

# **Iran's Regional Status: Expanding Influence alongside Weaknesses**

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Important changes in Iran's regional status in recent years have in many ways expanded Iran's influence in the Middle East and accelerated its drive to confirm its status as a regional power with a leading role in the Muslim world. This ambition rests on Iran's being a key country in the region, positioned at an important geo-strategic junction and boasting an ancient culture and imperial past. Iran's territory and its population are among the largest in the Middle East. It has great economic potential and the capability of building impressive military power, including non-conventional capabilities. The aspiration to regional hegemony is also driven by the regime's threat perception, shaped by the trauma of the Iran-Iraq War, the American threat to its strategic power, and concern over the security of Iran's oil production and exports.

The US, having expanded its military presence in the region over the past decade, is currently Iran's main source of fear. The regime deems the US a threat to its regional status, and to its stability and survivability. This threat perception and Iran's national aspirations of hegemony require it to influence the shaping of the unstable strategic environment, and in this context reduce the influence of the US in the area and ensure that US forces are not stationed close to Iran's borders.

Iran's aspiration to regional hegemony did not originate with the Islamic regime in Tehran. The Shah's regime also took measures to

build Iran as a regional power. However, while the Shah formulated the aspiration to hegemony in strategic terms, the Islamic regime conceives of this hegemony as part of a new Islamic order. The current regime believes that building Iran as a regional power requires it to defend the Muslim world, promote its interests, and use it as an element of Iran's power. To this end, the current regime, in contrast to its predecessor, incorporates the Islamic element in its policy and favors the Shiite community in particular. At the same time, in contrast to the Islamic regime in Iran's first decade, it places less emphasis on exporting the Islamic revolution to other Muslim countries, both because it has hitherto failed in this mission and because it is aware of the anxiety and damage that this emphasis has generated elsewhere in the region.

Several opportunities in Iran's strategic environment in recent years have enabled the regime to pursue its hegemonic ambitions. First, for the past several decades the Arab world has been noticeably weak, possessing inadequate capabilities to cope with the main problems facing it, including the Iranian threat, and to influence key developments in the region. Non-Arab countries – Iran, Turkey, and to a partial degree Israel – have filled this vacuum and attempt to influence the Middle East agenda. Iran, the most prominent representative of the Shiite community in the Muslim world, is aided by the fact that the Shiites' weight has risen in the past decade, mostly as a result of developments in Iraq and Lebanon, despite their being a small minority in the Arab world.

Second, Iraq has disappeared as a key player in the Persian Gulf. Before the US conquest of Iraq in 2003, and to a large extent before its defeat in the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq was the main regional player and successfully countered Iran, especially after Iran emerged as the loser in the war with Iraq in the 1980s. This situation has changed completely in the past decade, after Iraq lost all its military power and an important part of its political status and influence. In the current situation, there is no regional player capable of countering Iran's expanded influence in the area. Both Saudi Arabia and the small Persian Gulf countries, which are highly concerned about Iranian activity, especially its drive to obtain nuclear weapons, lack the ability to constitute a regional counterweight to Iran, and they have turned to the US to arrest Iran's progress.

Third, the US has met several Middle East challenges with noticeable weakness. Since the 1990s, which were overshadowed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the US as the only superpower, America's weakness in the Middle East and the limitations on its activity have surfaced more prominently. Its entanglement in the Iraqi and Afghani quagmires, its failure thus far to halt Iran's nuclear program, its inability to advance an Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic process, and its indecisive response to the current turmoil in the Arab world have highlighted its regional difficulties.

Fourth, Iran has gained several additional opportunities – though not necessarily as a result of its own initiative – that it has been quick to exploit. These include the Soviet Union's dissolution, which removed a longstanding strategic threat to Iran and provided it with an opportunity to expand its influence in countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus; the change in Turkey's policy; and Hamas' seizure of power in the Gaza Strip.

