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Iran's Destructive Regional Policy An Underrated Problem

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When talking about security challenges emanating from Iran, its nuclear weapons programme takes the centre stage, especially after the United States withdrew from the Iran Nuclear Deal. This strong and quite justified focus, however, often makes Iran's regional activities, with their direct consequences for security in Europe, disappear from view. Irrespective of the Iran Nuclear Deal and its future, it becomes clear that Iran cannot be a partner for the West in the Middle East. As long as Tehran can exercise its destructive influence there will be no prospect of more stability in the region. Not least in the interest of their own security, Europe and the United States should be anxious to stop Iran's advance in the region.

Main features of Iran's Regional Policy

To put Iran's regional activities into perspective, their ideological and political foundations are outlined at the beginning of this paper. The "Islamic Revolution" and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 rescinded the hitherto western orientation of the Iranian domestic and foreign policy. The pro-American and anti-Soviet alignment was replaced by a religious internationalism, which claimed to transcend narrow national interests and to free the oppressed Muslim masses in the Arab countries. The objective was to overthrow Arab nationalist despotisms, which were to be superseded by a "Governance of the Jurists" (*Velāyat-e faqīh*). Ultimately this policy has aimed to destroy the existing system of states in the region until today. For this reason, one can agree with U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis who said, "[Iran is] not a nation state, but a revolutionary cause".

Besides these ideological aspects of Iran's foreign policy, especially its antisemitism, its historical self-perception as a hegemonic power in the Middle East is also of major importance. While Tehran's endeavour to export its state model failed – not even a vaguely similar state model has been implemented in another country so far – the mullah regime has managed to significantly increase its influence in the region since 1979. Particularly since the liberation of Iraq from Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011, Tehran has cleverly exploited the spaces and the power vacuum created in the course of these developments. The regime's focus is particularly on the following four countries: Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria.

Iraq

Tehran began to organise and arm its Shiite brothers in faith in Iraq just shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein; after all Iran's rulers consider the neighbouring country their natural sphere of influence. Under the tutelage of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a powerful network of Shiite militias answerable to Tehran only developed in the years that followed. Not only did these militias fight against coalition forces but they also terrorised the Sunni population of Iraq, especially when sectarian violence culminated between 2006 and 2008. At the same time, Tehran consolidated its influence on the country's Shiite political parties, which – for demographic reasons – have since held the majority of seats in the Iraqi parliament. This will ensure that Tehran can continue

to exert considerable leverage on politics in the neighbouring country after this year's parliamentary elections. What is more, both countries have very close trade ties, and millions of Iranians visit Iraq's pilgrimage sites every year. Iran is pursuing two major objectives in Iraq: on the one hand it seeks to prevent Iraq from becoming a hostile state again, as it was under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, and to forestall another war like that from 1980 to 1988. At the same time, Iran is intent on denying other actors such as the United States or the Gulf States more influence in Iraq. The country between Euphrates and Tigris, on the other hand, is key territory for Iran's hegemonic plans, especially as it would provide Tehran with a land bridge connecting Iran with the Mediterranean Sea. This land bridge is a crucial goal of Iran's foreign policy. It is, for example, of importance for the delivery of military equipment to the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Particularly since 2014 and the war against ISIL, Iran has further increased its influence. As previously mentioned, the regime established Shiite militias in Iraq and also sent own troops to fight against the self-proclaimed caliphate in the neighbouring country. However, these militias have not been demobilised after the victory over ISIL but live on; some of them have been integrated into Iraq's regular armed forces. This is problematic not only because they constitute a state within a state but rather because these militias further deepen the sectarian divide in Iraq and thus hamper the desperately needed reconciliation process. Quite to the contrary, with their brutal action in predominantly Sunni areas liberated from ISIL, these militias are once again creating the conditions that were the prerequisite for the rise of the terrorist organisation in the first place. They are no less callous than ISIL fighters and responsible for ethnic cleansing, torture and extralegal executions of Sunni Muslims. The mere suspicion of having collaborated with ISIL is reason enough for them to resort to such measures. Only recently, the Iraqi parliament passed a law granting financial support by the Iraqi state to the militias controlled by Iran. Not only does Iran create demographic and military facts, it also permeates the economy of its neighbour to an ever-increasing extent because many contracts for the reconstruction of Iraq are awarded to Iranian companies.

