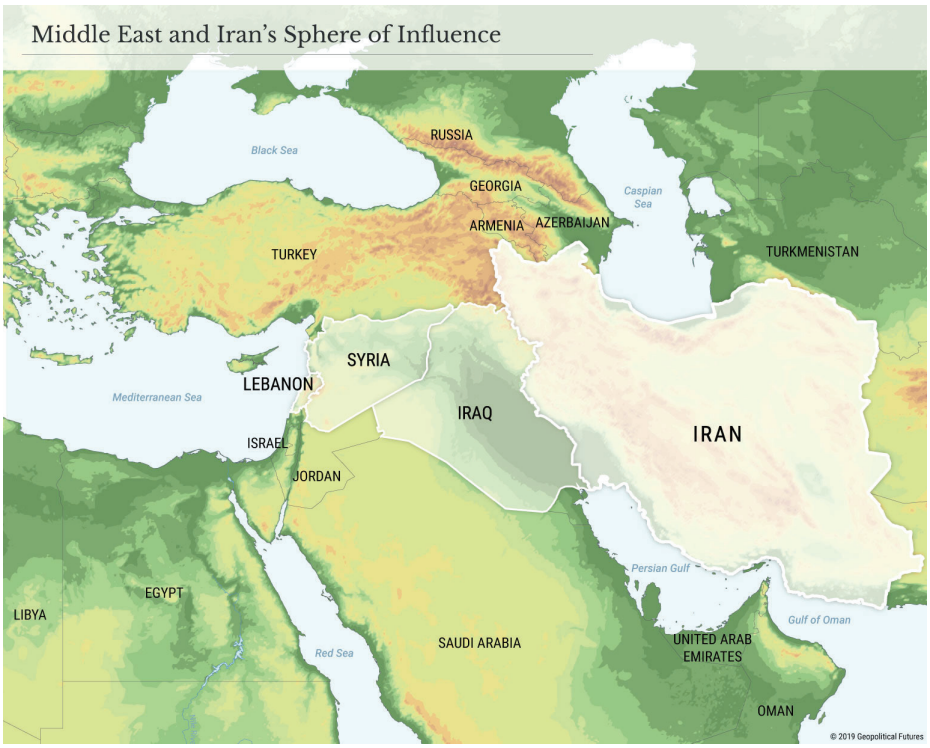
Despite the rapid spread of Iranian influence in Iraq, especially in the south, Iran's promotion of an exclusivist and belligerent sectarian identity did not sit well with most Shiites, who see themselves as the descendants of major tribes that hailed from Arabia. Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the leader of the 2005-06 transitional government in Iraq, sought to supplant Iraqi Shiite Arab heritage with a narrow sectarian identity. His zeal for Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's religious edicts alienated him among Shiites, who did not hide their distaste for religious revolutionism and influenced his political demise. Iran's clerical establishment has always sought to dominate Iraqi Shiism and replace Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who does not subscribe to Khomeini's rule of the jurisconsult, with a conformist spiritual leader. This policy backfired, despite Iran's financial support of students in Najaf's religious academies, making Iranian pilgrims generally unwelcome in the holy city.

Since 2003, almost 70 Iran-sponsored Shiite militias have emerged, most of which have been legitimized by the government in Baghdad. Iran has financially supported these groups, including the Popular Mobilization Forces, which have been active in fighting the Islamic State. Wahhabi raids on Shiite holy shrines in the early 20th century, and the Islamic State's capture of a large swath of Iraqi territory, convinced only a minority of Shiites that Iran should be seen as a trusted ally. Distrust of Iran in Iraq runs deep and cuts across sectarian lines. Despite endless proclamations of solidarity with Iraq, Iran – which is still haunted by the memory of its defeat in the 1980-88 war – had been contributing to the country's instability by providing it with arms and explosives. Shiites therefore understand that Iran wants Iraq to remain a weak and fragmented country.

An Identity Crisis

Suspicion of Iran is by no means surprising since Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis, who hail from the same tribes, are culturally and ethnically homogeneous. Most Shiites are former Bedouins who adopted Shiism in the 19th century after the development of Najaf into a provincial city and an economic hub in central Iraq. Iraqi Shiites are part of the national struggle between Arabs and Persians that dates back to the Muslim conquest of Persia and the fall of the Sa-

sanian Empire in the seventh century. This deep-rooted conflict has been disguised as an ideological crusade since Khomeini's Islamic revolution, but Shiites share the Sunni belief that Iranian influence is actually detrimental to Iraq. They argue that Iran sees Iraq as a base for its tug of war with the United States and a key part in its bid to establish itself as a supreme power in the Middle East.



An example of Iraqi grievances against the Iranians is Tehran's water management policies. After 2003, Iran accelerated the Shah's policy of dam construction and diversion of the Tigris River's principal tributaries such as the Lower Zab, Karun and Kerkhe that feed into the Shatt al-Arab river south of Baghdad. Iran dumps wastewater into the river, which is the primary source of water for Basra. Iraqis blame Iran for water shortages and salinity, as well as its deliberate destruction of their country's fishing industry.

