

Revolutionary Iran and the Arab Causes: A Case of Ideological Entrapment

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Brief Analysis

‘Iran has no objective interest in pursuing an anti-U.S. and anti-Israel policy, and would be amenable to a radical compromise, provided that its stature as the regional super-power is duly recognized.’ This is the blunt message communicated through various channels, including Iranian scholars associated with Tehran’s policy community during chance encounters with their Washington counterparts in Europe and the Middle East.

The message seems to confirm some Middle Eastern capitals’ long-standing suspicions—along with the hopes of a few circles in Washington—that Iran’s commitment to the ‘Palestinian cause’ and Arab revolutionary rhetoric is a tactical tool that seeks to further its ambition of regional hegemony, and is therefore reversible through negotiations towards a ‘grand bargain’ that recognizes the state as a conventional regional power.

While credible reports indicate that components of state establishment in Tehran would welcome a departure of policy that supports non-state actors in the region and a normalization of conventional diplomatic relations, the expectation that it could translate into an actual shift in policy is a case of wishful thinking. A more plausible assessment would consider the floating of this type of policy realignment a deliberate attempt by those with real power in the regime to encourage international calls for a ‘soft approach’ to dilute the resolve of their regional and international opponents.

The fundamental flaw in the expectation of policy shift is that much of Iran’s regional influence is predicated on its status as a champion of revolution. The primacy, potential or realized, of the Islamic Republic of Iran has always been premised on its adoption of regional revolutionary causes and its support of revolutionary actors. For forty years after, Iran has consistently pursued a strategy of nurturing and leveraging revolutionary impulses across the region—to shift this strategy would in effect negate the state’s entire foreign policy.

New Applications of an Ancient Model

Revolutionary Iran has effectively developed a ‘satrapy model’ reminiscent, albeit with considerable differences, of imperial antecedents. To insure control of the considerable span of territory over which they stretched, ancient Near Eastern empires—including Assyrian, Babylonian, and notably the Achaemenid Persian Empires—resorted to a form of tightly managed de-centralization, through which the internal affairs of remote provinces were delegated to the appointed local ruler in exchange for a reliable flow of ‘blood and treasure.’ The modern satrapy model expects

strategic advantage in lieu of tribute. In fact, it entails the provision of funds to the satrapy to secure such strategic advantage.

Both the imperial and revolutionary satrapy models rely on powerful messaging directed to subject populations affirming the place of the central authority. For the former, it was the overwhelming, punishing power of the imperial center that ensured its satrapies' submission. For the latter, the messaging is more subtle, with different versions proposed to relevant segments of the audience. This has amounted to a complex system of promotion of affinities, loyalties, and interests. The backbone of the revolutionary satrapy model system is the adoption of said elements of the 1970s ideological discourse in the Arab world, of which the Palestinian cause is central.

Supremacism—Sunni, Shi'i, Arab, or Persian—was present in the 1970s ideological landscape. Propositions of Shi'i supremacism were manifested in Khomeini's pan-Islamic irredentism, while, on the verge of the Juhayman al-Utaybi Meccan sanctuary takeover, Sunni supremacism as radical Wahhabism was formalizing in modern forms in Saudi Arabia. Yet, the ideological foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran as a movement capable of mass-mobilization are better pursued in the progressive Islamism of Ali Shariati and the critique of new and self-inflicted forms of colonialism of Jalal Al-e Ahmed. This may be attributed to the fact that both were in conversation with equivalent propositions in Arab political culture. An important albeit still not well examined role can be noted for the "Student Phalange" of Fatah, the main Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) faction, in fostering relationships and enduring alliances between key actors, at their formative age, in the Arab and Iranian revolutionary worlds in the course of the defining 1970s.

While the fall of the Shah of Iran lifted impediments and provided opportunities for both sides, the embrace of the Iranian revolution in the Arab world, and the support for Arab causes by Iranian revolutionaries should not be reduced, at least at its onset, to an arrangement of convenience. This created a convergence in the identification of strategic enemies: "international Imperialism"—that is the United States, as the main culprit in denying local societies their right to their resources and wealth; "Zionism"—Israel as a colonial-settler state that has usurped the rights of the indigenous population; and "reactionary regimes" as comprador entities betraying the interests of their countries.

The fallacy of a benign revolution was swift to be exposed within Iran itself, with the quasi-immediate emergence of oppressive government seeking totalitarian control. Many of its Iranian proponents, now in position of actual power, soon discovered the reductionist and rhetorical character of how enemies with Saddam's Iraq, a presumed "revolutionary" regime launching a devastating war against the Islamic Republic, and each of the United States and Israel, providing a lifeline—in the form of the 'Iran-contra' deals—even if for Machiavellian purposes.