### **The US in Iraq and Afghanistan: Playing into Iran's Hand**

The American military involvement in Afghanistan in late 2001 and in Iraq in 2003 aroused great concern in Tehran, which feared that the overthrow of the two Muslim regimes on its borders and the stationing of large American forces there would create both a precedent and a base for an American military operation in Iran. Iran's anxiety was compounded by its being surrounded on all sides by countries linked to the US. This concern caused Iran to temporarily suspend its nuclear military program.

As time passed, however, it became clear to the Iranian regime that the US was in no hurry to launch a military campaign in Iran, due to the risks this would involve. Iran's fear of an American military operation has likely not vanished entirely, and it stands to reason that it increases from time to time, for example, when the US administration signals that the military option has not been taken off the table. All in all, however, the Iranian regime probably believes that an American attack against nuclear sites in Iran is unlikely in the current circumstances.

Furthermore, the Iranian regime was quick to realize the opportunities latent in the situation that developed in Iraq. A hostile country that two decades ago constituted the gravest threat to Iran, Iraq has become the

most important sphere of influence for Iran as a result of the upheavals it has suffered. Above all, the elimination of Saddam's regime and the democratic process spearheaded by the US in Iraq have made the Shiites the key element there, and have given Iran an historic opportunity to build a foothold for itself in Iraq. At the same time, the weakness of the central government in Iraq, in contrast to the power of the armed ethnic militias, enables the Iranians to leverage their influence there.

Iran has set several goals for itself in the Iraqi theater. First, it wants an Iran-allied Shiite regime that ensures the political supremacy of the Shiite majority. For this purpose, Iran has supported the participation of Iraq's Shiite organizations in the democratic process spearheaded by the US, and has encouraged them to unite via a Shiite bloc that will head the government. Second, it is important to Iran that Iraq remain a militarily weak country that poses no threat. At the same time, Iran wants to see a united and stable Iraq, because a split in Iraq is liable to encourage a split and instability in Iran, particularly among the Iranian Kurdish minority. From Iran's perspective, the solution is the establishment of a weak federal state in Iraq, controlled by the Shiites and subject to Iran's influence. Such a country could restrain the national aspirations of the Kurds and the extremist Sunni groups, which constitute a danger to Iran. Third, since the US military presence constitutes a threat, Iran is keen on seeing a prompt exit of American forces from Iraq – preferably in the form of an American defeat – and it hopes to prevent long term strategic, diplomatic, and economic relations between Iraq and the US after the withdrawal of the American forces.

Iran has employed several tools to promote these goals. It has supplied Shiite militias with a variety of military aid – including advanced weaponry, advanced technologies for long range penetration of armor, rockets, and mortars – training, technical and logistical assistance, and financial aid. A large portion of the military aid was transferred, with the help of Hizbollah, by the al-Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards, hundreds of whom infiltrated into Iraq to activate the militias. The Iranians have also penetrated the Iraqi defense establishment. In addition, Iran has made great efforts, both open and clandestine, to influence the outcome of the 2005 elections. Iran sends thousands of religious figures and students to

Iraq, mainly to its holy cities, in order to exert an ideological influence and foster connections with Iraqi Shiite religious figures. In order to gain sympathy, Iran provides social services to the population in places out of reach of the Iraqi government, mainly in southern Iraq. Finally, Iran is building widespread official connections with the Iraqi government, and is playing a growing role in the Iraqi economy. Iran is Iraq's second largest trade partner after Turkey, it supplies an important part of Iraq's power needs, and it operates banks there. Iraq has thereby become dependent on certain commodities from Iran.