Torn between Baathist oppressive hegemony, rapacious pro-Iranian militias, and abandonment by wealthy Arab states in the Gulf, many Iraqi Shiites feel they have lost their sense of identity. They see themselves as a besieged population, portrayed as untrustworthy by Sunni Arabs and manipulated by the Iranians. Indeed, a large number of Iraqi Shiites want to resolve their identity crisis and appear to have settled for an Arab national identity. They appear to have lost hope that the post-Saddam regime will release them from the repression they have suffered and concluded that the time has come for the regime to go.

Over the past month, anti-government protests have erupted in several cities, including Basra and Baghdad. Angry demonstrators have burned the posters of Khomeini, who is revered as sacred by Iraqi Shiite political parties and militias, and set the Iranian consulate in Karbala ablaze. In Basra, they chanted: "Iran out, Basra is free." In Nasiriyah, southeast of Baghdad, they burned the offices of pro-Iran parties, as well as the headquarters of the Badr Brigade.

The size and scope of the demonstrations that have spread throughout southern and central Iraq reveals the magnitude of the anger toward Iranian influence in Iraq – which has become synonymous with corruption, poverty and unemployment. The rise in youth unemployment and surge in poverty levels in oil-rich southern Iraq have fueled the protests. But it's clear that the demonstrations, which the government has used excessive force to subdue, say more

about the search for a true identity than they do about living standards. Demonstrators want to regain their dignity and free themselves from Iran's grip. Most Iraqis, be they Sunni Arabs or Shiites, reject any suggestions of a cultural link to their Persian neighbors and see their connection to Iran as purely spiritual. (Imam Ali al-Rida, the eighth imam in Twelver Imami Shi'ism, died and was buried in Tus, in northeastern Iran.)

Iran Entrenched in Iraq

Iraqi Shiites turned to Iran reluctantly. Saddam Hussein's reign of terror cut off Iraq's contact with the outside world and its liberating tendencies. With the emergence of the information revolution, Iraqi Shiites after 2003 were energized and tried to break the sectarian shackles Iran had used to bind the two countries together. But having given sanctuary to Shiite dissidents in the 1980s, who became the rulers of the post-Baathist regime in Bagdad, Iran controls the power centers of the Iraqi political system and its armed forces. In this respect, Iraq doesn't differ from other Arab countries. Despite the schism between the public and the despotic rulers, the latter continue to wield power at the top because they are willing to use excessive coercion to prevent real political change from taking place. Iraqi citizens of all denominations are emerging as a real political force, but this is a long and painful process, and one can only hope that it will grow to become impervious to sabotage. In the meantime, Iran seems well-positioned to maintain its hold over the centers of power in Iraq.

6 | The Dilemma of Iran's Islamic Revolution

Tehran must cope with a hostile environment and a dwindling ability to retaliate.

January 15, 2021 | Hilal Khashan

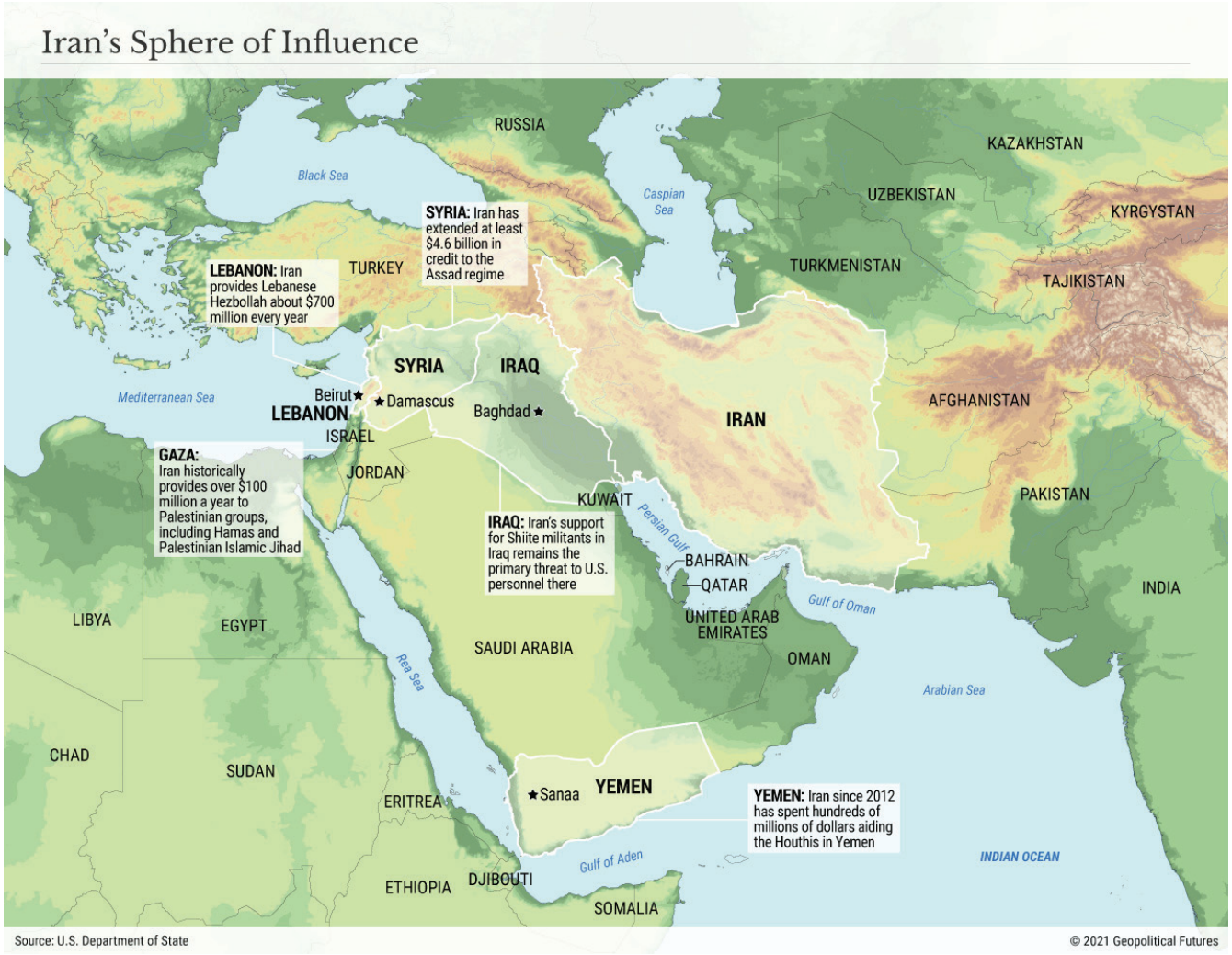
Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1979 Islamic Revolution ended Iran's nearly five centuries of uninterrupted imperial rule. But it continued the Persian tradition of territorial expansionism and regional dominance dating back to Cyrus the Great, whose empire in the sixth century B.C. stretched from North Africa to Central Asia. Iran's Islamic revolutionaries pursued their imperial objective under the guise of religious redemption, not brute military conquest, but they expanded the country's influence nonetheless.