Yemen

In Yemen, Iran is sponsoring Shiite Houthi rebels with arms, training and funding in order to support their insurgency against the Saudi-backed government. Iran is, without doubt, not the cause of the civil war in Yemen and its disastrous consequences for the civilian population, nor is Tehran the only regional power that fuels and prolongs the conflict again and again. However, there will be no prospect of peace for the country on the Red Sea as long Iran keeps up its influence at the current level. Even though Iran has only little economic and geopolitical interest in Yemen, its presence there is of obvious benefit in the struggle against Saudi Arabia for supremacy in the region. The mullah regime is thus in a position to tie up considerable resources of the Kingdom and harm the main ally of the United States in the region with comparatively little effort. It can use the long and permeable border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia as a gateway for attacks on the Kingdom, annoy the House of Saud with its pinprick policy time and again, or make Houthi rebels fire rockets on Riyadh as happened in 2017.

What is more, Iran may threaten freedom of navigation in the Red Sea by its presence in Yemen. The Tehran-backed militias have so far launched attacks exclusively on warships of the Saudi coalition. Iran would, however, use Yemen as a base for attacks on merchant ships if its nuclear facilities were bombed, or if the regime felt threatened by other factors. This would have major implications for the world economy. For Tehran, these are more than theoretical considerations, which manifests itself in the fact that Iran has begun to support the Houthis in developing better weapon systems.

Lebanon

To date Lebanon is considered the blueprint for Iran's efforts to achieve hegemony in the region. The foundation of Hezbollah – which still benefits from considerable financial support by Tehran – in the early 1980s went beyond the creation of a powerful paramilitary group in the cedar state. Rather, Hezbollah has turned into a powerful political organisation in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War. Decisions against its will are hardly possible. Although the “Party of Allah” has repeatedly attempted to present itself as a distinctly Lebanese organisation, occasionally using patriotic slogans and emphasising the Islamic-ecumenical element in the multireligious and multi-ethnic cedar state, there can be no doubt that the terror organisation is nothing more than an extension of Tehran's regime. In a conflict situation, it will give the interests of the revolutionary leader, Ali Khamenei, priority over those of Lebanon. Iran, with the help of Hezbollah, is pursuing various strategic goals. As in other countries, the primary objective of Tehran's interference in Lebanon is to contain the influence of Saudi Arabia and the United States in the region. What is more, its border to Israel makes Lebanon an attractive country for Iran's regional strategy. After all, the destruction of the Jewish state is more than mere propaganda by the Ayatollahs but the key goal of their policy in the region. Moreover, Lebanon is strategically coveted by Iran's regime for its direct access to the Mediterranean Sea.

Hezbollah's role, however, goes beyond controlling Lebanon and asserting Iran's interests there. The “Party of Allah” is also an effective instrument of state-sponsored terrorism as became evident by terrorist activities in the past, such as the attacks on the Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires in 1992, or on Israeli tourists in Bulgaria in 2012. Up to the outbreak of the civil war in neighbouring Syria, and especially after the war against Israel in 2006, Hezbollah was a useful propaganda asset because Tehran won much sympathy also among Sunni Arabs for its support to the organisation, through which it could present itself as the spearhead of all Muslims against the Jewish state. Hezbollah has, however, forfeited any sympathy among Sunnis with its intervention in the Syrian civil war in support of the Assad regime. The ruthless war, ethnic cleansing, and the war crimes of the Assad regime and its Iranian allies have turned Hezbollah into a foe in the eyes of the Arab world. The further aggravation of the Sunni-Shiite conflict, significantly driven by Tehran and Damascus, is intensifying tensions between the sectarian groups and increasing the risk of the collapse of the fragile political system, ultimately triggering another civil war in the cedar state.