The natural basis of Iranian influence in Iraq is the Shiites, but Iran also has longstanding connections with the large Kurdish parties and Peshmerga, the main Kurdish militia, and even with certain Sunni groups. Iran likewise has direct links to many Shiite factions in Iraq, including parties, militias, political leaders, religious figures, and economic entities. The organization closest to Iran, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), was founded in Iran in 1982, and moved to Iraq following the American occupation in 2003. The Badr Organization, the militia associated with it, also founded in Iran and trained by the Revolutionary Guards, entered Iraq in 2003. The Mahdi Army, led by Muqdata al-Sadr, which competes with the ISCI for leadership of the Shiites, has a tactical alliance with Iran, whereby Iran supplies the militia with money, arms, and logistical support, and the Revolutionary Guards train its personnel. While the two sides are suspicious of each other and Iran's relations with the organization are not as entrenched as its ties to the ISCI, al-Sadr fled to Iran when he was under American pressure in 2007, returning in 2010, and Iran regards him as an asset against the US. Iran also used its contacts to establish a ruling coalition in Iraq in 2010 on the basis of the Shiite National Alliance and its Kurdish partners.

Yet despite the unprecedented influence that Tehran has developed in Iraq, its achievements to date are mixed and its influence is limited. The large Shiite organizations and militias are willing to accept military and financial aid from Iran, but they are not dependent on it, and their main concern is the internal struggle in Iraq, not Iranian interests. Relations with Iran's allies in Iraq are tense, and Tehran at times encounters conflicts of interest in its support for them. There is a degree of hostility among the

Iraqi Shiites towards Iran and suspicion of its intentions, and the trauma of the Iran-Iraq War still overshadows their relations. There is also a degree of religious competition between the Shiites in Iran and Iraq. The holiest cities for the Shiites, Najaf and Karbala, are located in Iraq, and the majority of Iraqi Shiites, including their senior religious leader, do not accept the principle of an Iranian-style regime based on Muslim law.

There is no doubt that the American presence in Iraq and its political influence constitutes an important balance to Iranian influence. Iran labored unsuccessfully to prevent the signing of an agreement in 2008 on strategic relations between the US and Iraq, although as a result of its pressure on the Iraqi government a clause was inserted banning an attack on neighboring countries from Iraqi territory. As long as a significant American presence exists in Iraq, it strengthens the central government there and underwrites the ability to cope with Iranian influence.

Moreover, while geographical proximity, religious and ethnic affinity, and economic links ensure future Iranian influence in Iraq, the extent of this influence depends on several factors. The first factor is relations between Iraq and the US. The withdrawal of American forces from Iraq is liable to facilitate Iranian influence. The looser the long term connection between the US and the Iraqi government, the more room there is to strengthen Iranian influence. The second factor is the internal power of the Iraqi government: the weaker it is, the more dependent on Iran it will be, and vice versa. Third is the security situation in Iraq: from one perspective, deterioration in the internal situation will play into Iran's hands, because the parties in need of reinforcement will turn to Iran for help. In the final analysis, a great deal also depends on the future inclination of the Iraqi government: to the extent that it aspires to reduce Iraq's dependence on outside parties, while stressing Iraqi nationality, Iranian influence in Iraq will be negatively affected.<sup>1</sup>

The American military involvement in Afghanistan has also generated new opportunities for Iran, though clearly to a lesser extent than in Iraq. The US performed an important service for Iran by toppling the Taliban regime, which was hostile to Iran. Iran's purpose is twofold: to bring about an early withdrawal of NATO forces from the country in order to remove this threat to Iran, and to expand its influence in Afghanistan, especially in

the western area, home to a Shiite minority traditionally connected to Iran. Iran has taken several measures in this regard. Despite the past hostility between them, Iran is aiding the Taliban in order to complicate the situation for the American forces. As in Iraq, the al-Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards is supplying the Taliban and other militias in Afghanistan with military equipment and training. At the same time, Iran is moving to establish close relations with the Karzai government, and is making major investments in road building, an electricity system, education, and health services. As in Iraq, Iran is building personal relationships with leaders from across the political spectrum, especially among the Shiite minority, thereby becoming an important factor in Afghanistan while awaiting the withdrawal of American forces.

### **On Israel's Borders: Syria-Lebanon and Gaza**

Iran's range of interests and its aspirations towards regional hegemony have for years driven its activity in the Middle East and beyond. In recent years, major changes have occurred in its relations with Hizbollah and Lebanon, Hamas, the Gaza Strip, and Turkey. These are joined by Iran's interests and activity in two additional areas: the Gulf region and the Caspian Sea Basin, where no changes of consequence have occurred in Iran's status there.