Iran's war with Iraq in the 1980s slowed its penetration of the Arab region. Still, Iraq's defeat in Desert Storm in 1991 and its occupation by U.S. and allied forces in 2003 opened the way for Tehran to assert its influence in the Middle East. Last year, a former Iranian minister of intelligence bragged that Iran now controls four Arab capitals (Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa). Yet the U.S. withdrawal in 2018 from the Iran nuclear deal has gradually weakened Iran economically. It also isolated Tehran internationally. Iran is trying to cope with crippling sanctions, the new Sunni-Israeli alliance, frequent Israeli attacks and growing inability to sow discord in the region.

Imperial Nostalgia

Since the rise of the Safavid Empire in 1501, Iranian territorial ambitions stopped at India's gates in the east. They were also blocked in the north by czarist Russia, leaving the Arab lands in the west as the only outlet for fulfilling Iran's grandiose plans of becoming a world power. The leaders of the Iranian revolution similarly believe they are entitled to extend their influence throughout the Arab region. Khomeini and his propaganda machinery implored Arabs to topple their reactionary regimes and install Islamic revolutionary governments. Khomeini especially focused his calls on the Iraqi people, who he hoped would supplant their leaders and help him install a satellite government. He did everything within his capacity to destabilize Iraq, including assassination attempts, planting explosive devices and ordering daily artillery barrages, leading to the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

Many Iranians, be they Persians or Azeris, feel they are historically entitled to rule the region, and signing a treaty with them would not change their minds. In 1971, Mohammad Reza Shah ordered an ostentatious celebration in the ancient city of Persepolis commemorating the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire. Even though it was dubbed the world's most expensive party and resented by most Iranians, the festivities rekindled Iran's legendary nationalism. It's a tradition that current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei continues. In keeping with the Iranian elites' imperial thinking, Khamenei recently reminded the world that Iran's regional presence is nonnegotiable.



Iran's Arab Complex

Islam appeared in Mecca in 610 and spread spectacularly fast, overwhelming the worn-out Byzantine and Sasanian empires. In 636, an Arab Muslim army defeated the Persians in the Battle of Qadisiya in south-central Iraq, and 16 years later, the Sasanian Empire collapsed. This event stunned Persians who viewed their culture and civilization as superior to the conquering Arabs. Thanks to their religion, which permanently Islamized Iran, the Arabs – more than Persia's glorious past or any other people – have played a decisive role in shaping modern Iranian identity. Even though the Persians embraced Islam, they rejected the Arabic language and never overcame their historic defeat. The foundations of Islam's history took shape in the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties between 661 and 1258 in lands that accepted Arabization, which kept Persia outside the centers of power and deepened the dilemma of injured Persian national consciousness.

Many Arabs developed over the centuries the impression that Iranians are arrogant and condescending. During their 19th-century awakening, Arabs turned their back on Iranian culture. They chose to emulate Europe, namely France, because it presented itself as a liberal country even after colonialism. Most Iranians, both secular and religious, dislike Arabs; it does not

matter if they are Sunnis or Shiites. In the initial stages of the Iran-Iraq War, some 40,000 Iraqi Shiite soldiers defected to Iran, which imprisoned them because they were Arabs.