Syria

None of the countries mentioned so far is receiving more attention and resources from Tehran than Syria. When the Arab Spring reached the Levant state in March 2011, it soon became clear that the regime in Damascus, unlike those in Tunisia and Egypt, was anything but prepared to open the door for political and social restructuring. Bashar al-Assad rather followed his father's example and quelled any protests against his regime. Particularly at the beginning these demonstrations had been held peacefully and joined by each of the various groups of the population. Much like with Yemen, the Syrian civil war has meanwhile become too complex to view Iran as the sole party responsible for fanning the flames. The mullah regime and its activities, however, are the biggest obstacle to the pacification of the country as Assad is still in power, not least thanks to Iran's support. The mainstay of the war are Iranian ground forces, consisting of members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Hezbollah and international Shiite mercenaries from Afghanistan, Pakistan and a number of other countries. In effect, Iran has taken over control of the Syrian military and secret services.

The fact that Tehran invests between 20 and 30 billion USD in Syria alone per year, even though these resources are urgently needed to support the ailing domestic economy, has two main strategic reasons. On the one hand, Syria is a key country for the land bridge from Tehran to Beirut, with Damascus traditionally being Iran's only close Arab ally. An overthrow of the Assad regime would be a serious setback in Iran's efforts to dominate the Middle East.

On the other hand, Syria is important for the regime in Tehran because it could establish a second front against Israel. The ongoing military entrenchment in Syria is accompanied by other measures intended to change demographic realities, with Iran not shying away from ethnic cleansing. For example, areas regained from opposition forces are systematically repopulated with Shiite families. Moreover, the Iranians have begun to take possession of real estate and pieces of land in Syria. For one, they are compensation for Iran's support to the Syrian government, while this forced change in the demographic structure will make sure that the Assad regime will continue to stay in power, thus making a solution to the conflict impossible.

Conclusion: Europe and Germany should stand firm against Iran's regional ambitions

There can be no doubt that the Iranian regime strives to expand and consolidate its hegemony in the region. It would be a fallacy though to conclude that the problems in the Middle East with its complicated intra-state, ethnic and religious conflicts would disappear if Iran's influence vanished into thin air. At the same time, it is fair to say that there will be no prospect whatsoever of the disastrous situation improving in the region as long as Iran is exerting influence in the Middle East as described above. It becomes clear that the regime in Tehran is pursuing a strategy which clashes with the security interests of the West and will not contribute to the pacification of the Middle East. On the one hand, it is a threat to the security of the West's Sunni allies such as Jordan.

Teheran's aggressive activities have, on the other hand, further exacerbated the already tense situation between Iran and Sunni states, with the prospect of an open war that is more likely today than it was only a few years ago. The same applies to Israel, which has carried out more than 200 air strikes on Iranian positions in Syria and has made it abundantly clear that it will not tolerate a permanent Iranian presence there. This is unacceptable for the Jewish state not least because Iran keeps on threatening Israel with its annihilation. It must be emphasized that antisemitism is an essential element of Iran's doctrine. It must be taken seriously and not be dismissed as folklore with a touch of propaganda. Given its history and the public assertions that Israel's security is part of its *raison d'être*, Germany in particular needs to emphasize more clearly, accompanied by economic pressure if necessary, that these threats against the closest and most reliable ally in the region will not be tolerated any longer.

Europe should also have an interest in curbing Iran's influence in the region because the large majority of people in the Middle East are fleeing from the mullah regime and its allies. It is at least hard to understand why at the political level the influx of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees has never really been associated with the actions of Iran (and Russia) in the Levant. Neither has anybody so far addressed the fact that these refugees will never return to Syria in significant numbers as long as Assad and his Iranian allies rule the country. It is high time, therefore, to take the disastrous consequences of Iran's policy seriously and to curb the regime's influence in the region. But first of all we will have to realise that Iran is an opponent, not a partner.

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