Significantly, no substantive changes have marked Iran's relations with Syria either. The alliance between the two countries has remained intact since the Islamic regime rose to power in Teheran – one of the longest alliances between any two countries in the region. This continuity is impressive, given the differences between the two regimes. Disagreements between them surface from time to time, mainly due to Syria's potential interest in promoting a diplomatic process with Israel and Iran's anxiety that success in this process will drive a wedge between them. Iran must also assume that if suitable conditions emerge for a political settlement between Syria and Israel, Damascus will ignore Iranian pressure to terminate the process. Other disputes have arisen concerning inter-Arab issues and the Lebanese theater. Usually, however, joint interests overcome the disputes, and Iranian-Syrian cooperation is evident on key issues, including the military sphere and armament of Hizbollah. In recent years, the balance of

power between Iran and Syria has tilted in favor of Iran, given its stronger regional position and Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon.<sup>2</sup>

The Lebanese theater has long been an important focus of activity for Iran, due to the rising status of the Shiite community in the Lebanese political system; the founding of Hizbollah and its connection to Iran, Iran's interest in Lebanon as a front against Israel; and Iran's regard of Lebanon as a battleground in the conflict between Western culture and the Muslim world. Iran ranks Hizbollah as a success story – an organization built according to the Iranian model and headed by a religious figure, located at the forefront of the struggle against Israel, and closely connected to Iran. Of all the militias and organizations supported by Iran, Hizbollah thus receives the most military and financial aid.

Since the Second Lebanon War, Hizbollah's dependence on Iran has grown, given the organization's need for weapons and financial aid to rebuild its military capabilities against Israel, as well as Iranian backing for internal needs. Iran – as well as Syria – is a principal weapons supplier for Hizbollah and has provided it with thousands of rockets of longer ranges than it possessed before the war. Hizbollah's improved strike capability against the Israeli home front serves not only the organization, but also the Iranian interest of creating a credible deterrent against Israel, in part in preparation for a possible Israeli strike against nuclear sites in Iran. Hizbollah receives an important part of the military aid in maneuvers and training through the al-Quds Force, which is also involved in the organization's operations and decision making. Nevertheless, it is an open question whether Hizbollah blindly obeys orders from Tehran, or whether it leaves itself some freedom of action when the Iranian position contradicts its own interests.

Iran's influence in Lebanon has expanded in recent years, following the growing weight of the Shiites, Hizbollah's increased political power, and the crisis in the Lebanese political system. The confrontation between the organization and the government ended in May 2008 in a settlement reached at Doha, in which Hizbollah and its allies were given enough government ministries to veto government decisions. While Hizbollah failed in the 2009 parliamentary elections to upset the majority led by Saad al-Hariri, and its power in the government was slightly reduced, the replacement of Prime Minister Hariri by Najib Mitaki, who is more



sympathetic to Hizbollah, leaves Iran's influence undisturbed, with 18 of the 30 government ministries in the hands of Hizbollah and its allies. At the same time, there are limits to the growth of Iran's influence in Lebanon, both because of potential competition, friction, and conflicts of interest between it and Syria, which also exerts important influence on Hizbollah, and because there are many parties in Lebanon that object to Iran's involvement there.

Along with its increased power in Lebanon through a strengthened Shiite community and Hizbollah, Iran is acting to expand its direct sphere of influence in the country. President Ahmadinejad's visit to Lebanon – including southern Lebanon – in October 2010, the first of its kind, is a sign of Iran's efforts to broaden Hizbollah and Shiite influence in the greater Lebanese political system through the development of bilateral ties and economic agreements with the Lebanese government. Furthermore, it was reported that Ahmadinejad proposed to the Lebanese government that Iran supply arms and help train the Lebanese military. Iran is also conducting ideological propaganda, both directly and through Hizbollah, in order to implant the concept of a "resistance society" – a society fully mobilized for a long term struggle against Israel, with Hizbollah being the standard bearer in the struggle.<sup>3</sup>