Assuming they could normalize their relations with Tehran, the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council tried to establish friendly relations with Iran. In December 2007, Qatar invited Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to attend the council's summit in Doha. Saudi King Abdullah walked hand in hand with him as a gesture of friendship. But Arab reconciliation efforts foundered because Iran's religious leaders behaved as if they were on a divine mission.

U.S. Stranglehold and Israeli Vigilance

U.S. and British cooperation in executing Operation Ajax in 1953 to depose Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and reinstate Mohammad Reza Shah's rule humiliated the Iranian people and shocked them profoundly. They did not forgive the shah for colluding with foreigners – who always blunted their national aspirations – to return to power. The CIA-orchestrated coup played a role in making Khomeini's inspired revolution a success. The Islamic Revolution's plans for regional hegemony did not sit well with the U.S. and Israel, let alone Arabs, and immediately poisoned their relations. They only worsened with time.

The past few years of U.S. and Israeli strikes against Iran have revealed its military weakness and incapacity to retaliate, especially since its ability to use its regional proxies and get away with it is diminishing. On the first anniversary of the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Brigade, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah announced that avenging his death is the responsibility of all free people. He assured Shiites that the axis of resistance (Iran, Iraq, Syria, Houthi Yemen and Lebanon) emerged stronger from Soleimani's death.

Nasrallah falsely claimed that the assassination established a military situation that jeopardized the American presence in Iraq, which forced Donald Trump's administration to withdraw U.S. troops from the country. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, he said that Iran does not ask its allies to carry out military operations on its behalf. He said Iran knows when, how and where to answer Soleimani's killing. Nasrallah even praised Iran's self-restraint in not falling into the trap of retaliation, saying that the alliance it leads has an authentic and responsible leadership that made victories possible. He eventually laid the matter to rest, saying: "Killing our leaders makes us more determined to persevere to achieve our goals."

The Iranians have come to understand that U.S. President-elect Joe Biden will not lift the sanctions on Iran gratuitously, and instead will largely uphold the far-reaching expectations laid out for Tehran by his predecessor. Frustrated Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif rejected Biden's preconditions for lifting the sanctions and demanded that the U.S. abide by its commitments to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Zarif said the U.S. is not in a position to stipulate conditions to renegotiate the deal from which Trump unilaterally withdrew in 2018.

Iran also accused Israel of killing Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, its top nuclear scientist, last November, but did not answer it, revealing Tehran's military weakness and lack of options. Israel, whose air force continues to target Iranian assets in Syria, is carefully scrutinizing Iranian activity throughout the region and progress in its nuclear program.

Iran's Dwindling Options

There is little doubt that Iran's Arab policy is expansionist, combining religion with Persian imperial ambitions. Since 1979, the Islamic Revolution and Iran's governments have continued the territorial policy of Persia's ancient and medieval empires and the Pahlavis between 1925 and 1979. The 41st Gulf Cooperation Council summit, recently held in Saudi Arabia, issued the al-Ula Declaration, which ended Qatar's blockade and reached a unified foreign policy. This turnaround is not welcome news in Tehran.

Iran's frequent military exercises are intended to signal to the U.S. that its freedom of action is beyond subjugation and that it will retaliate massively against any attack. Iran disclosed an underground missile base on the Persian Gulf coast during an unscheduled tour by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps commander, Hussein Salami. But Tehran's ostentatious military parades are nothing more than a charade because the balance of military power tilts grossly toward its adversaries.

When the new commander of the Quds Brigade, Ismail Qaani, visited Baghdad last year, the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias thought he would distribute cash handouts as his predecessor had. Much to their disappointment, he gave them nothing. The Iraqi authorities required him to apply for an entry visa before his second visit, where he gave out silver rings. Qaani told the militias' commanders not to expect money from Iran and, instead, rely on the Iraqi government's $2 billion handout. Divisions plagued the Iran-backed Iraqi militias after the death of their deputy chief, who died in the same attack that killed Soleimani. The umbrella movement failed twice to reach a prime minister's consensus to succeed Haidar al-Abadi before agreeing on Mustafa al-Kadhimi in May 2020. Unlike bureaucratically rigid Qaani, the two are charismatic and influential enough to keep the militias together.

Iran avoids confrontation with its adversaries and usually uses its regional proxies in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen to set the region on fire. Iran is much less likely to use its regional proxies to launch an attack similar to the one carried out against Saudi Aramco oil installations in September 2019. The U.S. and Israel warned Iran that any attack against them by Tehran's proxies would invite an overwhelming reaction against Iran itself. Iran's conservatives have condemned reformist President Hassan Rouhani's policy of strategic patience in the face of grueling U.S. sanctions. Still, Ahmadinejad warned Iranian leaders against escalation and urged them to avoid any measures that could lead to war.

