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How to Understand Iran

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Brief Analysis

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Following the eruption of the recent protests that began in Iran on December 28, 2017, due to growing inflation and unemployment, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei [accused](#) Iran's enemies of “trying to strike the Iranian nation.”

Iran occupies an important position in the eyes of international and regional powers. A historical reading of the relationship of Iran to these powers shows an enduring yet rocky relationship governed by both mutual suspicion and mutual interests. But today Iran is living in a new environment in which the great powers are striving to contain and exclude their rivals to ensure a commanding position in the global order. During the time that Iran has aimed to become power player itself, it has been an active and proactive party in proposed regional plans for the Middle East; however, the great powers have insisted that Iran remain in a subordinate position. This stance is what has driven Iran to crystallize formulas, principles, and strategic doctrines that represent its regional identity and interests within a broad framework of Iranian nationalism. Iran's efforts encompass all areas of influence in the Middle East and attempt to reject any political or military reality imposed upon it.

Iran's political and strategic decision-makers perceive that everything Iran is currently doing in the region originates from the context of its higher national interest. If regional and international powers consider Iran's interventions to be factional and sectarian, that is their own business. On the contrary, Iran is directing at other countries the same accusations made against it, as Iran argues that it is other countries inflaming sectarian conflict in the region and that the United States caused al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, while Iran is merely fighting back against what misguided regional and international policies have unleashed in the Middle East.

After 2003, the Middle East suffered from regional polarization and was greatly affected by repeated American declarations to eliminate opposition to American influence under the banner of “the war on terror.” From this emerged the so-called “axis of evil” countries declared by the George W. Bush administration: Iran, Syria, and North Korea. This declaration indicated the future goals of American strategic planning for the Middle East. To escape the

specter of post-occupation Iraq, Iran sought to protect its national security by any and all means, especially since it shares a 1,450-kilometer border with Iraq. Proceeding from the possibility of America exploiting the Iraqi theater and using it against Iran in the future, Iran plunged forcefully into the Iraqi scene in all areas—political, economic, military, social, and religious—in an attempt to cut off any future American threats. It is enough to note that the Iraqi-American security agreement did not see the light until after explicit legal articles were inserted to counter the possibility of America launching military attacks against Iran from Iraqi territory.

The Iranian perspective reveals a country exposed to major international and regional challenges: many of the military capabilities of armed military organizations have been exhausted; regional powers seek to end their presence in the region and to transfer the conflict to inside Iran; and international powers are pursuing regime change in Iran. In the presence of such dangers and challenges, what more may await Iran? The discussion here is not to justify the roles played by Iran in the region, but to highlight the strategic imperatives that drive Iran to act in Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq, Africa, and Central Asia—indeed, in any patch of fertile ground upon which Iran might preserve its presence and statehood. The imperatives that allow Iran to intervene in all affairs in the region spring from the same imperatives that allow the United States to intervene in the Middle East under the banner of countering jihadist terrorism or of protecting American national security. All of these reasons lead Iran to justify its presence and expansion in the region through a variety of tools, methods, and justifications.

Iran's influential role in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, comes within the framework of countering threats to its national security. The expression of this strategy has been conveyed through the statements of the Supreme Leader of the Iranian Republic, Ali Khamenei, who often refers to confronting threats outside of Iran in order to avoid facing them within Iran. There is another important point to be noted: Iran has been attributed a heft in the Middle East greater than that which it actually possesses, as Western propaganda exaggerates Iranian hegemony and control over its spheres of influence in the region in order to increase pressure on Iran, while even the decision-makers in Iran are well aware that Iran is not capable of facing any armed conflict with Western powers—even within the region—by virtue of the large difference in military capabilities between Iran and these powers. Iranian military capabilities are based on two basic components, namely, ballistic missiles (internally) and human waves and the armed groups connected to them (externally). In fact, Iranian military doctrine is primarily defensive and designed to wage asymmetric warfare and wars of attrition. The geographical distribution inside Iran necessitates careful prioritization of military strategy when envisioning any possible future war. For example, all vital facilities are transferred to the northeastern parts of Iran because Iran is aware that any future war would come from the west and the south.

Iran to date has not been seriously affected by regional challenges, pressures, and international sanctions, in the context of two major issues. First, Iran is succeeding in playing its regional cards effectively, which has enabled it for the moment to carry out political and military struggles outside its borders without being forced to engage in conflict inside Iran. The second issue is the lack of success on the part of regional and international powers to find political and military routes to pressure Iran and to curb its defiance in the region. Thus, Iran remains powerful despite the continuing international sanctions and always considers itself capable of overcoming its challenges, as Ali Khamenei constantly affirms.

All in all, we must give broad attention to the study and understanding of Iranian history and political mentality because it contains effective arguments and proofs that can be used in any Middle Eastern arena, among many designations and justifications, both political and sectarian. It is not necessary to halt Iran's roles in the region, since Iran believes in its global role, its active international position, and its capability to provide a model of Islamic civilization that will help all of humanity. Indeed, Iran sees itself today as a forward-looking nation capable of producing security and military systems under its leadership and according to its vision. It is up to the rest of the world to understand that what is sectarian and factional from the world's perspective, is nationalist and patriotic

from Iran's perspective. Between these two visions, we need real historical, policy, and social reconsideration if we want to understand Iran as a nation.

Finally, there are some alternatives and solutions that the US and its allies could pursue to limit Iran's growing influence. Among them are finding military and security avenues capable of restraining and containing Iranian influence in the region through supporting and arming armed opposition groups. Another possibility is to use public diplomacy and soft power to win over Iranian society and communities subject to Iranian influence through numerous comprehensive initiatives that help those communities understand that the political regime in Iran is spreading societal chaos throughout the entire region. There is also a need to support the Iranian opposition in its current protests and activate its role both internally and externally to assemble a unified, national, Iranian opposition alliance that will be the true face and ready alternative to the current Iranian regime. ❖



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