A new Iranian outpost lies on Israel's southern border. For years, Iran tried to penetrate the Palestinian theater, because that is the main arena for the struggle against Israel and Iran has an important interest in halting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and because it affects important processes in the Middle East. Generally, however, Iran has been unsuccessful in this effort since the Palestinian Authority avoided overly close relations with Iran – except for short episodes, for example, the *Karine-A* weapons shipment. Of the Palestinian Islamic organizations, Islamic Jihad was always closer to Iran, including ideologically, while Hamas preferred to remain independent of Iran and accept only limited assistance from it.

This situation changed significantly following the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007. Especially once it became responsible for the population in Gaza, was confronted by an embargo on the Gaza Strip, and suffered relative isolation in the international theater, Hamas grew in urgent need of extensive military and financial assistance in order to continue the

struggle against Israel. Iran was more than willing to help Hamas, both directly and through Hizbollah. Iran gives Hamas financial assistance, trains its operatives, and serves as the organization's main source of arms, transported by sea and smuggled via Sudan and Egypt. Iran thereby seeks to encourage Hamas' struggle against Israel, reinforce its position in the Gaza Strip and vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority, disrupt any diplomatic process with Israel, and expand its influence in the Palestinian theater.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the affinity between Iran and Hamas is qualitatively different from the affinity between Iran and Hizbollah. Hizbollah is intimately connected to Iran both ideologically and practically, was built by it, and depends on it. Hamas, on the other hand, needs Iran's help and has common interests with it, but does not rely on Iran and strives to maintain its independence. From this perspective, Hamas, unlike Hizbollah, should not be regarded as an Iranian satellite, even if it ultimately serves Iran's goals.

### **The New Friendship with Turkey**

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran-Turkey relations have been marked by a degree of mutual suspicion, rivalry, and competition, largely due to the substantial conflicts of interest between the two regimes, Iranian involvement in terrorism and assistance to militant organizations in Turkey, defense cooperation between Turkey and Israel, competition between Iran and Turkey in the Caspian Sea basin, and Turkish military activity against Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq. Despite this suspicion, relations between the two countries were usually proper, and even the crises that occurred in their relations – such as the expulsion of the Iranian ambassador from Turkey in 1997 after he attended a conference of Turkish Islamic groups – did not lead to a serious deterioration in relations; important economic agreements were signed by them.

Since the rise to power in Turkey of the Justice and Development Party in 2002, a change in these relations has taken place, to a large extent at the initiative of the current Turkish government. Bilateral relations have grown closer, heads of government have exchanged visits, and Turkey has expressed greater understanding for Iranian positions. The most prominent example of this rapprochement was Turkey's position on the issue of the

Iranian nuclear program, namely, Turkey's opposition to stiffer sanctions against Iran, including in the UN Security Council, and its attempt, together with Brazil, to mediate a compromise regarding uranium enrichment. This proposal was unacceptable to the Western governments; had it been accepted, it would have been easier for Iran to evade the international pressure leveled against it.

This new turn in the Turkish government's position is due principally to its Islamic orientation, the Foreign Ministry's policy of "zero problems" with its neighbors, economic considerations, Turkey's growing energy needs, and Turkish displeasure with Europe and the US. From Iran's perspective, a rapprochement with Turkey offsets the partial international isolation and the stiffening of sanctions. Yet despite this rapprochement, the connection between Iran and Turkey should not be regarded as an authentic alliance. There are extensive differences between the two countries, both in the character of their regimes and in their international and regional orientation. Equally important is the vast potential for competition and rivalry between them over influence in the Middle East, influence and energy sources in the Caspian Sea basin, and footholds in Iraq. There are also important policy differences between them: Turkey will not give up its basic relations with the US and the West for the sake of becoming closer to Iran, Turkey opposes Iran's nuclear program, and Turkey supports the peace process between Israel and the Arab parties. Meanwhile, however, Turkish policy serves Iranian goals to expand its influence in the region.<sup>5</sup>