Iran does not bend under foreign pressure; fulfilling its national objectives outweighs any consideration, and its pride is more important than economic interests. However, Iranian leadership will eschew escalation, even as it proceeds with its nuclear program, which could only be stopped by an all-out U.S. attack that is not forthcoming. Iran boasts lively and diverse schools of thought that attest to its immense cultural richness, even though their ideological differences complicate its ability to project a consensual domestic and foreign policy. Only the Iranian people can extricate the country from its perennial dilemma.

7 | Iran's Nuclear Dilemma

For many Iranians, the nuclear program is a key part of restoring the country's past glory.

October 2, 2020 | Hilal Khashan

Nationalism is a powerful force in Iran's political consciousness. But in recent centuries, military defeats, external occupations and foreign interference have tempered its citizens' sense of historical and cultural pride. One of the more recent examples of foreign meddling is Operation Ajax, a U.S. plot to take down Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 after he nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and replace him with the shah. This event registered as an example of Western domination and helped motivate Iranians to reclaim their past glory.

The Iranian nuclear program is a continuation of this long-standing endeavor. Iranians, regardless of their political leanings, believe becoming a nuclear power is part of their national redemption story. They argue that they are surrounded by enemies who have violated their territorial integrity time and again. Even if they accept a new political deal that restricts their nuclear activity, they likely won't abandon their goal of becoming a nuclear power altogether.

The Evolution of the Nuclear Program

During the Cold War, the United States considered the shah a component of its Soviet containment strategy. Iran, which saw the Soviet Union as its main security concern outside its own borders, was strategically located, forming with Turkey the northern tier that would prevent the Soviet Union from encroaching on the oil-rich Persian Gulf. The shah recognized benefits of partnering with Washington. As part of President Dwight Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace program, Iran signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with the U.S. in 1957. In 1959, the shah ordered the establishment of a nuclear research center at Tehran University, and nine years later, Iran's U.S.-provided 5MW atomic reactor became operational. With Anglo-American backing, he sought to make Iran a regional power and the security broker of the Persian Gulf.

The shah secured technical expertise and enriched uranium to establish Iran's nuclear program. Until his ouster in 1979, Iran collaborated with the U.S., France, India, Argentina, South Africa and Germany to help build the Bushehr nuclear reactor. The shah spent $6 billion to construct nuclear facilities and planned to spend another $30 billion to build 20 nuclear reactors. The annual budget of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, which he founded in 1974, totaled $1.3 billion, second only to the National Iranian Oil Company. Even though Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Agreement in 1968, there was no doubt that the shah's ultimate goal was to develop nuclear weapons.

Many Iranians, especially poorer rural folks who migrated to cities during the shah's economic modernization campaign, saw no point in squandering the country's oil resources on such an outlandish project. After the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, citing Islamic jurisprudence's view that manufacturing atomic weapons is immoral, ordered the dismantling of the

country's nuclear program and allowed Iranian scientists to immigrate to foreign countries.

Khomeini seemed convinced that his revolution would soon spread throughout the Islamic world. He and the mullahs in Tehran did not expect Iraq to invade in September 1980, despite the fact that Iran had been provoking Iraq by planting explosives, launching cross-border shelling, attempting to assassinate senior officials, and encouraging Shiites to overthrow the Baathist regime. After they saw the damage weapons of mass destruction could do in the Iran-Iraq War, leaders came to regret dismantling the nuclear program and purging the armed forces after the revolution, both of which weakened the country against Iraq. They concluded that they must create a deterrent military capability consisting of conventional arms and weapons of mass destruction.

The war bloodied Iran, ravaged its economy and engendered a determination among the elite to acquire nuclear technology. Iran emerged militarily weak and had difficulty replenishing its depleted conventional military hardware with modern equipment. It sought to accelerate its nuclear program to achieve a deterrent capability and expand its ballistic missile program to offset a lack of sophisticated aircraft.

In 1989, Iran and the Soviet Union signed their first atomic deal. And in 1993, after Germany declined to resume the construction of the Bushehr nuclear reactor, Boris Yeltsin announced that Russia would complete it. Since the 1990s, however, the Iranians have toned down their public push for nuclear capabilities, recognizing that the international community is hell-bent on preventing Iran from acquiring an atomic bomb.

Motivations

Iran says that its nuclear ambitions are driven by a need for energy security, but considering the country's enormous oil and gas deposits, that argument is unconvincing. (The cost of generating electricity from these supplies is less than 20 percent of the cost of generating electricity from nuclear power.) In truth, Iran believes it needs to become a nuclear power in order to be seen as an equal of one of its rivals, Israel. It also wants to improve its strategic outlook relative to Turkey, Central Asia and Pakistan. Iran borders hostile countries in Central Asia and shares porous borders with Pakistan in Baluchistan, and it believes that the best way to keep them at bay is by acquiring nuclear capabilities.

For the Iranian people, history goes a long way in explaining the need for a nuclear program. Since the rise of the Safavid dynasty in 1501, Iran has felt isolated. The defining Battle of Chaldrian in 1514, in which the Ottomans soundly defeated the Persian army, shocked the Safavids and created a perennial security complex for them. Then, after a series of defeats at the hands of czarist Russia, Iran lost Transcaucasia to the Russians following the signing of the 1819 Treaty of Gulistan. In the 20th century, Iran's strategic vulnerability became worse after an uneven encounter with Russia and Great Britain.

