

# The Nuclear Agreement and Iran's Ambitions for Regional Hegemony

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Striving for regional hegemony is a fundamental element in Iran's strategic conception. Up until now, this ambition has not translated into territorial expansion. Iran's goals are to change the conditions of its strategic environment, bolster its status in the region, influence the region's main processes, and motivate groups and powers to acknowledge Iranian interests in the region. This ambition, relating first and foremost to the Persian Gulf area, and broadly to the Middle East as a whole, can be attributed to several causes: Iran's geopolitical position; its potential economic wealth; its central standing in the Muslim world, mainly in the Shiite camp; its imperial history in the region; its capability for building up a strong military force; and last but not least, Iran's recognition that the surrounding environment poses threats and risks, but also opportunities.

Two key factors currently affect Iran's efforts to achieve regional hegemony: the upheaval in the Middle East and developments related to the nuclear agreement. The fateful developments in the region over the past five years pose serious risks for Iran. First and foremost, the territories in Syria controlled by Assad have been greatly reduced, and his continued rule is in question. The Assad regime is Iran's main, and virtually sole, ally, and if it falls, it cannot be replaced. Consequently, since 2012 Iran has exerted growing efforts to stabilize Assad's regime and safeguard its future, mainly through the stationing of military advisors in the Syrian army; dispatching al-Quds Forces to fight beside those supporting the Assad regime; allocating weapons and military equipment to Syria; and providing financial assistance to the

regime. This aid reached a new peak in September 2015, when Iran sent an estimated 2,000-3,000 soldiers from the ground forces of the Revolutionary Guards and the al-Quds Force to take part in the fighting in Syria. As a result of this expanded involvement, over one hundred Iranian soldiers have been killed in northern Syria in recent months, including senior officers. Following the thwarted offense of the pro-Assad coalition and the increased number of losses suffered by the al-Quds Force, Iran decided to withdraw some of its forces and return them to Iran. Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Iran has supported and also urged the involvement of Hezbollah forces in Syria, and has reinforced them with Shiite militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. This aid improved the Assad regime's situation to some extent, but has not yet ensured its stability and future.

Secondly, the 1991 Gulf War, followed by the occupation of Iraq by American forces, removed the Iraqi threat to Iran, and therefore provided Iran with new opportunities in Iraq. Iraq is very important to Iran because of its proximity, and the fact that 60 percent of its population is Shiite and receptive to Iranian influence in Iraq. The situation in Iraq, however, is unstable, rife with widespread violence, while Iran has rivals in the Iraqi system who oppose the expansion of its influence and intervention in Iraq; Iran also fears that the instability in Iraq could spread to its territory. Anxiety about further deterioration in Iraq has motivated Iran to provide military aid to the Iraqi security forces, which up until now have demonstrated their inadequacy, and to support the Shiite militias with the intention of replacing the unmotivated Iraqi security forces in the battle against the Islamic State.

Thirdly, the Islamic State established itself forcefully in Iraq in mid-2014, and has become an important player in the Middle East theater. Iran perceives the Islamic State as a concrete threat, jeopardizing its most important interests in the region – the future of the Assad regime in Syria, the Shiite militias and the government in Iraq, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The appearance of the Islamic State presents a new/old Sunni ideal, perceived by the Iranians also as part of the Sunni-Shiite conflict and a challenge to the Shiite camp and to Iran's ambitions for regional hegemony. The Iranians perceive the sources of the Islamic State's power – its control of large territories in Syria and Iraq, its weapons and money, its fighting ability and determination, and its success in attracting tens of thousands of young people to its ranks – as

a tough and dangerous enemy. As a result of this realization, Iran is making great efforts to halt the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria.

Despite these dangers to Iranian interests, some positive aspects for Iran have also emerged. Western governments have bolstered their recognition of Iran, an important factor that can help stabilize the situation in Syria and Iraq. Iran's influence in these two countries can help stop the Islamic State, along with Iran's willingness to use substantial military force against the Islamic State. The rise of the Islamic State, regarded as a significant threat to the free world, has improved Iran's image, while it has drawn attention away from Iran's large scale use of terrorist organizations by proxy and its status as leading the radical countries in the Middle East. Iran's regional importance has been further enhanced as a result of increased cooperation with Russia in the struggle against the jihadist organizations in Syria – despite the possible disagreements between them about the future of the Assad regime – and the tightening of economic and nuclear ties between them, as well as Russia's supplying of weapons to Iran. At the same time as Iran was negotiating with the P5+1 on the nuclear question, Iran succeeded in forging spheres of influence in the surrounding areas populated by Shiite Muslims, by supplying them with money and arms. It exploited the fighting in Afghanistan to gain a sphere of influence in the western part of the country, relying on the Shiite minority there. Iran is also working to consolidate its influence in Yemen, important for its location at the entrance to the Red Sea coast, and south of Saudi Arabia, by taking advantage of the civil war in Yemen and supporting the Houthis.

The nuclear agreement that has given Iran international legitimacy for being a nuclear threshold country has boosted Iran's status and image as a partner in the fight against the Islamic State and as a key player contributing to the region's stability. The nuclear agreement conferred on Iran a positive image, at least in part, finding its place in the family of nations. By removing the sanctions, Iran will be able to substantially expand its economic ties with various countries, and devote more resources to its allies, including the Shiite armed militias and organizations. As a result of the high-level dialogue held over the past two years between Iran and the Western governments, the US administration and other governments expect and hope that the dialogue can be expanded to include regional issues. From the perspective of the American administration, this expansion, should it prove possible, will

help moderate the Iranian regime, and make it a positive player that will be able to contribute to stabilizing the volatile situation in the region. By carrying out the nuclear agreement and eliminating the sanctions against Iran, the United States believes that it can strengthen the position of the more moderate parties in the Iranian leadership and facilitate this dialogue.