### **Effects of the Upheaval in the Middle East**

The turmoil underway in the Middle East has important consequences for Iran's regional position. The profit and loss balance for Iran is mixed, but thus far Iran is among the beneficiaries of the upheaval from a number of perspectives. First, the US has clearly been challenged by the crisis, and its policy has proven inconsistent. Its efforts to expedite the fall from power of its longtime ally Mubarak have had a negative impact on its credibility with its other allies, who fear that they will not receive backing in times of trouble. The democratic process that the US administration is seeking to promote in the Arab world is still in its infancy, and it is not clear whether and to what extent it will move forward. If democratization proceeds,

Islamic elements may exploit the process to attain positions of power in Arab countries, thereby playing into Iran's hands.

Second, the Arab world has become even weaker. Rulers are preoccupied by internal affairs or their battle for survival, leaving Iran with greater freedom to act in the region. Iran's leaders regard the turmoil in the Arab world as a continuation of the Islamic awakening started by the revolution in Tehran.<sup>6</sup> The change that has taken place in Egypt is particularly important. In recent years, the Mubarak regime led the effort by the moderate Arab countries to counter the Iranian threat. Mubarak regarded Iran and its agents – Hizbollah and also Hamas – as a threat that should be resisted. Egypt refused to renew the diplomatic relations that Iran severed after its revolution. The situation is now different. The post-Mubarak government is considering a renewal of relations with Iran – although it has not rushed to take this step – and there is a change in attitude towards Hamas in Gaza. If the Muslim Brotherhood is an important element in the future Egyptian government, this is liable to serve Iranian interests.

Third, Israel is also among the losers. There is currently a question mark regarding the future of peaceful relations between Israel and Egypt and Jordan, or at least the nature of such relations. The political process with the Palestinians, highly problematic before the upheaval, has become even more tenuous, in part given Israel's reluctance to advance it in light of the uncertainty in the region. This clearly suits Iran, which has a declared interest in thwarting the peace process.

Fourth, at a time when regional and global attention is directed to the internal struggles in Arab countries, attention to the Iranian nuclear program wanes. No negotiations with Iran whatsoever on this question have taken place in recent months, and no additional pressure of substance was applied to stop the nuclear program. As such, Iran continues to promote its nuclear efforts with virtually no interference.

The story, however, is not over, and considerable potential for risk to Iran remains. Iran itself is in a state of unrest, which surfaces every so often. A large part of the Iranian public does not support the current regime or its leaders, and hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets for the same reasons that have challenged the Arab regimes: demands to remove the regime's leaders, open the political system, grant freedom of

expression and organization, contain the oppressive regime, and improve the economic situation. Furthermore, serious cracks have appeared in the Iranian leadership; senior religious figures are criticizing both Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad. Power struggles have intensified, and mutual recriminations have been sounded between Ahmadinejad and the chairman of the Iranian parliament. An open conflict has also begun between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad over the firing of ministers from the government. These cracks are not directly linked to the internal unrest in Iran, but they add to it.

At this stage, the Iranian regime is in no danger of falling. The demonstrations held in Iranian cities in recent months were rather limited, far smaller than those of June 2009. It was again demonstrated that the brute force employed by the regime was enough to deter the masses from going too far, and that to date, no cracks have appeared in the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij militia's loyalty to the regime. Potential for change in Iran exists, however, and the domino effect is likely to operate there too. The turning point could come when the masses who want a change become more determined to achieve it, inspired by events in Syria or Libya, when they form a strong leadership, and when the protests become more broad based and less local. There is no doubt that if such a dramatic change occurs, it will be the most significant result of the upheaval underway in the Middle East.