Iranians thus view their modern history as a history laden with defeat and abuse at the hands of foreign powers. They remember the 1890 tobacco concession deal in which Nasir al-Din Shah gave a British company a monopoly over the country's tobacco industry for a ludicrously low price, and the 1901 D'Arcy concession that gave a British businessman the right to domi-

nate the country's oil industry. They also remember the Russian occupation of Tabriz in 1908. Iranians believe acquiring nuclear weapons would protect the country against future foreign meddling in their domestic affairs.

For Iran's ruling conservatives, the nuclear program is necessary to maintain the country's regional standing. They realize that the legitimacy Iran garnered through Khomeini's revolution is eroding and believe the nuclear standoff with the U.S. is providing the regime with a new source of legitimacy.

U.S. and Israeli Concerns

Israel is adamant that it will not allow the Iranian nuclear program to continue. Over the past few years, agents apparently associated with Israel's Mossad intelligence agency assassinated four Iranian scientists and wounded one more. Last July, a mysterious explosion caused by either a bomb or cyberattack destroyed a centrifuge workshop producing enriched uranium at the Natanz nuclear facility, 200 miles south of Tehran. Even though Iran has pledged to rebuild the plant deep inside the mountains, it was a major setback for the Iranian nuclear program that would require at least two years to overcome.

In May 2018, the U.S. withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and reinstated crippling sanctions on the country. President Donald Trump believes the sanctions will force Iran to dismantle its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and end its support for its proxies throughout the Middle East. But Iran is too invested to back down. Iranians have seen their country withstand many challenges in the past and seem to believe that they will persevere again.

8 | Iran's Ideological Imperative

Tehran's ambitions in the nuclear talks go far beyond lifting sanctions.

February 24, 2022 | Hilal Khashan

A nuclear deal in Vienna is on the horizon. Iran knows it will not succeed in imposing its preconditions for returning to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew from in 2018. Despite the rhetoric coming from Iranian officials about having Washington lift all sanctions with assurances that it will not rescind its promises again, they have resigned themselves to grudgingly accepting Washington's position that an agreement is not a legally binding treaty. State-controlled media outlets do not present an honest view to the Iranian public of what's going on in Vienna, stressing instead that the outcome of the negotiations will meet Iran's expectations. But Tehran's goals here are broader than merely having sanctions removed. It needs a respite from its hostilities with the West to return to the oil market, undergo critical economic reforms and restore its regional diplomatic relations before it can resume its ideologically driven regional ambitions.

Limits of Returning to the JCPOA

The original JCPOA did not lift all sanctions on Iran, although it extended renewable economic relief, especially by allowing Iran to export its oil. Iranian negotiators understood that demanding the lifting of the entire sanctions regime was an unrealistic bargaining position, finally acquiescing to a multistage deal to roll back its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions related to the program being dropped. In 2015, Iran preferred to endure the non-nuclear sanctions to avoid curtailing its regional activities and ambitious missile development plans. The Iranians pushed for a timeframe to move from one stage to another to ensure an expeditious return to the oil market. The new agreement demands Iran reduce its uranium enrichment to 3.67 percent, dismantle its advanced centrifuges and store them in designated areas outside the country before sanctions relief takes effect. Since Iranian officials established a reputation for using evasive tactics and procrastination, the U.S. insists on its complete compliance before sanctions are removed.

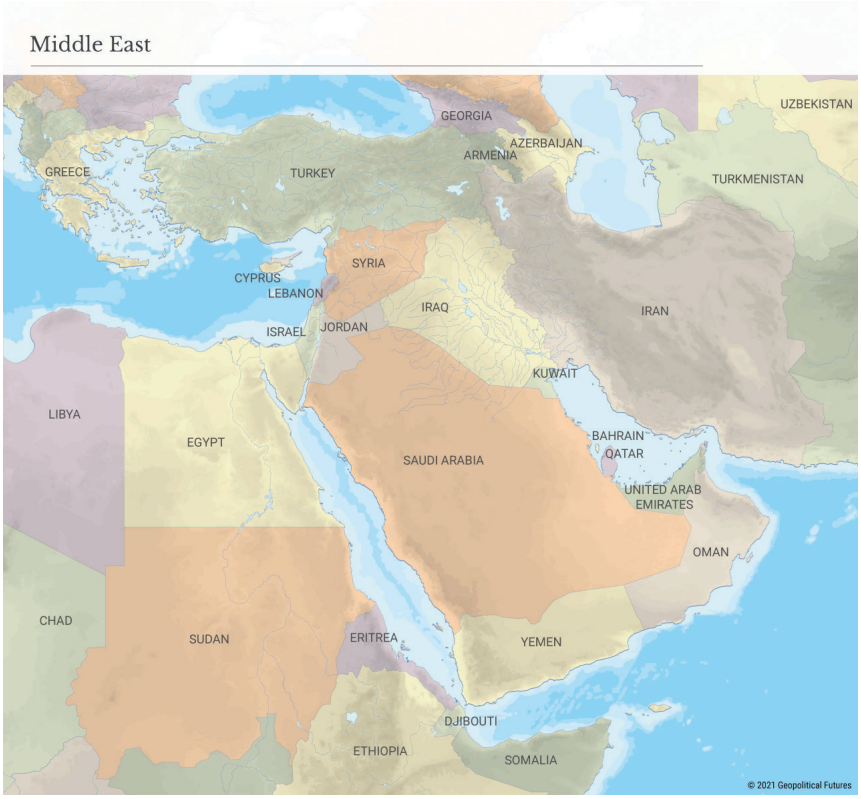
During Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Moscow last month, Russian President Vladimir Putin urged him to accept the U.S. deal because the six world powers involved in the Vienna talks had reached a consensus that required Iran to fully comply with certain terms for returning to the 2015 nuclear agreement. Last June, U.S. President Joe Biden reached an agreement with Putin to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Ahead of Raisi's visit, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett called Putin, with whom he has developed close relations, and urged him to take a tough stand against Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Lifting the sanctions on Iran's nuclear program, however, will not be sufficient to resolve its financial problems and end its isolation, especially in the Middle East. Iran is therefore trying to build bridges with other countries in the region. Raisi recently visited Doha in a surprise dip-