The center of gravity in Iranian strategic thinking may have shifted towards realism; however, the two courses of action had by then been set into motion. Iran inherited the 1970s-shaped anti-Imperialist, anti-Zionist, anti-reactionary Arab political discourse due to the loss of credibility of the revolutionary regimes that had adopted it—Iraq, Syria, and Libya—and to the disarray afflicting the PLO after its exit from Lebanon. Khomeini's semiotic refashioning of Iran through the highlighting of its Islamic heritage—including his initiation of the last Friday of the month of Ramadan as an annual Quds (Jerusalem) Day—was received in the Arab world, then still not consumed with Sunni-Shi'i disputes, as Iran "returning" to its authenticity. As a result, Iran gained considerable traction, and was viewed as a role model and potential sponsor by various Shi'i Arab personalities, soft Sunni Islamists, and Arab leftists of all stripes.

In parallel, Iran had successfully deployed in Lebanon its first (and to date most successful) franchise, in line with its own rhetoric of "exporting the revolution". Hezbollah was conceived and presented as a direct arm of Iran, brandishing its flag, and featuring the tagline "the Party of the Islamic Republic in Lebanon." Later reconsiderations were to dilute the dogmatism of the experiment, while preserving its core character as a totalitarian enclave.

The confluence of these two uneven trajectories may have prodded the Islamic Republic in uncharted directions. An assessment of the push and pull factors amounting to Iranian support for Palestinian Islamist movements remains incomplete. It is readily evident that Iran displayed more eagerness in supporting “Islamic Jihad” than Hamas — the engagement of which was often delegated to Hezbollah.

Ideological Entrapment in the 21st Century

In the following decades, little if any progress was made in elevating the status of Iran as a conventional influential state. In contrast, opportunities multiplied for Iran to enhance its influence as a supporter of revolutionary efforts. As a result, Iran pursued the latter policy in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and Afghanistan with marked success. Ironically, the success of the latter policy is directly tied to the failure of the former. Some in Tehran’s power circles may have deliberately ignored the relationship between the two sides of the equation, yet the paradox remains: Iran as Revolution is not just co-existent with Iran as State, but is in an impediment to its evolution.

Thus, even if leadership in Tehran determined that it was in Iranian national interest to operate within normal international political frameworks while maintaining its status as a regional power—as those back channels have repeatedly suggested—Iran’s satrapy model has trapped it in an ideological posture that makes such a conversion almost impossible. Iran’s satrapies of influence, extending across large sections of the Arab world, would either need to be incorporated into their respective nation states or self-dissolve into non-revolutionary structures channeling Iranian influence through conventional means in order to develop Iran into a conventional regional power.

An examination of Iran’s de facto occupation of Lebanon through Hezbollah strongly suggests that neither of these required paths of evolution is possible. Despite the virtual absence of both a regional or international plan to counter Iran’s longstanding attempts to encroach on state or local challenges in Lebanon to its coercive power, Hezbollah has ultimately been unable to impose its (Iranian) will on Lebanese society writ-large. Iran has also been unable to cultivate a lasting and reliable presence in Lebanon outside of Hezbollah. It is only through a revolutionary ideology cultivated within Hezbollah itself that Iran’s control can be maintained.

Similarly, the 5+1 negotiations and resulting agreement tested the possibility of Iran rebalancing its course towards conventional relations. Despite clear international incentives to refocus its policies to promote itself as a conventional regional power, Tehran took advantage of the more opportune environment to strengthen and extend its revolutionary network. The aftermath of the JCPOA agreement demonstrated that the current dynamic in Tehran is not a duel between State and Revolution, but a dominance of the Revolution that subjugates the State for its purposes.

Whether in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, or Bahrain, Iran has proved unable to translate its “revolutionary” presence into lasting benefit as a conventional regional power. Indeed, its continued influence through the satrapy model is at the considerable price of denying itself normalcy. Furthermore, the multiple political factions with vested interests in the deployment of the satrapy model preclude the possibility of a radical decision to abandon this expensive investment by those who could do so. Though the Iranian state would in some ways greatly benefit from normalizing relations with much of the international community, its reliance on the satrapy model for regional influence has created an ideological entrapment for the forty-year old state. ❖

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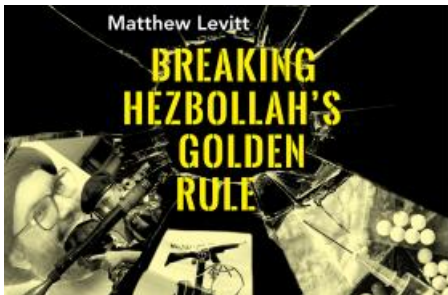
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