The American administration believes that there are people in the Iranian system, such as Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif, and likely also President Hassan Rouhani, who are interested in augmenting the dialogue with the United States. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei admitted as much in the context of achieving the nuclear agreement, and Rouhani said that under certain conditions, implementation of the nuclear agreement could be the start of new relations with the United States. Khamenei, however, together with the heads of the radical wing of the regime, including the commanders of the Revolutionary Guards, strongly opposes expanding the dialogue. Khamenei, who continues to foster Iran's revolutionary image, regards the United States as an enemy, and suspects it of trying to overthrow the Iranian regime from within. Khamenei publicly announced that Iran's policy in the region is the direct opposite of US policy, and that ending the struggle against the United States contravenes the Qur'an. He thereby made it clear that he would not extend the dialogue with the American administration beyond the nuclear issue.

On regional issues, Khamenei announced that Iran would not neglect its friends in the region. Iran will continue to defend the "resistance" in the region, especially that of the Palestinians, and will support to the best of its ability anyone fighting against Israel and Zionism. Khamenei, as well as senior Revolutionary Guards officials, has spoken about extending Iranian influence to the West Bank and sending arms there, as Iran is doing in the Gaza Strip. Khamenei added that Iran will continue supporting the Syrian regime, the people and the regime in Iraq, the oppressed peoples in Yemen and Bahrain, and the resistance fighters in Lebanon, and will provide them with all assistance. Khamenei's declarations make it clear that the Iranian regime regards the nuclear agreement as a means of lifting the sanctions and expanding Iran's influence in the region, and not as a gateway to forging regional cooperation with the American administration and instilling moderate and constructive policy in the region.

## **Conclusion**

The above analysis leads to the conclusion that the developments in the region and the nuclear agreement have indeed improved Iran's status and enhanced its regional influence, but will not lead to a real change in its regional policy. Two reasons shape this conclusion. First, although some individuals in Iran are interested in a more extensive dialogue with the United States that could lead to better relations, and possibly eventually to a more moderate regional policy, the radical wing of the regime and its leader Khamenei continues to harbor suspicions toward the American administration, despite the nuclear agreement. Khamenei has made it clear that he intends to continue the radical policy that has characterized Iran since the beginning of the revolution and the formation of the Islamic Republic. It is obvious that Khamenei is making the strategic decisions in Iran, and it is hard to believe that those advocating dialogue with the American administration and a more moderate policy in the region can act against his will, which is supported by most of the radical establishment.

Second, the clash between Iran's policy in the region and that of the United States is substantial. The ambition to achieve regional hegemony has been a key element in Iran's strategic concept, even during the Shah's rule; it derives from Iran's sense of power, but also from its perception of a threat. The means by which Iran seeks to promote its hegemony are through military force buildup, with an emphasis on its array of missiles and naval capabilities; development of its nuclear potential, while maintaining the possibility of realizing that potential when the time is right; promoting deterrence, which relies upon the use of terrorism when necessary; expanding Iran's influence in other countries through monetary aid and arms supplies; and expanding its multitude of armed militias, satellite organizations, and other allies, based within the Shiite population. Khamenei has stated clearly that he will not relinquish these resources and methods.

What this means is that the tension and conflict will continue between the Iranian approach and that which the American administration is trying to instill in the Iranian regime. In all probability, this tension will subside only if and when a real change takes place within the Iranian regime, and as a result, also in its policy in the Middle East theater. Such a change is possible in the future, because many people in Iran want a regime with a different

character. This transformation has not yet begun, however, because the regime has been skillful enough to employ measures to stop it. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that Iran's efforts toward gaining hegemony in the region are not free of obstacles: the threat to Assad's regime; the expected opposition from the United States, especially when it learns that the Iranians are not acting according to its wishes; the failure to defeat the Islamic State; internal difficulties in other Iranian spheres of influence – Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen; and the counter efforts by Saudi Arabia, and perhaps also by other countries in the region.

What is the significance of all this for Israel? As long as the Iranian regime does not undergo any transformation in its character, its attitude towards Israel, including its refusal to recognize Israel's right to exist, will remain unchanged. This situation, in which Iran's regional status becomes stronger even despite the obstacles, poses a danger to Israel. Iran will do everything it can, as Khamenei has promised, to rein in Israel's freedom of action, and to damage it. In practice, this effort is liable to include setting up another front against Israel from South Lebanon to the Golan Heights through Hezbollah, while bolstering Hezbollah's capability to strike against Israel, in addition to attempting to penetrate the Palestinian arena in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. At the same time, it is unlikely that Iran will pursue any direct confrontation Israel, or at least not while it is busy trying to stabilize the situation in Syria and fight against the Islamic State. From the positive angle, if the Islamic State is eventually defeated, even with help from Iran, this will also serve Israel's interest. Above all, it is clear that if Iran decides at some stage to break through to a nuclear weapon, the array of threats which Israel will have to address will change substantially. At this stage, it is more likely that Iran will prefer to wait, and put off any decision to break out to nuclear capability by at least a few years.

Israeli countermeasures will have to pass through the United States. The American administration's policy on the nuclear question will contribute to the anticipated strengthening of Iran, and the United States is therefore expected to be committed to aiding its allies – not only Israel – and to assuage their concerns about Iran, if Iran does continue its radical policy in the region. An open question is whether the current and future American administration will show the necessary determination vis-à-vis Iran, or will practice appeasement toward it, as it did in the nuclear talks.