lomatic stunt and signed several economic agreements with Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Raisi's principal target is Saudi Arabia because lifting sanctions stemming from Iran's destabilizing activities depends on repairing Tehran's ties with Riyadh. He wants to use Qatar's good offices to expedite normalizing relations with Riyadh, especially since the meetings in Baghdad between Iranian and Saudi diplomats did not lead to a breakthrough. The Saudis are equally interested in engaging the Iranians, and their desire to have Doha play mediator swayed King Salman to end Saudi Arabia's three-and-a-half-year blockade on Qatar.

Iran's Ideological Objectives

The ongoing Vienna talks have not addressed Iran's regional policies, human rights violations and missile development activities. Therefore, the related sanctions will stay in effect until the Iranians resolve these outstanding issues. The U.S. has already informed the Iranians to settle directly with Riyadh what the Saudis consider Tehran's regional subversive activities.



It's nearly impossible to separate Iran's foreign policy from its ideological objectives. Since the shah's fall in 1979, Iran has been trying to export its revolution throughout the Arab region. Its successes in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen attest to Iran's perseverance and the weakness and fragmentation of the Arab political order. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's exhortation of Iraqi Shiites to topple Saddam Hussein's regime triggered the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 enabled Iran to gain a foothold in Iraq, eventually establishing numerous loyal Shiite militias and dominating Iraqi politics. Iran's encouragement of Shiites to rebel against injustice put it on a collision course with Saudi Arabia, the leading country in the Gulf Cooperation Council. Iran drew closer to the Saudi border, galvanizing politically and socially marginalized Shiites in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to demand political inclusion and fair access to material resources.

The restive Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province is an impoverished and ostracized subcultural group that comprises 15 percent of the local population. Encouraged by the success of the Iranian Revolution, it rebelled in November 1979 against the government. The military crushed the rebellion and initiated a reign of terror in the Eastern Province until 1983. Residents again took to the streets during the 2011 Arab Spring and after Saudi authorities executed Shiite activist cleric Nimr al-Nimr in 2016. Iran reacted angrily to al-Nimr's execution, and protesters attacked the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, leading to the severance of

diplomatic relations between the two countries.

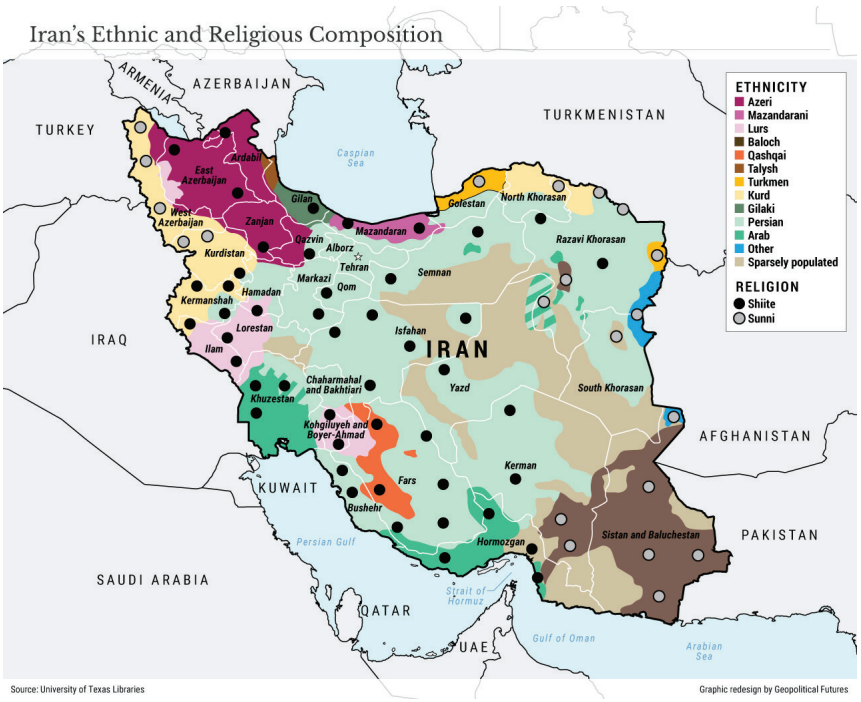
Central to Khomeini's revolutionary ideological approach was the concept of backing oppressed peoples and supporting their fight against tyrannical rulers. Under these pretenses, Iran justified its selective interference in its neighbors' domestic affairs and forging of alliances with local forces in these countries. The fact that Raisi insists on removing the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, especially its extraterritorial branch the Quds Force, from the U.S. list of foreign terrorist organizations clearly demonstrates that Iran intends to pursue its destabilizing regional policies.