The events in Bahrain are important in this context. Bahrain is a tiny country, but the unrest there has significance disproportionate to the country's size. Most of the country's population is Shiite and some of it is under the influence of Iran, which is involved in subversion there and which occasionally mentions its historic affinity to Bahrain. A change in Bahrain is also liable to have a negative impact on Saudi Arabia; in addition, the US Fifth Fleet has its Persian Gulf headquarters in Bahrain. For these reasons, Saudi Arabia took the unusual measure of sending military forces to Bahrain to help the regime overcome the internal unrest, and thus far the downslide has been successfully halted. The Bahrain episode reflects a successful Sunni effort to counter Iranian involvement, even if the struggle there has not necessarily ended. Moreover, the affair reflects a twofold Iranian failure, at least for the present: the Persian Gulf countries perceive

Iran as being involved in the unrest in Bahrain, and Iran has failed in its aid to the Shiites there.

The Iranian regime is liable to suffer in two other respects. Above all, the Syrian regime, its main ally, may well collapse under pressure. If this happens, the next regime in Syria, especially if it is Sunni, might draw closer to the US and the West and distance itself from Iran. Such a development is also liable to have a negative impact on Iran's influence in Lebanon and its connections with Hizbollah, some of which run through Syria, and its influence on Hamas. If the democratization process in the Middle East gathers momentum, it is liable to work against the Iranian regime, whose character and philosophy stand in opposition to liberal democracy.

## **Conclusion**

The relative weakness of Iran's rivals and their inability to stop the Iranian steamroller, including in the nuclear sphere, have contributed to Iran's rising influence in recent years. Iran's ability to exploit opportunities and utilize the vacuum created in weak countries – such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon – and the need for assistance on the part of sub-state organizations such as Hizbollah, Hamas, and the militias in Iraq and Afghanistan, have also played an important role. Through its organized mechanism for channeling money, arms, al-Quds personnel, and religious figures, Iran has succeeded in building strongholds and gaining important influence, both in its neighboring environment and along the Mediterranean shore. These strongholds have a practical effect on the radical axis extending from Afghanistan through Iran to Shiite Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, with branches in the Gaza Strip and the Shiite community in the Persian Gulf. Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, should this occur, is liable to impart additional momentum to Iranian influence, because it will generate further pressure on countries in the region to toe the Iranian line.

There is another side to Iranian success, however, which is likely to help curb it. The regional parties cooperating with Iran – in Iraq, for example – have conflicting interests and other considerations that may well contain Iran's influence. There is a broad front of various governments, headed by the American administration, that are making efforts to thwart Iran, even if their success to date has been limited. Furthermore, the Middle

East is changing; as the force and direction of the change is still not clear, neither is the extent of influence exercised by Iran. Above all, significant potential for regime change exists in Iran, and even if this has not yet come to fruition, it is likely to occur in the future. Thus despite Iran's successes, there is no doubt that it currently fears negative developments – mainly the possibility that the fall of Arab regimes will give renewed encouragement to unrest in Iran. Another worry is that the Syrian regime will fall and drag its ally down with it. If these scenarios occur, they will outweigh the profits that Iran has hitherto reaped from the upheaval in the Arab world.

## Notes

- 1 Frederic Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but not Omnipotent*, RAND Corporation (Santa Monica, CA., 2009), pp.107-11; Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali, "Iran's Influence in Iraq," *Policy Focus* 111, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2011; Kenneth Katzman, "Iran-Iraq Relations," CRS Report RS22323, August 13, 2010; Yoel Guzansky, "Made in Iran: Iranian Involvement in Iraq," *Strategic Assessment* 13, no. 4 (2011): 85-100.
- 2 David Menashri, "After the War in Lebanon: Iranian Might and its Limitations," *Iran Pulse* No. 2, August 20, 2006.
- 3 "Exporting the Iranian Revolution to Lebanon," Israel Intelligence & Commemoration Center, November 26, 2008; Eyal Zisser, "Iranian Involvement in Lebanon," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 3, no. 1 (2011): 3-16.
- 4 Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," CRS Report RL32048, April 18, 2011.
- 5 Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "The Politics of Strange Bedfellows," *Strategic Assessment* 14, no. 1 (2011): 95-108.
- 6 Mehdi Khalaji, "Iran's Policy Confusion about Bahrain," *Policy Watch* 1823, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 27, 2011.