Since the revolution, Iran has held annual international Islamic conferences and celebrations to promote pan-Islamic unity. But these publicity events contradict Iran's focus on Shiism and ascendant Persian nationalism at home. Indeed, Iran's national policies have a solid sectarian tendency. The Iranian constitution declares Twelver Imami Shiism the official religion of the Islamic Republic and specifies that its president must be an Iranian who believes in its religious orientation.

Iran's Islamic ideology combines Shiism and historically rooted Persian society, culture and civilization. It is worth noting that the Islamic Republic is not only about religion and affinity to foreign Shiite sects. It cannot ignore the pluralist social fabric of Iranian society that antedates the revolution – provided demands for political change do not denounce or undermine the Islamic Revolution. National security necessitates tolerating the opposition that works within the boundaries set by the state. Iran's diverse political spectrum includes extremely nationalist groups with no regard for Islam and ultrareligious groups focused solely on Islamic identity. Between these two extremes, many other groups display a mosaic of political-religious preferences that oppose the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, especially its emphasis on the Arab region.

Regional Outlook

Israel is not the only Middle Eastern country worried about Iran's nuclear ambitions. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates also believe that the negotiations with Iran will not end its nuclear aspirations but merely postpone them – essentially because after 2031, Iran will be free to enrich uranium beyond 3.67 percent at its Fordo and Natanz facilities. Saudi Arabia knows that the U.S. wants to reach a nuclear deal with Iran, and that it cannot obstruct it. The Biden administration prefers that the Iranians and Saudis settle their differences separately from the talks in Vien-



na. The Saudi royals do not have an option except to communicate with the Iranians. The Saudis need an agreement to end Yemen's seven-year war, which overburdened its financial resources and dissuaded foreign entrepreneurs from investing in its Vision 2030 plan to wean itself from dependence on oil revenues and achieve economic development.

Iran and Saudi Arabia might reach an entente, but it's unlikely to last because their regional visions are incompatible. For decades, the foundations of Saudi foreign policy rested on avoiding conflict and promoting regional stability. In contrast, Iran led an aggressive regional approach to spread its influence and reshape the region to its advantage. The two countries need a break from conflict to ponder their internal politics. Iran needs to rebuild its economy and placate its impoverished population. The Saudi royals desire a smooth leadership succession and a move from a rentier to a knowledge-based economy. Iran is interested in developing its economic ties with the Arab world, especially the sizable Saudi market. By opening to Saudi Arabia, Iran hopes to send a clear message of goodwill to other countries in the region that it is a legitimate regional power.

Iran is not rushing to impose its regional hegemony, perceiving it as a worthwhile historical endeavor. It uses soft power – for example, spreading its culture, providing scholarships, extending invitations to visit Iran, and interacting with government officials, clerics and intellectuals – to influence the Arab public. Iran helped Hezbollah launch a cultural revolution among Lebanese Shiites, who no longer associate with Lebanon. It altered the demographic composition of Syria, a project it cautiously initiated in the early 1980s, transforming it into a country that looks more Shiite than Sunni. Iran attempted to spread Shiism in Morocco, Egypt and Sudan, and succeeded partially in Yemen and Gaza, thanks to its partnership with the Islamic Jihad Movement in the Palestinian territories. The leaders of the Islamic Republic constantly search for opportunities to infiltrate the region at the mass level and try to take advantage of interstate political divisions. When the Saudis and Emiratis led a regional effort to enforce an austere blockade on Qatar in 2017, Iran immediately opened its skies to flights to and from Doha. It also established a sea route to supply essential goods to Qatar. Iran is constantly looking for opportunities to influence foreign events and consolidate its status as a significant regional power. In the politically volatile Middle East, opportunities never cease to present themselves for watchful Iran.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Hilal Khashan is a contributing analyst at Geopolitical Futures. He is a Professor of political science at the American University of Beirut and a respected author and analyst of Middle Eastern affairs. He is the author of six books, including Hizbullah: A Mission to Nowhere. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019.) He is currently writing a book titled Saudi Arabia: The Dilemma of Political Reform and the Illusion of Economic Development. He is also the author of more than 110 articles that appeared in journals such as Orbis, The Journal of Conflict Resolution, The Brown Journal of World Affairs, Middle East Quarterly, Third World Quarterly, Israel Affairs, Journal of Religion and Society, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, and The British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies.

MISSON STATEMENT

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